

Promiscuity is complex

By Sean McLennan

It was a year ago this issue that my first article appeared in *Outlooks*—one about Manchester, Britain’s gay mecca. Excited about my new writing position, I widely publicized its appearance amongst my friends and family, including my parents. After it came out I asked my mother what she thought and her cryptic reply was: “I don’t like promiscuity.”

I was really taken aback! And honestly, I didn’t even understand what in the article had prompted her to say that. In the end, I had to go back and reread it myself. I surmised that it was because I had complemented Healthy Gay Manchester on its extensive education campaign which went as far as to distribute booklets describing the legalities of cruising, the individual’s rights and a step-by-step arrest scenario. I also complemented them on their anti-AIDS program, which provides safer sex packs everywhere on Canal Street. This pocket-sized pack includes two condoms and lube, acknowledging the number one cause of condom breakage. In a time when North America is facing increasing AIDS cases because of waning educational efforts, it seemed to me that Manchester was way ahead of the game.

I assume that it was references such as this that caused her to make a connection between the pervasiveness of such materials and the fact that gay men were out having copious amounts of sex—and I assume that her comments were motivated out of concern for my own health and well-being and a reluctance to bring up the subject directly, not because she has backward views of sex education (which I know she doesn’t).

Whether we like it or not, the connection that she made, I think, is a common perception in the population at large, and whether we like it or not, it’s a perception that has a firm and justifiable grounding in reality. It is probably the case that gay men are more promiscuous than any other demographic group (by “promiscuous”, I mean “having many transient sexual relationships”—i.e. sex with lots of different partners, not necessarily more sex in general).

The reality of this fact is one of the most emotionally laden controversies related to homosexuality (and the fight for our acceptance) both within the gay community and in our relations with the straight public. It is not necessarily just the right-wing extremists that have problems accepting the amount of same-sex contact that goes on in parks, tea-rooms, and bathhouses all across North America—in fact, not insignificant portions of the gay community have supported movements to

crack down on casual sex. They would argue that this behaviour counters their efforts to establish same-sex relationships as valuable and equal to heterosexual ones. But queer activists on the other side of the spectrum would argue that casual sex constitutes an integral aspect of gay-male culture and that there is no reason that we should be required to conform to a heterosexual norm of what sexual relationships are perceived to be—they are fundamentally different in so many ways that no analogy can be drawn between the two.



I’m in no position to resolve these issues. In fact, I don’t even think that they are very interesting—ultimately the judgment of whether gay male promiscuity is “good” or “bad” is a matter of opinion and cultural norms that are largely arbitrary. What is often overlooked and dismissed while people battle out “good” and “bad” is the remarkable complexity of factors that influence to the situation. What an excellent opportunity it provides us for learning more about human nature. Many of these questions have not even been posed, let alone explored in serious academic research, possibly because of the socio-political implications of doing so.

Starting right from the bottom, there are several interesting biological questions that can be asked. Do views of sexuality vary significantly along gender lines? Do men and women approach sex differently? Common wisdom tells us that men are more sexually aggressive, more visually stimulated and less emotionally involved in sex, but this position is difficult to demonstrate scientifically because it is impossible to eliminate the role that the status of women in our society plays in the socialization of courting and sexuality. You cannot ignore that aspect when considering gay and lesbian sexual relations, but one could argue that they apply to a lesser extent. Homosexuals have to challenge all sorts of socialization issues; why would the ones applying to promiscuity and casual sex be the only

ones left intact? Homosexuals provide a unique comparison group to examine the totality of human sexuality—and it has been my observation that same-sex groups conform to the common wisdom. We can see very significant differences between the way queer men and women deal with sex, lending weight to the argument that such differences have a biological basis.

Then again... there could be significant social issues that contribute more to gay male promiscuity than to the population in general. The roots of addictive behaviour (of any sort) have been well mapped and are more or less consistent. They include extreme feelings of loneliness and isolation, fear of abandonment and a significantly marginalized self-image. These are all very serious issues for youth that are growing up knowing that they are different from the norm. And since the issue surrounds sexuality, it may be that gay youth have a stronger predilection towards sexual addiction than straight youth. Note: this does not imply that all gay males are sex addicts or even that a significant portion of them are. It suggests only that the percentage may be higher than the straight population and that may be a contributing factor in gay male promiscuity.

It may also be that sexual addiction in the gay population may be quite different than in the straight population. Because promiscuity seems more acceptable in the gay community (a fact evident from the established existence of bathhouses, for example) it may be that sexual addiction is more manageable for gay men as far as dealing with it in their daily lives. This, on one hand may allow for less personal turmoil, but, on the other hand, may make it more difficult for sufferers to identify the problem and get help. Think of the difference between tobacco addiction and alcoholism—the former being more condoned by our culture because it has less dramatic social and individual impact, and consequently it is a much more ubiquitous problem.

There are also a number of social questions that can be explored via comparisons between gay and straight groups. Take pornography, for example. It is often argued that pornography is degrading to women because there is a male-female power dynamic in our society in which women are seen as inferior. This is a significant reason why pornography is “just bad.” However, can the same be said of gay pornography? When the participants are both male (as is the intended audience), the aforementioned power dynamic is completely removed from the equation. What are the implications of that? Does it mean that

pornography is generally degrading to everyone, male or female? Or does it constitute a model for pornography that is not degrading to anyone?

Similar comparisons can be drawn in many other areas; there is a completely untapped resource for exploring interpersonal relationships (both sexual and otherwise) that lack our society’s gender bias. Queer relationships could perhaps even stand as a model for straight, egalitarian relationships and shed light on challenges like negotiating household tasks in the absence of stereotypical gender roles.

More subtle anthropological issues have begun to be explored surrounding gay male promiscuity. Specifically, the notion of public vs. private is the subject of a book called *Public Sex /Gay Space*, edited by William Leap. All of the essays contained therein relate to how gay men construct “private space” given the challenges of meeting and copping off with other gay men. There are some very interesting findings; for example, it appears that the definition of “public” for gay-identifying males is actually closer to the straight cultural norm than to straight-identifying men who have sex with other men.

These sorts of examinations may seem rather esoteric and nit-picky, but they have very real down-to-earth implications. For example, recently thirteen men were arrested after being filmed in a bathroom in Ohio. Only one challenged the use of secret video on the grounds that it violated his right to privacy; his challenge was not successful. Privacy issues have always been at the heart of laws surrounding homosexuality and anthropological examinations of the subtleties of the construction of private space may well have a significant impact on those laws.

Gay male promiscuity is complex subject and it is not simply a question of morality. It is rich with academic concerns, opportunities and implications that supercede sexual orientation and speak to human society in general. In my opinion, we need to understand in much greater detail the factors contributing to promiscuity and ask the questions that remain taboo in our society before we can pass judgment on its nature, good or bad. Anything else is jumping to a conclusion without possessing all the facts.

Sean McLennan has a degree in Linguistics from the University of Calgary and he’s currently working towards a PhD in Linguistics and Cognitive Science at Indiana University. In between research, classes, and teaching, he does Web-design, writes for a Japanese English-learning magazine, and is active in a local GLBT education group.