

HIV/AIDS EDUCATION AND THE (Mis)representation of Safe Sex

Christopher Kendall

Safe sex and the meaning of negotiation amongst equals.

There has been much discussion in recent years about the role of and need for gay male pornography in the lives of gay men. Arguments in favour of gay porn and against legal efforts to regulate its production and distribution are numerous.¹ This article does not examine all of the arguments for and against gay male pornography.² Rather, it focuses solely on the claim that in a culture which rejects same-sex sexual expression and in which AIDS and HIV transmission remain very much an issue, same-sex sexual imagery must be promoted as it provides a rare forum for the dissemination of the types of messages which ensure that gay men have access to a source of identity politics which is both liberating and life affirming. Ultimately, this argument is rejected.

This article argues that gay male pornography does little to promote the type of life-affirming gay male identity required to ensure that gay men take the sexual and personal precautions needed to ensure that safe-sex is in fact practised and guaranteed. On the contrary, gay porn asks only that gay men assimilate into the mainstream by becoming the 'real' men, socially, they have been told they should have been all along and promotes a sexuality which is far from equality-based. Ultimately, this may result in considerable self-hate and the suppression of any gay male sexual expression which challenges the types of sexual inequalities that result in homophobia and systemic inequality in the first place.

This article also argues that the ideals conveyed in gay male pornographic materials now find expression in many of the safe-sex educational materials used by gay rights organisations throughout Australia to disseminate safe-sex messages, such that their effectiveness is seriously undermined. In conclusion, it will be argued that while gay men are entitled to question legal efforts to regulate same-sex sexual images and representations, they should not do so without first examining whether the messages they are trying to protect are actually empowering gay men to respect and protect themselves and others, or whether they simply reinforce the types of cultural stereotypes and inequalities which ultimately cause considerable personal and systemic harm.

If I said you had a beautiful body would you hold it against me?: A West Australian perspective

HIV/AIDS education aimed at the gay male community almost invariably relies on the use of images of young, white men who are hyper-fit, hyper-masculine and hyper-'male' (a point I will clarify later in this article). A recent flyer circulated by the West Australian AIDS Council, for example, features the muscled torso of a young man posing in his underwear. The flyer was intended to encourage gay men to attend a series of workshops on safe sexual practices. It is a flyer which I choose to refer to only because it is typical of the types of mediums used today to teach gay men about safe sex. A similar flyer can probably be found in most HIV/AIDS organisations throughout Australia.

Christopher Kendall teaches law at Murdoch University. I would like to thank Jeremy Curthoys for encouraging me to publish this work and, most importantly, for allowing me to 'steal' his ideas! Your insight and generosity are, as always, much appreciated.

The efficacy of this image as a method for teaching gay men about AIDS and HIV transmission needs to be questioned as an analysis of the message it and others like it conveys says a great deal about how gay men are supposed to look, act and feel about their sexual identity. This is particularly evident if we examine what safe sex is and what safe sex requires. For the purposes of my argument, I propose the following theory regarding the nature of safe sexual practices:

- safe sex requires negotiation between those having sex;
- such negotiation requires that the parties treat themselves and each other as valued human beings, deserving of equality, reciprocity and respect;
- self-esteem is critical and required before we can respect ourselves and others and ultimately engage as an equal with others;
- equality lies at the heart of self-esteem.

The question that needs to be asked is whether the messages gay men are presently conveying to each other about same-sex sexual activity support the type of equality-based relationships with others needed to ensure negotiation amongst equals and ultimately, safe sexual practices. I think not.

To return to the flyer mentioned above, since we can't tell from the flyer 'who' this young man is (recall that we are only presented with a muscular, white torso), we are left only with the 'option' of asking 'what' he is. It is worth noting that the young man presented is only part of a person. He is incomplete and, as such, anonymous. He is without an identity other than one defined by his body. In short, he is presented as a mere object, not a whole person. In a world in which gay men are forced (sometimes quite violently) to hide their real identities, this image again invites us to treat those around us as mere objects, as things devoid of any human identity.

This is problematic for a number of reasons. To begin with, we rarely feel obliged to think or care about how we treat many of the objects we come into contact with. It is only when someone is recognised as a subject that we are forced to think about who he is, what we are doing to him and what the consequences of our actions are for him. More importantly, however, it is only when we have the subject in mind that negotiation with that subject even begins to be relevant — assuming, of course, that you are willing and able to recognise him as one.

Gay male pornography³

What else does the image outlined above tell us? Note that it presents what many in the gay male community today perceive to be the physical ideal. The flyer could easily be taken from any number of gay male pornographic magazines presently available throughout Australia. For reasons far too numerous to effectively outline here, many in the gay male community believe gay pornography is central to the development and formation of gay male identity. Whatever the reason for this belief, our community's fixation with gay porn as an effective 'learning tool' is problematic. This is particularly apparent when viewed within the context of those sexual messages defended as a form of safe-sex education.

Gay male pornography creates a sexual hierarchy in which 'he' who is aggressive and dominant (read masculine) is powerful (read the epitome of what it means to be male socially defined) and the person over/upon whom that power

is exercised is non-masculine, hence feminised, hence non-powerful (read 'female' as socially defined). It is this sexuality that violates women and it is this sexuality that leads to the oppression of gay men. Gay male pornography, because it glorifies the masculine, reinforces a male/female social dichotomy. In doing so, it strengthens those stereotypes that allow society to view certain behaviour as feminine, hence inferior, and reaffirms, because it reinforces, the idea that it is unnatural to engage in a sexual dynamic not premised on male/female polarity.

Gay male pornography invites the man who uses it to participate in a sexual dynamic premised on sexual inequality. With titles like 'Beat Me Till I Come,' 'Stud Daddy' and 'I Was a Substitute Vagina,' gay male pornography sends a very clear message about what the idealised gay male is in today's society: young, muscular, 'good looking', preferably white, definitely able-bodied. In all of these materials, it is the white, physically more powerful, more dominant, ostensibly straight male who is afforded role model status. The result is a sexuality that is rarely mutual and based on compassion or respect for others. What one gets from gay porn is a sexuality that epitomises inequality: exploitation of others, assertiveness linked with aggression, physical power and the right to overpower, intimidation and non-consensual behaviour sexualised as normal and liberating — in sum, an identity politics which mimics a model of behaviour which is more concerned with the use and abuse of others found in the form of sexual hierarchy than with liberation from that hierarchy.

Some have argued that gay male pornography is necessary as a mechanism for the dissemination of safe-sex education. I remain unconvinced. To begin with, most gay male pornography today *fails* to deliver a safe-sex message. The condom is neither seen nor discussed.⁴ And should this surprise us? What one sees in gay porn is a sexual model that copies the power inequalities present in straight sex — sex through which (male) power is gained by controlling/dominating those around you. Given that the gay sex presented in gay porn attempts to look (and does so quite successfully) a lot like the sex that straight men have in straight porn, and given that, socially, the act of penetration determines who controls who and who, as a result, gets male power, and given that all pornography focuses on the right of the masculine top to penetrate the disempowered bottom, be they a woman or a less aggressive man who as such is socially feminised, deemed less male and rendered socially less significant, it is not surprising that gay porn continues to present unprotected penetrative sex — that is, penetration in which the condom is neither used or, for the purposes of pornographic sale, carefully concealed. Safe-sex has come to be regarded as gay-sex (hence less 'male'). Thus, gay sex which rejects safe sex presentations becomes descriptively less gay, socially more 'male' — the real identity sold in gay male porn.

In addition, however, given what the sex in gay porn has come to represent, it is also clear that in many ways safe sex stands to emasculate the pornographic symbol. For safe sex to work, one needs to accept that both parties have rights — the right to protection and more importantly, the right to a recognised human existence. In a sense, safe sex represents a form of negotiation imposing limits on sexual conduct — negotiation between relatively equal parties. More importantly, however, it recognises that there are limits on what you can do without the consent of the other. Given then that gay porn presents a sexuality in which 'real' men do not need

consent, such that sex which does is interpreted so as to undermine the apparent right of men to do as they please, it is not surprising that any 'appliance' which imposes a limit on this right, is not promoted. Hence, much like straight sex, sex in which women are made responsible for protecting themselves physically with contraceptive techniques and devices which can cause irreparable harm and sometimes death, and in which men are deemed to have no responsibility whatsoever for the safety and comfort of their partners, gay sex, as taught in gay porn, teaches gay men that real men do as they please, while fags simply hope for the best — an option which is particularly troubling given that many of the men in gay porn are offered no voice with which to insist on safe sex and are instead told that should simply find gratification underneath the weight of a real man who wants to use them.

Gay male pornography, in common with all pornography, treats those it uses as objects that deserve only to be used and ultimately discarded. Its message is that inequality is the norm. The dominant male it glorifies is invariably 'straight acting' and the person upon whom he acts is not. Even when only one figure is shown the problem still arises as the figure presented is invariably the idealised masculine norm — an ideal which now permeates popular gay male culture such that gay male culture has, in many ways, become a pornographic culture devoid of those qualities on which true equality must be built.

As stated, the messages gay men now use to educate each other about safe-sex tend to mimic and rely on the types of imagery so readily presented in gay pornography. This raises a multitude of issues. First, if safe sex is about negotiation how does a person who is subservient even begin to negotiate? Second, many in the gay community are not, or do not wish to be, 'straight acting'. What does this imagery say to them? Third, the masculine physical ideal, based on dominant and subservient roles, is imposed on us by society — a society in which power is exercised by those who link masculine and feminine stereotypes with compulsory heterosexuality. This is the polar opposite of equality. It does nothing to further gay liberation. It perpetuates our own oppression and justifies the oppression of others such that we now find ourselves buying into the very power structures that seek to exclude us.

The message conveyed in images which sexualise hyper-masculinity is one which asks only that we be all that a community obsessed with manliness says a man should be. For many gay men, this results in incredible self-loathing, low self-esteem and self-hate. The standard set is a standard that is not easily met or maintained. For many gay men, men who have for too long been denied participation in a society quick to suppress individual development, the imagery the gay male community offers as identity results in overwhelming despair and a sense of non-belonging.⁵ Should it surprise us then that this too, combined with the effects of homophobic rejection generally, has already taken its toll on our community and the community at large? The spectre of AIDS has shown us that we can care and we must care. We have not, however, carried this over into our sexual relationships and, perhaps ironically, this has only worsened the reality of AIDS in our community.

Gay men assert that we are not to blame for AIDS. We cannot, however, state with the same certainty that we offer each other any incentive to care about ourselves, to look to the future and to recognise that our lives are worth preserving. We tell each other that to be gay is to live for the moment — to use it while you have it and to make sure that if you don't

have it you work hard to get it. Because we are encouraged to participate in a sexual game devoid of caring and compassion, both for ourselves and others, a game which focuses only on controlling or being controlled, we define our personal integrity through our sexual encounters — by how often we get sex and with whom. For many, the power of sex, of finding approval and validation in the sexual act, of longing to be told that you still have what it takes, far outweighs any need for self-preservation. Believing that you have no right to question, that you should simply be happy that a real man wants you, and desperate for approval, self-respect and personal safety take a back seat, with often catastrophic results.

This problem is part of a broader problem of identification. Even when we do 'come out' our sexuality remains anonymous. We fail to own it. It is not a part of us, but rather something we treat as separate from our individuality. When we sexually interact with others we see ourselves as operating only on a sexual basis. We don't interact as individuals. Given this, why worry about someone you see only in sexual terms? Indeed, why ask that they care about you?

Conclusion

Gay men must no longer accept or believe that the means justify the ends in HIV/AIDS education. Most of us know the mechanism of infection and the days of transmission resulting from sheer ignorance are long gone. So why then the recent alarming increase in HIV infection amongst young gay men worldwide? It has been my purpose in writing this article to encourage those who care about our community to re-think the messages we are providing each other about self-respect and self-preservation. I have not attempted to 'prove' anything. Rather, I have simply queried the effectiveness of a political and human rights strategy which accepts and reinforces the message that unless you personify a sexualised norm which has little if anything to do with self-respect and respect for others, you are without value.

When I first mentioned my concerns about the types of flyers being used by WAAC to promote its safe-sex campaign, I was asked whether I 'had a problem with erotica'. In response, I would like only to state that if erotica is about equality, mutuality, reciprocity and respect, then I do not have a problem with erotica. If, however, erotica, as presently defined, is about devaluing the individual, anonymity and the perpetuation of inequality, then yes, I do have a problem with it. Put simply, if inequality is what turns gay men on, it is hardly liberating and it most definitely is *not* life affirming.

References

1. See generally, Sherman, Jeffrey, 'Love Speech: The Social Utility of Pornography', (1995) 47 *Stanford Law Review* 661; and Burger, John, *One Handed Histories: The Eroto-Politics of Gay Male Video Pornography*, Harrington Park Press, New York, 1995.
2. For arguments by gay men opposed to the production and distribution and production of gay male pornography, see Kendall, C., 'Gay Male Pornography: An Issue of Sex Discrimination' (1995) 5 *Australian Feminist Law Journal* 81; and Stoltzenberg, John, *Refusing to be a Man*, Meridian Books, New York, 1991.
3. Some of the ideas expressed in this section appear or are further explained in Kendall, C., 'Gay Male Pornography/Gay Male Community: Power Without Consent, Mimicry Without Subversion', in Kuypers, J. (ed.), *Men and Power*, Halifax: Fernwood Press, forthcoming 1997.
4. See Patton, Cindy, 'Safe Sex and the Pornographic Vernacular' in Bad Object Choices (eds), *How Do I Look?* Bay Press, Seattle, 1991.
5. See Harris, Will, 'Porn Again' in *Campaign Magazine*, Sydney, December 1993 at 46-50.