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Latino men who have sex with transgendered women: The influence of heteronormativity, homonegativity and transphobia on gender and sexual scripts

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Abstract

Latino men who have sex with transgender women make up an overlooked sector of the population that requires more attention than is currently given in sexuality and gender studies, particularly in regard to their non-commercial, long-term sexual and romantic relationships with transgender women. Sixty-one sexual histories were selected for this qualitative analysis from a larger study on Latino male bisexuality in the New York City metropolitan area. Findings suggest that participants' sexual and gender scripts with transgender women were strongly regulated by heteronormativity. Furthermore, homonegativity and transphobia often intersected in the lived experiences of men who have sex with transgender women resulting in relationship conflicts over the control of transgender women's bodies, sexual behaviours, and gender performance both in public and private. Findings also suggest that low relationship conflict is more common among men who have sex with transgender women who exhibit diverse sexual roles (being both insertive and receptive during anal sex), or transgress heteronormative scripts through dialogue of desires, and/or by embracing transgender women as human beings and not as hyperfeminised objects of desire. Stigma reduction and alternatives to heteronormative interventions are needed to improve relationship dynamics, and potentially positively impact on the sexual health and overall well-being of Latino men who have sex with transgender women and their transgender women partners.

Keywords

Latino; heteronormativity; homonegativity; men who have sex with transgendered women; transphobia

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Conflict of Interest

Miguel Muñoz-Laboy, Nicolette Severson, Ethan Levine and Omar Martínez declare they have no conflict of interest.

Introduction

Behaviourally bisexual Latino men have sex with a plurality of sexual partners, which may include cis-women, cis-men, and transgender sexual partners (Muñoz-Laboy, 2004, 2008; Muñoz-Laboy, et. al., 2015). Yet, sexual experiences with the latter group have rarely been examined among bisexual Latino men. More broadly, Latino men who have sex with transgender women comprise a vastly understudied group, inclusive but not limited to behaviourally bisexual men. We therefore chose the behavioural descriptor ‘men who have sex with transgender women’ to define men who have erotic interactions with transgender women. We recognise that behavioural descriptors do not capture the complexity of men’s lived experiences; however, we sought to avoid the confusion that can arise with the use of subjectively chosen identity labels such as gay, straight, etc. Transgender is an umbrella term that covers a wide spectrum of individuals who ‘cross or transcend culturally defined categories of gender’ (Bockting, Rosser, and Scheltema, 1999:177). In this study, we chose to use the term transgender women to refer to male-to-female transgender women who had surgically and/or hormonally feminised their bodies or expressed a gender not matching that assigned at birth, while retaining their male genitalia.

The scholarly attention that has been paid to men who have sex with transgender women has rarely explored the non-commercial, romantic dimensions of men’s engagement with their transgender partners with some notable exceptions (Bockting, et al 2007; Coan, Schrager, and Packer, 2005; Lenning and Buist, 2013). Among these exceptions are the ground-breaking studies on non-commercial, romantic, and sexual relationships between men and their transgender women partners in non-US contexts, such as Brazil and India (Kulick, 1998; Ramberg, 2014; Reddy, 2005) which provided us with the foundations to move away from only thinking of men who have sex with transgender women in terms of the clients of sex workers, and to examine the relational dynamics between men and their transgender women partners. The present analysis focuses on the cultural forces that shape how men who have sex with transgender women perceive their romantic relationships with such women, defined as an interpersonal relationships that involves physical sexual and emotional-affective intimacy as perceived by our study participants.

Stigma and the regulation of men who have sex with transgender women’s sexuality

Erving Goffman (1963) defines stigma as ‘an attribute that is deeply discrediting’ that reduces the bearer ‘from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one’. Numerous studies have demonstrated how stigmatisation processes increase individuals’ vulnerability to behavioural risks, disease acquisition, and excess mortality (Bostwick et al., 2010; Kumar, Hessini, and Mitchell, 2009; Parker and Aggleton, 2003; Varas-Díaz et al., 2005; Ward, 2005). Nonconformity with heterosexuality or monosexual sexual systems (be these exclusively gay or straight), compounded with minority ethnic status in racially divided countries like the USA increases the likelihood that individuals such as Latino men who have sex with transgender women will experience intersecting oppressions and simultaneous forms of stigmatisation (Fukuyama and Ferguson, 2000; Namaste, 2000; Norton, 1997). Based on this premise, our analysis focuses on examining the impact of heteronormativity, homonegativity, and transphobia on Latino men who have sex with transgender women.

Heteronormativity refers to the myriad ways in which heterosexuality is produced as a natural, unproblematic, taken-for-granted and ordinary phenomenon (Kitzinger, 2005). Homonegativity refers to the larger exposure of prejudices due to sexual orientation among sexual minorities, to the overall cultural attitudinal negativity towards same-sex sexualities, and the internalisation of negative views of the self because of non-conforming sexuality (David and Knight, 2008; Nakamura and Zea, 2010).

Homonegativity is present in Latino as well as in Anglo culture (Nakamura and Zea, 2010). Homonegativity is different from homophobia since the latter focuses on the emotional response to same-sex sexuality. Rather than focusing on homophobia, our analytical emphasis is on transphobia, which refers to antagonistic attitudes, feelings, and practices together with emotional disgust, fear, anger, or discomfort felt or expressed towards transgender people (Norton, 1997; Serano, 2016). Heteronormativity and transphobia have been found to be important factors in shaping the sexual and romantic experiences of transgender people (Iantaffi and Bockting, 2011; Schilt and Westbrook, 2009). Similarly homonegativity has been demonstrated to increase mental health and behavioural risks among gay and bisexual Latino men, but its influences have not been examined with Latino men who have sex with transgender women (Nakamura and Zea, 2010).

Analytic framework

Until recently, references to men who have sex with transgender women have identified them near exclusively as the clients of transgender women sex workers and have been rooted in pathological/therapeutic models largely ignorant of lived experiences, community needs, risks and strengths (Blanchard, 1993; Driscoll, 1971; Money and Lamacz, 1984; Pettway, 1996). By way of contrast, adopting a sexual culture model of men who have sex with transgender women's sexuality means adopting a conceptual framework based on sexual meanings and lived experiences (Herdt 1999; Mauk, Perry, and Muñoz-Laboy, 2013; Parker, Herdt, and Carballo, 1991). A sexual culture analytical approach emphasises the 'shared or collective characters—their constitution not as the property of atomised or isolated individuals, but rather of social persons who are integrated in the context of specific cultural settings' (Parker 2001, p. 166). Within this context, our examination of men who have sex with transgender women's sexual histories focuses on meanings of lived experiences and how the overall sexual culture of Latino men dominated by heteronormativity and homonegativity influences Latino men who have sex with transgender women's sexual and gender intrapsychic (internal meanings, interpretations of expectations, and rationales of behaviours) and interpersonal (actual behaviours and codes for interactions) scripts (Paiva, 2000; Simon and Gagnon, 1984).

Masculinity and men who have sex with transgender women

Masculinity is a cultural construct, which to a large extent influences sexual and gender interactions through scripting behaviours that reflect expected, desired or imposed notions of masculinity; in turn these scripts are constructed in opposition to social-cultural notions of femininity (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). The pursuit of what is perceived as ideal masculinity or the dominant masculinity model has been associated with themes of anti-femininity, emphasised femininity, homonegativity, and overt heterosexuality (Joseph and

Black, 2012; Kimmel, 2005). Connell and Messerschmidt (2005: 848) define hegemonic masculinity as a dominant form of masculinity that ‘embodies the currently most honoured way of being a man’, an expression that is not so much ‘normal’ in the everyday lived sense, as normative—or an ascendant position achieved through culture, institutions, and widespread ideals of manhood. In contrast, an emphasised femininity encourages passivity and an overall compliance with men’s desires for attractive female bodies, dominance, and power (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Indeed, it has been suggested that transgender people may be closely bound to normative gender and sexual roles as a process of validating their notions of gender, presumably to attract partners with a similar affinity for strongly normative gender roles (Iantaffi and Bockting, 2011; Schilt and Westbrook, 2009; West and Zimmerman, 1987). Furthermore, transgender expressions of gender and sexuality challenge core principles of heteronormativity, e.g., the presumption that there are only two sexes or that it is only normal or natural for people of different sexes to be attracted to one another (Kitzinger, 2005). Thus, to understand the social and sexual dynamics that exist between men who have sex with transgender women and their transgender partners, we need to pay close attention to the regulatory mechanisms of gender and sexuality, including the influence of heteronormativity, homonegativity and hegemonic masculinity.

Objectives

This analysis was guided by the following questions: how do men who have sex with transgender women describe their sexual and romantic interactions with transgender partners? What are the dominant gender and sexual (intrapsychic and interpersonal) scripts regulating the interactions between men who have sex with transgender women and transgender women? How do men who have sex with transgender women attitudes and practices inhibit or enable long-term relationships and sexual encounters with transgender women?

Methods

Sampling and recruitment

Data for this analysis was drawn from a larger project on behaviourally bisexual Latino men in and around New York City. This mixed-methods study consisted of field observations of sexual partnering venues (night clubs, Latino bars, and Latino social-cultural events), 148 in-depth interviews on men’s sexual histories, and selfadministered questionnaires. Selection criteria for participation: being 18–60 years old and bisexually active (having had sex with a least one cis-man or transgender man and one cis-woman or transgender women) in the last six monthsⁱ; it was not necessary that participants self-identify as bisexual.

We used quota sampling per geographical zone of the city, which meant that we recruited a set number of individuals per zone based on neighbourhood demographics (recent migrant Latino groups, e.g., Peruvians, vs. old migrant Latino groups, Puerto Ricans). Four zones were selected because they had the highest concentrations of Latinos (based on US census

ⁱSix months has been established as a time-frame to establish behavioural sexual orientation stability (Stokes, McKirnan and Burzette, 1993)

data from 2000) in the New York City metropolitan area inclusive of Newark and Jersey City, both in New Jersey. To ensure a diverse sample (i.e., a sample that not only represented one type of sampling venue), we monitored study enrolment and devoted efforts to assure that overall recruits were divided equally (25%) between the following four venues: venues that were not gay/bisexually oriented nor AIDS services related (e.g., religious organisations, sports teams, or worker's programmes); venues that we considered sexual venues for men cruising for sex with other men, including public sex spaces such as parks, piers, and Internet sites; bisexually-oriented venues, including gay night clubs, sex clubs and bars, as well as bisexual groups, online networks, and chat rooms; and clinic sites, such as STI clinics and community health clinics.

The process of recruitment consisted of four steps. First, a recruitment card was designed to recruit both self-identified and non-self-identified bisexual Latino men. Second, the card was given to all people present in recruitment sites along with mini-posters and cards left for potential participants. Third, a version of the card was posted on two Internet sites geared towards Latino men cruising for sex with other men and those oriented towards self-identifying bisexual Latino men. Fourth, interested participants had the option of calling via phone, emailing the study recruiter, or visiting the recruitment Internet page of the study. We screened 258 men of which 42.6% did not meet the study criteria. Of the 110 that did not meet the study criteria: 16.4% did not have male partners in their lifetimes, 5.5% did not have female partners in their lifetimes, 25.5% had not had sex with female or female-to-male partners in the past six months, 26.4% had not had sex with male or male-to-female partners in the past six months, 13.6% were HIV positive, and 12.7% were unable to participate in the study due to scheduling conflicts. This study was funded to assess persons without an HIV diagnosis; therefore, HIV positive individuals were excluded from the study. This form of recruitment allowed the team to interview behaviourally bisexual men who identified as bisexual, as well as those who did not.

Procedure

Two highly experienced bilingual field researchers conducted the sexual history interviews. One was a cis-male and the other was a cis-female. The interviews took place in the offices of the field researchers at the Centre for Gender, Sexuality, and Health, Mailman School of Public Health, Department of Sociomedical Sciences. The physical location of this office is within a larger complex of hospital buildings, yet, the Centre's decoration does not reflect a hospital atmosphere. At the time of the study time, the Centre was decorated with LGBTQ, women's rights, and black social movements' posters from Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa. As the Centre is located within a building that requires high levels of security, this posed a challenge for some of our undocumented research participants. A field researcher therefore meet prospective participants at the entrance of the building and accompanied them to his or her office. The participant would receive a cup of coffee, tea, or water, and then the field researcher would commence the interview after consent procedures. The interview guide consisted of a checklist of questions including topics and probes on the chronology of sexual experiences from what the participants remember as their earliest experience until how they currently find partners or maintain sexual partnerships. The field researcher had the option whether or not to reveal his or her age, sexual orientation,

nationality, and/or gender identity if participants asked. Interviews were conducted in English, Spanish, or both. The data used for this analysis was transcribed directly from the language in which they were elicited by bilingual transcribers from a certified agency. Analyses were conducted in the original language of the transcripts. Quotations were translated into English by the first author (bilingual in Spanish) for the purpose of this analysis. Interviews lasted between 45–60 minutes in length.

Protection of research participants' rights

This study was approved by Columbia University Institutional Review Board (CUMC IRB AAAE0494) and Temple University Institutional Review Board (IRB #20641). To protect the confidentiality and privacy of study participants and research materials, a federal certificate of confidentiality (CC-HD-09-84) was obtained. The names of participants in this analysis are pseudonyms to protect participants' right to anonymity.

Data analysis

Interview transcripts were de-identified and entered into Atlas.ti, a software package specifically designed to handle textual data. A basic codebook in Atlas.ti was constructed, including coding families based on the interview guide topics (e.g., Sexual Relationships, Romantic Relationships, Partner Characteristics) and 300 sub-codes reflecting abstract concepts as defined by the research team (e.g., Religious/Spiritual Influences, Expressions of Masculinity, Type of Sex Market). Two independent coders coded 15% of the interviews with 80% congruency in coding; the remaining 85% were then coded using the same codebook. We selected 61 men who had had sex with transgender women from the original sample of 148 behaviourally bisexual Latino men: 27 reported having a regular transgender women romantic (affective, intimate) partner in the six months preceding the interview and 34 reported having a casual, secondary, or tertiary transgender women partner in the same time period.

For this analysis, two analysts (NS and MML) read the 61 men's interviews with a focus on the research questions guiding the study and to independently determine the centrality of the themes and codes from the master codebook. Their findings were then presented for discussion to all the authors of this paper. As a result of these discussions, interviews were recoded for emerging codes (e.g., 'hyperfeminine' and 'hypermasculine', which we defined as instances when men who have sex with transgender women expressed a hierarchical or exaggerated adherence to gender stereotypes when describing their sexual and/or romantic partners).

The next step in our analysis was the selection of illustrative case studies of sexual scripts of the men who have sex with transgender women (Yin, 2009). We selected excerpts from 10 cases in our analysis together with statements on specific recurrent themes across the entire sample of men.

Findings

Men who have sex with transgender women in the sample were male at birth and identified with the label 'men'. The majority did not identify with traditional sexual labels (gay,

straight, bisexual) and viewed sexual identities as flexible. Men below 30 years of age, and almost half the sample across all ages employed language that reflected this fluidity of identities, such as “a heterosexual who likes attractive men sometimes.” Older men viewed their sexuality in terms of the secrecy or privacy of their sexual activities as on the “DL” (down-low).ⁱⁱ A third, smaller group, across all ages of men defined themselves as “straight” and stated that their reason was because they were the ‘man in their relations, the ones penetrating their sexual partners’.

Ricardo, a 49-year-old man of Cuban and Puerto Rican background, had been a sex worker for 15 years at the time of the interview. He described using his manliness as a way of generating clients, mostly transgender women and cisgender men. He developed affective feelings towards his transgender women clients and some had transitioned into regular secondary sexual/romantic partners. He did not disclose his sex work to his wife (a cis-woman) or their children. In order to best maintain a separation between his family and work lives, he kept two cell phones. He explained:

The other phone—I keep it hiding in the sneakers and under a suitcase or whatever when I’m going out, like today I bring the phone I had. It was the one they call me on, my children, and my family. I left the other one in the house.

Ricardo more often than not took an insertive sexual role with his clients, secondary partners, and his wife. He distinguished between transgender women and cisgender women, but viewed transgender women no differently than cisgender women because the transgender women that he knew and felt close to had ‘beautiful tits, beautiful ass, hips, everything...they look like real women’. Emphasising his identity as a straight, married man, Ricardo said he’d take a male client if he ‘had to’ for the money but did not experience any sexual desire for men. In Ricardo’s case we can observe the impact of his homonegative environment through his negative attitudes towards same-sex and the value that he places on transgender women’s femininity.

Martin, a 19-year-old man of Dominican background who identified as gay, came out to his friends and family at age 17. He expressed his conflict around his attraction to transgender women:

I don’t even know what I like about trannies. It’s kind of uncomfortable. It confuses me after I have sex with them. I feel like it’s wrong.

Martin’s use of the word “trannies,” an often use pejorative term to refer to transgender women, and what seems to be an expression of regret or guilt, illustrates his discomfort having sex with and feelings towards transgender women. He described hanging out with ‘lots of gay people’ and engaging in HIV education outreach programmes, yet he still had negative feelings towards LGBT groups. He explained, ‘I have one really close gay friend, but besides that I don’t even like hanging around gay people’.

ⁱⁱDown low is a label that received national media attention in the late 1990s and early 2000s through Oprah Winfrey’s show on African American male bisexuality.

Although Martin's discomfort with his sexuality and larger homonegativity can potentially be attributed to his young age and lack of maturity, a number of older men expressed hesitation about pursuing relationships with transgender women, particularly in their own neighbourhoods. The internalisations of homonegativity and transphobia often translated into repressive intrapsychic scripts for interpreting the experience of sex and attraction towards transgender women and/or into interpersonal scripts to regulate the stigma associated with sexual/romantic relationships with transgender women. It also manifested itself in acts of aggression and control of transgender women sexual/romantic partners.

Victor provides a case study to illustrate the above dynamics. He was a 37-year-old man of Puerto Rican heritage, who described his sexual identity as 'experimental' and 'on the down-low'. He remembered feeling very attracted to the transgender women in his neighbourhood, but worried for his reputation.

They were hot and shit. But I didn't—you know, I'm in a neighbourhood. I'm a street guy. So I couldn't mess with them.

Victor recalled a series of encounters with a transgender woman who he did not mind being seen with as she could 'pass' for a non-transgender woman in public. Although he did not rule out having future encounters with transgender women, he expressed criticism of them:

You got to understand they're trying to be something they not. They're trying to be women. So they mixed. They confused. They worse than women, and they're dangerous, too ... they're worse than women, I'm telling you, because they confused.

Similar to Victor, for Mateo, sexual and romantic relationships with transgender women often triggered internal and interpersonal conflicts over visibility, identity and sex roles. Mateo, a 37-year-old man of Dominican heritage, considered himself 'on the down-low'. In his twenties, Mateo had had numerous one-night stands with transgender women. Later he had a year-long, cohabiting relationship with Jennifer, a transgender women with whom, he was 'in love'. Although he was 'very serious' about his relationship with Jennifer, Mateo's internal conflict over his sexuality became a barrier in their relationship. He explained:

Jennifer always felt uncomfortable for the simple fact that I hid her from like the rest of my family, I never took her to like none of the parties, and she said, 'Introduce me to your family'. It was pretty hard ... Sometimes they even asked me, 'Why do you neglect her? Jennifer is beautiful', but they don't really know why sometimes I push her away. It was pretty hard. You could say I'm a confused person ... Just 'cos of the world, the way the world is, you push that person away. Society does that.

Mateo described a 'very stressful' evening in which he brought Jennifer home to meet his mother. In the end, he explained that he purposely 'sabotaged the relationship' by having sex with his Jennifer's friend, who was also a transgender women. Looking back, Mateo expressed regret about his decision saying, 'I should've never broke up with her, but I did, worrying about what people [might] say'.

For Victor, Mateo, and most of the other men, concern for their reputation and the maintenance of a masculine image was of critical importance in their interpersonal and public interactions. By extension, anti-effeminacy and support for traditional, heteronormative sexual scripts were prominent in men who have sex with transgender women narratives. Participants consistently held heteronormative gender norms in high regard and sometimes exaggerated such conventions when discussing their relationships with transgender women. Many admired masculine gender presentations in themselves and their male sex partners, while preferring feminine presentations among their cisgenderwomen and transgender women partners. In some instances, transgender women were described as more feminine or ‘girly’ than cis-women and were praised for achieving ‘passable’ and hyperfeminine public female personas.

Several men who have sex with transgender women were quite vocal in their admiration of the beauty and “physical perfection” of transgender women (with some using terms as ‘beauty queens’ to describe them). Julio, a 28-year-old man of Colombian heritage who considered himself heterosexual, expressed that transgender women were ‘more woman than a woman in bed’. Much of this admiration was focused on a particular stylised femininity similar to those in the covers of women’s magazines, the ‘all done up’ femininity (as one of the participants expressed). Emilio, a 24-year-old second generation Guatemalan, who considered himself bisexual, recalled a prior relationship with Yasmin, a transgender women partner:

I was attracted to her realness, you know. In public, she looked like a girl, you know what I’m saying? Yasmin conducted herself like a female, she act like a female... she knew how to cook, how to take care of her man...

Emilio also alluded to the dominance he felt when he was with Yasmin:

It’s just something that—they want to make you feel like the man, you know what I mean? So you just really feel like the man. That’s how you feel with them, and so I think it’s empowering to feel like, you know, dominant, you feel taken care of in the sense of how a woman would take care of a man.

Yasmin and Emilio ended their relationship after 8 months however. Emilio attributed their breakup to her transgender background, which had become problematic for him with the passage of time. He explained:

Yasmin [pseudonym] had this idea of how a man should treat a woman and how a woman should treat a man... And it’s something that she tried to model versus where a [nontransgender] woman just is naturally nurturing, a [nontransgender] woman is naturally able to be submissive...

Emilio’s reference to the transgender background of his woman partner as a reason for the ending of their relationship was a reason given by other study participants, although a number of men recognised the complexity of reasons why their relationships ended. On the one hand, men found the enactment of an exaggerated, ‘all done up’ femininity appealing—both in itself and in its allowance for an asymmetrical expression of dominant masculinity. On the other, if this performance of femininity became too visible, the perceived gap between the presentation of gender and the ‘natural’ reality fostered discomfort. Enrique, a

56-year-old man, born in Puerto Rico who had relocated to New York at 13 years of age, who considered his sexual identity ‘private’, said that in his past relationships, some transgender women went ‘overboard’ trying to imitate cisgender women:

Some transgender women act out the part of a woman... instead of feeling the woman, or being the woman... they’re acting it.

At the same time, Enrique appreciated that:

They took care of all the things on the table to become what they are at that time, you know? How to express themselves as a woman, how to react as a woman, how to feel as a woman, how to generate more of that woman feelings, lovey-dovey, you know.

The above can be seen as tensions around gender roles. Another area of conflict in long-term, romantic relationships was over sex. This is an issue not unique to relationships between men and transgender women. For example, a number of participants expressed contradictory feelings and expectations about their sexual desires towards transgender women, and reacted negatively if transgender women resisted or challenge them. Consistently, men expected to be dominant, controlling, and the insertive partners during sex, while some also desired and enjoyed being penetrated, controlled, or dominated by their transgender women partners. However, these practices (being penetrated, dominated) had to be performed in way that did not threaten men’s notion of power and control. For example, for transgender women to be assertive and express their desires too openly about what they want in a relationship commonly resulted in conflict f ‘more straight, but still deciding’. His relationship with Maria, his transgender women girlfriend, had ended when she started expressing what she wanted during sex. He explained:

It didn’t last much because, like I said before, I like to be the one like on top... It was good at the time, but then when the arguments came about who wanted what, I wasn’t having that.

Felipe, a 20-year-old man of Dominican heritage who identified as bisexual, told a similar story about breaking up with his long-term transgender girlfriend:

It didn’t work out, because I do not—she likes, she wanted me to do things that I didn’t want to do... she wanted me to suck her dick. And I didn’t want to, I wasn’t attracted to that. You know, if it’s a girl, it’s a girl, and if it’s a guy, it’s a guy.

Lucas, Felipe, and other men in the sample used transgender women’s expressions of their desires as transgressions of their expected hyperfeminine roles, thus grounds for ending relationships. As in most sexual-romantic relationships, what at the start of the relationship had been viewed as a desired characteristic later becomes the reason for rejection when differences and verbal conflicts arose. One example of this concerned the penises of some transgender women. One participant noted that a former partner’s penis ‘bugged’ him out. Emilio expressed an avoidance of his ex-girlfriend’s body:

With a female, or a female figure, I’m going to be dominant of course. That whole transgender thing, you fucking me with your penis is not going down. I don’t really

think that's attractive. I don't have a problem with looking at it. I know you're a man, you know what I mean? But I don't get no satisfaction [from it].

For Emilio, the presence of a penis drew attention to his partner's transgender status, and questioned the heteronormative script relating to women. Although most of the men in the sample described having been penetrated anally by their transgender women partners, only a minority of participants enjoyed talking with their transgender women partners about sex. In the public sphere, these men consistently adhered to strict gender roles that combined a focus on their transgender partners' bodies with the transgressively erotic experience of role reversal. Men who had sex with transgender women typically considered themselves (a) 'very masculine', preserving traditional gender roles during social and sexual interactions to the extent that they can control (b) as preferring to have sex with transgender women who looked 'very feminine', and (c) as enjoying transgressing traditional heteronormative expectations by being penetrated by transgender women partners. Alfonso, a 45-year-old Latino man who declined to label his sexuality, was involved in concurrent relationships—with a cisgender woman, a cisgender man, and a transgender women, described being penetrated by his transgender women partner as:

Totally crazy (laughter). Insane (laughter). Make you feel at your best. It makes me feel great.

Yet, Alphonso's wider views about sexual morality were deeply conservative. For example, he said: 'All these sexual identities had gotten out of hand and are having an immoral impact on people'. He also articulated a sexual double standard whereby men can 'do it with anyone or anything', while women were 'limited' by being 'ladies'.

Discussion

In this study, we sought to examine how heteronormativity functions in the lives of men who have sex with transgender women. Consistent with data from a larger study on behaviourally bisexual Latino men, participants faced considerable stigma regarding their sexual desires and behaviours (Muñoz-Laboy, 2008). Moreover, many men expressed homonegative, binegative and transphobic attitudes that channelled behaviour towards discretion and discouraged the disclosure of non-heterosexual identities in favour of a maintenance of a normatively masculine public persona (see Garcia, et al., 2013; Muñoz-Laboy, 2008; Martinez, et al., 2012; Severson et al., 2014; Severson, et al., 2013).

Before discussing our study findings in detail, it is important to acknowledge two limitations. First, our participants were not a homogenous group. Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, Mexicans, Cubans, and other Latino groups may experience different forms of stigma and have differing cultural perceptions of sexual and romantic relationships with transgender women, given variations in the cultural construction of masculinity, migration histories (e.g., economic migration, circulatory migrant patterns), legal status (e.g., Puerto Ricans are born USA citizens), progress in sexual and gender rights in the countries of origin, and length of stay and acculturation to US sexual cultural values (Martinez, et. al., 2012; Ramirez, 1999). Our study was not designed to capture these ethnic differences, instead it was designed to identify the commonalities in the sexual experiences of Latino

men who have sex with transgender women across different nationalities and lengths of stay in the USA.

Another study limitation derived from the fact that the primary focus of the broader study lay in sampling men who were behaviourally bisexual. This analysis did not include men who have sex with transgender women who were not currently behaviourally bisexual, who only dated transgender women, or who were in an exclusive (monogamous) relationship with a transgender women partner. Additional research is needed with each of these three groups of Latino men. In spite of the above limitations, our analysis provides an opportunity to explore the sexual scripts of Latino men who have sex with transgender women, a group often overlooked in the literature on bisexuality.

Sexual histories of men who have sex with transgender women illustrate a shared social experience of heightened stigma and often-inflexible heteronormative relationship patterns. Importantly, men who have sex with transgender women managed social stigma and their desire for transgender women as sexual and romantic partners by avoiding sexual identity labels, by compartmentalising their behaviours, and by embracing normative sexual-gender scripts. These scripts include polarised expressions of gender roles and, within this construct, idealised transgender femininity as hyperfeminine or more ‘real’ than non-transgender femininity. While heteronormative sexual-gender scripts and an emphasis on idealised femininity were part of the appeal of men’s interactions with transgender women, homonegativity, fear of stigma, and inflexibility in their sexual-gender scripts ultimately curtailed many longer-term relationships.

The polarised gender expressions favoured by men in this study suggest a tension between the pursuit of a hyperfeminine fantasy and the rejection of women and their diverse expressions of empowerment and womanhood, a common tension documented in the USA and across Latin America (Caceres, 1999; Kimmel, 2005; Lancaster, 1997; Murnen and Byrne, 1991; Ramirez, 1999; Schifter, 2000). This tension was highlighted in participants’ relations with transgender women, with men emphasising their own masculinity while attempting to downplay or deny any potentially masculine characteristic in their partners’ bodies and desires. Participants described complex processes whereby relationships with transgender women both challenged and reinforced their own security as (masculine) men, thereby enabling an expression of dominance that might be particularly appealing for men who perceive their masculinity as compromised (Bourgois, 2003; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Pyke 1996). Repeated references by men who have sex with transgender women to transgender women partners ‘acting’ or ‘modelling of’ femininity suggests that the men in our study acknowledged and sought out what they perceived as expressions of femininity in their transgender women partners, appreciating them conditionally so long as these partners were successful at ‘passing’ as women in public without appearing too ‘unnaturally’ feminine in private.

The interview accounts elicited offer insight into the dynamics that foster and inhibit long-term relationships between men who have sex with transgender women and transgender women. As noted above, men faced multiple challenges to successful relationships with transgender women - from macro-social cultural scripts of heteronormativity to internalised

homonegativity. Latino men who have sex with transgender women exist at the intersection of multiple axes of oppression, and although there are no studies that examine the impacts of multiple oppression among men such as those in our study, there is clear evidence that experiencing multiple oppression increases individuals' internalised stigma and vulnerability to sexual and mental health problems (see, for example, Bostwick et al., 2010; Varas-Díaz, Serrano-García, and Toro-Alfonso, 2005).

The accounts provided by our study participants offered indirect glimpses into the difficulties that some transgender women endure. Prior research with transgender-identified subjects notes that some embrace strict expressions of normative gender and sexual roles in order to validate their identities as men and women and to improve their chances of social recognition and safety (Iantaffi and Bockting, 2011; Lenning and Buist, 2013; Roen, 2002; Schilt, 2010). Thus, it is possible that the transgender women partners of study participants tolerate long periods of discrimination and microaggression within their romantic relationships as a way of legitimising a perceived notion of traditional womanhood. The relatively rigid gender role expectations men who have sex with transgender women hold may contribute to the heightened risk of intimate partner violence that has been documented among transgender women (Ard and Makadon, 2011; Santana et al., 2006). Many transwomen described in this study were restricted to the status of secret partners, isolated from friends and family while also expected to embody a fantasy femininity, both in regards to physical appearance and their sexual desires and behaviours. Moreover, the asymmetrical power balance that often defines romantic partnerships between transgender women and their male partners may create further vulnerabilities for transgender women, including lowered control over their sexual practices, including protective behaviours such as condom use (Melendez and Pinto, 2007).

If viewed as a discrete phenomenon, the presence of heteronormativity may appear minor in comparison to the critically elevated health risks facing men who have sex with transgender women and their transgender women partners. Yet, by systematically privileging some relationships and stigmatising others, heteronormativity contributes to the very social inequalities that manifest themselves in elevated risks and health disparities. Stigma reduction and alternatives to heteronormativity interventions are needed in order to improve the relationship dynamics of Latino men who have sex with transgender women and their transgender women partners. Future studies might expand on the findings presented here through a focus on the experiences of transgender women who partner with men, both short and longer term, and the protective factors that may promote transgender women's and men who have sex with transgender women's sexual health and wellbeing.

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