The Experience of “Bottoming”: Considerations for Identity and Learning

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Abstract: Bottoms—Gay men who prefer to be penetrated, sexually—are more stigmatized than other gay men, and may develop and experience identities differently than other gay, bisexual, or heterosexual men. This paper explores intrinsic dispositions and extrinsic motivations that may lead bottoms to perform and embody psychosocial and sexual identities in intimate, interpersonal, and social contexts.

Sexuality is one of the most complicated, yet understudied aspects of human behavior. Despite sexuality being “the source of our most profound private emotional and physical experiences,” (Edwards & Brooks, 1999, p. 49) the subject “has remained un-discussable in everyday life” (p. 55) and as an area of interest and investigation. In contexts where dialogue about sexuality is considered appropriate, a number of dynamics tend to shape discussion, such as power, vulnerability, control, dominance, submission, and intimacy (Kippax & Smith, 2001). Many of these dynamics are the same or similar to those dynamics dictating the development of individuals’ identities, both sexual and non-sexual. However, conversations about sexuality rarely move beyond our most basic understandings of orientations (such as heterosexual, bisexual, and homosexual) or temperaments (such as conservative/traditional or progressive/nontraditional).

The diverse sexualities of gay men remain underexplored. Gay men may exhibit many different sexual role preferences that are as much a part of their identities as being gay itself (Hoppe, 2011). For example, some gay men identify as tops (generally prefer to penetrate during anal and/or oral intercourse), some identify as bottoms (generally prefer to be penetrated), some identify as versatile (generally exhibit no particular preference for penetrating/being penetrated), and some do not subscribe to any of these labels. The complexity of the meanings and connotations of penetration among gay men “is muddled by stereotypes, preconceived notions, exaggerated scenarios…and the inadequacy of the language we use to address [the] issue” (Underwood, 2003, pp. 13-14). However, this does not negate the need to continue to study the significance and consequence of the labels gay men use and to which they subscribe. Thinking about bottomhood as an identity is a particularly compelling place to begin because of the stigmatization often experienced by these gay men, both within and outside of communities of other gay men (Hoppe, 2011). Men and women of all sexual orientations still believe men compromise their masculinity when they allow penetration. Thus, “bottoms are judged on an entirely separate scale” and are often “more severely stigmatized because” penetration “is considered feminizing and shameful” (Underwood, 2003, p. 3). Men who identify as bottoms and allow penetration by other men, may be likely to develop and experience their identities differently than other gay men and certainly heterosexual or bisexual men. The purpose of this paper is to explore the intrinsic dispositions and extrinsic motivations that may lead some gay men to perform and embody “bottom identities” in intimate, interpersonal, and social contexts.

The Scripting of Gay Bottom Identities

Sexual scripting (Simon & Gagnon, 1973) considers sexuality “as a social process rather than a biological imperative” (Irvine, 2003, p. 490). Sexual scripting involves the embodiment and perpetuation, often unconscious, of codes that have become the baseline for human behavior.
(Simon & Gagnon, 1973). Such scripting processes might include when some men hold doors open for women, and in turn some women may learn to expect or desire this behavior in male partners. Both the man’s holding doors open and the woman’s reaction are part of the social script of chivalry, in which men and women learn how to interact with one another in a particular manner and may reproduce the script by performing it in both sexual and non-sexual contexts. Even such heteronormative scripts can have an impact on gay men’s interactions and sexual behaviors. For example, bottoms, because of the assumed and stereotyped passivity of being penetrated, may be viewed as “the woman” in intimate relationships, their roles and the way they are treated by the partner who is “the man” mirroring or being likened to interaction seen in heterosexual couples. Sexual scripts also become a way of understanding and interpreting sexual behaviors (Simon & Gagnon, 1973). Scripts occur on three levels: intrapsychic scripts (e.g., those experienced by an individual, “I am a bottom, so that means I am passive.”), interpersonal scripts (e.g., those experienced between people, “We are both bottoms, so we are sexually incompatible.”), and cultural scenarios (e.g., socially-constructed expectations, “You are a bottom, so I expect you to let me, as a top, be in charge.”). However, “script” is not a direct synonym for “learned action”—all scripts occur in some way on each of the three levels, and identical actions in different social settings indicate different meaning by taking consciousness of actions into consideration.

Feminist theories are also helpful in understanding the social location of gay men who bottom. Because of their subverted sexual position, these men do not enjoy the same benefits of the patriarchy, and thus, feminist theory can be a lens through which to understand their experiences. In “Thinking Sex,” Rubin (1984) introduced the charmed circle to describe sexualities that have society’s seal of approval: heterosexual, married, monogamous, procreative, intra-generational, intra-racial, etc. Bottoming is often considered shameful because of its association with the anus (Guss, 2010) and because it is thought of as “feminizing” (Morin, 2010). Although still judged for having sex with men, people can more easily understand the role of a man who penetrates. The concept of masculinity is one with which gay men must grapple and negotiate.

Many gay men who have identified as bottoms at one point in time actually choose to abandon or alter that self-categorization over time, in part due to the overlay of heteronormative roles into top and bottom labels and in part due to the loaded nature of the term “bottom” itself (Wegesin & Myer-Bahlburg, 2000). Top, bottom, and versatile are all labels used to discuss the position preferences of gay men and do not in all cases communicate exclusive preference (Moskowitz, Eiger, & Foloff, 2008). Bisexual men who enjoy being penetrated may be able to subvert some of the stigma associated with “bottoming” because they may also have sex with women. Because of this, bisexual men also seem less likely to identify as bottoms. Tops and bottoms are assigned roles that go far beyond who penetrates and who is penetrated. Cultural scripts such as those surrounding passivity, masculinity, power, and intercourse have dictated a complex web of sex-role associations that leave bottoms highly stigmatized. Much of this stigmatization may stem from the association of bottoming, or being penetrated, with being a woman. Similarly, some gay men view themselves as bottoms in sexual situations where they are more “effeminate, less aggressive, shorter, endowed with a smaller penis, less handsome, or of lighter skin color” (Carballo-Diéguez et al., 2004, p. 163) than their partner. Each of these in some ways indicates the ways in which heterosexual scripts for sex and relationships influence gay men’s perceptions of topping and bottoming and even have racial implications. Bottoms may
be associated with shame and powerlessness (Carballo-Diéguez et al., 2004). Stereotypes and beliefs about what it means to be a bottom often play out in relationships of gay men.

Identity Issues for Bottoms and Sexual Dynamics

The dynamics of power have been explored in several studies (Damon, 2000; de Zwart, van Kerkhof, & Standfort, 1998; Kippax & Smith, 2001). Even in healthy sexual situations, power is a complex construct that is negotiated between two people during intercourse (Kippax & Smith, 2001). Power is commonplace in both the rhetoric of sex and in the act itself as individuals interested in power “seek out opportunities for self-display where they have an audience for their endeavors, and to value interpersonal encounters in which they play an active, assertive, or controlling role” (Damon, 2000, p. 16). Contrary to the popular notion that the top is always the dominant partner, the ways in which power unfolds in sexual settings varies significantly (Kippax & Smith, 2001). In unpacking such a complex construct, there is an important distinction to be made between powering domination “where there is no possibility of resistance from one or other person” (Kippax & Smith, 2001, p. 416) and power dynamics, an exchange or redistribution of power that “opens up the possibility of intimacy and mutual pleasure within fantasies of domination and submission” (p. 413). For bottoms who enjoy the thrill of being “dominated,” it is often a fantasy of being dominated rather than actual domination. Thus, the illusion of domination is only possible because the bottom has given the top permission to “dominate.” For some bottoms, work and other life pressures require significant energy and authority, and it is in sex where they can let somebody else take charge (Damon, 2000). In his iconic essay “Is the Rectum a Grave?,” Bersani (1987) famously argued, “to be penetrated is to abdicate power” (p. 212). But power can also be constructed in favor of the bottom. By allowing entry into his body, the bottom holds considerable power and some men identify as power bottoms, taking pride in controlling the sexual act and the ways in which their “top” partner will be submissive. Finally, in the sexual “dance,” two men can exchange power, each asserting his dominance at different moments. However it is constructed or performed, power plays a significant role for both tops and bottoms (Damon, 2000).

Another construct in bottom identity is intimacy. For some bottoms, it is the feeling of closeness with a partner rather than the physical sensations that makes sex meaningful. Bottoms have expressed the emotional sensation of letting one inside (Damon, 2000) and some find bottoming to be a powerful source of spirituality and connection. Bottoms in a few different studies have expressed a sense of fusion with their partner in the act of intercourse, involving a temporary losing of self as two lovers merge into one being (Corbett, 1993). This sentiment has also been construed as “deep communication” (Underwood, 2003). Although intimacy is sometimes characterized as the opposing polar of domination, the two constructs are not mutually exclusive.

Submission is an important component of identity for some bottoms (Hoppe, 2011). Powles (2003) discussed his journey to becoming a bottom and the meaning he ascribed to that identity. The intricately designed “dance” attracted the “opposite” type of sexual partner, a complex exchange of power and energy in which the fantasies—rather than physical acts—consumed and stimulated his sexual arousal. Through the abdication of power, his perceptions about his experiences changed. Submission, sometimes involving “knowledge of imminent pain or violence” (p. 112) played a key role in the bottoming experience. The desire to be submissive and the fantasy of being dominated is common, even if it is not always acted out (Morin, 2010). In addition to experiencing psychological pleasure by giving partners physical pleasure, bottoms
may experience pleasure by feeling used, being a site for the dispensing of semen, or being acknowledged as a “good boy” by their partners (Hoppe, 2011).

All of these constructs are important to the ways in which role preferences are scripted with respect to traditional notions of gender. American heterocentric scripts dictate that women be passive and that men be active/dominant. In gay sexual culture, these heteronormative scripts have been reproduced for tops (active/dominant) and bottoms (passive) (Hoppe, 2001). This has significant ramifications for bottom role identity. Internalized homophobia and “Femiphobia” (Morin, 2010, p. 107)—fear that females may be considered equals to men—creep into the collective societal mindset when people must contend with the thought of men being penetrated. In coming to terms with an uncomfortable proposition, people simplify sexuality and apply the script of the receptive role equals the female position. Although sex and gender are intimately related, “sexuality is not a residual category, a subcategory of gender; nor are the theories of gender fully adequate to account for sexuality” (Vance, 1984, pp. 9-10). While some bottoms may identify with women because of the historical association with passivity, being a bottom can be thought of as “a differently structured masculinity, not a simulated femininity” (Corbett, 1993, p. 345). In considering the socialization of bottoms, one study found a connection between bottoms and feminine childhood experiences and adult cross-dressing, but the authors warn that “over- attribution of femininity to those who engage in receptive sex may exacerbate the negative stereotype associated with bottoms…and further promote the ‘closeting’ of men who self-label as bottoms” (Wegesin & Meyer-Bahlburg, 2000, p. 58).

Because of societal homophobia and heterosexism, there is an emphasis on sexual activity when thinking about gay men. A lot of assumptions about heterosexual couples may be made based on societal scripts, but it never has to cross one’s mind what goes where. When people observe a relationship in which both people are men, the focus tends to be on working out the details of their sexual lives. Even the most well-intentioned people ask: “who is the ‘man’ in the relationship and who is the ‘woman’?,” which assumes that people need to be boxed into one set of scripts. This apparent need to find heterosexual male/female role equivalents my leave bottoms feeling feminized due to the social constructions about what it means to be penetrated. This contributes to the excess of significance (Rubin, 1984), in which too much significance is placed on sexual acts of all kinds, but is compounded further for gay men, who are perceived to be more sexually promiscuous. An additional burden is placed on bottoms because of the sexual double standard that women face: if they enjoy sex, they are perceived to be slutty. Because bottoms are penetrated, they may be seen as not participating in sex in the proper way.

In terms of gender, bottoms may differ considerably in how they construct their identity (Damon, 2000; Hoppe 2011). In one study, some men “…experienced great difficulty in coming to terms with the pleasure of being anally penetrated, and the difficulty related to what they regarded as an incompatibility between being masculine and receptive” (Kippax & Smith, 2001 p. 420). Another study revealed that some bottoms enjoy being dominated and overpowered, and attributed the pleasure of the sexual experience to the masculinity of their partners (Damon, 2000). The ways in which bottoms situate their gender identity psychologically often has a physiological manifestation of some kind, especially with respect to how comfortable they are having sex. For the men who find it troubling to have a man’s penis enter his body, being penetrated may have a castrating effect. He may find it difficult to maintain an erection and fail to achieve penile orgasm. A “feminine identification” is often assumed of all men who bottom “via the abdication of phallic activity, the enactment of castration, and the fantasized experience of the anus as vagina” (Corbett, 1993, pp. 351-352). However, for other men, the stimulation of
the prostate enables the bottom’s penis to remain a primary source of pleasure during sex, and these men are often easily able to achieve orgasm (Underwood, 2003). Central to a bottom’s sexual experience is how comfortable he feels with his anus and how active a role it plays in the experience. Could the penetration be reconstructed as an anus engulfing the top’s penis? If receptive anal intercourse involves losing oneself in merger, could “that surrender be re-imagined as an expansion, as an urge to consume or incorporate, to possess the partner?” (Guss, 2010, p. 138). Some bottoms understand their role to be one of control. A man experiencing penetration may have a “desiring anus” (Dowsett, 1996) yet not think of the sexual episode in terms of receptive behavior. Additionally, the conclusion of a sexual activity may or may not end in a penile climax. For some bottoms, the satisfaction comes from getting his top to achieve orgasm. Others experience a climax entirely located in the anus without ejecting semen (Botticelli, 2010; Hoppe, 2011).

Finally, gay men who bottom face unique wellness issues. Because practices such as anal sex are considered pathological or immoral, gay men often practice unsafe sexual behavior, lacking access to information or fearing social stigmatization. Because of the nerve endings in the anus where a penis is penetrating, bottoms are more likely than tops to contract HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (Wegesin & Meyer-Bahlburg, 2000) and many studies are focused on HIV prevention (Carballo-Díéguez et al., 2004; Damon, 2000; de Zwart, van Kerkhof, & Sandfort, 1998; Hart et al., 2003; Moskowitz, Rieger, & Roloff, 2008). Additionally, due to the sensitivity of the anus, some bottoms experience anodyspareunia (Damon & Rosser, 2005). Similar to dyspareunia, in which pain is experienced during penile-vaginal intercourse, anodyspareunia involves severe physical and psychological distress, leading bottoms to abstain from sex, sometimes abandoning it forever. Further, because the nerve endings in the anus connect with the brain, studies have found that the psychological affliction actually increases anal tension and pain, dispelling the myth that it results solely from the physical act of intercourse (Damon & Rosser, 2005). Because of the shame of engaging in anal intercourse and disagreement in the medical community about its prevalence, it is likely that many cases of anodyspareunia go undiagnosed.

Implications for Adult Learning and Education

The issues bottoms face in constructing, negotiating, and performing their identities provides a glimpse of the work that still needs to be done. We discuss implications for further investigation in gay identity development, education and learning regarding attitudes and values to gender, benign sexual variation, empowering dialogue regarding sexual safety, relationship development, and societal homophobia.

First, research in adult learning and education could further investigate alternative models for identity development and construction. In aspiring to be too comprehensive, most sexual identity development models fall short. Models that detail stages of development are limited because they suggest that identity is achieved, progressing in some normal fashion, and that all people identity in the same way (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). Bottoms are just one subgroup of gay men; does their development occur differently than tops, versatilities, or men who subscribe to no such label? Research employing queer theory may help advance models of gay development. In queering identity development, scholars should consider Foucauldian notions of power, knowledge and pleasure, which “in turn, produce our sense of ourselves and others and the limitation we put on our own behavior” (Edwards & Brooks, 1999, p. 54). Because most identity development models have focused on traditional development (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005), models that apply queer theory may be especially useful in investigating whether men who identify as
bottoms development in ways that are similar or different that those men and women upon whom other models are based.

What does the bottom position say about traditional constructions of masculinity? Queering research in adult education involves exploring how traditional gender boundaries can be deconstructed. It would be useful to explore “power relations and contest the social, political, economic, historical, and cultural context that define and sustain so-called normal sexuality, sexual orientation, and gender expression or identity” (Hill, 2004, p. 91). Issues of who penetrates, who is penetrated and the kinds of orgasms that are experienced complicate traditional gender constructions. What impact does the penetratability of a bottom have on his gender identity and experiences both in sexual intercourse and in other facets of life? Reframing the reception of a penis into the body as an act of power instead of a dejection of masculinity may increase a bottom’s ability to enjoy sex. Receiving the penis “…does not constitute a loss of masculinity. On the contrary, the ability to relax, to receive, to voluntarily surrender control is a psychological and interpersonal asset, not a loss” (Morin, 2010, p. 107). A reconstitution of gender construction utilizing purposeful integration of the masculine and feminine aspects of self may solve physical obstacles in some cases. Re-conceiving these roles more broadly in multiple contexts could liberate people to practice their sexualities freely in pursuit of benign sexual variation (Rubin, 1984).

How do bottoms think about their role in a sexual relationship? The clinical implications indicate that in order to have a fulfilling relationship, couples interested in maintaining a monogamous relationship would be well advised to find a sexual complement. If self-labeling predicts most other sexual activities beyond penetration, then two tops (or two bottoms) would likely be sexually incompatible (Moskowitz, Rieger, & Foloff, 2008). Studies should investigate how self-label plays out in long-term relationships and if “alignment or misalignment of the sexual self-label can predict relationship satisfaction” (p. 201). With so many sub-identities emerging (e.g. “power bottoms”, “versatile-tops”), research is merely at the cusp of understanding the psychosocial implications of these varying definitions.

How do bottoms learn about their sexual identity? How do bottoms learn to have sex? Without role models or sex education specific to same-sex intercourse, gay men learn about sexual intercourse in ways that are different than most heterosexuals who are exposed to models in popular culture. However, because “learning can be participatory, self-directed, collaborative, transformative, or conflictual” (Hill, 2004, p. 93), learning about sexual intercourse likely comes from actual experience. Additionally, recent research has revealed that one primary source for sexual education for bottoms may be internet pornography (Rothmann, 2013). Resistance education, involving “unlearning” and leading “to powerful identity transformations in individuals” (Hill, 1995, p. 148) can be a useful method for sexuality educators. When people “unlearn” things they have taken to be truths, they can confront stigmatization, homophobia, and heteronormativity. Resistance education can take place in a variety of settings, whether structured or informal. In fact, “much gay education occurs in an informal context, is self-initiated, self-directed, purposeful, and sustained, but is not sponsored, planned, or directed by an organization” (Hill, 1995, p. 148). In constructing their sexual and relational roles, bottoms may need to unlearn societal scripts.

Does the fantasy of being dominated for some bottoms increase the likelihood of putting themselves in riskier sexual settings? Does bottomhood identity development have implications for how communities talk about safe sex? Studying sexual behaviors and their meanings to the gay men engaging in them is important in order for normalization of anal sex (de Zwart et al.,
The psychological burden of carrying this additional stigmatization produces increased internalized homophobia (Morin, 2010). Thus, it is important to consider how one’s sexual position impacts their sexual practices. Bottoms need messages that suggest ways they can relinquish control (fulfilling their desire to be “overpowered”) while remaining safe (Damon, 2000). Bottoms must be able to assess their sexual safety and to what extent “they experience power as a sexual motive” (Damon, 2000, p. 28). If bottoms rely too heavily on these power dynamics, it may inhibit their ability to practice safe sex. Thus, an “empowerment-based prevention intervention…could incorporate consciousness raising elements about socially constructed gender roles and their effect on interactions among gay and bisexual men” (Carballo-Diéguez et al., 2004, p. 168).

What are the implications for adult education and learning with respect to these traditional attitudes and values? Learning about the sexuality of bottoms should not be geared exclusively to bottoms or other gay men. In order to improve societal acceptance of anal sex and alternative sexualities, adult educators should educate about the sexuality of all people. They “have a unique opportunity to create conversations about sexuality identity in the adult classroom. As a site of learning and a site of difference, sexual identity discussions can enrich our education of the whole person” (Brooks & Edwards, 1999, p. 55). In creating such opportunities for people who may not normally think about different sexualities, adult educators can facilitate learning communities “built on the mosaic of difference. Sexual identity is an important site of difference and development and consequently is an opportunity for important learning” (p. 56). Whereas the literature in the past has focused on death and illness of gay men, new research and educational outreach should focus on healthy benign sexual variance. And in so doing, education will reveal to students their “attachments to heteronormality, homophobia, and heterosexual privilege” (Hill, 2004, p. 91).

Sexuality is an important, yet undervalued, aspect of our lives that we often feel compelled to hide. For those inside the charmed circle, this seems proper and unproblematic. But this is not the case for those on the outskirts of the mainstream and “without more detailed knowledge about anal sex, researchers and HIV prevention workers will continue failing to comprehend the decisions gay men make about both protected and unprotected anal intercourse” (de Zwart et al., 1998, p. 90). This paper considered the issues that bottoms face in the construction, maintenance and performance of their gender and sexual identity, as well as implications for practice and research of adult educators. Sex takes on a multitude of meanings for the gay men who engage in it. For the physical and mental wellbeing of bottoms, adult sexuality educators and researchers should strive to advance research and promote empowering messages about safety and normalization of anal sex.

References


