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Motivations for a Casual or Occasional Sexual Encounter with a Man and/or Transgender Woman among Heterosexual Men: Toward a Better Understanding of Atypical Sexual Partnering

Cathy J. Reback, Ph.D.^{1,2,3}, Sherry Larkins, Ph.D.³, and Kirsty Clark, M.P.H.⁴

¹Friends Research Institute, Inc. 1419 N. La Brea Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90028, USA

²Center for HIV Identification, Prevention and Treatment Services, University of California, 10880 Wilshire Blvd, Suite 1800, Los Angeles, CA 90024 USA

³Integrated Substance Abuse Programs, David Geffen School of Medicine, Semel Institute of Neuroscience and Human Behavior, University of California, 11075 Santa Monica Blvd., Suite. 200, Los Angeles, CA 90025 USA

⁴Department of Epidemiology, Fielding School of Public Health, University of California, Box 951772, Los Angeles, CA 90095 USA

Abstract

Little is known about the motivations for an occasional sexual encounter with a man or a transgender woman among heterosexual men. This study employed qualitative methods to better understand occasional atypical sexual partnering. Open-ended interviews were conducted with 31 heterosexual men who reported at least one sexual encounter with a man or a transgender woman in the previous 12 months. Using the principles of Grounded Theory, three themes emerged: Participants were motivated by (1) the easy, uncomplicated nature of a sexual encounter with a man and/or a trans woman that often circumvented the sexual politics of a typical male-female interaction and/or, (2) the sexual experimentation that took place with these partners; and/or, (3) the default nature of such encounters when a cisgender woman sexual partner was unavailable or perceived to be unattainable. These findings indicated that, among this sample of heterosexual men, the motivations for occasional atypical sexual partnering with a man or a transgender woman were varied, complex and could be multifaceted. Furthermore, these findings support prior studies that have demonstrated that sexual behavior can span beyond sexual identity.

Keywords

heterosexual men; MSM; transgender women; casual sex

Corresponding Author: Cathy J. Reback, Ph.D., Friends Research Institute, 1419 N. La Brea Ave., Los Angeles, CA 90028, Phone: 1-(323)-463-1601, reback@friendsresearch.org.

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For decades, researchers have explored gender and sex differences in an effort to determine why men, more than women, pursue sex with a casual or occasional partner (Clark & Hatfield, 1989; Conley, 2011). A “casual partner” refers to sexual partnering that is devoid of an emotional attachment (i.e., “hookup culture” (Paul & Hayes, 2002)), whereas an “occasional partner” refers to sexual partnering that is infrequent (e.g., a man engages in a sexual encounter with a sex worker once or twice a year). These terms are not mutually exclusive as an occasional sex partner is, almost always, also a casual sex partner.

The definitional script of casual sex includes three main concepts: 1) the parties involved are not in a committed relationship; 2) the sexual encounter is short-term and does not occur within a committed relationship; and, 3) there are a variety of sexual behaviors not limited to sexual intercourse that can be classified as casual sex (Epstein, Calzo, Smiler, & Ward, 2009). Some theorists have used an evolutionary explanation for why men tend to have more casual sexual partners and more uncommitted sexual encounters than women, suggesting that biologically and evolutionarily humans are driven to reproduce as many offspring as possible. And, given that men do not gestate, this drive is logistically easier for men than for women to achieve (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Symons, 1979). Others suggest that hormone differences account for the gender disparities in the desire for casual sex as most men produce higher levels of testosterone, they tend to have a higher sexual desire and more casual sex partners (see van Anders, 2013 for challenges to this assumption). Still other research suggests that men are more likely to anticipate pleasure and experience less guilt from casual sex than women (Herold, Maticka-Tyndale, & Mewhinney, 1998). Historically, interest in casual sex has been more socially and culturally acceptable for men than women (Reiss, 1967). Regardless of the origins or causes of these differences, existing scientific literature has demonstrated that casual sexual encounters are more common among men than women (Carroll, Volk, & Hyde, 1985; Herold et al., 1998; Surbey & Conohan, 2000; Yost & Zurbriggen, 2006). However, men’s motivations for such casual sexual encounters have yet to be thoroughly examined or understood.

Previous research exploring men’s motivations for pursuing and engaging in casual sex has almost exclusively focused on heterosexual sexual partnering among adolescents and young adults, often in reference to college-age “hookup culture” (Garcia, Reiber, Massey, & Merriwether, 2012; Herold et al., 1998; Herold & Mewhinney, 1993; Levinson, Jaccard, & Beamer, 1995; Simpson & Gangestad, 1991; Surbey & Conohan, 2000). However, less is known about adult men who continue to have casual sexual encounters past young adulthood. In one of the few studies exploring adult male’s scripts about sex and dating, researchers found that some men attached great importance to being sexually competent and virile, most particularly with casual sexual partners (Seal & Ehrhardt, 2003). Furthermore, findings demonstrated that men in the study deemed casual sexual partners as unsuitable for a long-term, emotionally committed relationship. They indicated that the need for casual sex was often motivated by the desire for sexual variety as well as the cultural belief that having sex with as many women as possible was a man’s responsibility. What is still less understood is the motivations for casual or occasional sexual partnering among a subgroup of heterosexual men who engage in these sexual encounters with men and/or transgender women (here after: trans women).

Studies investigating casual sexual partnering among heterosexual men who engage in sexual encounters with men or trans women have almost exclusively focused on the “down low” phenomenon among primarily African American/Black men (Bond et al., 2009; King & Hunter, 2004; Martinez & Hosek, 2005; Millett, Malebranche, Mason, & Spikes, 2005; Wolitski, Jones, Wasserman, & Smith, 2006). Due to cultural stigmas and traditional constructs of sexuality and masculinity within some African American/Black communities, a sexual subculture has emerged in which some gay and bisexual African American/Black men present as heterosexual to their communities, but continue to have casual sexual encounters and/or romantic relationships with men “on the down low” i.e., in private. Another study that investigated sexual scripts among heterosexually identified college students who “hooked up” with a same-sex partner found that heterosexually identified Caucasian/White men were no more likely than African American/Black men to report a same-sex hookup (Kuperberg & Walker, 2018). The study found that many of the college-aged heterosexually identified men who had “hooked up” with a man were in the early stages of their sexual identity formation and reported “wanting more” same-sex partners including the potential for a same-sex relationship in their future. Others reported strong religious practices or ideology that may have inhibited a non-heterosexual identity. This research with college-aged heterosexually identified men, similar to research with men “on the down low,” focused on the theme that many of these college-aged men were repressing a gay or bisexual sexual identity. There is little research on heterosexually identified men who engage in same-sex sexual behaviors and are not “on the down low” or privately hiding an identity as a gay or bisexual man due to cultural or societal stigmas; that is, men who maintain a heterosexual identity despite same-sex sexual encounters (Reback & Larkins, 2010).

Additionally, there is a dearth of understanding of heterosexual men’s casual sexual encounters with trans women. One qualitative study examining the experiences of men sexually interested in trans women found that 50% of the sample identified as heterosexual (Weinberg & Williams, 2010) and all considered sex with a trans woman as “casual sex.” The men’s reasons for casual sex with a trans woman included fulfilling a fantasy, the ease and fun of associating with trans women compared to cisgender (i.e., non-trans) women, and the sexual explicitness of their sexual encounters with trans women compared to cisgender women. Some of the men explained that they frequented the venue from which they were recruited – a trans-specific bar – at least weekly, suggesting that their interest in sexual encounters with trans women was not a fleeting or occasional interest.

There remains much to learn about the motivations of adult heterosexual males and their engagement in casual or occasional sexual encounters with “atypical” sexual partners (i.e., a sexual partner whose gender differs from that of their typical sexual partner). Occasional sex, in particular, is an understudied area of exploration; occasional sex with an atypical sexual partner is even less researched. In this unique study of heterosexual men, participants’ narratives were deconstructed to examine their occasional sexual encounters with a man or trans woman. For this analysis the occasional sexual partner type was coded as “atypical” as all participants’ primary or usual sexual partner type was a cisgender female. This qualitative research study sought to better understand the motivations for an occasional sexual encounter with a man and/or a trans woman among a sample of heterosexual men.

METHOD

Participants

The target population was heterosexual men who had occasional sex with a man and/or a trans woman. For the purpose of this study, occasional sex was operationalized as having at least one such sexual encounter in the previous year, but not more than one per month. Qualitative interviews were conducted with 31 participants; inclusion criteria for study participation was: (1) male, and identifies as heterosexual; (2) has had sex with a non-primary man or a trans woman at least once in the previous year; (3) did not have sex with a non-primary man or trans woman more than once a month; (4) 18 years of age or older; (5) resides in Los Angeles County; (6) had the ability to conduct an interview in English; and (7) was willing to provide voluntary informed consent. See Reback & Larkins (2013) for a detailed description of the participants' characteristics.

Procedure

Potential participants were recruited through flyers placed in adult bookstores, sex shops, video stores, parks, restaurants, bars, hotels, and laundromats and through collaborating social service agency referrals. Recruitment materials referred interested individuals to a toll-free phone number. All potential participants were screened over the phone by the field researcher who conducted a brief conversation with the caller to inform him about the research project and answer questions regarding the study, and, if he was still interested, eligibility was then determined. If the caller was both interested in participating and eligible to participate, an appointment was scheduled to review the Consent to Participate Form and to conduct the interview. Appointments were scheduled at the participant's convenience. After providing written consent, study participants filled out a brief demographic questionnaire and then began the qualitative interview. The Friends Research Institute, Inc. Institutional Review Board provided oversight of all study activities. Additional study procedures and outcomes are described elsewhere (Reback & Larkins, 2013).

Qualitative Interviews

Open-ended, semi-structured questions focused on study participants' sexual history, first and most recent sexual experiences with a man or trans woman, the meaning of their sexual experiences with a man and/or trans woman partner(s) as well as with their cisgender female sexual partner(s), knowledge of these encounters among their family and friends, sexual risk behaviors with a man and/or trans woman partner(s) as well as their cisgender female sexual partner(s), alcohol and drug use, and history of incarceration. Interviews were conducted by a trained field researcher and ranged from 1 to 3 hours. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by a professional transcriber who was bound to confidentiality. Each study participant selected a pseudonym for purposes of anonymity. Each participant was interviewed once, and sampling was terminated when new study participants began providing redundant data, and themes became repetitious (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Upon completion of the interview, all study participants were compensated \$50 for their time and effort.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was guided by principles of Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), in which researchers inductively build theories based on the data, as themes, subthemes, and relationships emerge and become more fully articulated following each iteration of data review. The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim, reviewed for accuracy, and edited to remove identifying information. To ensure coder reliability, a first-level coding scheme was developed by the principal investigator and a qualitative data analyst independently after each had listened to the audio recordings, reviewed the transcripts, and written interview notes. ATLAS.ti[®] was utilized to facilitate the coding, sorting, searching, and extracting of text. Interview data content areas were identified and classified by topic. After comparing codes and reviewing inconsistencies, a final thematic coding scheme was developed by which all transcripts were coded. After manual coding, ATLAS.ti[®], using keyword searches, assisted in theme development and code refinement. Quotations that best represented each theme were selected from the database for inclusion in this article.

RESULTS

Participants discussed their interest in occasional sexual encounters and their motivations for selecting a man and/or a trans woman partner. Three main themes emerged: Participants were motivated (1) by the easy, uncomplicated nature of a sexual encounter with a man and/or a trans woman that often circumvented the sexual politics of a typical male-female interaction, which they found to be labor-intensive, expensive and complicated; and/or, (2) by the sexual experimentation that took place with these partners; and/or, (3) by default as a cisgender woman sexual partner was unavailable or perceived to be unattainable.

Avoiding Perceived Male-Female Sexual Politics: Easy, Uncomplicated, Disposable Sex

Easy and Uncomplicated.—Several participants explained that male-female relationships (with a cisgender female) seemed taxing and voiced displeasure with the complications of male-female sexual politics. Tensions and expectations, they explained, were inherent in such interactions as cisgender females were sexually, socially, materially, and emotionally more demanding than an occasional man or trans woman sexual partner. Some viewed cisgender females as more likely to “play games,” “beat around the bush,” and “bring baggage” to a sexual encounter than a man or trans woman, and were decried as emotionally “controlling” and “devious.” Some participants stated that cisgender women “nag,” “demand,” and require increased obligations sexually, socially, and materially. The increased effort to acquire a cisgender female sexual partner, they concluded, was not worth the investment when seeking more immediate sexual satisfaction. Anthony explained the effort he had experienced when approaching a cisgender woman compared to a trans woman:

Anthony There’s [more] tension when trying to approach a real woman. A real woman likes to play games, whereas I don’t really have to approach a transgender with any set game. [A trans woman] is easier, as opposed to me trying to figure out, “Well, what does this girl want to hear, or what does she think about me?” Because a [cisgender] woman can love you to death for a long time and you would never know.

Similarly, Jackson cited the “wasted” time, energy, and effort associated with cisgender women as motivation for occasionally partnering with a trans woman.

Jackson Why bullshit and beat around the bush and put all this other shit on it all the time? You can bullshit and you can be doing it and be done on about your business. To me it [dating a cisgender woman] is just a lot of wasted time and energy and effort.

According to Paul, cisgender women have “extra baggage” compared to engaging in an occasional sexual encounter with a male:

Paul [Partnering with a man] alleviates all the other extra baggage that I have to deal with, with the attitudes, and all the different characteristics that women have.

Some participants described their motivation for seeking an occasional man and/or trans woman sexual partner was the ease and convenience with which they were able to acquire sex, as compared to acquiring sexual contact with a cisgender female. Other participants suggested that a man and/or a trans woman partner would engage in sex sooner than a cisgender female partner, who might request courting and dating prior to engaging in sexual activities. Jacob explained anticipating the immediacy of a sexual encounter with a trans woman:

Jacob With a transgender, it’s easier to meet and have sex the same night than it is to meet a real woman.

Similarly, Jerry, who occasionally met a male partner through the Internet, worked long hours and, therefore, felt that he did not have time to date a woman. A male sexual partner was viewed as more available, accessible, and easy to meet compared to a cisgender female sexual partner.

Jerry With the men it’s just cheap and easy. I work extremely long hours and I know it’s the cheap and easy thing. For instance, a girl that I like—we casually see each other—I’d have to go find her and put it together and hope that we connect, da, da, da. So, if I turn on my computer, there could be something within the next hour, or midnight tonight.

The ease with which a sexual encounter with a man and/or a trans woman could be arranged within a short period of time was an important aspect of motivation for many of the participants.

Disposable.—In addition to the easy and uncomplicated nature of the occasional sexual encounter, participants also explained that a man and/or a trans woman partner could provide “disposable sex,” specifically, sex that was free of intimacy, attachment, and obligation. Some argued that while they preferred a cisgender woman as an intimate and emotional sexual partner, a man and/or a trans woman partner provided quick sex without commitment. Many participants reported seeking a sexual encounter with this partner type precisely because the sexual interaction was devoid of an emotional connection. They reported feeling little obligation to satisfy their partner sexually as the sexual encounter was solely about their satisfaction. Michael described his motivation as “selfish,” acknowledging that his

occasional sexual encounter with a man was about satisfying his desire and not about affection or intimacy.

Michael You don't have to put as much work in with the men. I'm saying it from a selfish point. It's like you're just there for sex, no hugging and loving and all that stuff. And it satisfies a sexual desire and then it's gone.

Like Michael, Jason's motivation for an occasional sexual encounter with a man was to have quick, unilateral sex with "no strings attached":

Jason They [men] have a specific purpose and it's done and over with quickly. There's no strings attached to it, nothing lingering, no connection. So it's specifically for the purpose of making me feel better at that time, and then I'm done with it.

For most, sexual contact was detached from emotional or relational connection with the partner; thus communication and intimacy would be kept to a minimum. Participants spoke of these sexual encounters with little regard for their sexual partner's desire or satisfaction. The participants described engaging in sex that was detached from the partner and single-focused, and thus the partner was easily discarded. This was manifested by leaving immediately following sexual gratification, limiting conversation or not speaking at all, limiting eye contact, and avoiding kissing:

Hector I don't want to talk. I don't want you to talk to me. If they stand up and want to cuddle with me or kiss me, or play with my dick while I'm trying to put my pants on, I push the hand away and zip up. I got to go. I take off. ... I don't want to be around him, I want to go home. I don't want to talk to [him], I just want to get away. [He] wastes my time saying, "Oh, can I have your phone number; are we going to get together again?" I might see you around, see you later, got to go. It was nice, thank you, yeah, yeah, yeah, bye. That's how I feel; I feel like, "You're a burden to me and you bother me, get away from me."

Acquiring sexual partners can be challenging, time-consuming, and often involves courting, dating, and other intimate gestures. Some participants expressed the belief that cisgender women were less likely to engage in sexual activities and, at the same time, were more likely to be demanding. The participants were motivated to seek a man and/or trans woman partner by the perceived effortlessness of acquiring sex as well as the belief that these partners required little of them in return.

Experimental Sex

In addition to what participants described as the uncomplicated, convenient, intimacy-free nature of their sexual encounters with a man and/or a trans woman, many participants referred to the experimental quality of the sexual interaction as a motivation. Some stated they enjoyed engaging in sexual activities that were novel and different, activities that they viewed as too "kinky" for their cisgender female partners. They described their desire to engage in sexual activities they believed to be "dirty," "rough," and "dark." With cisgender female sexual partners, certain sexual acts, such as multiple-partnered sexual encounters, anal penetration, or the use of sex toys, fell outside the boundaries of comfortable sexual

scripts. They expressed a desire to engage in such behaviors with a man and/or trans woman partner, but viewed a cisgender woman as “above” particular sexual acts. Phillip discussed his interest in “kinky” sex and his belief that a trans woman, rather than a cisgender woman, should fulfill that desire:

Phillip The sexual activity [with a trans woman] is everything that a man puts up in his mind—these fantasies that they have of doing things that he wouldn’t do with his wife or let his wife do. The oral, the kinky stuff that goes along with it. Just the basic stuff; every man’s fantasy that he wants to experience or fulfill. I said, “That’s icky to have your wife or your girlfriend to do that to you.” So I went outside [my relationship] and I finally got it done and to know what it felt like.

To Phillip, an occasional sexual encounter with a trans woman served as the means to fulfill his sexual fantasy and to participate in the type of sexual activity that seemed impossible or undesirable with a wife or girlfriend.

Participants described their occasional man and/or trans woman sexual partner as sexually experimental and, particularly their trans woman partner, as more eager to please. Many participants stated they felt less inhibited and, therefore, better able to explore their sexual desires. They explained this freedom, in part, because they viewed trans women as “male” and therefore more “sexually liberal.”

Jacob Basically, transsexuals [sic] are more sexually liberal. They’re a male so they have the same attitude as a male does, sexually. Men are more sexually open to do things that women aren’t.

For other participants, sex with a cisgender female partner was seen as mundane and common, whereas sex with a man and/or a trans woman partner was viewed as exotic and thrilling, and a welcomed change. Variety was desired as Jackson compared his atypical sexual partner to trying a different ice cream flavor:

Jackson I guess [I like] the variety. It’s just something different to do. Every once in a while I like the change. Just like you go to [name of an ice cream franchise store] and say I’m tired of vanilla, let me have some strawberry or something.

Similarly, Willie echoed Jackson’s comments and suggested the need for the “thrill” of something different or “spicy”:

Willie [M]aybe she ain’t cutting it. Maybe sometimes you get sick of that shit and you look for something more spicy—I guess that’s what it is. I guess there’s a thrill behind that shit. It’s a thrill. Like some people got rushes to jump out of planes. It’s something that’s an experience.

Some participants expressed the belief that a man and/or a trans woman partner brought a unique quality to the sexual encounter, a quality that a cisgender woman could not offer. Despite ongoing sexual relations with a cisgender woman (a girlfriend or a wife), these occasional sexual encounters filled a void, fulfilled a fantasy, offered variety, or satisfied an

urge. The participants valued sexual experimentation and viewed their sexual encounter with a man and/or a trans woman as fresh and different, as “a thrill.” Moreover, they believed that such activities were too unconventional for their cisgender female partners.

A Reliable Second Choice

While several participants focused on the disposable and experimental qualities of these sexual interactions, others stated that a sexual encounter with a man and/or a trans woman was by default. Rather than deliberately seeking a man and/or a trans woman sexual partner, they explained that their atypical sexual partnering was a function of their inability to find a cisgender female partner. A man and/or a trans woman sexual partner, while not their first option, was described as a reliable second choice—an available alternative when a cisgender female was perceived to be unavailable or unattainable. Most of the participants who did not have a current girlfriend or wife described a desire for a cisgender female partner and, ultimately, an ongoing heterosexual relationship with a cisgender woman. However, many of these participants felt that factors in their current life situation such as homelessness and/or substance use prevented them from seeking their ideal sexual partner. Sam’s description illustrates the circumstances around which he chose an atypical sexual partner:

Sam I really have to be hard up. If I do that it’s like I’ve got to relieve a lot of pressure ... with a transgender. It’s just got to be when I can’t get to my girl, boom. I’ve really got to be hard though. It’s like if you see a lot of prostitutes out there, and you’re hard and you want something real bad, it’s like buying a hooker. So the transgenders want to just give me something, and I’ll probably screw a drag queen in the butt or something like that. I’ve got to be really horny and hard up to really get off.

When a cisgender woman was not perceived as a realistic option, these participants explained that they would compromise their primary sexual partner type and engage in a sexual encounter with an atypical sexual partner type. As such, their occasional sexual partner could provide the emotional and sexual satisfaction, albeit momentary, that they previously received from a girlfriend or wife. Chuck, who earlier in the interview described himself as “unattractive” to women because he was homeless and addicted to drugs, viewed emotional intimacy with a cisgender woman as impossible and unattainable. When he felt lonely, he hoped for companionship with a cisgender woman, but compromised with an occasional sexual encounter with a man or a trans woman:

Chuck I’m by myself now, I’m not in a relationship anymore, I’m not married anymore. And for me, that’s the closest to it, it’s usually a stranger, someone I don’t know. I want to hear the words, “I love you,” and, to me, that’s my love for that moment ... When things get to where I get on the pity pot and start feeling sorry for myself, I don’t allow it to go that far. I know when it’s coming, and that’s when I go “creeping.” I go out [to] get someone ... the ultimate goal is I want to hear the words, “I love you.” ... Having somebody around, holding somebody, doing the little simple things like that, to me, that’s a woman. See, I lay next to a man I’ve linked to a woman.

Many participants expressed their desire for what they viewed as an “ideal heterosexual relationship,” including a wife, children, and a house. They explained that they preferred not

to have sex with a man and/or a trans woman, but they believed their present situation—i.e., homelessness, substance use, HIV status, unemployment—made finding a cisgender female partner unrealistic. A man or a trans woman, they believed, had “lower standards” and were thus willing to engage in a sexual relationship with someone a cisgender woman would most likely reject. From their perspective, cisgender women desired a man who is housed, employed, and healthy. Participants perceived that cisgender women were less accepting of a man whose lifestyle includes homelessness, substance use, HIV infection, and unemployment. Jacob, who occasionally chose a trans woman sexual partner, described this belief:

Jacob I haven’t had a steady girlfriend for a while because I’ve been having this drug problem and am homeless and stuff like that. Basically nobody wants to be with me, [or] somebody like that ... People look at me like I’m a piece of trash or whatever; it’s embarrassing to me. And I’ve been lonely lately. So I was even thinking about getting into a relationship with a transgender ... Because they’re the only ones that will talk to me. [With] the shape of my finances and everything else, there’s not really women, except for prostitutes, I can go to. It’s been, like, lonely. I think transgenders are more accepting of people like that. And a lot of them are addicts or used to be addicts, so they’re more accepting.

Terry’s situation was similar to Jacob’s; he explained how he viewed his addiction and employment status as preventing him from establishing an ideal heterosexual relationship:

Terry My preference would be a woman. [But,] I don’t feel that I am socially adequate right now for a woman. I don’t think I’m at a place where a woman would want to deal with me [because of] my addiction, because of my current status in working. Not too many women would deal with me ... My lifestyle, the way I’m living right now. I don’t think a woman will accept me. [If I were] working, employed, not on drugs, I would pursue a woman.

Like Terry and Jacob, these participants viewed their occasional sexual partnerships as temporary until their circumstances changed. Derrick, who had occasional sexual encounters with men — sometimes for trade and sometimes for pleasure — explained that these sexual encounters were a substitute until he found employment (the sexual encounters for trade) or was in a relationship with a woman (the sexual encounters for pleasure). In both cases, he viewed sex with a man as temporary, a reliable second choice, until his current situation (financial or romantic) changed.

Derrick I have to do it [have sex with a man] because I’m not working right now. It’s mainly just [to] support myself. Mainly, it’s like a job...

Q [T]he men you have sex with who you don’t charge money for, why do you think you do that?

Derrick I don’t know ... Maybe because I met them first before I ran into a woman, maybe. Or at the time, I wasn’t dating anybody, wasn’t in a relationship with a woman.

While participants such as Terry, Jacob, and Derrick referred either homelessness, substance use, HIV infection, and/or unemployment as factors that influence their sexual partnering, other participants cited still other circumstances such as incarceration to explain what they described as an atypical occasional sexual partner.

Two-thirds (65.5%) of the participants reported a history of incarceration, either in jail or prison. A few participants described their sexual encounters while incarcerated, explaining that in the absence of a potential cisgender female sexual partner, a man and/or a trans woman became an acceptable second choice. Following their release, they continued to view a man or a trans woman as an acceptable second choice sexual partner. One participant, Fred, who spent 11 years in prison, discussed how he “settled” for a sexual relationship with another man during his incarceration:

Fred I needed a woman. I spent a lot of years without a woman, and I had to use something to substitute ... That’s another world, being in prison, living that life, having a homosexual or a person as your woman. That’s a different life, that’s a different page in life for me, and probably for many people that have been in prison. The ones that have never been in prison would probably never realize or understand what I’m talking about. Never in their life would they understand this because you have to be put in the situation where I am using a man as a woman. I was craving for the touch of a woman, of being caressed by a woman, of being gently touched and gently spoken to, which I wanted from a woman. But I had to settle for a man.

Another participant, Ken, who was recently divorced after 23 years of marriage, similarly discussed engaging in sex with a man while in prison and feeling that a male sexual partner was an acceptable second choice because a cisgender female partner was unavailable to him.

Ken I never met a guy that really turned me on like that. It was just mainly just for the sex. [In prison] was the first time that I actually tried it. The prison we were in was a low security prison; they’re like rooms. So we played cards and, you know, it was kind of like [we were] hiding it a little bit.

For some participants who were incarcerated, sexual interactions with a man or a trans woman became an acceptable standard post-incarceration because a cisgender female was unavailable. They accepted such sexual partnering while incarcerated and continued doing so upon occasion post-incarceration. Others believed their marginal life situation made a cisgender female sexual partner unattainable. These participants maintained a pragmatic and utilitarian approach to sex, explaining that if they desired a sexual encounter or relationship and a cisgender female was unavailable, they would “settle” for a man or a trans woman partner.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore the motivations for occasional sexual partnering with a man or trans woman among a sample of heterosexual men. All participants identified as heterosexual and had engaged in at least one sexual encounter with a man or trans woman in the past year, but not more than one sexual encounter with a man or trans woman per

month. Findings from this unique sample demonstrated that heterosexual men engaged in an occasional sexual encounter with a partner who was not a cisgender female due to: (1) the ease and uncomplicated quality of the encounter and the perception of a man or trans woman as a “disposable” sexual partner; (2) the experimental and exciting nature of the sexual encounter; and, (3) the perception of a man or trans woman as a reliable second choice when a cisgender woman was not available or accessible, often due to social circumstances such as homelessness or incarceration. Interestingly, these three themes were represented among participants who engaged in an occasional sexual encounter with a man only, with a trans woman only, and with both a man or a trans woman partner. This study was the first of its kind to enhance understanding of occasional sexual partnering with atypical partner types among heterosexual men.

Many participants reported that their primary motivation for having an occasional sexual encounter with a man or trans woman was the ease and uncomplicated nature of these sexual contacts. This form of sexual partnering required no obligation or responsibility beyond their own sexual gratification (Anthony: ‘A real woman likes to play games, whereas I don’t really have to approach a transgender with any set game.’). Some participants explained that finding a trans woman or male sexual partner was quicker and less burdensome than finding a cisgender female partner (Jacob: ‘...it’s easier to meet and have sex the same night than it is to meet a real woman.’). Studies investigating the motivations of occasional male clients of female sex workers have demonstrated similar findings. One study exploring the motivations of men who had engaged in a sexual encounter with a sex worker at least once found that over one-third of the sample believed that paying for sex was less trouble than finding a non-exchange sex partner (Pitts, Smith, Grierson, O’Brien, & Misson, 2004). A similar qualitative study found that many men viewed a sexual encounter with a female sex worker as a relatively uncomplicated way of getting their sexual needs met (Jordan, 1997). However, the present sample was unique in the heterosexual participants’ choice of a man or trans woman sex partner rather than their typical partner choice (i.e., cisgender woman). Some participants explained that they specifically sought out a non-cisgender female sex partner because they viewed the encounter as completely devoid of emotional connection that they might expect with a cisgender woman (Jason: ‘There’s no strings attached to it, nothing lingering, no connection.’). Despite reporting comparable motivations including ease and feasibility as similar samples of men who have occasional sexual encounters with cisgender female sex workers, the current sample reported seeking an additional layer of emotional detachment from the “lingering” feelings that might be present even in a sexual encounter with a cisgender female sex worker.

Beyond the perception that a sexual encounter with a man or trans woman was easy, uncomplicated, and devoid of emotion, a key motivation for many was the experimental nature of the sexual encounter. Some participants highlighted that they felt uncomfortable engaging in what they perceived as “dark” or “dirty” sexual fantasies or kinks with cisgender women, and instead sought out a man or trans woman to satisfy their sexual desires. Sociological and sexuality literature is relatively devoid of studies investigating strategies to manage or engage in kinky sexual desires. The few studies investigating bondage, discipline and sadomasochism (BDSM) subculture highlight that stigmatizing public portrayal of kinky sexual desires and discrimination or prejudice against “kink communities” can

produce stigma management strategies including concealment and disengagement from mainstream society (Bezreh, Weinberg, & Edgar, 2012; Brown, 2010; Meeker, 2013). Some of the men in the current sample expressed embarrassment or disgust in fulfilling some of their stigmatized sexual desires with a cisgender woman (Phillip: ‘That’s icky to have your wife or your girlfriend to do that to you.’). Instead, they turned away from ‘mainstream’ cisgender female sexual partners, and fulfilled these kinky desires through an occasional sexual encounter with a man or trans woman. Still other men described their occasional sexual partnering with a man or trans woman as a kink in and of itself, using words like “thrill” and “spicy,” or yearning for a partner who was not “vanilla,” to describe their motivations for these occasional sexual encounters. Research on the associations between kink, stigma, and sexuality is in its infancy; however, findings from the current study suggest that some heterosexual men might have an occasional sexual encounter with a man or trans woman to fulfil a kinky sexual desire.

The final salient theme that emerged from the men’s narratives was the perception of a man or trans woman as a “reliable second choice” for a sexual encounter. Due to many of the participant’s social circumstances, including homelessness and substance use, they perceived themselves as unable to attract a cisgender female sexual partner (Terry: ‘[If I were] working, employed, not on drugs, I would pursue a woman.’). Additionally, some of the men who had a history of incarceration explained that, due to the sex-segregated nature of jails/prisons, they were used to having sexual encounters with a man or a trans woman while incarcerated, and some continued this sexual practice, upon occasion, post-incarceration (Fred: ‘I was craving for the touch of a woman...but I had to settle for a man.’) Some participants in the latter group explained that until their incarceration, they had not had a sexual encounter with a man or trans woman (Ken: ‘[In prison] was the first time that I actually tried it.’). Literature examining sexual fluidity (i.e., context-dependent flexibility in sexual partnering) has suggested that the strict categorization of sexual identity (e.g., gay, bisexual, heterosexual) might be misleading, and that sexual attraction and partnering can instead be situation-dependent (Diamond, 2016; R. Epstein, McKinney, Fox, & Garcia, 2012; Ross, Daneback, & Månsson, 2012; Rupp & Taylor, 2010). Clearly, this study supports the notion of sexual fluidity; despite identifying as heterosexual, context-dependent factors (i.e., homelessness, incarceration) motivated some men to seek out a sexual encounter with a man or trans woman.

Limitations and Conclusions

Given the hidden nature of the study population, qualitative research was the ideal method for studying this hard-to-reach sample (Malterud, 2001). However, as with any study, these data must be interpreted within the confines of the study’s limitations. The study utilized a convenience sample and all data were self-reported. Errors in recall, deliberate falsification, and social desirability might have influenced a participant’s self-report (Nederhof, 1985) and the recruitment methodology limits transferability. Additionally, as some participants reported prior incarceration and current substance use; thus, the findings might not be representative of other lower-risk heterosexual men who report occasional sexual encounters with a man or a trans woman. Finally, because eligibility criteria required English as the language for the interviews, the findings may not represent those individuals with limited

English language skills. Despite these limitations, these data shed light on the sexual motivations of a highly unique population that spans themes crossing sexual desire, identity, and behavior. From this study, we move toward a better understanding of the motivations for occasional sexual encounters and sexual partnering with a man and/or a trans woman among a sample of heterosexual men.

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RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN PARTICIPANTS: All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

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