

“The Provider”: The Effects of Economic Inequalities and Masculine Gender Roles on Self-efficacy and Sexual Decision Making among MSM

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Background

Self-efficacy has been a model to understand condom negotiations among men who have sex (MSM); however the model focuses primarily on individual characteristics and few studies have examined effects of relationship dynamics such as gender and inequalities on self-efficacy. While recent research has begun to address the role of financial imbalance in condom negotiations for heterosexual females, studies have not examined how dynamics of financial imbalance and power affect sexual decision making among MSM. Theories of power and control suggest that men exert aggression to maintain their role of control in a relationship. Feminist theory points a finger to sociocultural context that promotes patriarchy, traditional gender roles and imbalance of power in relationships. Previous studies of Masculine Gender Role Stress have addressed primarily the association of stress on heterosexual male sexual risk taking and aggression. Although they were originally based in heterosexual populations, these theories may prove useful in developing a framework around the self-efficacy model to understand power within the context of same-sex relationships between men. Adherence to a traditional masculine role implies a disempowered feminine role which in turn may impact sexual decision-making through its effect on the self-efficacy of the disempowered partner.

Methods :

The 10-week longitudinal study consisted of 3 phases: a baseline in-depth interview (IDI), personal relationship diaries and a debrief IDI. Participants were MSM aged ≥ 18 and reported recent unprotected anal intercourse. During the baseline IDI participants reported up to 5 past relationships using a timeline with pre-determined labels and forced ranking to rate aspects of the relationships such as risk. Participant then completed 3 web-based personal relationship diaries that tracked sexual experiences over the study period. The debrief IDI was used to process the diaries in more depth and included tools similar to the baseline including pre-determined labels and forced ranking. There was no loss to follow-up and 100% retention. Verbatim transcripts were analyzed as individual life-stories using MaxQDA 11 software and coded based on reoccurring themes across the data. Analysis included codes pertaining to inequalities, economics, masculinity, dominance and sexual risk-taking.

Results:

Our preliminary results suggest that in male same-sex relationships, men still try to follow traditional gender roles based on characteristics and behaviors associated with “masculinity” and “femininity.” These scripts are primarily defined by financial support where one partner is the “provider” or “sugar daddy.” This role is also sometimes reinforced by differences in age. The masculine role is coded with dominance, control and power, which implies that the other partner plays a feminine role coded with submissiveness, lack of control and disempowerment. This implied power balance may have an effect on self-efficacy of the partners placed in disempowered gender roles and in turn may affect sexual-decision making such as condom negotiations.

Masculinity, Inequalities and Economics “the provider”

The idea of one male partner being more of a patriarch was frequently discussed in the interviews. Issues of economics were frequently linked to masculinity and related back to heterosexual constructs. Overall, participants frequently returned to normative concepts of traditional masculinity with references to power and control. The flip-side to this exaggerated masculine role is the submissive, feminine role.

I can probably only speak for my demographic, African American male, raised in an area where pre Will and Grace so, you know, a lot of us still were traditional, were conservative in the sense of top, bottom, dominant, submissive, provider, supportive, kind of mirroring straight relationships (P119)

Taking care of the domestic duties, being sexually submissive, and being emotional were linked to traditionally feminine roles. Being a financial provider, being aggressive, and in control were associated with masculine roles. These differences in roles were not always static. Some participants described playing a supported feminine role when younger only to play a providing masculine role later. Even in relationships where the participant spoke of being equals, traditional gender roles were a persistent reference point.

When we're joking around or kid around with each other, we will use that term of if we're, you know, talking about one another to someone else in the family or our social group, we'll refer to each other as the husband or the wife depending on the situation... It depends on what we're in the mood to do or because we share everything so well, you know. If I'm cooking, that's more traditionally old school, more of a wifey thing to do and I'll get labeled that in our conversations. But yes, there's no defining roles. (P117)

Often participants described an unwillingness to play the feminized role because of its association with submissiveness and a loss of control. "The provider" is the masculine role coupled with financial imbalance where the partner placed in a masculine role is also the primary contributor financially. It is accepted that playing the role of the provider creates an imbalance in power and control.

Then he was like well you need to just quit and I'll take care of you and I was just like, no, because then that means, I was always brought, you pay the cost to be the boss so it's his money, his house, and then I would be stuck and I was never, I'm not the type of person to let somebody else take care of me because to me that kind of, you kind of lose control. Maybe I have control issues. (Laughing) Well, not maybe, I have control issues... (P106)

For many men there seems to be a stress associated with losing control or playing a submissive role. Participant 119 expressed a fear that in the future his younger financially-dependent partner could become the breadwinner of the family. For Participant 119, the stress of this potential role reversal almost creates a competition. He seems to be threatened by the possibility of dating someone with equal or greater financial power and seeks to keep his partner in the disempowered feminine role.

I mean, I don't even know if 5 years from now, 10 years from now our kids will be able to tell a difference, like, if they would truly see a dominant. I mean, maybe because I'm older but, and I

don't know what that, how that makes me feel because I've always imagined being the head of my house. So I don't know, you know, if [partner] is, owns a dental practice and he's making a couple hundred thousand a year. I don't know, you know, it makes me want to, it makes me, it push me to make sure that I negotiated, I, I cannot explain it. It makes me want to go to law school now. Like it makes me want to make sure that I can either be equal or because I think I'm afraid of being in this position that he's in and what that's going to make me feel like. (P119)

Autonomy and Decision-making

Our preliminary findings also point to traditional masculine roles and financial power potentially having an effect on decision making in same-sex relationships. The idea of a patriarch or “provider” having the power of the final decision is reinforced by participant’s accounts. Participant 117 explains this concept.

Interviewer: ... So what does the husband role look like in that situation?

P117: For me, old southern and old school with the old soul, the supporter, the one who's going to kind of, please take no offense to this, but the one who's going to kind of make the final decision. I think that's not necessarily a quote “man's role.” But I definitely think it's a leadership or masculinity role. I'm very open to the idea that women can be in a leading role but at the end of the day, for me, a lot of those leading roles tend to have masculinity associated with it.

This ability to make decisions extends to sexual decision making as well. If the masculine “provider” has final say in decisions overall because of his role and status, how does this impact sexual decision making? Participant 101 explains how one partner wanted him to fit this fantasy of imbalanced roles.

So with him, I think I became, I became what I thought he wanted me to be. And here's my, I was this young, naïve, vulnerable, passive, nelly gay guy that he wanted to mold into what he wanted it to be. And I think the more I saw it, the more I fit into that fantasy with him. He wanted me to be, I was 30, he wanted me to be, “Are you really 30? You're not that old.” Yes, I really am. And well, well a woman never tells her age. Well, I probably should have said look, bro, yes, I am, you know, this is who I am. (P101)

He later describes the difficulty when he wanted to renegotiate condom use after realizing that this same partner had cheated. Not only did his partner prefer him to play the feminized role of the younger, passive, dependent partner, but these role differences affected his ability to negotiate condom use. He compares sex under the premise of financial power imbalance to rape.

P101: Let him say I was his first. You know, anytime we're about to get out of a relationship, we always say well, you know, you're the only one I've done this with. So if I'm the only one you're doing this with, why do we need condoms?

Interviewer: So how did that impact the trust that you had with him?

P101: It kind of broke it because now I wanna use one, but now I don't want to have sex. I always sit back and tell people that if you, it's almost if, if you're making me have sex because I

feel like I have to in order to get money or I have to for you to love me or I have to for a place to stay or anything, then it's almost like nonphysical rape. You're making me do these things and I don't want to do it. I don't feel comfortable.

Discussion

The preliminary results of this study suggest that gender roles and financial imbalance are linked to power differentials in relationships between MSM. Existing theory explains links between masculine gender role stress and aggression as well as financial imbalance and sexual decision making among heterosexuals. These theories may support explanation of power dynamics within relationships between MSM. Further exploration of variables such as financial differences in same-sex relationships and traditional masculine roles may inform the self-efficacy model and have implications for interventions in condom negotiation and HIV prevention in the context of MSM relationships.