

## **A Qualitative Study of Heterosexual Men's Attitudes Toward and Practices of Receiving Anal Stimulation**

Culture, Health and Sexuality

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## **Abstract**

This study examines the practice of and attitudes toward anal sexual stimulation among 30 heterosexual undergraduate men attending a UK university. While scientific and popular belief throughout the twentieth century considered anal pleasure to be only for gay or gender non-conforming men, we find participants discuss such pleasure openly and some have explored physically receiving anal pleasure. Participants did not stigmatise sexual pleasure derived from anal play, challenging cultural narratives that conflate anal receptivity with being gay. We document how ignorance around the best practices for anal sex may impede pleasure and the further exploration of sexual pleasure and highlight areas where sexual health and education interventions may be beneficial.

**Keywords:** anal; heterosexuality; masculinity; sexuality; sexual health.

## Introduction

Commonly held beliefs about the male prostate and men's anal penetration are characterised by two key ideas: 1) that it is analogous to the G-spot in women; and 2) that a man who enjoys receptive anal pleasure is gay (Branfman and Stiritz 2012; Glickman and Emirzian 2013). Few academic studies have examined how men view and experience receptive anal pleasure (Baldwin and Baldwin 2000; Branfman and Stiritz 2012; Morin 2010; Moskowitz and Hart 2011). These studies have largely focused on same-sex penile-anal intercourse, usually ignoring heterosexual men's capacity for receptive anal play and forms of anal stimulation without a penis (McBride and Fortenberry 2010). Furthermore, studies into heterosexual male anal practices often utilise the lens of disease and sexual health, frequently treating it solely as a risky sexual behaviour related to the transmission of HIV (e.g. Ndinda et al. 2008; Lane et al. 2006). Interestingly, there is more developed literature on the motivations for heterosexual women engaging in anal sex (e.g. McBride 2018; Reynolds, Fisher and Rogala 2015; Owen et al. 2015).

Apart from some insightful non-academic work (see Glickman and Emirzian 2013), only two peer reviewed studies have examined heterosexual men's anal pleasuring practices (Branfman and Stiritz 2012; Branfman, Stiritz and Anderson 2018). The first examines social stigma around men's anal pleasure to argue that educators can use male anal pleasure as an example to help students critically analyse the social construction of sex, gender and sexuality (Branfman and Stiritz 2012). The second uses the same data set to empirically examine the frequency that heterosexual respondents reported engaging in receptive anal stimulation, and the cultural meanings they attached to this practice. While most young men surveyed in that study problematised the exclusive association of anal eroticism with male homosexuality, they also believed anal penetration as primarily for gay and bisexual men (Branfman, Stiritz and Anderson 2018).

This article adds to the literature on anal sexual practices among heterosexual men by exploring their perceptions of anal sex for men and their own experiences of anal sexual pleasure. The results are conceptualised through sexual stigma and homophobia (Anderson 2009)—defined as the fear of being socially perceived as gay—to understand heterosexual men's participation in anal sex. We document how ignorance around the best practices for anal sex may impede pleasure and highlight areas where sexual health and education interventions may be beneficial.

## Sexual Stigma, Masculinity and Homophobia

In the West, anatomical sex, gender identity and sexual orientation are commonly conflated. Gay men are assumed to have feminine characteristics, while lesbian women are commonly assumed to have masculine characteristics (Kite and Deaux 1987). This is despite widespread recognition that sex, gender and sexuality are distinct but interrelated, and that each entails complex power relations (Schwartz and Rutter 1998). In this context, there is a pervasive cultural belief that only gay and bisexual men receive anal pleasure (Herek 2007). This is connected with the conflation of femininity and homosexuality, given that gay and bisexual men also consider men who are receptive partner in anal sex to be more feminine than men who are the insertive partner (Moskowitz and Hart 2011; Ravenhill and de Visser 2018).

The taboo on men's anal eroticism fits with the stigma that has historically been used to police non-normative sexual behaviours (Gray, Schein and Ward 2014; Rubin 1984). Stigma related to heterosexual men's anal pleasure mirrors older taboos, such as the association of clitoral eroticism with female homosexuality (Maines 2001). As such, for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, American women avoided clitoral stimulation out of fear of being thought lesbian (Stiritz 2008). Sexual behaviours that were distinct from penile-vaginal sexual contact were socially and legally censured (Rubin 1984). Masturbation was considered to be the practice of 'homosexuals' for much of this period (Hunt 1998). Sodomy laws criminalised a range of sexual practices, yet the policing of these laws often focused on anal sex between men because of its perceived extreme immorality (Rubin 1984).

This policing of men's sexual practices necessitates an understanding that homophobia regulates not just sexual minorities' behaviours and freedoms, but also those of heterosexual men. How homophobia polices gender as well as sexuality has been conceptualised as homophobia (see Anderson 2009; McCormack and Anderson 2014a). Defined as the cultural fear of being socially perceived as gay, homophobic cultures are ones in which homophobia is deployed to regulate how men and women behave and interact. In homophobic cultures, heterosexual men tend to avoid things socially classed as 'gay' or feminine, such as crying, expressing fear or being tactile with other men (Floyd 2000; McCreary 1994; Way 2011).

Alongside cross-cultural differences (e.g. Hasan, Aggleton and Persson 2018), the dynamics of masculinities and masculine expression are influenced by intersections with class, ethnicity, religiosity and other significant variables in Western culture (e.g. Joseph-Salisbury 2018; McCreary 2010; Roberts 2018). Similarly, psychological perspectives recognise that men also negotiate masculine identities in diverse ways within these specific cultural contexts (Wetherell and Edley 1999), with some heterosexual men more willing than others to enact traditionally non-masculine behaviours (e.g. Aggleton 1987) and consideration of these aspects helps recognise the plurality of masculinities within cultures as well as between them.

The desire to be perceived as heterosexual and masculine is understandable in a culture that distributes privilege unequally according to gender and sexuality. Consequently, when heterosexual boys and men fear the stigma attached to homosexuality, they normally conceal their same-sex sexual practices or desires (Lancaster 1988). Here, the easiest way for a man to be considered heterosexual and masculine in a homophobic culture is to avoid same-sex sexual activities and avoid admitting same-sex sexual desire. Borrowing from the one-drop theory of race (Harris 1964), in which a dominant White culture once viewed anyone with even a portion of Black genetic ancestry as Black, Anderson (2008) calls the behavioural component of this model the one-time rule of homosexuality. This term reflects the cultural tendency to equate a man's one-time same-sex sexual experience with a gay orientation in masculine peer culture. As the one-drop rule existed to reify white privilege by policing the categories of pure whiteness, the one-time rule exists to maintain heterosexual hegemony. This rigid social border serves to naturalise straight men as a category that is innately superior to penetrable sexual minority men and women (Pronger 1999).

The conflation of male receptive anal sex with homosexuality is a component of the one-time rule. Demonising homosexuality has reproduced the general rule that one's socially perceived heterosexual identity is partially conditioned not only upon sex with appropriate (different-sex) partners, but also upon appropriate sex roles or acts. In other words, men must

penetrate women, not stimulate or penetrate their own orifices, or allow their orifices to be stimulated or penetrated by others (Holland et al. 2004). While stimulating one's own anus is not direct sexual contact with another male, homohysteria constructs anal stimulation as a homosexual act, even if performed in a heterosexual context (Agnew 1985; Jeffries 2009; Morin 2010). As a concept, homohysteria has attracted significant intellectual debate, (see for example McCormack and Anderson 2014a, 2014b; Parent, Batura and Crooks 2014; Plummer 2014; Worthen 2014), which has strengthened the concept and nuanced its use in the sociology of men and masculinities (e.g. Anderson and McCormack 2018; Scoats 2017; Severs 2017).

While homohysteria is a powerful tool to understand the changing dynamics of heterosexual men's sexual practices, its focus on homosexuality perhaps marginalises the influence of other social factors. As the regulation of anal sex and masturbation suggests, men's sexual practices are entwined with sexual stigma not solely related to homosexuality, but including the sex/gender system of a given culture (see Rubin 1984), the association of masculinity with penetration in sex (Holland et al. 2004), and forms of male privilege equated with physical (and thus sexual) dominance (Burton Nelson 1994). Given this, we find homohysteria to be a useful sensitising concept (see Anderson and McCormack 2014) that contextualises the cultural arena and can then be complemented by other concepts, such as sexual stigma and heteronormativity.

### **Decreasing Sexual Stigma**

While the one-time rule of homosexuality was particularly prevalent in the 1980s and 1990s, although attitudes toward sex and sexuality are changing in Western societies (Anderson and McCormack 2018; Giddens 1992). Recent decades have brought a liberalisation of attitudes towards and institutional control over sexual behaviours (Twenge, Sherman and Wells. 2016; Twenge, Sherman and Wells. 2015). This shift is evident in the growing percentage of people who engage in non-marital intercourse (Twenge, Sherman and Wells 2015), increasing acceptance of oral sex (Vannier and O'Sullivan 2012), masturbation (Laqueur 2002), pornography (McCormack and Wignall 2017) and anal sex (Leichliter 2008). These trends are related to increasing social acceptance of alternative categories of sexuality (Carrillo and Hoffman 2018; McCormack 2018; Savin-Williams 2018). Homophobia has decreased significantly in Britain (McCormack 2012; Weeks 2007), and British Social Attitudes survey data documents a sustained improvement in attitudes toward homosexuality among the British public (Keleher and Smith 2012); also found in analysis of opinion polls (Clements and Field 2014).

With this attitudinal shift, homohysteria declines and men can engage in broader set of sexual behaviours (McCormack and Anderson 2014a). For example, Anderson, Adams and Rivers (2012) have shown that, while there is no previously documented history of men kissing each other on the lips in Anglophone countries, data from 145 interviews among English undergraduate men finds that 89% have done so. In research on 90 heterosexual undergraduate men in Australia, Drummond et al. (2014) find 29% report having kissed other men. Survey data of 475 men from throughout 11 US universities, and 75 in-depth interviews of US undergraduate men, indicates that homosocial kissing occurs among undergraduate, heterosexual men at the rate of 10% (Anderson, Ripley and McCormack 2019). In their study of kissing in the USA, which occurred after the English and Australian studies had been

published, Anderson, Ripley and McCormack (2019: 39) argue that the differential rates of kissing are attributable to “differences in attitudes toward gay people in these cultures,” with England the most accepting of gay people and the USA the least.

The expansion of sexual behaviours extends to more overtly sexual behaviours than kissing. Threesomes comprised two men and one woman do not necessarily call into question the heterosexuality of the male participant (Scoats, Joseph and Anderson 2018). Similarly, heterosexual men have been shown to engage in same-sex sexual acts without calling into question their heterosexual identity (Carrillo and Hoffman 2018; McCormack 2018; Robards 2018; Savin-Williams 2018). Glickman and Emirzian (2013) suggest that young, straight-identified men are increasingly willing to be anally penetrated by a sex toy under the control of a woman, yet little research examines the changing role of anal sex for young straight men.

In the recent study by Branfman, Stiritz and Anderson (2018), 66% of heterosexual men indicate that anal eroticism is culturally associated with homosexuality, and 95%, ( $n=161$ ) report that they also associate anal pleasure with gay men. However, 80% ( $n=136$ ) disagreed with the statement, ‘Any guy who enjoys being anally penetrated during sex is probably gay.’ Only 19% of respondents maintained the personal belief that anal penetration indicates homosexuality or emasculation. Generally, for those respondents homophobia has not been completely de-coupled from homosexuality. However, the diversity of attitudes relating to anal stimulation and receptivity suggests that boundaries of ‘acceptable’ masculine gender and sexuality are changing. This study provides qualitative data regarding heterosexual men’s perspectives on and engagement with anal stimulation. It also expands the empirical data on this phenomenon to a different country (England) and with a different demographic (university-attending men).

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

Data come from 30 semi-structured in-depth interviews with cisgender men aged between 19 and 33 (mean 20). Using Savin-Williams’ (2014) 9-point scale of sexual identification, all participants self-identified as heterosexual (18 exclusively straight, 11 straight, 1 mostly straight). Participants identified as middle-class with no strong levels of religiosity. The sample was exclusively white British, apart from one participant who identified as South Asian.

### ***Procedure***

Participants were recruited from a sport-related third-year class in a university in southern England through one of the researchers advertising the study during a lecture. Interested individuals were given an information sheet and consent form. Participants were offered GBP 20 for participation. Interviews were conducted in a university office and averaged approximately 45 minutes, starting with demographic information and included questions about their sexuality, opinions of anal sex, and their own anal practices. Follow-up questions were used by the interviewer, meaning that participants were not always asked the same questions.

As part of their third-year class, the students had been asked to complete Herek’s (1988) Attitudes Towards Gays and Lesbian scale. Participants were asked if they would be

happy for the results to be shown to the interviewer – all consented. The sample displayed high levels of acceptance of homosexuality and displayed no hostility toward gay or bisexual people; half the sample identified as strong supporters of rights for sexual minorities and the remaining participants noted no antipathy toward gay or bisexual people.

Ethical approval was granted from the University of Winchester internal ethics committee and ethical procedures of the British Sociological Association were followed. Participants are given pseudonyms to preserve anonymity.

### ***Data Collection***

Semi-structured interviews were adopted. A level of familiarity between the researcher and participant was present to allow for a more open discussion of sensitive topics (Hutchinson, Marsiglio and Cohan 2002). The interviewer disclosed that he was a cis-gendered gay man, to signal his openness to understanding the potential of anal pleasure, given the cultural associations between gay identity and anal sex. Participants were able to withdraw from the study or review their transcriptions afterwards – no participant did so.

### ***Analysis***

Given the lack of existing research and the exploratory nature of the study, an inductive approach was taken. Interview transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2013). Two authors (EA; LM) coded the data independently, with codes compared for similarity; there was minimal variation between the two researchers. Recurring patterns were identified, and initial codes were agreed upon. These codes were combined with the existing literature to create inductive themes grounded in the data (Braun and Clarke 2013). A third author (LW) cross-checked the analysis with a random sample of interviews to check for internal coherence.

### ***Results***

The findings of the thematic analysis identified three major themes: general attitudes towards anal sex; personal experiences of anal sex; and reasons for not engaging in anal sex.

#### ***General Attitudes Toward Anal Sex***

Participants did not demonstrate stigma towards anal pleasure and did not consider a man who engaged in anal play as feminine, gay or otherwise. When asked if there was a link between anal pleasure and gayness, Channing, aged 18, stated, 'Fingering [yourself] does not make you gay. It has no indication of your sexuality whatsoever. It only means that you're more prone to trying new things, that's all. For today's generation, it's just completely normal'. Theo, aged 19, who had experienced anal stimulation in the past, said that he would 'tell most of his friends' when asked how open he would be with others about his experience. Bruce, aged 19, explained that there were no taboos in talking about engaging in anal stimulation within his friendship group, but also no judgement against those uninterested in it. He said, 'We are extremely open about it. I've got friends that get fingered while having sex with their girlfriends, and then I have another friend that's quite the opposite'. Bruce

described anal sex as ‘just another sexual activity’. For participants who discussed sex with their friends, anal sex was casually just another topic within the conversation.

Some participants implicitly framed anal receptivity as for others, rather than themselves. Having experienced anal stimulation in the past, Dan, aged 19, suggested that it ‘wasn’t for me’, but added, ‘If that’s what you enjoy then fair enough, I’m not going to complain. But I can’t see myself enjoying it’. Aiden, aged 18, also said that anal pleasuring ‘is just not for me’ but he added that, ‘A lot of guys are open about [doing] it’. Similarly, Tony, aged 19, explained that, ‘I wouldn’t do it to myself’, but also that, ‘Obviously gay sex doesn’t make you gay. In Spartan times gay sex was just sex, male sex is there for fun’. In doing so, participants were rhetorically distancing themselves from the possibility of anal pleasure, even when some (e.g. Dan) have explored it (Wetherell and Edley 1999).

A culture of acceptance was not universal. Four men still perceived a stigma around anal stimulation. For example, when asked why he had never experimented with anal sexual pleasure, Joe, aged 20, said, ‘I’m so manly, and that means I’m not gay. There is still a part of me that associates it with gay men’. This is despite Joe describing himself as being ‘comfortable’ with the idea of exploring anal pleasure in the future. Showing evidence of the diversity of male peer group cultures, Tim, aged 19, stated that he had previously been ‘ridiculed’ by two friends when he told them he had tried to finger himself. Henry, aged 20, also felt that as a society there was still some perception the activity was for gay men: ‘It’s one of those things that’s still massively stigmatised as gay’. He went on to explain, ‘I think generally men don’t talk about their wanking habits, particularly straight men, because I think to start discussing something like that people would almost see that as a homosexual discussion’. Thus, whilst positive attitudes toward male anal stimulation were present for most participants, there were still some for whom it was at least somewhat censured.

There was a bigger split in attitudes once questions moved from general attitudes about anal sex to considering exploring anal sex personally. Sixteen participants had positive perceptions of anal sexual pleasure. Of those men, nine had previous experiences with it while seven had no experience but expressed interest in it. Jacob, aged 19 who was ‘open to anal pleasuring’, said that it was ‘definitely something guys think about.’ Interestingly, he noted that, ‘gay guys wouldn’t do it if there wasn’t pleasure behind it’, as part of the rationale for his openness.

### ***Experiences of Anal Stimulation***

Fourteen participants had experience with their own anal penetration, either on their own or with a partner. Of these participants, nine said they enjoyed it and would consider doing it again. Matthew, aged 33, describes his first experience as initiated from his girlfriend, while she was performing oral sex. Matthew ‘found it enjoyable’ partially because he ‘heard that you can achieve orgasm through there’. He described that in watching a comedic film in which ‘a guy gets paid to get fingered by a sexual health clinic lady,’ it ‘made [anal stimulation] easier to accept’. Theo also expressed that being anally stimulated led to a ‘far more intense’ orgasm. Alan indicated that after his experiences with fingering himself, he progressed to using a vibrator, which he described as ‘far better than just using a finger’. Similarly, Patrick, aged 19, recognised that the next step in his anal exploration might be something other than a finger: ‘I know you can’t start big, so getting things that are small and working up’.

Only two participants indicated they were no longer interested after having had



experience with it, while three did not clearly indicate either way. aged 20, stated that he once had a 'prostate massage with fingers' but 'didn't see the appeal' and 'didn't really get anything out of it'. Bruce fingered himself in the bath when he has 'fifteen or sixteen...probably just out of curiosity'. Bruce further explained that despite no longer being interested, he had experimented with anal stimulation whilst engaging in heterosexual sex, about 'three or four times'.

Participants who had explored receiving anal sexual pleasure discussed the risks involved with anal play and ranked anal practices in terms of natural progression. For example, Andy, aged 19, indicated that while he would be interested in using fingers to explore anal play, using a vibrator was 'too far'. When asked to expand, he said, 'I dunno, I dunno', and could not articulate an answer. It is possible that Andy felt a vibrator would be 'too far' because of its association with women's sexual pleasure or the more intense stimulation it would provide, or perhaps his inability to articulate a response shows a level of uncomfortability in discussing anal exploration. Lucas, aged 20, also acknowledged the risks involved with anal play, saying he would 'set boundaries to mitigate risks'. Expanding on these risks, James expressed the fear of risking 'ripping something down there'.

However, while participants expressed interest and concern about exploring anal pleasure, their knowledge was somewhat limited. Perhaps because of the frequent discussions of sexual health risk related to anal sex in popular culture, all participants raised concerns about perceived risks involved in anal sex, particularly around potential pain involved. Yet, there was little discussion of how to negotiate these risks other than considering size of the instrument used for penetration and the act of penetration. Participants understood the need to progress in size from smaller to larger for anal insertion. Significantly, none of the participants had used lubricant (specifically designed or substitute) to explore anal play. Some stated that they had never considered it, but others humorously dismissed the process, with Patrick stating that 'curiosity has no time for lube'.

### ***Men Without Experience of Anal Stimulation***

Sixteen men reported no experience of anal stimulation. Nine men clearly were not interested in exploring anal sexual stimulation. While a range of reasons were given, these rationales were mostly under-developed, suggesting that there was an absence of discussion about it rather than an active silencing in their peer groups. There were six participants whose responses were best coded as a lack of consideration of the practise.

Three participants framed anal stimulation as anything other than pleasurable. Peter, aged 19, stated how his friendship group had at some point discussed anal sex practices. One of his friends' girlfriend had a dildo and 'shoves it up his arse'. While the discussion occurred, Peter felt uncomfortable, saying it 'didn't make me think that I should shove something up my arse to see what happens'. Other participants were put off by having an association of the anus with non-pleasurable activities. Chris, aged 19, was 'completely put off' by the idea of fingering himself and had a self-described 'narrow view of it'. He continued, 'the fact is that your bum is used for you to go to the toilet, and not as a pleasure spot. My brain won't compute that it should be used for anything other than that'. Aaron, aged 20, described health issues related to constipation, that were 'painful, and so might be a factor [for forgoing anal play of any form]. I just don't have any interest'.

One participant framed a rejection of anal stimulation in gendered terms. Sam said that he was 'not open to trying a dildo'. He said that he would feel 'a bit emasculated'. Sam described a view of power within his sexual experience that was central, saying, 'I feel like it would be giving her the power a bit. That would be a subservient position; it wouldn't fit with the role'. No other participants discussed a gendered power dynamic related to anal sex. Indeed, six participants indicated they would be more likely to experiment with anal play if their girlfriends were interested in pleasuring them anally. For example, Ben said that while he would not let a 'one night stand' finger him, he would do it if he had 'been in a relationship for ages' because 'you'd be bored of stuff and you'd be more comfortable with it'. James, aged 19, stated that he would rather have his girlfriend finger him than him finger himself. Citing cultural reasons, James indicated that his girlfriend 'had more resistance to it'. At the same time, he expressed being curious, and that, 'slowly, but surely, one day, we will get around to it'. Jacob compared fingering himself while masturbating to 'giving myself a blowjob'. His logic was that, 'You wouldn't want yourself to do it, but when someone else does it; it is so much more enjoyable'. It may be the case that the subversion of gendered power dynamics is part of what is appealing to exploring anal pleasure, as has been documented among gay men (Ravenhill and de Visser 2018) and in kink communities (Wignall and McCormack, 2017).

## Discussion

This study draws on findings from 30 interviews with heterosexual men to explore their attitudes toward and practice of anal stimulation. Despite a history of gendered regulation of anal sexual practice (Pronger 1999), there was a casualness towards talking about and, in some cases, practising anal sex: for most, anal stimulation has been a discussion topic with peers and partners; just under half of the sample had engaged in anal practices; and there was a partial disassociation of anal pleasure being coded as gay among heterosexual men.

Prior research has shown that receiving anal pleasure transgresses the boundaries of heterosexuality for men (Branfman, Stiritz and Anderson 2018; Morin 2010). This marks a shift in attitudes and behaviours that is both significant and limited: that men are discussing receiving anal pleasure without concern about being socially perceived as gay is a marked change from men's discussion and practice from the 1980s and 1990s (Pronger 1999); and yet this shift is still limited because these heterosexual men's practices are not wholly embracing discussion and physical exploration of anal sexual pleasure. This may be explained by two factors: first, that homophobia has declined but still persists alongside other forms of social stigma and, secondly, that the notion that penetration of a partner is the *sine qua non* of sex may mean that anal receptivity is dismissed because it is not considered central to achieving orgasm (see Holland et al. 2004). That is, the effect of the combination of the sustained decrease in homophobic attitudes, and thus homophobia, is tempered by continuing sexual stigma and the continued importance of penetration within sexual ideals.

While most participants indicated a level of acceptance around anal play, a minority still acknowledged the existence of stigma from others. Within contexts where this behaviour is still stigmatised, the one-time rule of homosexuality is likely still in operation meaning that homophobia is still present to a degree. Reasons for a continued association of anal sex with homosexuality are diverse. First, while previously behaviours such as anal stimulation are increasingly accepted, they may still be partially coded as a sign of homosexuality because of

cultural lag (Ogburn 1950). Thus, it may be difficult for certain men to engage or be interested in anal stimulation due to their own associations of anal play with homosexuality. This dynamic might explain those men's inability to articulate reasons for their aversion. However, multiple studies have demonstrated how heterosexual men have expanded the types of behaviours they are willing to engage in with other men. These behaviours do not, however, necessarily trouble men's heterosexual identities; instead, previously stigmatised behaviours have been incorporated into a heterosexual sense of self, so do not need to be hidden from others. It is thus important to consider how psychological identity work connects with these broader structural issues (Ravenhill and de Visser 2017; Wetherell and Edley 1999).

Of those who had experienced anal stimulation, the majority enjoyed their experiences and were interested in pursuing them further. However, none of the participants reported using lubricant when engaging in anal play. Lubricant is necessary in anal penetration for both pleasure and safety (Reynolds, Fisher and Rogala 2015). As such, varying levels of knowledge about how to safely practise anal penetration exist (McBride 2018) and there is a need to promote good knowledge of how to engage in anal sexual practices (Marston and Lewis 2014). It is also possible that participants used lubricant in their exploration but felt that stating an absence of lubricant made their behaviours more masculine. Further research investigating heterosexual men's use of lubricant, in many forms of sexual activity, would enhance our knowledge.

While one consistent sexual script for how participants engaged in anal activities was absent, mirroring previous research and highlighting the complexities related to anal practices (Duby et al. 2016; Roye, Tolman, and Snowden 2013), there were common narratives of how and why participants would engage in anal play. Participants were more comfortable engaging in anal exploration with a long-term partner compared with a short-term partner. This mirrors the findings of Reynolds, Fisher and Rogala (2015) in which heterosexual women identified anal penetration as less risky if practiced with a trusted long-term partner. While described as sometimes being more intimate than vaginal sex and leading to greater orgasm, participants in Reynolds, Fisher and Rogala's study were more concerned about risk (see also McBride 2018; Villar-Loubet et al. 2016). This is not to endorse notions of anal sex as inherently risky but to recognise that dominant cultural discourses still often position it as such.

The findings of this study indicate that sexual health practitioners need to expand their discussion of anal sex practices to heterosexual men as well. This would include discussion of how men can explore anal pleasure both on their own and with a partner (see Glickman and Emirzian 2013), and how a significant proportion of men may identify as primarily or mostly, but not exclusively, straight (Savin-Williams 2018). Such education would be useful in highlighting the importance of negotiating safety and pleasure in sexual acts and could help to further destigmatise anal sexual practices more generally. Such discussion would also support the goal of progressive sex education that seeks to move beyond a focus in sex on penile-vaginal penetration for men and think more holistically about sexual pleasure (Holland et al. 2004). Indeed, school-based sexual health interventions that emphasise the diverse ways in which people can have sex would also be useful.

Our analysis contrasts with queer theorists' perspectives on what heterosexual men's anal pleasuring means. Aguilar (2017), for example, uses analysis of advice columns by the gay journalist Dan Savage to argue that heterosexual men exploring anal sexual pleasure with their girlfriends is "ideological work" (p. 275) to keep the social privileges of straightness.

Ward (2015) goes further, arguing that straight men co-opt same-sex desire as a “constitutive element” (p. 5) of heterosexual masculinity so as to maintain the marginalisation of gay men. We do not find this explanation persuasive and consider it to be a conservative analysis that fails to recognise social change related to masculinities and homophobia of the past thirty years (see Anderson and McCormack 2018). This conservatism may be attributable to the queer focus on textual analysis rather than engaging with recent sociological and psychological empirical data (see also McCormack 2018; Savin-Williams 2005; Weeks 2007).

### **Limitations**

There are clear limitations to this study. First, as with many other interview-based studies of sexuality that use a convenience sample, the representativeness and reliability of self-disclosure must be considered. However, given the sensitive nature of discussing sexual practices, particularly related to anal sex given the potential for associated stigma, it was necessary to compromise on representativeness to locate participants (Harris, Cook and Kashubeck-West 2008). Second, Wiederman (1999) has suggested that college students willing to volunteer for studies about sex are typically more sexually experienced, hold less traditional values around sex and are more likely to score highly on measures of sensation seeking and sexual self-esteem. Accordingly, the sample is potentially biased toward those who are more sexually liberal. Yet the purpose of this study was not to document prevalence but provide exploratory data about an understudied topic. We also recognise that stigma related to anal practices may be higher than indicated in this study due to the voluntary nature of the sample. Finally, the disclosures of the interviewer’s sexuality may have influenced participant responses, but we believe it more likely enhanced truthful narratives.

### **Conclusion**

This study has examined heterosexual men’s attitudes toward and experiences of anal stimulation, both in general terms and regarding their own practice. We found that many men in our study have experience of anal stimulation and a greater number would be interested in doing so in the future. As such, this study has identified an important population to consider for work related to sexual health and pleasure. If men’s sexual practices continue to expand, which theorists of masculinity predict may occur (Anderson and McCormack 2018), it is important to ensure that men are able to do so in a way that simultaneously minimises the risks of doing so and enhances possibilities for pleasure.

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