



(Bare)ing our desires

by Trevor Hoppe

Ever since the term "barebacking" was popularized in the mid-1990s, pundits and academics alike have concocted a flurry of explanations for a phenomenon that has been likened by some as the sign of the next gay apocalypse. The explanation given depends on who's talking. Psychologists might link barebacking to depression, while sociologists might suggest that men are socialized to take more risks – sexual or not. Because of the vilification of anyone who admits to having unprotected sex, it's rare for gay men to actually speak for themselves.

As a member of a community unwilling to talk openly about fucking without condoms, I've struggled to sort through it all myself. As a young HIV-negative gay man who has had unprotected sex, many of these explanations have grown stale. I don't feel depressed or prone to risky behavior. After living in San Francisco for two years, I want to suggest an alternative narrative that has little to do with mental health, but everything to do with gay male sex culture.

When I arrived, I expected to find in San Francisco a thriving sex-positive gay male culture that celebrated our pleasure. It's supposed to be the "mecca" for gay men, right? Yet, I was having trouble locating pleasure in local online ads for sex. I was instead finding guys looking to "mount" or "breed ♦ me – or, basically, fuck me without a condom and cum inside me. Filled with hetero-loaded words like "cunt," "slut," and "bitch," their ads were built around stereotypical ideas of heterosexual sex, impregnation, and male domination.

Initially, none of this really interested me – I'm a pushy bottom, after all. I can play submissive, but I know who's *really* in charge. Like many gay men, though, coercion fantasies had always turned me on. This was especially true for stories about the high school bottom-boy who's turned into a whore – at first against his will, but then with his consent. Not unlike similar hetero good-girl-gone-bad narratives, after his first fuck, the slutty bottom cannot help but beg for more.

I had other fantasies, though, and my jerk-off material ran the gamut of gay porn. As I spent more time in San Francisco, however, this began to

change. While my porn collection before I moved here was rather diverse, increasingly I found myself only beating off to bareback porn and "boyslut" erotic stories. My fantasies crystallized into reality during a recent hook-up when my fuck buddy pulled out, pulled my hair, and asked, "You want me to breed that white ass?" Both of our online ads said "safe only," but we hadn't used a condom since our first hookup.

The question stopped me in my tracks – I was totally turned off. By asking for my permission, he had destroyed my fantasy of "giving it up" bare – a fantasy in which my consent didn't matter. See, I don't hook up with guys who explicitly seek out unprotected sex. My fantasies about barebacking rely on the dominant hetero narrative of "giving it up" – perhaps with some coercion. While no one has ever verbally pressured me to have unprotected sex, plenty of tops have tried to "stick it in" without a condom and without asking. This doesn't mean that I'm not complicit in his actions, but it does mean that the top initiates. I don't ask for it. That's the fantasy – and, on occasion, my reality.

Recent posts from an HIV-negative blogger in New York suggest that San Francisco isn't the only city where barebacking and domination fantasies are tightly linked. Titled "Confessions of a Bareback Top," his blog features allegedly true stories from his hookups such as "Publicly – a SAFE ONLY top on many websites including Manhunt & Adam4Adam but secretly – a raw cum-dumping top." In a post titled "It's been a while. Latin bitch got what he deserved," his story ends this way:

"I got up and rinsed off in his bathroom. I threw some water and soap on my dick and washed my hands. He asked if I really came in him and I didn't reply. You can tell he regretted doing it – and by me not answering, I wanted to be sure I confirmed his worst fears ... that he took a raw load. I grabbed my bags to leave and I heard him say (face down, still on the floor, hands bound), 'Leave your number if you want.'"

It's the classic tale of the boy-turned-whore who can't help but ask for more. While I'm not trying here to analyze gay male culture everywhere, this New Yorker's stories seem to suggest a larger-than-San-Francisco phenomenon. That said, I'm not interested in over-generalizing this trend. Instead, I want to jumpstart an open and honest dialogue about gay men's fantasies and desires – a dialogue that could help men better understand what they desire and why. The silence that now surrounds barebacking is perpetuating confusion, shame, and sex-negativity.

While dialogue is an important first step, we must also demand research that investigates our desires and fantasies, not just our behaviors and HIV incidence. Most American HIV prevention research models, while well suited for, say, monitoring new HIV infections, are incapable of ever substantially investigating gay men's richly complex sexual cultures. Studies that go beyond the superficial, culturally incompetent models developed by public health researchers and epidemiologists are hard to find.

If HIV prevention organizations want to remain relevant, they should demand richer, more meaningful data. Without new approaches, we will continue to be shortchanged by well-meaning researchers alleging to document our lives – and by prevention organizations who rely on this data. While many of these studies simply skim the surface, others do violence by misrepresenting and potentially demonizing communities that researchers only superficially understand. The tools for better prevention research exist; scientists in Australia, England, and other countries pioneered them. That American researchers have lagged so far behind in their implementation is an embarrassment – and, perhaps, even a crime.

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