Sexuality and Sexual Identity

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"Big Man on Campus." "Sexual Athlete." For many, these terms conjure up the dominant cultural image of the athlete on campus: He is extremely popular, self-assured, and (hetero)sexually active. Other boys and young men are envious of the ease with which he can "get women." My interviews at times revealed a grain of truth to this popular stereotype of the athlete. Chris H. said that even as a second-string professional basketball player, it was "just the good life." He laughed, "I mean, you could wave at one way up in the fifteenth row, and after the game, she's standing right there by the locker room...that's what makes it fun, you know." Similarly, when asked how he related to others when in school, Thomas M. said, "I liked to be the big man on campus, and sports was a highlight because it gave me that opportunity. Everybody knew who I was. Big Tom. Everybody knew who I was."

On the surface, these two statements affirm the stereotype of the athlete as a confident young man at ease with himself and with his sexuality among his peers. Interestingly though, when asked about their specific relationships with girls and women, a very different picture emerged. "Big Tom," for instance, stated that "girls, in high school, were really not prime in [his] life." He laughingly continued, "When I was in high school, I thought I was an ugly guy. You know, being under a lot of pressure, and being so much bigger than everybody, and everybody's always looking at you. In high school, you don't know what looks mean—it could be good, it could be bad. At one time I felt I was a freak, so I was more or less into myself. I don't think I had one girlfriend." This youthful awkwardness and insecurity with respect to girls seemed almost universal among the men I interviewed. David P.'s shyness was compounded by his family's difficult economic situation, so for him, sport became an escape from dealing with girls: "No doubt I was shy, and I think it had to do with the fact that if I did make a date with a girl, how was I going to go? What was I going to spend? Because I had none of it. So I just used sports as an escape." Clarence T., who had no trouble paying for dates, nevertheless had similar problems with girls:

In my senior year [of high school], I remember dating all these girls. It was real bizarre: I had this list I kept of all the girls I wanted to go out with, and it was like twenty-five people, and I went out with twenty of them. I was just going out with people. I wasn't sexually active—I hadn't had intercourse—I might have done a little petting, but never any genital stuff. I think I was popular, and was seen as an attractive boy, but I didn't have a sense of it. I just thought I was absolutely ugly as hell.

Several of the men I interviewed recalled hoping that being an athlete would give them the confidence to overcome their "lameness"
with girls. Jon P. said that he had hoped that being on the basketball team would help him overcome his shyness "and make it easier to talk with girls. It didn't." But several of these men reported that they did eventually develop ways to talk to girls, despite their shyness. Eldon C., for instance:

[In high school], I was lame, as they called it. So I didn’t know how to do women so well. My stepmother threw a sixteenth birthday party for me and invited a lot of friends, and I remember that day, trying on a lot of the roles that I saw guys playing, and it kind of shocked me because the women took it seriously, you know. That was a big turning point for me. I didn’t particularly like—some of the black modes of relating to women, I thought were stupid. Like: "you know, sugar, you know"—just nonsense—sweet nothings seemed silly to me. [But] anyway, I tried it, my version of it, and to my surprise some woman took it seriously. That meant it was possible [laughs].

Calvin H. describes a similar transformation from tortured shyness with girls in high school to a smooth "rap" with women in college:

I was just scared, and bashful and shy. I did not know what to say or what to do. It was very uncomfortable. One of the things that were the rewards of being a good athlete, and you didn't really want it—I mean, you wanted it, but you didn't want it—you know, like, a girl likes you, but then, clamming up and not being able to communicate very effectively. This was a very bad time, because you're always around a lot of girls at parties. I was very uncomfortable in groups and with individuals. Finally I went off to college and went to the extreme of trying to attract a lot of girls, and was semi successful. You knew you had to have a date on Fridays, and knew you had to have one on Saturdays, and so you just walked through the student union, and you'd just have this rap you'd thought of, and you'd just put it on. It was peer pressure. I'm naturally a shy person. But somehow in college I was able to somehow fall into the right kinds of things to do and say.

We can see from these stories that developing a "rap" with women becomes an almost ritualized way that a young man helps himself overcome an otherwise paralyzing shyness, a sense of "lameness" when trying to relate to young women. This sort of verbal game involves a certain dramaturgy, a conscious self-manipulation ("you'd just put it on"), and one result is that girls and women become the objects of men's verbal manipulation. This kind of manipulation of women does not spring naturally or magically from men's shyness. Rather, it is socially learned through the male peer group. Notice that Eldon C. learned to "do women" by watching his friends. Calvin H., though somewhat mystified as to how he was able to overcome his shyness and "fall into the right things to say," also cites "peer pressure" as a motivating force. Clearly, an analysis of the development of men's sexual relationships with women must take into account the ways that male peer groups influence attitudes and feelings about sexuality and emotional commitment to women.

Peter Lyman, in his study of college fraternities, argues that there is an erotic basis to the fraternal bond in male groups. In the past, the key to maintaining the male bond was the denial of the erotic. Organized sport, as it arose in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was based in part on a Victorian antisexual ethic. First, it was believed that homosocial institutions such as sport would masculinize young males in an otherwise feminized culture, thus preventing homosexuality. Second, the popular (and "scientific") belief in the "spermatich economy" held that "the human male possessed a limited quantity of sperm, which could be invested in various enterprises, ranging from business through sport to copulation and procreation. In this context, the careful regulation of the body was the only path to the conservation of energy." As sociologist Todd Cress suggests, in a society in which it was held that young men's precious energies would be drained off should they expend too much sperm, sport was elevated as the key
to regenerate the male body and thus make efficient use of male energy."  

Some of the older men in this study went through adolescence and early adulthood when remnants of the ideology of the "spermatic economy" were still alive. Eldon C. reports that as a young runner, from the late 1940s through the mid-1950s, he had been "a bit cautious about sex, because [he] still had some old-fashioned notions about sexual energy [being] competitive with athletic stuff." Most of these men, though, came of age during the sexual revolution of the 1960s and early 1970s, when the dominant credo became, "if it feels good, do it." As a result, the male peer group, within the athletic context, became a place where sexual activity and talk of sexual activity (real or imagined) was a key component of the status system.

But if the bond among men is erotic, and the culture is increasingly telling them, "if it feels good, do it," what is to prevent the development of sexual relations among young men who are playing, showering, dressing, and living in such close quarters? The answer is that the erotic bond between men is neutralized through overt homophobia and through the displacement of the erotic toward women as objects of sexual talk and practice. In boyhood, adolescent, and young adult male peer groups, "fag," "girl," and "woman" are insults that are used almost interchangeably. In this way, heterosexual masculinity is collectively constructed through the denigration of homosexuality and femininity as "not-male." Bill S. described nicely how his high school peer group helped to build his own public presentation of his sexuality: "I was shy [with girls]—I hung out more with guys. I never dated. I never was real intimate with anyone. It was just kind of scary because I thought I'd get teased by my peers." When I asked him whether he'd be teased for not being involved with women, he replied,

you fuck 'em, or something like that, yeah, that's real important [laughs]—but as far as being intimate, or close, I wasn't. And that wasn't real important, just so I could prove my heterosexuality it was real important. But I always wanted to look good to females—because I didn't have the personality [laughs]—to get 'em into bed! So I wanted to be able to have the body, and the sort of friends around who admired me in some sort of way, to have that pull.

This sort of use of women as objects of sexual conquest is important for gaining status in the male peer group, but it also impoverishes young males' relationships with females. As Bob C. put it, in high school, he and his friends would "tell a lot of stories about girls. I guess it was a way to show our masculinity. [But] I never got emotionally involved with any of the girls I went out with. I never got close to any of them." The link between young males' tendency to "tell [sexual] stories about girls" and their lack of intimacy with girls is an important one. As Peter Lyman points out, young males commonly use sexually aggressive stories and jokes as a means of "negotiating" the "latent tension and aggression they feel toward each other." They also are using this joking relationship to "negotiate the tension they [feel] between sexual interest in the girls and fear of commitment to them. [They use] hostile joking to negotiate their fear of the 'loss of control' implied by intimacy." While talk of sex with females, then, bonds the males together, the specific forms of sexual talk (sexual objectification and conquest of women) helps them deal with their terror of intimacy with women (described, by many, as "shyness" or "lame-ness" etc.). Again, in the words of Lyman, "In dealing with women, the group separate[s] intimacy from sex, defining the male bond as intimate but not sexual (homo-social), and relationships with women as sexual but not intimate (heterosexual)." In a very real sense, these young males' relationships with females—whether sexual or not—were constructed through (indeed, were often distorted by and subordinated to) their
relationships with their male teammates. One logical result is the kind of attitude toward women that former pro football star Jim Brown describes in his book, *Out of Bounds*. When he played football for the Cleveland Browns, he explains, his male “partners started calling [him] the Hawk” because he was so successful in “chasing women.” Now at age fifty-three, Brown continues to view women primarily as young, sexual bodies and as objects of consumption: “My lady right now is nineteen…. When I eat a peach, I don’t want it overripe. I want that peach when it’s peaking.”8 Clearly, this attitude tends to preclude Brown’s developing a long-term intimate relationship with one woman. After all, every woman eventually ages, her body changes, and she can be discarded and replaced by what Brown sees as an endless supply of younger, firmer bodies.

Unlike Brown, many male athletes do yearn for, and manage to develop, more or less exclusive relationships with one woman. But this happens despite the fact that the male peer group tends to police its own members in terms of intimacy with females. Male peers might taunt boys and young men who start to spend too much time with a girlfriend, who are becoming too attached, telling them that they are “pussy whipped.” Don Sabo, in writing about his own football career told this tale: “Once when I was a high school junior, the gang in the weight room accused me of being wrapped around my girlfriend’s finger. Nothing could be further from the truth, I assured them, and in order to prove it, I broke up with her. I felt miserable about this at the time and I still feel bad about it.”9 Sociologist Timothy Curry found in his participant-observation study of two college male locker rooms that sexually aggressive talk about women usually takes the form of a loud public performance.10 Curry also observed that any serious discussions between two men about actual relationships with girlfriends usually takes place in hushed tones, often at the edges of the locker room. If this sort of talk is discovered by the group, the speakers are often ridiculed and taunted to reveal details about the woman’s body and whether or not she is sexually “putting out.” The result of this locker room culture, according to Sabo, is that many men end up suffering a kind of “sexual schizophrenia.” Their minds lead them toward eroticism while their hearts pull them toward emotional intimacy.”11 Some young men deal with this split by keeping their emotional attachments with women a secret, while continuing to participate in locker room discussions about sexuality with their male peers. Bob C. had one such relationship in high school: “We started sneaking around and going out late at night and no one else knew. I didn’t tell any of my friends. We got along great, sexually and emotionally, though she said I didn’t express my feelings enough.”

At times, the male peer group’s policing of its members’ relationships with females took on a racial angle. Larry W., for instance, said that when he was in college “the biggest conflict we had was black males dating white girls. The white males would call up the white females and call them whores, bitches, and prostitutes—you know, insulting language, like ‘If you ball him, you’ll ball anybody, so come over here and ball me too.’” In this case, the peer group was not only policing intimacy with women, but also imposing controls on interracial sexuality.

The need to prove one’s manhood through sexual conquests of women was experienced as a burden by many young heterosexual males, and was sometimes complicated by racial tensions, but it was especially oppressive for gay men. Mike T. threw himself into sport, rather than into dancing, largely because he was terrified that people might find out that he was gay. Sport allowed him to project a masculine public image. But this meant that he also had to project a heterosexual image:

*I hated high school. I mean, I just didn’t know who I was. I think I had quite a bit of negative self-esteem*
at that time, because I really felt different. I mean, I didn’t drink, I didn’t like to screw around, and this was what all my friends did, so I felt compelled to go along with this stuff, and all the time hating it. I dated some women, some that I loved because they were just really fine people—but physically, there was not a great deal of passion. For males, there was a passion. [But] homophobia was rampant, especially in athletics. You see, I think a lot of athletes go into athletics for the same reason I did. They need to prove their maleness. And I did, I readily admit it. I felt I’ve got to hide this thing—because I know what they were thinking: if I were gay, they would see me as less than a man, or not a man. So I’m going to be a man, because that’s what I am.

Though his secret knowledge of his own homosexuality made this process a much more conscious one for Mike (“I was clearly aware of what I was doing”), his public construction of manhood-as-heterosexual was not all that different from what his nongay teammates were doing. Whether gay or heterosexual, the denial and denigration of gayness and femininity (in oneself and in others) were important to these young men’s construction of masculine identities and status in their male peer group. As Mike T. said,

Go into any locker room and watch and listen, and you’ll hear the same kind of garbage—I call it garbage now, and I thought it was garbage then, but I felt compelled to go along with it, because I wanted that image. And I know others who did, too. I know a lot of athletes are gay. And I think a lot of athletes are attracted to athletics because they’re fighting feelings of tenderness—not necessarily gay—but they’re fighting feminine qualities. I know a lot of football players who very quietly and very secretly like to paint, or play piano, and they do it quietly because this to them is threatening if it’s known by others.

The pressure to be seen by one’s peers as “a man”—indeed, the pressure to see oneself as “a man”—kept most young males in conformity (at least on the surface) with this homophobic and sexist locker room “garbage.” Conformity with locker room culture was a way for both gay and heterosexual men to construct their public masculinity. But gay men were far more likely to see this process as a strategy than were heterosexual men. As Arthur Brittan explains, “Gender identity...is a set of reflexive strategies which are brought into play whenever gender is put on the line. In everyday life most heterosexuals do not have to do too much identity work because they tend to function in contexts in which heterosexuality is taken for granted.” In the locker room, gay athletes must constantly engage in “identity work.” Nearly every gay athlete that social scientist Brian Pronger interviewed agreed that being around all of those naked male bodies in the locker room “feed[s] the homoerotic imagination and provide[s] homoerotic contact.” One gay athlete told Pronger, “[There is] a surprising amount of sexual cruising and activity in the university locker rooms and shower. I’ve certainly had sex there.”

But since homosexual behavior—or even more subtle expressions of desire—violate the kind of masculinity that is common in the locker room, most gay men develop a strategy of identity construction that is “ironic”: On the surface, they conform to the heterosexual masculine culture, while underneath, they view the locker room through their hidden knowledge of its highly charged eroticism.

Even for a few heterosexual men, the “garbage” of the locker room led them to question—even reject—the jock culture and the specific form of masculinity and sexuality that predominated there. Brent F., for instance, says that toward the end of high school, he “really got turned off to the way the guys were relating to the girls”:

It was really ugly in certain ways, like just treating them like objects, totally judging them by their surface appearances, talking amongst themselves in really abusive language about girls, how they’re going to do this or that to them. I thought it was wrong. I thought that people shouldn’t be treated that way. I started to realize that the way I related to women was not the way these guys were relating to them, and therefore I didn’t want to relate with them on that level. So I started to distance myself from the same activities, and started to feel really alienated from my buddies.
This rejection of the sexist treatment of women was a rare exception to the rule. It is significant that this realization was made by a young athlete who several years earlier had decided that he was not a "career athlete." That he had already begun to disengage from his athletic career meant that he had less invested in the athletic male peer group. For young men who were fully committed to athletic careers, this sort of rejection of one of the key bonds of the group might have amounted to career suicide. So whether they liked it or not, most went along with it. Furthermore, when the "garbage" went beyond verbal sparring and to sexual behavior, peer group values encouraged these young men to treat females as objects of conquest. Eric M. described a night on the town with his male peers. He was in high school, a virgin, and terrified at his own lack of sexual experience. But when they hit the town, he said, "We were like wolves hunting down prey. Dave told me, 'If a girl doesn't give it up in sixty seconds, drop her!'"

It is this dynamic that is at the heart of what feminists have called "the rape culture." One study of date rape revealed that college men who have experienced pressure from their current male friends to engage in sexual activity are more likely to commit acquaintance rape. Similarly, a 1988 national study found that "involvement in peer groups that reinforce highly sexualized views of women" is an important predictor of "sexually aggressive behavior" by college males. Robin Warshaw concluded from her research on date and acquaintance rape that "athletic teams are breeding grounds for rape [because they] are often populated by men who are steeped in sexist, rape-supportive beliefs."

Indeed, sportswriter Rich Hoffman reported in a story in the Philadelphia Daily News that between 1983 and 1986, a U.S. college athlete was reported for sexual assault an average of once every eighteen days.

The sexual objectification of women among male athletes is probably, in most cases, a "rhetorical performance" that rarely translates into actual aggression against women. But there is considerable evidence that men pay a price for these performances. As sociologist Miriam Johnson has argued,

That the peer group's pressure to be heterosexual occurs in a context in which women are sex-objectified may well have the consequence of making it difficult for males to become sexually aroused in a relationship in which they do not feel dominant over the female. If one learns about sexuality in the context of being rewarded by other males for "scoring," for "getting pussy" or just "getting it," then this does not augur well for egalitarian sex.

Though this socially structured denigration of women truly does hurt young males, in terms of making the development of true intimacy with women more difficult to develop, ultimately, it is women—the "prey"—who pay the price for young men's fear of intimacy with each other.

Young men don't totally "go it alone" in constructing masculine identities and relationships. Athletic teams and organizations, after all, are organized and run by adult men....

NOTES


2. Here are some of the roots of the still-popular misconception that male homosexuality is connected to some essential "femininity," a confusion of sexual identity with gender identity. This confusion is clearly a cultural manifestation. See W. L. Williams, The Spirit and the Flesh: Sexual Diversity in American Indian Culture (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986).


5. I recall, though, that despite the fact that scientific "sexology" had long-since discredited the notion of the spermatic economy, and despite the fact that Joe Namath had exploded the myth in professional football by showing up for big games, even the Super Bowl, and making thinly veiled statements about whom he had slept with the previous night, I had a community college coach in 1971 who would routinely warn us before every weekend to "save [our] energies for the games...stay away from the split-tails" (which of course meant women).


7. Ibid., p. 156.


12. Christine Williams points out in her study of the construction of gender in the Marine Corps and in the nursing profession that homophobia and misogyny are a common part of basic training for male Marines. See C. L. Williams, Gender Differences at Work: Women and Men in Nontraditional Occupations. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).


