

Exploring the Desires and Sexual Culture of Men Who Have Sex with Male-to-Female Transgender Women

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Abstract Men who have sex with transgender women (MSTW) currently constitute a gap in the research community's understanding of male sexuality and sexual desire. In an effort to address this lack of knowledge, an ethnographic study of MSTW in New York City was conducted between December 2005 and May 2007, including in-depth interviews with MSTW ($n = 15$), key informant interviews ($n = 13$), and ethnographic observation of semi-private “tranny” parties held at various venues throughout New York City. The specific objectives were to: (1) describe the sex marketplaces and the sexual experiences of an ethnographic sample of MSTW in New York City and (2) describe the ways MSTW construct their sexual partnering practices and the meanings attributed to those practices in relation to varying social contexts (in and outside the sex marketplace). In this analysis, we described the MSTW sex market landscape in New York and identified three major recurrent themes in the ways that MSTW organized their sexual desire for TW transitioning from sex marketplaces to social spaces in their lives: (1) phallus-centric trade sex market focus; (2) relational-companionship market focus; and (3) specialized market focus. Although the findings from the study are not representative of the broader MSTW population, they represent an important step in amassing a body of knowledge about an understudied and underserved sex market upon which future research is needed.

Keywords Men who have sex with transgender women · Transgender · Transsexualism · Sex market · Ethnography

Introduction

Men who have sex with transgender women (MSTW) have received limited attention in sexuality and masculinity research and, as Weinberg and Williams (2010) have identified, the research trend has been towards clinical research (Blanchard, 1993; Bockting, Miner, & Rosser, 2007; Weinberg, Shaver, & Williams, 1999). Weinberg and Williams (2010) have also pointed out the importance of examining the interaction between social context and the ways MSTW construct their sexual desires. In their qualitative study on the sexual field scene of MSTW, they focused on one establishment, “Mabel’s bar” (a bar catering towards TW and MSTW), and conducted 43 on-the-spot interviews (Weinberg & Williams, 2010). They found that Mabel’s bar provided a sexual field where the illusion of attractive and easily available genetic females was promoted as the central commodity of the space. Most of the men in their study were aware of the performance on site and what the available roles and the prevailing scripts were. Weinberg and Williams concluded that the MSTW deconstruct the relationship between gender and sexual arousal through gender transgressions but also reconstructed together through the valorizing of extreme presentations of transgender women.

Drawing on the work of Weinberg and Williams (2010), we used sex market theory to examine the sexual field of the MSTW scene in New York City. In developing sex market theory, Ellingson, Laumann, Paik, and Mahay (2004) argued that to effectively understand gendered sexual ideologies, they must be studied in relation to a broader system of sexual partnering—what they refer to as a “sex market”—which includes consideration of both the space and negotiations in which sexual practices take place. This is especially useful for the study of bisexuality, because it keeps us from isolating bisexual behavior from the social context and norms related to the family and parenting, work-related interactions, situations of migration, and sociogeographic isolation:

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One metaphor with considerable power is, we believe, the idea of the *sex market*. Opposed to the black-box, economic notion of autonomous markets, the notion of the sex market places the explanatory focus on the local social and cultural structures that limit or channel sexual behavior. In other words, we emphasize the way in which actors' social embeddedness in personal networks, meaning systems and sexual scripts, local organizations and urban spaces leads to different patterns of sexual partnering, sexual behaviors, and sexual-relationship outcomes. Thus, the sex market is the spatially and culturally bounded arena in which searches for sex partners and a variety of exchanges or transactions are conducted. Readers should note that...we distinguish between *sex markets* generally (i.e., the general social/relational structure in which the search for a sex partner takes place) and particular *sexual market-places* (i.e., the specific places where one goes to find a sex partner). (Ellingson et al., 2004, p. 8)

This approach to studying the systems of sexual partnering consists of a number of different axes: (1) social networks, (2) physical space, (3) sexual scripts, and (4) institutional spheres. Social networks influence the flow of information and patterns of partnership formation within sexual markets. Social networks also provide information about possible venues to meet sex partners (e.g., where to go to have public sex with other men). Thus, information, and the social control mechanisms contained within it, constrains the potential pool of sexual partners. While the sociological space of social networks is fundamental to the structure of sex markets, physical space and geography are equally important. Physical space, in this context, delineates the geographic boundaries of the market (i.e., the geographic proximity that is necessary in order to maintain a sexual relationship) and organizes specific "sexual market places"—or places within the city where one goes to meet potential sexual partners. Neither the social dynamics of network connections nor the physical realities of both natural and human-made geographies displace or occult the continued importance of cultural meanings of sexual scripts. On the contrary, sexual scripts are essential elements to these sex markets because they are what we observe as the cultural norms by which sexual courtship occurs. Indeed, scripts are dependent on situation and place, dictating the types of codes (both formal and informal) that generate sexual negotiation.

In seeking our understanding of the intersections of the MSTW sexual marketplace and the ways MSTW construct their sexual desires, we conducted a two-year ethnographic study from 2005 to 2007. The specific objectives were to: (1) describe the sex marketplaces and the sexual experiences of an ethnographic sample of MSTW in New York City and (2) describe the ways MSTW construct their sexual partnering practices and the meanings attributed to those practices in relation to varying social contexts (in and outside the sex marketplace).

Method

Participants

Three data collection methods were used in this study: in-depth interviews ($n = 15$), key informant interviews ($n = 13$), and ethnographic observations. In-depth interviews were conducted with MSTW to gather descriptions of current and past sexual experiences with TW, biological women, and men as well as to explore how MSTW constructed their personal identities in relation to varying partner contexts. Key informant interviews were conducted to provide further explanation of and insight into the social spaces and scripts operating within and relevant to this particular subset of the local MSTW community. Key informants interviewed included: a male heterosexual bartender and a gay-identified doorman who worked at TW parties ($n = 2$); TW involved in organizing social events and parties for TW and MSTW ($n = 3$); MSTW involved in organizing social events and parties for TW and MSTW ($n = 2$); MSTW outside the TW party scene ($n = 2$); TW sex workers ($n = 3$); and a TW rights community organizer ($n = 1$). Participant observation was conducted to explore the commercial and sexual geography of sex venues frequented by MSTW in New York City, with the goal of understanding the ways in which members of this sexual culture interpreted and understood the MSTW experience.

"Transgender" is an umbrella term that covers a wide spectrum of individuals who "cross or transcend culturally defined categories of gender," including cross-dressers, drag queens and kings, bi-gender persons, male-to-female and female-to-male transsexuals, and transgenderists (Bockting, Rosser, & Scheltema, 1999). In this study, we chose to use the term transgender women (TW) and limited its usage specifically to male-to-female transgender women who had surgically and/or hormonally feminized their bodies (e.g., breast augmentation, facial feminization surgery) while retaining their male genitalia.

Defining men who have an erotic attraction to TW presented a more complex methodological challenge, as there were no existing labels for this population, their desires, or their sexual orientations. We chose the behavioral descriptor MSTW based on lessons learned through previous ethnographic research, which overcame the limits of identity labels, such as "gay men," through the development of behavior-based descriptors such as "men who have sex with men" (Alonso & Koreck, 1989; Carrier, 1989; Parker, 1987, 1991; Parker & Carballo, 1990). We recognized, however, that the MSTW descriptor did not capture the full complexity of the lived experience of these men. Furthermore, acknowledging that some men's sexual partnering with TW may be of limited duration, the study did not view MSTW as a finite "population," as understood in other fields of scientific inquiry.

Procedure

In-depth interview participants were recruited through four strategies: (1) advertisements placed in a monthly print magazine targeting men who are sexually attracted to TW ($n = 7$); (2) online advertisements posted on the Craig's List website ($n = 1$); (3) while conducting fieldwork at tranny parties ($n = 2$); and (4) through referrals from other interview participants and key informants ($n = 5$). The magazine was the primary recruitment source because the publication specifically targeted MSTW. Advertisements placed in the magazine resulted in 75 inquiries; of which more than 53 % (40/75) met the study eligibility criteria but only 17.5 % (7/40) were available to be interviewed, consented, and participated in the study.

Inclusion criteria for the in-depth interviews included men who: (1) were at least 18 years of age; (2) had been sexually active with TW within the previous 24 months; and (3) were able and willing to give informed consent. Since the study included some behaviors that are illegal in the State of New York (e.g., exchanging sex for money), participants were not required to sign written consent forms and instead provided verbal consent. This study was approved by Columbia University Medical Center Institutional Review Board (Protocol Number: IRB-AAAB3778). Pseudonyms are used in this article to protect the confidentiality of our study participants.

The in-depth interviews lasted 2 h and took place in locations that were conducive to participants' comfort and confidentiality. Due to the small sample size, a table of the demographic and behavioral characteristics of participants would be of limited use. Instead, we have assembled brief biographic capsules of the participants (see Appendix 1). Participants ranged from 27 to 80 years in age. The majority were in their 40s. The racial/ethnic breakdown included four African-American, nine Caucasian, and two Latino men. Interview transcripts were coded independently by the authors and analyzed together. Preliminary findings were presented to participants as well as to a scientific advisory committee. Their feedback was incorporated into this article.

Data Analysis

The authors coded and analyzed the transcripts of the in-depth and key informant interviews. The key informant interviews were coded to provide insights into the context of the MSTW sex marketplaces. The narrative data from the key informant interviews were combined with the field notes from the ethnographic observations of the sex marketplaces and were coded for ambiance, sexual, and non-sexual dynamics between MSTW and TW on-site, and general structure of the setting. The in-depth interviews and the sex marketplaces were analyzed as case studies. First, we divided the narratives of individuals and settings according to recurrent themes of the ways they con-

structed their desire. It was clear that not one case study represented all the variations in the histories of desire within each of the themes. Thus, we independently ranked the four case studies in each age group and, after discussing them, we selected the final three case studies that are presented in this article, each one representing the recurrent themes in our study. For this analysis, we aimed to present the cases that contained the most recurrent themes while at the same time we wanted to present nuances that were unique to the case studies. These cases do not represent the total number of types of sex marketplaces of MSTW in New York City nor all the variations in which sexual desires intersect with social context in the lives of MSTW.

Results

How does one go about meeting transgender women to have sex with them? Where does one begin? Our participants expressed that initially they only felt comfortable looking at transgender pornography in magazines, videos, or online. But one day they read that one of their favorite TW porn-stars, frequently featured in transgender videos, had a website. While visiting the website, they noticed a listing of "she-male events" in the city. Eventually, they found themselves at a tranny party in a club near Times Square or at a club in Chelsea (New York City). While at the party, they met some of the transgender women who, up until then, they had admired only from a distance and, after mentioning that one was "new to the scene," a common question that followed was: "Have you been to the new party down in the East Village, the party in the East 20s, or that Chinese restaurant on the Upper East-Side?" This was the trajectory that most of our participants experienced in accessing the MSTW sex market.

Fieldwork for this study began on a cold, December night when the ethnographer made his first visit to Club Topaz, where Trish Mars—transgender porn star, escort, and party promoter—was then hosting her weekly parties and a monthly theme party. We first learned of Club Topaz while reading an article about Mars, a celebrity in MSTW sexual culture, in a popular New York magazine which included the address of her website. When visiting Mars' website, one could view a listing of all her parties, along with links to she-male escort sites, and other information regarding the small industry that had grown up around Mars' work in the escort and pornography industries.

Club Topaz was located in a dark and deserted fringe area of New York City where Times Square intersects the Garment District. Comprised mostly of warehouses and small businesses that close for the night, the area was in stark contrast to nearby Times Square with its neon lights and throngs of tourists. The club's location gave the appearance of having been intentionally chosen because it was out of the view of the wider city—close, but not too close. Also, as a club with no

windows, it was easy to pass by Club Topaz and remain unaware of what went on inside. At the time, Trish Mars was hosting two of the most popular tranny parties of the week at Club Topaz—“Trannylicious” on Thursday night and “Gurlesque Burlesque” on Saturday night—in addition to monthly theme parties. All the parties were advertised online. For the next 6 months, the ethnographer conducted weekly fieldwork at the club, arriving before 10 p.m. when the parties began in order to observe the dynamics outside as attendees began to arrive and usually staying until 1 or 2 a.m. or as late as 4 a.m., depending on how long his energy would last.

As the ethnographer approached Club Topaz, the only person visible was an elderly woman sitting on a stool, wrapped in a faux-fur coat, who was trying to keep warm with the assistance of an electric heater attached to an extension cord running into the building through the snow and ice. We later learned that this was Tia, a somewhat loved and, at the same time, feared transgender woman who assisted the party’s promoter. Once inside, the ethnographer was asked for a \$20 admission fee by a very tall, attractive transgender woman named DeDe DeLish—also an assistant to Trish Mars—who sat inside a glassed-in booth similar to what one would encounter at a movie theater. DeDe, perhaps sensing my nervousness and uncertainty, also called him “sweetheart” and pointed him to the next door which led directly into the club’s party space—a large, cold, cavernous room that was tattered-looking and smelled of perfume and stale beer. The room was dimly lit and included the effects of several small strobe lights, a shining silver disco-ball, and loud club music emanating from a DJ booth in one corner. Opposite the DJ booth was a portion of the club known as the VIP Lounge consisting of several long benches against the wall, sectioned off from the rest of the club by flowing, gauze-like drapes. Later he observed that the VIP Lounge was where men were taken to receive “private” lap dances performed by transgender women.

At the far opposite end of the club was a long bar with a dozen stools where a bartender named Conner (a key informant for this study) routinely worked the parties. Next to the bar was the club’s one bathroom which was shared by both men and transgender women, and which included two urinals, two toilet stalls, one sink, and one wall covered with a large mirror. The bathroom, used by all who attended the party, was attended by an elderly woman known as “Nana.” Nana—who appeared to be the only biological woman at the party—dispensed paper towels, mints, and copious amounts of compliments in a thick Caribbean accent to the transgender women who frequently used the bathroom mirror to check their appearance and to ask Nana what she thought of their outfits.

The remainder of the club space consisted of several small tables perched on high legs which allowed people standing a place to set their drinks, some vinyl upholstered benches along the walls, and a small stage jutting out into the middle of the club. On “Trannylicious” night, the stage was used for spontaneous dances by any of the transgender women

present. At Saturday night’s “Gurlesque Burlesque” party (“A Celebration of the Art of Tease”), use of the stage was restricted to transgender women who were hired to dance for \$100 per night.

With people routinely coming and going, it was not possible to count the total number of attendees on any given evening. But it was not uncommon to see up to 50 people at any one time on a Thursday night and 100 or more at Saturday night’s more popular party. The ratio of men to women would also fluctuate, resulting in changing social dynamics that will be described later. The majority of men attending were white and appeared to be in the 40–60 year old age range. However, there were nights when some younger men in their 20s and 30s would attend, along with a few men who appeared to be in their 70s. On Thursday nights, one could frequently observe men who looked as if they were on their way home from work, wearing suits and ties and, frequently, wedding bands, and carrying briefcases. On Saturday nights, the party attracted younger men and men-of-color, though the majority consistently remained white. Most of the transgender women who attended the parties looked to be in their 20s and 30s and appeared to be black or Hispanic, by the color of their skin.

Occasionally, older women would also attend. Spanish was frequently heard and it seemed to be the primary language spoken by many of the transgender women attending the parties. Though parties were scheduled to begin at 10 p.m., the men who were attending frequently had to wait outside for a half-hour or more. All the parties ended promptly at 4 a.m., as mandated by city ordinances.

Sexual interactions at Club Topaz were typically initiated over the purchase of a drink at the bar. When a transgender woman was interested in a man, she would approach the man and ask him to buy her a drink, or a man interested in a transgender woman would offer to buy her a drink. Over drinks and some back and forth talking, men were often then escorted by a transgender woman to the VIP Lounge for a lap dance or some couples would leave the club for what the ethnographer assumed was a sexual encounter, an assumption that was further confirmed when the ethnographer later observed that most of the women who left with men usually returned to the party within 1–1½ h. The purchase of a drink was so much a part of the club’s sexual dynamics, and a signal that one was interested in sex, that the ethnographer soon stopped buying women drinks—realizing that what he initially viewed as a means of striking up conversations with people was, in fact, mistakenly signaling to women that he was a potential john.

Lap dances were a popular form of entertainment at Club Topaz and contributed significantly to the sexual dynamics of the club. Performed in the VIP lounge, and lasting 4 or 5 min for the price of \$20, lap dances were comprised of men sitting on one of the benches along the wall of the lounge as transgender dancers straddled the men’s legs and rubbed their bodies against the men, especially against their crotches, all

done somewhat to the beat and rhythm of whatever music was being played. During the dance, men were allowed—and encouraged—to touch and rub the women’s breasts, buttocks, and crotches. Men were also allowed to lick, smell, and kiss these various parts of the woman’s body. It was not uncommon to see four or five men sitting on the bench in close proximity to one another while they received their lap dances.

Lap dances offered mutually beneficial opportunities to the women performing the dances and to the men for whom they were being performed. For example, for a transgender woman performing a lap dance, it was an opportunity to bring attention to specific parts of her body in which she thought a man might be sexually interested; conversely, a man was provided the opportunity to sample (or verify) what he might decide to purchase. An example of this mutually beneficial arrangement is presented in the following excerpt from an interview conducted with Georgia Peach, a transgender sex worker who was a regular at Club Topaz, and a key informant for this study:

...when the men come to me, they’re usually looking for someone that looks like a girl but has a big cock. There are different qualities in different girls. Some girls the men want because they have real titties and some of the men want a big ass. With me, they’re usually looking for a girl with a big cock—and for a girl who is pretty. I think I’m pretty, don’t you?...But they [the men] usually want to be sure of what they’re going to get....So during a lap dance, you can sit on a guy’s lap. I might let them feel me up, touch me, let them check out the goods and let them find out how big my cock is. I might grind a little. But the guys always try for more. My standard is, I’m not going to pull out my cock because that’s too much....To pull out my cock? That’s not lady-like. (Key Informant Interview)

Georgia’s comment about penises—what Garber (1992) has referred to as the “absolute insignia of maleness” (p. 94)—reminded me that penises were rarely directly observed at Club Topaz. However, the symbolic importance of penises was reflected in the many references to their existence, beginning with the club’s promotional materials that reminded party-goers that they were attending a she-male, rather than a transgender, event. Additionally, many transgender women found creative ways during the parties to signal to men that they indeed possessed a penis, signals that did not go unnoticed.

In reality, lap dances were more public than private. Initially, gusts of wind caused by the opening and closing of doors nearby would blow the curtains around, providing all who walked by a view of what was taking place in the VIP Lounge and adding a voyeuristic/exhibitionist dynamic to the party. As a result, it was common to see men nervously pacing back and forth outside the VIP lounge attempting to catch a glimpse of the lap dances being performed behind the

curtains. Eventually, after a police raid, the staff at Topaz removed the drapes and the lap dances proceeded for a short time in full view of anyone entering or leaving the club. Though the removal of the curtains was intended to control and prevent the sexual behaviors that occurred during lap dances, it actually had the opposite effect. For a short time, lap dances not only continued, but became more popular, and their public nature intensified the voyeuristic/exhibitionist dynamic present at the parties.

In the sex market places that we examined, we identified three major recurrent themes in the ways that MSTW organized their sexual desire for TW transitioning from sex marketplaces to social spaces in their lives: (1) phallus-centric trade sex market focus; (2) relational-companionship market focus; and (3) specialized market focus.

Phallus-Centric Trade Sex Market Focus

Freddy had been married for 15 years and had two children. He routinely visited sex workers—both biological females, whom he referred to as “the ladies,” and TW, whom he referred to as “the lady-like.” Freddy kept all of his visits to sex workers a secret, but he was particularly surreptitious about his encounters with TW. He was convinced that any revelation of his interest in TW would have devastating consequences: “If someone found out, I would probably have to start a new life somewhere!...That’s how bad it could be.”

Like most of the men in this study, Freddy began the interview with an unsolicited clarification of his sexual orientation, which he described as “heterosexual with a twist.” Freddy’s first sexual encounter with a TW—what he described as “not sex, just a blow”—happened 10 years earlier as he left his workplace near Times Square and headed to the subway. Freddy recalled how he happened upon some “interesting lady-like, but sort of like more male” people who were hanging-out on the corner. Freddy’s first reaction was “Wow!” He recalled that some looked “very much like a lady” while others looked “more like a man.” Despite the uncertainty he felt about the gender of the TW he saw that day, Freddy’s “curiosity” eventually brought him back to the area and, ultimately, to a hotel room where he received “just a blow,” his introduction to sex with TW.

With no computer of his own, Freddy “[would not] even go near the Internet” for fear of someone finding out, so he relied primarily on personal ads as a way to meet TW. While preferring TW who were “nice looking and passable... meaning, with a lady-like body,” Freddy described an unabashed desire for “a nice penis as well”:

It has to be big. I like it when the person takes their clothes off and you can see it hanging. Not just hanging, but the kind that you do a double-take and say, ‘That’s something I want to go for!’ If it’s something small, I don’t get much turned on. And the fact that it’s

connected to someone who looks like a beautiful woman, that's what I call the best of both worlds.

For Freddy, “going for it” meant being the receptive partner in anal sex: “I’ve been trying to be the receiver and, you know, it’s gotten more comfortable....And it’s been fun trying something that I thought was prohibited for straight guys.” Attracted to “aggressive” women, Freddy found that TW frequently exhibited these qualities during sex, particularly a willingness to penetrate him anally: “Over the years, I’ve tried to get a few regular women to fuck me with toys, but it never went over too well.” Freddy’s desire for aggressiveness had also resulted in a “move to a more S & M [sado-masochistic] direction,” including being spanked and urinated upon. Like the other men in the study, Freddy shopped for “functional” TW, concerned that “because a lot of them take hormones, it [the penis] doesn’t work as good.”

Freddy understood his sexual attraction to TW as an “urge” that needed to be acted on and then left him feeling “empty and ashamed.” He described how purchasing magazines featuring graphic photographs of TW “messed” with his urges to the point that he seldom purchased such publications anymore. In contrast to his negative feelings about sex with TW, Freddy described feeling unashamed of his experiences with biologically female sex workers (“unless it’s bad service”): “...with the women, I really get into it. I mean, I’m a passionate person and so I get into it. I’m like all over their body.”

Relational-Companionship Markets

The second theme of desire we observed among the men in our sample was one in which they sought companionship from TW, as exemplified by the sexual history of a participant named Gus. Gus worked as staff in a Manhattan apartment building and lived in New Jersey with his wife, Nicki, a transgender woman. Gus’ introduction to transgender women occurred 30 years before, while looking at porn magazines. Gus’ early fantasies about TW were “more of a sexual thing” that included thoughts of being dominated by a partner:

I guess that’s what it was...you know, some guys like having a woman who would turn them around and say, ‘Get on your knees and beg like a dog.’ Just that dominating....It’s like some men have fantasies of their wife or girlfriend having a strap-on [dildo]. It’s not necessarily all about penetration...it’s just, you know, like, ‘Wow,’ the thought that she’s taking charge.

While speaking of domination and penetration, Gus voluntarily clarified that he identified as heterosexual and always considered himself “an all around guy who played sports and had many, many girlfriends.” As time passed, Gus found the circumstances of his life changing. He married, fathered a

daughter, and later divorced. After his marriage ended, Gus initially thought that he “didn’t want to be bothered” with another relationship; however, recalling the photograph of the transgender woman that was his “inspiration” many years before, he thought, “What the heck,” and turned to “the new computer technology” and began to explore online transgender sites. Rather than searching for quick sex, Gus found himself wanting to meet and date a TW. He soon arranged his first date with a TW he met online who invited him to a weekly transgender party.

Gus recalled how disappointing the party turned out to be. His date, though a “very nice person,” was “tall and manly” and did not at all resemble the ultra-feminine TW he had seen online; neither did many of the other cross-dressing party-goers who, Gus thought, looked “like truck drivers wearing women’s clothing.” Feeling discouraged and “out-of-place,” Gus was heading for the door when Nicki arrived in the company of several other Asian TW. “Wow, there’s something special about this person,” Gus recalled thinking when he saw her. Noticing that she was not wearing a mini-skirt or tube-top—the type of clothing that he associated with the sex workers who attended the party—Gus asked if they could exchange telephone numbers. A week later, after spending many hours speaking to one another by phone, Gus and Nicki met for their first date, the beginning of their long-term relationship.

Though at one time Gus viewed his attraction to transgender women as “more of a sexual thing,” he came to recognize that he wanted “not just the fantasy, but the whole thing.” Asked what he meant by “the whole thing,” Gus explained:

...it’s like a normal relationship...um, you know, a man and a woman is how I see it. And I’ve been married before, so I can distinguish. I mean, we have our bills, we have our jobs, we sit down to eat at home when we can. It’s like any other relationship.

Feeling “so strongly...in love” with Nicki, Gus knew that he wanted his relationship with Nicki to be “legal...and full out.” As a result, they married three times: first in Canada where same-sex marriages are permitted by law; next, wanting a wedding that they could share with Nicki’s family, they were married in the Philippines in a service conducted by a bishop who “does gay marriages” that was televised on a Phillipino version of a reality TV show; and finally, wanting to “do it legally in the United States,” Gus and Nicki registered as domestic partners in New Jersey, a commitment that Gus viewed as equal to marriage. Gus believed that when he met Nicki, he met his “soul-mate,” and though he had not disclosed to his relatives that Nicki is transgender—he planned to tell his 12-year-old daughter when she was a few years older—Gus enjoyed the love and acceptance of Nicki’s family and spoke excitedly about her nephews calling him “Tio [Uncle] Gus.”

Specialized Market Focus

The third focus we identified for participation in the MSTW market pertained to having sex with TW enabled them to explore their own femininity, as illustrated by a participant named Stan. Stan was a 52-year-old retired auto worker who lived in New Jersey and made near-weekly trips to Manhattan to attend tranny parties and clubs. Stan began having sex with TW while serving in the Navy during the Vietnam War where he “worked the same gun boats as John Kerry.” He recalled a trip to Hong Kong where he and several fellow sailors visited a nightclub that featured “hostess girls” who, in addition to drinking and dancing with military personnel, exchanged sex for money in a warren of small rooms on the club’s second floor. Stan was warned by sailors who were familiar with the club to be sure to “check the plumbing” of the girls by feeling their genitals before heading upstairs, so as to avoid ending up with those who were “not real girls.”

When dressed in women’s clothing, Stan identified as “Lynnette.” As Lynnette, Stan enjoyed both anal and oral sex with TW. Along with his fondness for “six feet and taller” brunettes, Stan found himself turned on by items of clothing that have been traditionally viewed as very feminine—“sexy” lingerie, stockings with black seams, high heeled shoes—many of the same items of clothing that Stan preferred to wear as Lynnette. And while always viewing himself as a “real lady” while in drag, Stan also enjoyed “bondage” and “rape fantasies...but never to the point where anyone gets hurt.”

As Lynnette, Stan also had sex with men, which he described as limited to “oral sex on straight guys...especially fun when they are intoxicated. That’s the way you can have fun with a straight guy,” Stan chuckled. He went on to describe a time when a policeman caught him performing oral sex on an off-duty policeman in a semi-public place. As Stan’s life and sexual experiences evolved, so did his view of his sexual orientation, which he described as follows:

I used to think I was a bit of a bisexual—and definitely a heterosexual during the early years of my first marriage. But then I got into this [cross-dressing] and it...snow-balled. Now I identify as a bisexual drag queen.

Stan’s life as a bisexual drag queen had not been without challenges; his drug use, which began during his time in Vietnam, continued in different forms, most recently with cocaine, which he and his TW partners frequently smoked when “getting down.” Stan learned that he was HIV positive 8 years ago, an infection he believed he obtained during sex with a co-worker’s wife who later died of AIDS. Being a six-foot, two-inch, broad-shouldered, manly looking drag queen who often traveled from New Jersey to New York City by public transportation, Stan also routinely encountered harassment, particularly from the police. In spite of these obstacles, however, Stan described his “totally out” life of a drag queen this way:

Am I ashamed? No. I’m totally at peace....My mother knows I’m a drag queen and we’re very tight. I’m at peace with my ex [wife], and my daughter is OK with it. And I’m happy with what I am. People who don’t know me might ridicule me. But people who know me don’t make a fuss about it.

Discussion

Though the sex marketplaces we describe above had been created and eroticized by MSTW, they were not immune to the influences of broader social forces. As Kelly and Muñoz-Laboy (2005) have noted, “...the examination of the intersection of micro-social practices and larger social structures remains crucial for a fuller understanding of human sexuality” (p. 360). Social dynamics at all the parties often mirrored broader social influences of heterosexism, homophobia, race, ethnicity, and class. Most of the parties consisted of economically privileged white men looking to purchase sex from economically marginalized transgender women-of-color. Furthermore, the parties were not free of racism. For example, before Topaz closed, several of the staff informed us that they were looking for jobs elsewhere because Topaz was becoming “too ghetto.” When we inquired further as to what they meant by “too ghetto,” the same staff would point to the groups of young, black transgender women who attended the parties—“straight-up ghetto hookers” or “black guys with dresses and fuckin’ wigs on,” as Conner the bartender described them. Not only was their race an issue; doubt was also cast on the authenticity of their gender presentation.

Lastly, the gentrification of New York City has also had a displacing impact on the MSTW sex market and in the numerous ways it once had more access to public and semi-public spaces in the city. Soon after Manhattan’s Meatpacking District became a fashionable nightspot, and a desired place to live by moneyed citizens, the tranny stroll which existed there was forced out. Gone was the stroll that for decades had economically supported many young and poor transgender women-of-color and provided a place for MSTW to meet them for sex. Perhaps even more significant to the New York MSTW sex market was the gentrification and redevelopment of Times Square over the past two decades. Prior to gentrification, the area was a significant part of the public-commercial sexual landscape of New York City in general, and home to a MSTW sexual economy characterized by numerous transgender bars and clubs, in addition to low-cost hotels that housed many transgender sex-workers. Many people interviewed for this study historically traced their introduction to this sex market back to a version of Times Square that no longer exists.

In this study, we identified three recurrent focuses on the utilization of MSTW sex market. In thinking about MSTW, one might be tempted to assume that all members of this

sexual subculture were sexually attracted to TW due to the presence of their penises. Analysis of the data obtained during the course of this study, however, revealed a more complex picture: in this study—as in our culture—the penis was extremely important to many, less important to others, and nearly insignificant to some. Weeks (1986/2002) was correct in pointing out that there is a marked difference between the “supercharged symbolic value” (p. 52) of the penis and the way penises actually appear in real life:

Male genitals are fragile, squashy, delicate things...penises are only little things (even big ones) without much staying power, pretty if you can learn to see them like that, but not magical or mysterious or powerful in themselves, that is, not objectively full of real power. (p. 53)

What truly matters about penises (or, for that matter, any other sexual organ) is the social and psychological significance ascribed to them (Weeks, 1986/2002). The men in the study did not express an interest in penile characteristics that are frequently considered important by others—for example, color, width, curve, circumcised/uncircumcised, or the shape of the head. However, these men expressed that size, functionality (i.e., the ability to achieve and maintain an erection and the ability to ejaculate), and what one of our participants called “erotic balance” (i.e., a penis as part of the body of a person who in every other way looks like a biological woman) were all essential physical components of their sexual desire for TW.

In addition to the pleasure provided by the physical characteristics of size, functionality, and erotic balance, men exhibiting this pattern of desire for TW described a common affective element resulting from being the receptive partner during anal sex—what one of our participants referred to as “role reversal.” In contrast to their TW partners’ masculine role of “aggressive” and “dominant” penetrators during anal sex, these men were able to enjoy being penetrated—experiences they interpreted as a form of feminine behavior. Freddy noted that he found it “fun trying something that [he] thought was prohibited for straight guys.”

The phallus-centric market focus seems to be formed and influenced by specific historic and social circumstances. Specifically, these men live during a time in which “demand for commercially available services has not only soared, but become ever more specialized” (Bernstein, 2001, p. 392). The phallus-centric market focus illustrates how the sexual objectification of women has been extended to TW; as one key informant stated, “the men view the girls like blow-up sex dolls.” Freddy and the other men in our sample that exhibited this pattern of desire for TW lived in a time during which a shift from “the relational to recreational model of sexual intimacy [and a] symbiotic relationship between the information economy and commercial sex consumption” occurred (Bernstein, 2001, p. 411). These men had unprecedented access

to TW pornography in magazines, videocassettes, DVDs, and on the Internet.

The stories of the men in our study suggested a second market-focus, relational-companionship. As a result of the current social context in United States sexual politics, MSTW exist in a veritable no-man’s land, void of examples of relationships that mirror and validate their experiences. As a result, men like Gus were forced to organize their relationships with TW on their own. Gus, who was previously married to a biological woman, attempted to reproduce a heterosexual relationship with Nicki, a type of relationship with which he was familiar. Gus viewed his relationship with his transgender wife as “normal” in that it consisted of “a man and a woman” who “like any other relationship” lived together, shared meals, and worried about bills.

Transgressing heterosexism to maintain companionship and intimate social relations with TW is a major challenge for MSTW. After witnessing TW being “treated as second-class citizens by both the gay and straight communities,” a number of the men expanded their community activism beyond the confines of transgender parties and social events and regularly marched in New York City’s annual LGBT parade as a means of publicly supporting TW in their struggle for social and economic justice.

The third focus of participation in the MSTW sex market was the desire to have space to cross the binary gender through cross-dressing. In cross-dressing and having sex with straight men, MSTW assumed a unique quality of active resistance, both taunting and destabilizing heteronormativity. For example, in addition to providing him with intense sexual pleasure, Stan was a “rebel” who, when assuming his Lynette persona, intentionally resisted conforming to the rules of heteronormativity.

Our data were consistent with Weinberg and Williams’ (2010) findings, particularly on the emphasis of the penis and cross-dressing as commodities in the interactions in the sexual marketplace of the bar. Because we used a different methodology and conceptual framework, we were able to deepen our understanding of MSTW not as a sexual subculture but as a distinct sex market itself that operates as any other sex market in a geographical space. Similar to heterosexual markets in the city that have transactional-trade focus (e.g., bars for one night stands, heterosexual sex work spaces); relational-companionship focus (e.g., speed dating spaces, singles events in church); or specialized market focus (e.g., dominatrix dungeons), the MSTW sex market in the city seems to operate parallel to these other markets, providing perhaps critical sexual space in the landscape of the city. Further research must examine how stable are MSTW market configurations, the impact of participating in diverse components of MSTW sex market on their sexual practices or in the ways men construct their masculinities, the impact of racial–ethnic–class dynamics

on men's participations in MSTW markets, and so on. Although the findings from the study are not representative of the broader MSTW population, they represent an important step in amassing a body of knowledge about an understudied and underserved sex market upon which future research is needed.

Limitations

This study had several methodological limitations. First, from a sampling perspective, findings based on 2-h interviews conducted with a sample of 15 MSTW recruited from a limited number of venues in a small geographic area cannot be generalized to all MSTW. The recruitment strategies used also had inherent limitations. In our desire to reach authentic MSTW, we relied heavily on one recruitment source, a magazine that targeted MSTW. This approach may have produced a sample of men who were more comfortable talking about their sex lives and more financially secure (as they were able to afford the \$6 price of the publication) than may have resulted from alternative recruitment strategies. We attempted to address this limitation by recruiting other participants from the field. Recruitment from the venues in which participant observation was conducted, however, proved not to be very useful in addressing this limitation, as many of the venues had entrance fees ranging from \$20 to \$50. As evidence of this limitation, none of the study's participants were unemployed or on public assistance. Thus, caution must be used to generalize study findings at the individual level (i.e., MSTW communities). However, we conducted in-depth interviews where most recent studies available with MSTW have used either online surveys or on-the-spot interviews; thus, our method provides a level of richness, comprehensiveness, and insights that might be difficult to achieve using these other methods. Furthermore, our systematic ethnographic observations of the MSTW marketplaces provided triangulation to our narrative findings.

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Appendix 1: Biocapsules of Research Participants

MSTW In-Depth Interview Participants

- Aaron, at 27-years-old, was the youngest research participant in the study, and was the only informant recruited through the advertisement placed on the Craig's List website. Aaron lived on Staten Island with his parents and worked in Manhattan as a clerk in a small manufacturing business near Times Square. Describing himself as a "late bloomer," Aaron began meeting TW in tranny chat rooms while still a teenager, but did not have sex with a transgender woman until he was 25-years-old.
- Brian was 40-year-old doctor from a small southern city who frequently visited to New York City to meet and have sex with TW. The father of two young children, Brian ended his 19-year marriage during the time this study was being conducted. Though Brian recalled some boyhood memories of looking at *Playboy* magazines and imagining that the women had penises under their panties, it was not until 3 years before this study that he began to explore online transgender websites. His first sexual encounter with a transgender woman (actually two women simultaneously) occurred the night he first met the study's authors at a tranny party.
- Felipe was an 80-year-old musician originally from the Southwestern United States. Married twice, and the father of several adult children, Felipe had spent the last 50 years working full-time as a professional musician. Though his introduction to TW took place when he began performing in Manhattan clubs in the 1950s, he did not begin having sex with TW until the late 1980s.
- Frank was a 71-year-old man who had been self-employed for many years in telecommunications and real estate. Frank started going to transgender bars 26 years prior to his involvement in the study, but only began dating TW 3 years prior, when his wife developed what was thought to be a terminal illness and instructed Frank to "find someone." Though Frank's wife of "40-somethin' years" survived the illness, they had an "understanding" that allowed Frank to pursue his interest in TW. Frank worked as a volunteer counselor for "Renaissance," an organization whose mission was to assist people who were going through gender transitions.
- Freddy was a 42-year-old man who had been married for 15 years and was the father of three children. He was employed by a company that rented film equipment to movie productions. Freddy regularly visited transgender and biological female sex workers, a habit he kept from his family and friends.
- Gus was a 51-year-old man who worked as a doorman at an apartment building on the Upper West Side. Divorced from his first wife, and the father of a teenage daughter, Gus lived in New Jersey with Nicki, his transgender wife. Gus first learned of transgender women in his mid-20s, but did not have sex with a transgender woman until he met Nicki.
- Juan was a 44-year-old writer who covered entertainment topics for several popular magazines in New York. Originally from Spain, Juan began attending tranny parties in

the early 1990s as part of his job. Rather private about his sex life, Juan preferred to speak more about the social life he had shared with a number of TW, including dinner and movie dates. Juan had been attending one of New York's tranny parties for over 10 years and considers it his "neighborhood bar."

- Lou was a 39-year-old former professional athlete who first had sex as a 17-year-old high school student when he met some TW in the Times Square area of New York. With a college degree and some experience as an exotic dancer in Times Square clubs, Lou was employed in the manufacturing and selling of industrial cleaning supplies. Not married or romantically involved, Lou viewed himself as "technically on the down-low."
- Mark was a 46-year-old carpenter who was divorced after 20 years of marriage. He was the father of two children. Mark began having sex with transgender women at the age of 20. Though he still hoped to re-marry, Mark continued to have sex with transgender women whenever the "urge struck."
- Martin was a 40-year-old computer programmer who volunteered as a bartender at one of New York's weekly transgender parties. Though never married, Martin had several extended relationships with TW and viewed himself as an activist for transgender rights.
- Mike was a 45-year-old firefighter who lived on Long Island with his wife of 13 years, and their two children. Mike first learned of TW while looking at pornography during his teenage years, but did not have sex with them until several years before he was married. Though he hoped his marriage might "cure" him of his interest in TW, his unusual hours working as a firefighter provided him with frequent opportunities to attend tranny parties where he met TW for sex.
- Paulie was a 38-year-old Italian-American from Brooklyn, who had worked at various points in his life as a carpenter, but had recently spent several years in prison for "racketeerin' and bank robbery." Single at the time of his interview, Paulie had been "involved" with a biological woman for 9 years, but began to have sex with TW in the 1990s.
- Richard was a 41-year-old actor with a successful theater career both in New York City and other major cities across the country. Formerly married to a woman who introduced him to receptive anal sex, Richard lived with a female companion who was aware of his sexual attraction to TW. Out of "respect" for his current relationship, Richard was abstaining from having sex with TW, but retained "blissful memories of being on [his] hands and knees while getting fucked and feeling [his partner's] breasts brush across his back," what he recalled as "the best of both worlds."
- Stan/Lynette was a 50-year-old veteran and retired auto worker who lived in New Jersey. Married twice and the father of two adult children, Stan's first sexual encounter with a TW took place when he was 19-years-old and on leave in Hong Kong during the Vietnam War. Stan found out he was HIV-positive 8 years ago. When cross-dressing, Stan preferred to be called Lynette.
- Tim/Sharon Opal Williams was a 41-year-old "professional" in the restaurant industry. Raised in a fundamentalist Christian family, Tim's first sexual experience with a TW was at the age of 15. Later married, Tim's marriage ended in divorce when his wife could no longer accept Tim's cross-dressing. While cross-dressing, Tim chose to be known as Sharon Opal Williams.

Key Informants of Ethnographic Observations

- Amanda was a transgender woman who began going to transgender bars in Manhattan in 1976, where she subsequently worked as a cocktail waitress and "watched the interplay between the men and the [transgender] women." Prior to her own gender transition, Amanda enjoyed sex with transgender women. Alongside her work in a financial institution, Amanda was a social activist committed to the full inclusion of transgender people in the political process, civil rights, education, and healthcare.
- Conner, in his early 30s, tended bar at three different transgender parties while this study was being conducted. "Not into she-males," Conner identified as a heterosexual and lived in New Jersey with his girlfriend. He preferred to tend bar at transgender parties because the pay was good; earning anywhere from \$600 to \$800 for a 6 h shift. Considering himself as "part friend, part therapist, and part spiritual advisor" to the MSTW who attended the parties, Conner defined his job this way: "My job as a bartender is to make everyone believe that I'm their frickin' best friend."
- DeDe was a transgender woman who worked as a combination doorkeeper/floor manager at one of the more popular transgender parties in New York City.
- Georgia Peach was a 26-year-old sex worker and a regular attendee at many of the transgender parties where I conducted fieldwork. Originally from the Midwest, as was the ethnographer, Georgia and he quickly established a rapport.
- Heather was a 26 year old transgender sex worker whom I met at one of the more popular transgender parties in the City. In addition to frequent conversations about MSTW at the parties, Heather allowed him to formally interview her on three occasions. At the time of this writing, Heather was no longer involved in sex work and was dating one of this study's research participants. Though completely

“passable” as a woman, Heather had plans to go to Thailand for sexual reassignment surgery in early 2008.

- Giovanni enjoyed attending transgender parties and had been doing so for a number of years for the enjoyment of their “cutting edge feeling,” and their “fascinating clientele.” Giovanni did not identify as a MSTW.
- Jenny was a transgender woman who frequently hosted transgender parties around New York City.
- Leah was a transgender woman who performed sex work at one of our fieldwork sights. She and the ethnographer frequently sat near each other at the bar, and Leah was never one to shy away from offering her opinions about anyone or anything at the party once she learned he was a researcher.
- Lena was the hostess and promoter of Lena’s Silver Moon transgender party and revered for her service to the transgender community for providing a safe and enjoyable social environment where all were welcome. Lena’s support of this study was invaluable; with her assistance, the ethnographer was introduced to many MSTW, four of which agreed to be interviewed for this study.
- Mark was the volunteer DJ at one of the City’s more popular transgender parties. In addition to playing great music, Mark was a MSTW who enjoyed introducing the ethnographer to other men of the same persuasion.
- Richard was a gay-identified man in his early 30s who had been working as the doorman at Lena’s Silver Moon transgender party for 3 years. Though he initially took the job as a means to earn some extra money, Richard’s work at the Silver Moon had become an integral part of his week. Richard “took pride” in the fact that he was the first person people encountered when they arrived at the party and was the person who “set the tone of the party,” assuring people “they [would] have a good time” in a “fun and safe environment.”
- Sal was an MSTW whom the ethnographer frequently met during fieldwork. Employed at a large Wall Street firm, Sal was initially reticent about talking about his own experiences as an MSTW. (He failed to show up to two scheduled interviews.) However, my conversations with Sal provided significant insights into MSTW culture, and kept the ethnographer abreast of other transgender parties happening around the City.
- Sally was a transgender woman who had been attending transgender parties for 3 years. Though Sally identified as a “transsexual lesbian,” her regular attendance at a tranny parties, and her keen sense of observation, made her an invaluable key informant.

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