

The Gay Dilemma

THE AIDS THREAT HAS BROUGHT IT UP:
WHY ARE SOME HOMOSEXUAL MEN SO PROMISCUOUS?

BY NIKKI MEREDITH

The apparent association between acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) and multiple sexual partners has forced many homosexual men to re-examine their lifestyles.

For many, promiscuity is out and monogamy is in. But questions remain as to whether most homosexual men really want or can have monogamous relationships.

The data that spurred this self-examination, and surprised even a few veterans of the urban gay scene, come from researchers who have been studying the sexual practices of men who have contracted AIDS. In a 1982 study of 50 AIDS victims, for example, the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta found that the median number of lifetime sexual partners for these men was 1,100, with a few of the men reporting as many as 20,000. The median number of different partners for a homosexual control group without the disease (a matched sample of 120 men) was 550. These figures are consistent with the results of a 1978 survey of 685 gay men living in San Francisco. Psychologist Alan P. Bell and sociologist Martin S. Weinberg of the Kinsey Institute for Sex Research found that 15 percent of these men reported having between 500 and 1,000 partners;

more than 25 percent had above 1,000.

Traditional psychoanalysts—still bitter about the American Psychiatric Association's 1973 decision to drop the designation of homosexuality as a sexual deviation from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*—see these seemingly astronomical statistics as further proof that homosexuality is, by definition, a disorder of psychosexual development. The association's 1973 resolution states that a "significant proportion of homosexuals are clearly satisfied with their sexual orientation and show no signs of psychopathology." Nevertheless, it is worth looking at the doctrinaire psychoanalytic explanation of gay promiscuity because at its base is the belief that anything but male-female sexuality is abnormal—a view widely shared by society and by many nonanalytic psychotherapists who treat homosexual patients.

New York psychoanalyst Charles W. Socarides, a longtime advocate of the disease model of homosexuality, says that promiscuity among gay men is a manifestation of oedipal fixation: "In his primary identification with his mother, the homosexual has (figuratively) lost his penis and, therefore, to preserve himself he must incorporate the penis and the body of another man.

New York: a subculture in transition.





The more fragile the structure of the homosexual ego, and the earlier fixated he is, the more he needs the fix of a homosexual act to allay anxiety and the more indiscriminant he becomes."

From this perspective, the gay scene in San Francisco, a nationally renowned homosexual mecca, is one center of anxiety-allaying activity. For more than a decade, San Francisco has been seen as the homosexual equivalent of the "Big Rock Candy Mountain," where, as one gay man puts it, "orgasm is never more than five minutes away." It is important to emphasize that while some promiscuity has been common in urban areas such as San Francisco, Los Angeles and New York, it has not been universal. Even in those "liberated" cities, there are many gay men who lead lives quite removed from sex in "the fast lane."

In the days before AIDS, a man

alone seem to argue against the Freudian contention that castration anxiety is a universal symptom of homosexuality.) Heterosexuals often cite this artifact of gay culture as the quintessential expression of indiscriminate sex. Not so, claims psychologist C. A. Tripp, author of *The Homosexual Matrix*. He says that the phenomenon instead reflects a high degree of discrimination. "If the barrier between the two men suddenly became transparent, at least one of them would likely find himself having sex with someone he would never consider pursuing as a sexual partner."

Taken out of a larger context, descriptions of bathhouses and statistics on number of sexual partners only tend to confirm many heterosexuals' belief that gay men are depraved. And it might well persuade them that gay men are indeed seeking relief from

industry thrives by serving the needs of male customers as efficiently as the customers of gay baths service each other. In *Thy Neighbor's Wife*, journalist Gay Talese borders on the romantic when he describes his own massage-parlor adventures, particularly his attraction to the impersonal nature of the experience.

But aside from a select number of men who, by virtue of their power or wealth, reportedly have remarkable sexual success—Hugh Hefner, for example—studies indicate that heterosexual men lag far behind their homosexual brothers. In their 1973 book, *Male and Female Sexuality*, psychiatrists Marcel T. Saghir and Eli Robins reported that out of a sample of 24 heterosexual and 80 homosexual men, 72 percent of the heterosexuals had fewer than eight lifetime partners as compared with 1 percent of the homosexuals; whereas 75 percent of the homosexual men had reported more than 30 partners, not one heterosexual man did so.

Despite this difference between heterosexual and homosexual males, there is an increasing trend among researchers to view gender rather than sexual orientation as the key variable in understanding sexual attitudes. One factor is the relatively low rate of promiscuity among lesbians. In Bell and Weinberg's lesbian sample, more than 70 percent of the women reported fewer than nine lifetime partners; only 3 percent had more than 100 different partners, and none had more than 500.

Also, the promiscuity among heterosexual women, much highlighted in the '60s and early '70s, is now widely regarded by many as more a product of transitory experimentation and media propaganda than a reflection of an enduring transformation in women's sexual patterns.

The pronounced difference in the sexual behavior of gay men and lesbians and similarity in attitude between lesbians and heterosexual women has led some researchers to view the sexuality of the gay culture—"uncontaminated" as it is by the female ethos—as a distillate of male sexuality. "In a way," Weinberg says, "I believe we can learn more about male sexuality by studying gay men than we can by studying heterosexual men."

The same conclusion, from a sociobiological perspective, has been suggested by anthropologist Donald Sy-

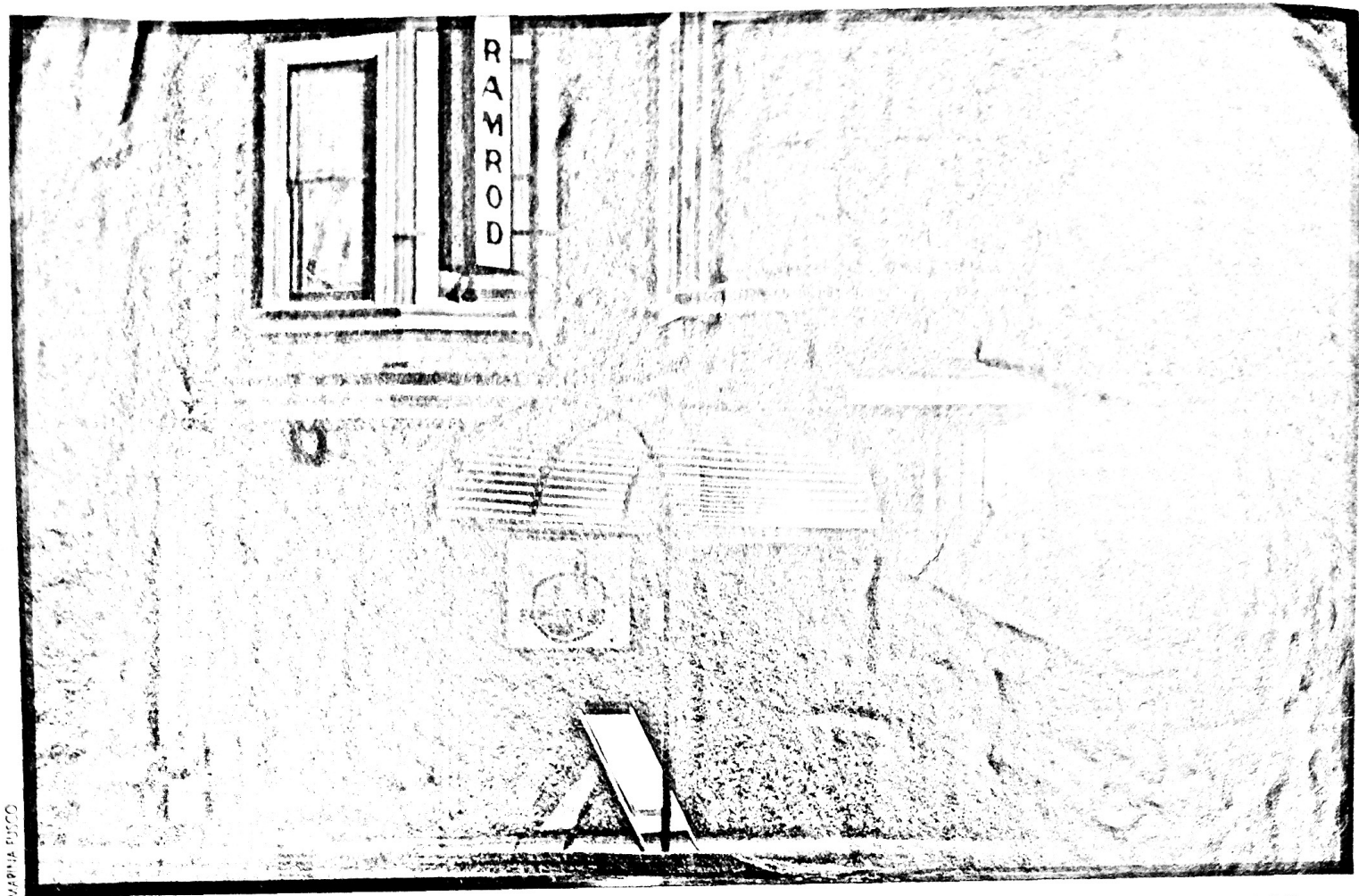
THERE IS A REMARKABLE RESEMBLANCE BETWEEN THE FANTASIZED SEXUAL LIFE OF GREAT NUMBERS OF HETEROSEXUAL MEN AND THE REAL LIFE SEXUAL PRACTICES OF SOME HOMOSEXUAL MEN.

cruising the bars, street corners, sex shops, restaurants and grocery stores of the Castro District—San Francisco's gay ghetto—had no difficulty finding willing partners for one-night stands, sometimes efficiently condensed to one-hour or five-minute stands.

If convenience was a priority, he may have preferred visiting a bathhouse, where sex-with-many evolved to an art form. It seems unlikely that men reporting thousands of sexual partners could have been quite as successful without the baths. Bathhouses are typically arranged to accommodate orgies, one-to-one or one-to-two or -three sexual encounters, or, for the man who prefers anonymity, there are "glory holes"—circular cut-outs in bathroom-like stalls that allow one to have oral sex with a neighbor in the next stall without introductions or small talk. (The degree of trust involved in the use of a glory hole would

overidentification with their mothers and the attendant insecurity about their masculinity. But for all of this alleged female identification, there is a remarkable resemblance between the fantasized sexual life of great numbers of heterosexual men and the real-life sexual practices of some homosexual men.

The hypersexuality that has permeated much of gay culture has an unmistakably masculine flavor: Many heterosexual and homosexual men have an equal appetite for pornography and a fondness for young, well-toned bodies. And anonymous sex is certainly not unknown in the heterosexual male world—although straight men usually have to pay for it. At one time, a San Francisco theater featured live stage shows that provided male members of the audience the opportunity to perform oral sex on the female dancers. And, in addition to traditional prostitution, the massage-parlor in-



San Francisco: Established gay couples don't frequent bars, says one psychologist. "It's too damn stressful."

mons of the University of California at Santa Barbara. Citing similar data, he asserts that the sexual agendas of males and females are genetically programmed to be dissimilar. "In homosexuality, we see male and female sexualities in their pure, uncompromised form," he writes in *The Evolution of Human Sexuality*. Extrapolating from studies of primate behavior and primitive societies, Symons contends that men's desire for many sexual partners, arrived at through natural selection, maximizes their reproductive potential. In contrast, women get no reproductive advantage from multiple sexual partners, Symons argues, because of the long gestation period of their offspring. Women instead seek permanent relationships with good providers who will help assure that their progeny survive.

What enhances this genetically fueled male drive for multiple investments, Symons says, is high arousability to multifarious stimuli, particularly of the nubile variety, that is, good breeders for his sperm. This ubiquitous male sex drive—poet W. H.

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THAN WE CAN BY STUDYING
HETEROSEXUAL MEN.

Auden called it an "intolerable itch"—is described by New York sex therapist Avodah K. Offit as a "powerful and obvious excitement that may constantly afflict the healthy male with the desire to copulate." Referring to laboratory tests of male arousability she writes, "Considering the factors that influence it, I am overwhelmed. Very few experiences do not stimulate the libido of the apparently healthy male." So, the theory goes, homosexual men are prone to seek a variety of

partners because they are able to fulfill their genetic instincts unburdened by the sexual agenda of women.

Many who object to this socio-biological orientation maintain that the male-female dichotomy is a result of social conditioning rather than genes. The limitation of the "male distillate" view of homosexuality, they charge, is that it characterizes the gay culture as a capsule unaffected by social forces. Homosexual men may not be "contaminated" by sexual relationships with women, but they are influenced by their experiences as members of a minority group at odds with the larger community.

The degree of alienation experienced by homosexuals was poignantly expressed last July by Massachusetts Congressman Gerry E. Studds. After his sexual encounter with a congressional page was revealed, Studds publicly declared his homosexuality and in a subsequent interview said, "To grow up and to enter adulthood as a gay person in this country is to be in a situation where all the messages one receives with respect to the deepest feel-

ings inside oneself tell one that those feelings are not legitimate at best, and that they are sinful and evil at worst."

San Francisco clinical psychologist Paul Walker, who is gay, says these feelings of alienation create a sexual identity that is very different from the heterosexual's. "Many homosexuals feel that their whole sense of being is defined by their sexuality from an early age. After years of sexual repression, defiantly they shout, 'See how uninhibited we are, see how we've thrown off the chains of guilt—unlike you poor straight people who have for so long subjected us to feelings of worthlessness and sinfulness.'"

Some of this repudiation of straight values is most pronounced when a homosexual "comes out"—the gay man's

possibly be role models for me? I can't get married, I can't move to the suburbs with my lover and move into a house with a two-car garage, surrounded by neighbors who would welcome us. As far as I'm concerned, everything has to go, you either accept it all, every bit of it—you get church sanction, you get in-laws—or none of it. The bottom line is that we are not of the American culture."

Sutton, on the other hand, faces the dilemma shared by many gay men: the need for emotional intimacy in the land of sexual plenty. He may not want to move to suburbia, but he does want love. And while the American heterosexual record for enduring relationships is nothing to boast about, there is evidence that "paired intima-

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rite-of-passage. San Diego psychiatrist David McWhirter explains that many gay youngsters are deprived of normal adolescent experimentation with sex because they are trying so hard during that period to hide their homosexuality. "Depending on when they finally have this period of sexual experimentation—sometimes it isn't until they are 35 or 40 years old—they can get sort of hung up before they work it out," he says.

Terry Sutton, who moved from Iowa to San Francisco a year and a half ago, says his "coming out" left him without "anchors." "Suddenly I was dumped into all this maleness. I had nothing to tell me that I ought to be monogamous—other than something inside that said, 'I want to be loved.'"

Reiterating a common refrain that trying to live like heterosexuals is self-defeating, Sutton says, "Growing up, I always knew that I wasn't going to have a relationship like my mother and father. How could a straight couple

cy" is a much greater task for homosexual men.

Some observers of homosexual behavior believe that society's stigma against homosexuality is sometimes turned inward and projected by gay men onto each other, mitigating against love and emotional commitment. Social psychologist Evelyn Hooker, considered a pioneer in homosexual research, observes, "Even with gay liberation, there is much homophobia among gays themselves. It is extremely difficult for some gay men to accept the fact that they can have long-standing relationships and not be punished for it."

Walker says this self-deprecation can produce compulsive promiscuity, which he distinguishes from "recreational" promiscuity. "The man suffering from this kind of compulsive disorder must have a great number of sexual partners in order to validate his sense of self-worth, but there is no joy involved. As soon as he connects with

The nightmare of AIDS and its life-threatening consequences is by now a familiar story, but for many gay men the epidemic has also had far-reaching social and psychological effects. "It's as if a panel of experts sat down one day and said we are going to stop promoting sexual freedom; monogamy will now be the hallmark of gay sanity," says San Francisco psychologist Paul Walker.

During the past year, manifestations of this shift have become increasingly visible: the sudden drop in business or closing of once-flourishing bathhouses, the near-desertion of streets and parks formerly bustling with men "cruising," and perhaps the decline in the incidence of venereal disease in both New York and San Francisco.

The changing interest from scoring sex to scoring relationships has also been evident in the gay press. Peter Frisch, publisher of *The Advocate*, says that classified advertisements seeking "sex only" have dropped by 25 percent, while ads placed by men seeking "relationships" have increased by at least that much. Ads for models or escorts, which once filled seven or eight pages, have fallen to one page.

This shift in attitudes was also apparent in a March 1983 survey of 600 sexually active gay men. San Francisco therapists Leon McKusick, William Horstman and Arthur Carfagni say the men generally reported more interest in forming new relationships and felt greater commitment to existing relationships and to limiting sexual contacts outside primary relationships. A majority of the men said that they believed that being in a monogamous relationship would be best for them.

McKusick believes the outcome of the March survey was probably affected by its timing. "The media had just amped up its coverage of AIDS, so we caught everyone in mid-panic, but, at the same time, the men were relatively ignorant about the way the disease is transmitted."

While people are now better informed, much of the panic has sub-

sided and along with it, some of the sexual restraint. "There's a limit to how long people can stay terrified," says New York psychiatrist Michael Pollatsek. "I'm learning from my patients and other doctors that there has been a resurgence of sexual promiscuity by some who were cutting back earlier last year."

Hal Slate, owner of the Caldron, a private sex club in San Francisco, says his business, which dropped precipitously during the first six months of last year, has picked up since the summer. "More people are coming in now, but there is a difference. Most members come less often, play with fewer people, leave earlier and are just more cautious."

Some men are finding the attempt to suddenly shift gears a difficult struggle. "A lot of people I know have been pretty hard on themselves because they haven't been able to make overnight changes in their lifestyles," Slate says. "That feeling of failure leads to anxiety, and then they go out and get loaded and sexually splurge."

McKusick says that some of the men he sees in his practice have made commitments to sexually exclusive relationships because of AIDS, and are finding it less than blissful. "Some complain of increased pressure and even feelings of hatred, and other common pitfalls of intimacy that one can have in a monogamous relationship."

The shift from sexual freedom to sexual restriction, McKusick says, has had a profound effect on the "tribal" character of the gay-liberation movement. "A central feature of the urban gay culture was getting together as brothers, going to the baths and celebrating their sexuality. It seemed very important in throwing off negative stereotypes and feeling a sense of identity around one's sexuality."

But Cleve Jones, a 28-year-old gay activist and political aide to a San Francisco state legislator, says that a new sense of brotherhood is replacing the old one. "Gay men are finding out that they enjoy activities with



New Bell Saloon, San Francisco: meeting panic with calm advice.

other gay men that have nothing to do with sex—baseball, soccer, choral groups. Now there are more social alternatives to bars and heavy drugs and sex."

Robert Ferro, a 40-year-old New York writer, says the shift away from a sexual emphasis was beginning to take place among members of his generation even before AIDS. "We were the vanguard of the gay sexual revolution, but people in my generation are maturing and less driven by their genitals."

"Even before AIDS, friends of mine who were running clubs were talking about turning the music down so people could talk and get to know each other. The back rooms were still there, but no longer as important," Ferro says the development of nonsexual gay activities has been "ripping along" in New York as the gay community grows, and he claims that this diversification of interests has been accompanied by a general move toward respectability. "It comes from a desire to no longer be limited by the perception of us as a sexual and social anathema."

These factors, along with AIDS,

have combined to create what Ferro calls "homosociability" and an overall desexualization of the gay culture. "I spent some time at Fire Island this summer, and I noticed a big difference in the way the men approached one another. Usually, in the past, when you were walking along the boardwalk or hanging out on the Island, the possibility of sex was constantly hanging in the air. When people passed, they would eye each other rather than greet each other. If you were available, there would be one kind of response; if you weren't, there would be none at all. This summer, people would just say hello and smile."

No one knows, however, what would happen if a cure for AIDS were found tomorrow. "It's still too early to say how profound and long-lasting some of these changes will be," says San Francisco psychiatrist David Kessler. "There is a tendency to place a higher value on limited sexual behavior and monogamy to fit into traditional ideas, but whether that fits into the values of gay men ... we don't know."

—N.M.