

Maintaining a Heterosexual Identity: Sexual Meanings Among a Sample of Heterosexually Identified Men who have Sex with Men

Heterosexually identified men who have sex with men are an understudied group for whom there is little knowledge of the social and sexual meanings of their same sex encounters. This study employed qualitative methods to better understand the maintenance of a heterosexual identity in the face of discordant sexual behaviors. Open-ended, in depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 21 heterosexually identified men (M age, 39.85 years) who reported at least one sexual encounter with a male in the previous year but not more than one sexual encounter per month with a male. Of the participants, 61.9% were African American/black, 28.6% were currently married, 71.4% reported current substance use, and 57.1% were HIV infected. Participants did not consider their same-sex activities as discrepant with their heterosexual identity as these activities were coded as infrequent, recreational, accidental, or an economic necessity. They avoided intimacy by depersonalizing male sexual partners, limiting gestures (e.g., kissing, hugging, eye contact, conversation), and by distancing themselves from gay-identified venues. Participants transferred responsibility for their same-sex sexual activities by blaming external factors, such as a fight with their wife or substance use, for the sexual encounters. Despite their ability to compartmentalize these sexual encounters, many participants expressed guilt and shame when discussing their same sex experiences.