WHAT DO YOU LIKE TO DO? GAY SEX AND THE POLITICS OF INTERAFFECTIVITY

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Abstract

This essay draws on research conducted in Sydney in which gay men were invited to recount their experiences of recent sexual occasions in one-on-one interviews. It argues that the political dynamics of gay sex are not found in the enactment of particular practices, nor in the attainment of capacities to perform those practices with pleasure and pride. Sexual practices, however adventurous or extreme, are not, in and of themselves, politically transgressive acts; nor is the derivation of pleasure from their enactment inherently liberating. Rather, in deploying Sylvan Tomkins' (1962; 1963) affect theory to analyse stories of gay men's sexual experiences, the essay explores how the affective dimension of power and the transformative potential of interaction are enhanced when sexual occasions are approached and experienced as open-ended intercorporeal assemblages. The analyses of interview data indicate a sexual politics of interaffectivity as the condition of corporeal transformation within sexual interactions.

Often at some point in the negotiation of casual sex between men, one man will turn to the other and ask, 'What do you like?' or 'What are you into?' The context of the sexual occasion constrains the sense-potential of these otherwise most open of questions. What is sought, and sometimes supplied in response, is a specification selected from an array of sexual practices and roles. The intention is to establish some practical parameters for the sexual interaction that is unfolding. The effect can be to guarantee the production of pleasure and pride in an ensuing performance of sexual competence. We argue here that there is a civilised certainty entailed in such foreclosed enactments of sex that is at odds with claims about the transgressive politics of gay sex. In support of our argument, we draw on interviews conducted with gay men in Sydney in which they told us stories about recent sexual experiences.

Consider this story from Brandon. He's at a sex venue in Sydney and he's just met another man. They move into a cubicle where they kiss for a short time. Here's how Brandon recounts what happened next.

So from there I asked him, 'What are you into?' I noticed he was wearing a red handkerchief in his back pocket, which indicates that he is into fist-fucking, which is something I’m into. So I said to him, ‘You’re into that? So am I.’ He said, ‘Yes.’ I said, ‘well, OK, fine. What else?’ He mentioned water sports. Basically that was about it, in so far as anything over and above general sex. So I said, ‘That’s cool. Do you want to get into that?’ He said, ‘Yes.’ So we did, basically. Then - I can’t remember a blow-by-blow description of what happened where, but we both - I think we ended up with us both - I think we were having oral sex to start off with. Him to me, more than me to him. He took his trousers off and I said, ‘Did he want to get fisted?’ He said, ‘Yes.’ So I did that to him.

We're not concerned here with the accuracy of Brandon’s memory. Nor do our analyses attempt to chart the actual neuro-physiological experience of men during sex. Rather, we pay attention to the words and phrases men use to describe the affective experience of sex. We use Sylvan Tomkins's (1962; 1963) theory of affect to analyse how the motivational 'pushes and pulls' of sexual interactions are rendered

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1 Sex venues, also known as saunas and sex clubs in Sydney, are commercially-operated venues providing spaces and facilities for men to meet and have sex, on the premises, with other men. Sex venues are different from brothels, in that men pay for entry to the venue; they don’t pay for sex itself.
in the stories men tell in interviews. This

textual rendering of interaffectivity,
discursively mediated and shaped in the
interview, links questions of how men engage
in sexual practices with questions of how they
value their sexual experiences. By charting
the interaffective dynamics of sexual stories,
we can move beyond static accounts of sexual
meaning and value. Our analyses aim at
understanding the experiential process of
learning through which some kinds of sex and
some ways of doing sex become more
interesting, more exciting, more valuable to
these men than others.

Our interest in Brandon’s story is the way the
verbal specification of sexual practices –
invoked in the questions he asks and supplied
in the answers he receives – gives structure
to the narrative he recounts; indeed, gives
structure to the enactment of sexual
interaction in advance of it actually
happening. A ‘blow-by-blow’ description of
physical interaction is rendered redundant in
the phrases ‘so we did, basically’ and ‘so I did
that to him’. For these phrases merely confirm
the enactment of sexual practices previously
specified in the verbal exchange. Primarily,
Brandon’s recollection of this occasion is of a
conversation which established the
parameters of sexual interaction and serves to
recount the formation of relations.

I fisted him to start off with. Then when
we finished, I said to him, ‘Do you want to
do me?’ He said, ‘Yes.’ We reversed role
plays. He did me for a while. By that time it
was getting late. The place was getting
crowded. It was also particularly
uncomfortable, so I said to him, ‘Well, look.
What are your plans for now?’ He said,
‘Nothing as yet.’ And I said, ‘Well, I live
round the corner. Why don’t you come
home?’ So we did. [...] We came back
here. Sat on the couch. Watched a few
dirty videos for a little while. And then I
said, ‘Do you want to come to the
bedroom?’ We had sex on the bed. We
fisted each other a couple more times. We
used some dildos for a while. By that time
it was three or four in the morning. We
cuddled up, went to sleep. And that was it.

It is difficult to recover from Brandon’s story
any sense of the political interest or
excitement that often accompanies discussion
of such sexual practices as fisting, water
sports, watching porn or playing with dildos.
The videos they watch are designated ‘dirty’
and Brandon does indicate that fisting and
water sports are perhaps a bit special. They
are, as he puts it, ‘over and above general sex’
– referring, we assume, to more ‘vanilla’
sexual practices like kissing, touching, and
sucking that they also enacted. But other than
that, there is a comfortably familiar
progression for Brandon and his sexual partner
in the way that fisting – and fisting each other
in turn – leads to an invitation to stay over, to
more fisting, and from there to cuddling up in
bed together and falling asleep. Indeed,
considerations of comfort and domesticity
figure prominently in Brandon’s decision to
invite the other man home.

For me if I’m going to do something like
that [fisting] I want to have room. I want
to have music. I want to have candles. I want
to be able to get up, shower, use the toilet.
Do stuff like that. Where you know, also,
you know, grease and stuff like that. It gets
very messy. So I’d rather do that in the
comfort of my own home.

Fisting, fucking, playing around in another
man’s arse – we contend these are not, in and
of themselves, political acts of resistance or
transgression; nor, we argue, is the derivation
of pleasure from their enactment inherently
liberating. With its routine familiarity and
comfortable domesticity, Brandon’s story
readily deflates political claims about “the
transformative power” of “queer sexual
practices”, such as David Halperin’s claim that
“fist-fucking and sadomaschism” may be
regarded as “utopian political practices” that
“disrupt normative sexuality identities and
thereby generate – of their own accord, and
despite being indulged in not for the sake of
politics but purely for the sake of pleasure – a
means of resistance to the discipline of
sexuality” (1995, pp. 96-97; original
emphasis). As Mathew, another man we
interviewed, assured us, “fisting can be the
most boring experience on earth”. What we learn from these men is that “the extremely obscure process by which sexual pleasure generates politics”, as Leo Bersani once put it (1989, p. 208), cannot be articulated to particular sexual practices; nor can it be located within particular bodies or body parts, or in particular images, styles or fantasies about sex. The rectum may well be, in Bersani’s cherished sexual fantasy, “the grave in which the masculine ideal […] of proud subjectivity is buried” (1989, p. 222), but in other sexual fantasies, such as the one enacted and recounted by Brandon, it may host the intimate homebirth of a budding sexual friendship. (On the day of the interview, Brandon had invited his fisting partner over for dinner.)

More recently, Bersani (2000) has cautioned against an investment in masochism with which he once urged celebration of gay men’s anal erotics. “Masochism is not a viable alternative to mastery”, writes Bersani, because “[t]he defeat of the self belongs to the same relational system, the same relational imagination, as the self’s exercise of power; it is merely the transgressive version of that exercise” (p. 648). The relational imagination of psychoanalysis, to which Bersani refers, is in his terms “a drama of property relations” (p. 647), one in which the exercise of power resides in an individual’s mastery or abandonment of itself and in struggles to master others and other objects or suffer losing them to the world. However, ownership, mastery and control represent only one modality of power. Although they do account for those founding sexual fantasies of liberation from prohibition and repression and for those pervasive erotic dramas of the transgression of domination and submission within which the politics of gay sex have been articulated and given value.

The fantasies and dramas of sexual liberation and transgression are widely apparent across the literature on homosexuality. Halperin’s discourse on ‘the transformative power’ of such ‘queer sexual practices’ as ‘fist-fucking and sadomasochism’ is one account. From a broader perspective on the history of sexual politics, Altman (1971) records an initial formulation of the project of gay liberation from prohibition and repression, and Reynolds (2002) explores how gay liberationists in Australia attempted to live the actuality of their political exigencies. From a perspective on the sociology of sexual practice, Dowsett offers an account of ‘the desiring anus’ in gay men’s “collective reinscription of transgressive desire” (1996, pp. 205-213) and Kippax and Smith (2001) analyse the power dynamics of anal intercourse between men. Gay men's own accounts of 'extreme' sexual practices also encode a celebratory sense of transgression and liberation (Mains, 1984). Our perspective on the politics of gay sex views the assertion of experiences outside of power with suspicion: “We must not think that by saying yes to sex, one says no to power”, wrote Foucault (1978, p.157). Yet we also heed warnings, such as those from Edwards (1994) and Simpson (1996, with an ironic twist), that we are mistaken to assume that, where they are not determined by heterosexual norms, the sexual practices gay men enact are thereby intrinsically transgressive or resistant.

In our own attempts at articulating the political dynamics of gay sex, we have turned to a Deleuzian understanding of desire as “the affective dimension of power” (Patton, 2000, p. 73). Paul Patton describes how Deleuze's understanding of power differs from those focused solely on ownership, mastery and control. Power is not only concerned with the way “agents exercise control over the actions of others”, writes Patton; it concerns “all of the ways agents are able to act, upon others or upon themselves” (p. 59). Drawing on ideas from Spinoza and Nietzsche, Patton explains how Deleuze understands power as “not only the capacity of a body to affect other bodies but also the capacity to be affected” (p. 74). Accordingly, “a body will increase in power to the extent that its capacities to affect and be affected become more developed and differentiated” (p. 74) and this ‘increase in power’, an increase arising from “new possibilities for affecting and being affected”, generates new intensities that enhance our desire (p. 75).
Understanding desire as the affective dimension of power ensures that the politics of sex are not exhausted by those routine scenarios of transgressively submitting to another’s domination or liberating ourselves from social repression. There are many ways of acting on ourselves and with others to enhance our powers and transform our desires. It is the transformation of affective capacity that exposes the political dynamics of our actions. Although a body cannot usually transform itself, for its actions are constrained by its capacity for action. It is in ‘acting upon the actions of others’ that our capacities can be transformed; or as Patton puts it, “activities or forms of engagement with the world and with other bodies [...] are the means by which we can bring about increase in our own desire” (p. 76).

In our next story, Mark tells of an experience that transformed his sexual desire. Unlike Brandon’s story where fisting figures in relatively unremarkable ways, Mark’s experience of fisting is rich in affective intensities. In general, we’ve found that where men recount sexual experiences that are transforming in some way, those experiences are marked in their telling by particular affects.

In analysing these textual markers of affect, we have drawn on the work of Sylvan Tomkins (1962; 1963). The Deleuzian idea of affective capacity is wide-ranging in conceptual scope but it cannot be used to articulate the experience of particular affects. Tomkins, on the other hand, develops a rich vocabulary for analysing affective experience by distinguishing nine channels of affective intensity, each with its own patterns of realisation in the body. We used Tomkin’s nine affects to chart the marking of affect in the interview texts. Our analysis reveals that, as a text, Mark’s story is more heavily marked with affect than is Brandon’s text. This heavier marking of affect attracts attention, giving a certain impetus, significance and value to Mark’s experience. What emerges as affectively marked and valued by Mark, more so than by Brandon, is the open, unpredictable quality of the experience he recounted.

Mark begins his story with an experience of surprise that is vividly recalled.

Well, I suppose I still remember the experience quite vividly the first time I fisted somebody. Because that was sort of a bit of a mind-blowing experience. Because it was something I hadn’t thought about. It just happened quite unexpectedly.

Surprise, according to Tomkins (1962), is a kind of circuit breaker that is triggered when something new or unusual or unexpected interrupts our ongoing activity and demands our attention. In fact, Mark’s encounter with the newness of fisting emerged over a period of time and was initially mediated by language. Mark first learnt about fisting in a conversation that took place at a club.

Did he say what it meant?

He just explained to me that it meant that he was a fisting bottom. Because on the right side, I think, it’s passive. And the colour red represented either getting fisted or fisting. So he just explained the code, basically, what it was. Not much more than that. Because I wasn’t all that inquisitive about it.

Mark admits to being ‘a bit naïve at the time’ and to never having ‘thought about anything like that or dreamt about that situation before’. He also recalls that he ‘wasn’t all that inquisitive’ about fisting after it had been explained to him. But the experience of talking about fisting before doing it does not seem to have diminished Mark’s surprise at finding
himself fisting and getting ‘turned on’ by doing so.

But then he left me his number and he wanted to see me again. And so he rang me up one time. And I went over to his place and we started to muck around. And he had some dildos there and stuff, and then we started to muck around. And I started to play with his arse and you know, I thought, ‘Oh, yeah. This feels OK.’ And you know, I was getting turned on by the whole experience.

In recounting his experience, what Mark recalls as surprising, as ‘weird’ and as ‘amazing’ to use his terms, is firstly the physical sensation of ‘what it felt like to be inside someone’s arse’.

What did it feel like? It’s sort of weird, yeah, just to actually feel what it felt like to be inside someone’s arse, I suppose. It’s just like smooth and soft and warm and you know, just quite weird, really. Its like the skin’s sort of wrapping all around your hand and just you’re just working through that. I don’t know how you can explain that. It’s quite weird. Just the thought, or the mental thing, that you’re actually, your hand is inside someone’s body is really quite an amazing thought process, apart from just having your cock in someone’s arse.

Secondly, what Mark found ‘amazing’ about his experience of fisting were the implications of the practice ‘if you stop and think’ in terms of pleasure, power, risk and trust.

Because it’s quite amazing, as well. Because I mean, if you stop and think you’ve got your hand up there, although they’re enjoying it, I mean, an incident like that you could kill them, I suppose. It would be just a matter of, you know, punching your hand really hard through their bowels or whatever. You could rip their guts out of them. You could turn something which is potentially pleasure into a lethal weapon. So just the knowledge that you’ve got that power is a bit of a head-fuck as well.

On reflection, Mark described his first-time experience of fisting as ‘a bit of a spin out’ not simply because he hadn’t done it before, but because of the way that it turned him on.

So that was really a bit of a spin out for me to do that, because I hadn’t done that before. And I was really getting quite turned on by the whole experience. And since that experience, I suppose, I’ve done it heaps of times.

Importantly, Mark makes clear in his story that it was not the idea of fisting or a fantasy about fisting that turned him on. It was the actuality of the practice, the physical sensations and mental implications of fisting that excited him so in the process of doing it.

But were you taken by surprise finding your hand up his arse?

Yes.

You were?

Sure. Because I’d never thought about it. It wasn’t quite a fantasy that I was chasing. And that’s a fantasy that I just never happened to have in reality. It just happened spontaneously. And he manipulated me in a way, I suppose, that he got what he wanted.

So when you realised that you were fisting him, how did that impact on you?

Well, I enjoyed it. I loved it. I thought it was just great, because I was getting aroused by the whole experience. I mean, I didn’t have any trouble sustaining an erection. So I thought, ‘Well, if I can get a hard-on through the whole experience, there’s something telling me that this is fun.’ Otherwise, I’d lose it. [...] And is there anything else you want to say about that particular occasion?

No. I suppose that was the start of something new, that I knew that I enjoyed and that I probably would like to do, from time to time, with somebody to turn me on, I suppose, to an extent that I want to do that.

Even though he had heard about fisting and what it entailed, Mark did not know in advance
of doing it that fisting would turn him on. Nor did he know, in advance of that occasion, that fisting would become incorporated into his sexual repertoire as something he now likes to do.

Political ideas about the erotics of transgression have been central to the project of gay liberation. Within these ideas, what makes sexual practices erotic is that desire for them is, or was once, subject to prohibition and repression. Accordingly, what motivates sex is a desire to transgress this prohibition, to break these taboos, to express what has been repressed. These ideas about the erotics of transgression have their origin in psychoanalysis, in that psychoanalytic ‘drama of property relations’ wherein we struggle for ownership, mastery and control of others and ourselves. Mark’s story about fisting articulates an aspect of this erotics when he speaks of ‘that power’ to ‘turn something which is potentially pleasure into a lethal weapon’. But it would seriously skew his account to seek solely in ‘that power’ an explanation for the surprising transformation in Mark’s desire ‘to actually feel what it felt like to be inside someone’s arse’.

As a way of countering the legacy of liberationist ideas and characterising a transformative experience like Mark’s, we recognise in his story an erotics of unpredictability. This is not an erotics where sex is totally chaotic or always unknowable. It is an erotics of not knowing in advance what is going to happen and of finding this out through the interactive experience of doing sex together. When bodies enter into sex with an open and exploratory attitude to what will transpire, they enter an intercorporeal assemblage where bodily capacities to affect others and be affected interact and intermingle. Where the possibilities of sex are not foreclosed in advance and where pride in the performance of sexual competence is no longer guaranteed, the affective dimension of power and the transformative potential of interaction will be enhanced.

If Mark recounted an experience of entering an open and unpredictable sexual assemblage which transformed his desire, we could say that Brandon recounted an experience of enacting a relatively fixed sexual assemblage delimited in advance of its happening. Although we would also acknowledge that Brandon’s story manifests openness and exposure of a kind. After all, he welcomed a stranger into his home and invited him to stay the night. But it is Mark’s story that, in our view, best exposes the political dynamics of sexual interaction to the future possibilities of the new.

We have considered how the affective dimension of power and the transformative potential of interaction may be enhanced when sexual occasions are experienced as open-ended intercorporeal assemblages. Our analyses indicate a sexual politics of interaffectivity as the condition of bodily transformation within sexual interactions. Whether fisting, fucking and playing around in another man’s arse expose us to open-ended experiences of interaffective transformation or enclose us in routine enactments of transferable competence comes down in the end to a question of tolerance: to what extent can we tolerate being transformed in our interactions with others?

Here’s another story.

Have you ever been fisted?

No, never. Came close. One guy that had a fair few fingers in, he was getting close. He was heading down that road. And I was seeing how far I could take. Then no, I wasn’t enjoying it and I asked him to stop. He was happy to stop. I’m not sure, but he told me it was up to his knuckles. It was a combination of unenjoyable and also ‘Do I actually want to get fisted? How much will I enjoy getting fucked after I have been fisted?’

So it was more than just a simple physical sensation. It was the concern ‘Am I going to enjoy getting fucked?’

What are the long-term consequences, the medical issues? Do I really want somebody’s
fist up my arse? It was both. I was nervous. I was getting off on it. I was enjoying it. But as soon I felt pain, I generally don’t feel pain when I’m getting fucked. I love it. I just wasn’t sure.

So it was just the one occasion? You haven’t come close to having it happen again?

No.

Do you think you might at some time learn some more?

One of the few policies I have is ‘Never say never.’

Author Notes

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References


