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"we just don't know ourselves sexually." This lack of self-observation may lead to a decreased ability to self-regulate in the sexual domain.

The third hypothesis is that, in light of such volitional, self-regulatory breakdown, *culturally scripted information*, rather than self-formulated intentions or plans of action, become the main regulators and determinants of sexual behavior. In the case of Latino gay men who live in the U.S., I have proposed that the following set of six sociocultural variables or factors—machismo, homophobia, family loyalty, sexual silence, poverty, and racism—constitute the basic forces that give shape to the psycho-cultural scripts that regulate our sexual behavior. Because these six cultural factors explain and give meaning to what appears from the outside as simply "risky behavior," a major claim is that the high occurrence of unprotected sex among Latino gay men has logic and meaning from our given sociocultural perspective.

Whenever possible, in the next three chapters, I will give voice to the men I have interviewed in order to show how the six cultural factors are internalized and subjectively experienced in the context of sexual activity. I will attempt to show that these sociocultural factors, now internalized, have become competing variables or major barriers to the practice of safer sex, and how they weaken self-regulatory or personal control of sexual activity. In particular, I want to show how the experience of such cultural factors has been oppressive, wounding our self-esteem, undermining our perceptions of sexual control, and promoting a certain fatalism about the inevitability of HIV infection.

## 4.

## Machismo and Homophobia

### The Wounding of Self-Esteem

They see me with desire  
thinking I am "bugarron"  
but they are totally wrong . . .  
more "hembra" than me  
in bed they'll never find.

—"Me siento lindo y hermoso," poem by Tatiana  
*Perra! La Revista*, vol 1, no.2. June-July 1995  
(translation by RMD)

*Bugarron*: Heterosexually identified man who penetrates other men. *Hembra*: A real woman, female equivalent of macho.

It is impossible to write about the experiences of homophobia in the lives of Latino gay men without addressing cultural ideals about men and masculinity. Homosexual boys are socialized in the context of three messages that link machismo and homophobia in an oppressive partnership. In a single stroke, the messages both inflate our self-concept and destructively wound our dignity and self-esteem.

A first message defines masculinity, the essence of male identity, in terms of highly prized virtues such as courage, fearlessness, protection, and strength. Men are given privileged status as carriers and defenders of cultural treasures—financial, political, social, and psychological. As feminist writers have pointed out, patriarchal societies are organized to maintain male domination, giving males not only access to power but also ample opportunities for asserting and establishing their self-worth and self-esteem. If this were the only message received about our manhood, we would predict that most males in Latino communities, heterosexual and homosexual alike, would grow up with a strong sense

of self-assertion and self-esteem, though perhaps pedantic, inflated, and unacceptably oppressive toward women.

A second and perhaps more powerful message is that not all men are masculine and that, in fact, masculinity must be *proven* by exceptional feats of courage, fearlessness and strength. This second message, the need to prove masculinity, breeds restlessness, anxiety, and self-doubt. Masculinity is presented not as a praiseworthy personal virtue but as some kind of northern star that, while ever-present in our personal journey, can never be truly reached.

It is this message that promotes "machismo" or "hypermasculinity," the excessive, abusive, and perverted display of masculine traits, most often in response to personal doubts about achieving the masculine ideal. Deeper doubts and insecurity about one's masculinity, and "non-masculine" feelings of helplessness and fear, predict stronger displays of *machista* attitudes and behavior. It is my belief that the combined message stating "It's great to be a man, but you are not one until you prove it" constitutes a powerful predictor and explains much of the behavior as well as many of the psychological characteristics and emotional wounds attributed to Latino males—homosexuals not excepted.

The third message, most devastating for Latino gay men, states that "homosexuals are not true men" or, even worse, "homosexuals are *failed* men." In our culture, as in many others, homosexuality has been defined in terms of gender identity rather than sexual orientation (Almaguer, 1991); that is, homosexuals are not considered true or real men—"no *hombres hombres*"—as one research participant told me with great emphasis and conviction. Homosexuality in men is conceived as the failure to achieve the culturally given and highly prized masculine ideal and, therefore, is something to scorn and be ashamed of. While femininity is socially regarded as desired virtue in women and defined "in contrast to" or "in complement to" masculinity in men, those same feminine characteristics in males, including same-sex attraction, are understood and regarded by the culture as shameful personal failures. The stronger and deeper the machismo ideology in a given community, the more homophobic attitudes can be expected.

The definition of homosexuality as a gender problem rather than as a difference in sexual orientation fuels and exacerbates homophobia. Homosexuals are portrayed in terms of those characteristics that must be avoided precisely by those involved in proving masculinity. It is no

surprise that the most common insult among boys who are working out their sense of manhood among other boys is *maricón*, the cultural equivalent of "faggot." Homosexuals carry the burden of portraying and embodying the "failure scenario," a reminder of masculinity gone wrong. Homosexuals thus serve as the target of anger, violence, and disgust, like a perverted support system for boys' insecurities in their task of proving manhood. It is no wonder that many boys who experience same-sex desire end up in silence, highly inhibited, and feeling that they are wearing a false mask of masculinity.

Because of the culture's definition of homosexuality in terms of gender identification rather than sexual orientation, boys who experience same-sex desires tend to be tortured with doubt about their masculinity. The machismo triple message is, therefore, perceived as particularly relevant and accusatory by homosexual boys, leading to a more pronounced need to prove effortfully their masculinity. Some boys, especially those with more effeminate characteristics, may give up early on in their attempts to prove manhood and may construct a feminine identification. Others, less extreme, grow up believing that they are not truly "*hombres hombres*" (men men) or "real men" like their heterosexual counterparts, constructing the idea that their masculinity is in reality a show or facade that hides more or less successfully the *loca* (crazy woman, cultural equivalent of "queen") within. Effeminate homosexuals are referred to as "obvious," meaning that all homosexuals are deep down effeminate and womanlike, and what varies among us is the degree of our concealment.

Thus, even though it may appear somewhat counterintuitive, my working hypothesis is that gay-identified men who grow up in Latino cultures are more vulnerable to the machismo message and, therefore, would be more concerned and compelled to prove their masculinity than their heterosexual peers. For those who understandably give up proving their own manhood, the cultural message of machismo often turns into an obsession to experience the manhood of their sexual partners, to the point of feeling sexually attracted only to straight or straight-looking men.

#### A Personal Story

It took me at least six months to finally produce some writing on the topic of this chapter. Time and time again, I approached the keyboard only to become paralyzed with a familiar, empty, painful feeling in the

stomach—that very same feeling evoked by the recess bell during my school years in Cuba, Guatemala, and Puerto Rico.

While my classmates expressed joy and relief, the bell signaled for me another half-hour of name calling—*Pato, Pajarito, Mariquita, Maricón*—and, quite often, physical abuse. As the unwilling subject of an ill-fated Pavlovian experiment, the recess bell produced in me a certain anticipatory panic for the forthcoming laughs, name calling, threats, punches, and kicks, all of these woven into some kind of message about my failed masculinity. At recess time, being left alone was a most welcome though bittersweet relief. I wanted so much to be approached, included, and respected by other boys! But solitude was much better than never-ending harassment.

Very puzzling at the time was the fact that when many other boys at my school were called the colorful variety of "faggot" names, they either casually returned the insults, jokingly fought back, or seemed to have cared less. Much to my confusion and surprise, many classmates shrugged off the name calling and acted as if the terrifying insults bounced off their very tough skins. It was clear to me that the wide variety of faggot insults were not only directed at me; in fact, with few exceptions, everyone got their share.

But I reacted differently. Unlike the seemingly casual, transitory, and only skin-deep effects on my peers, the insults tortured me and left me paralyzed in a combination of panic and despair. I believed somehow the insults contained a kernel of truth. The insults were validated, in my mind, by the emerging awareness of my own homosexuality. In fact, more than being insulted, it felt like I was being publicly and shamefully *exposed*. In those days, I had recurrent dreams of shame, such as finding myself in my underwear, right in the middle of the school playground full of kids.

At recess time, I was not only a victim but also my most severe and damaging perpetrator. I tortured myself with questions of personal doubt: Was it my voice? Was it the way I moved my hands? Was it my terror and deep aversion to violence? My dislike of rough sports? Or was it that unexplainable feeling of weakness in my arms that made me physically unable to punch my insulting opponent in self-defense? I grew up with the disturbing conclusion that there was something profoundly wrong with me. After all, I felt in the most profound physical guttural ways, those shameful feelings the faggot names described.

My shame, though obviously connected to my sexual feelings, was more clearly focused on failed masculinity. More deeply shameful than sex was the fear that I was publicly failing at the most important task or sacred ideal—manhood—given to me by family, media, and peers. I had learned very well what a man should feel, say, and do, and I knew I couldn't feel, say, and do it that way. I felt in my gut the despair of someone who could not reach what seemed, at first view, a very simple goal, a goal apparently reached by everyone else around me with relatively little effort. I felt, and knew, that I could not be what I was supposed to be, "a real man," as dictated by my culture. I remember dreaming exhausting dreams of constant walking, running, climbing, never able to reach the place, the finish line, the summit. My mother told me once, in recent years, that as a child I complained a lot of being tired. My parents thought it was my flat feet; now, I know better. At the time, however, my flat feet were yet another confirmation, as concrete as they come, that there was something profoundly wrong with me.

Thoughts of denial and escape, at different levels of self-awareness, provided some welcome relief. After all, the sex stuff could be kept in secret or maybe eventually changed if I had sex with a female prostitute, or kissed a girlfriend, or married a woman some day. I was a sensual, sexual, passionate child and remember enjoying thoroughly a woman's touch and affection. I remember getting aroused by anything sexual, even magazines of naked women or older boys' tales of heterosexual prowess. Of course, so I thought, I could become a celibate priest and store my sexuality safely in a locked drawer—all of which I did for a number of years—so I could live happily ever after with pride and respect from my family and friends. But there was not much relief for that feeling of deficiency, for that sense of personal weakness and failure with respect to the culture's masculine ideal.

At age 46, as an openly gay man, with years of participation in the gay liberation movement, and a 10-year veteran of psychotherapy, I had no idea it would be so difficult to write about the impact of machismo and homophobia. But now I realize that, in so doing, I am revisiting and exploring the origins of the most profound wounds I carry. In fact, I could not have written this chapter except by telling at one point my personal story and recognizing my personal wounds.

This chapter is about me and men like me who grew up homosexual in Latino communities, where an intricate alliance between machismo

and homophobia has devoured our sense of dignity and self-esteem, in the same way that HIV is now devouring our immune systems. I believe that the experiences of machismo and homophobia, and their destructive linkage in our culture, hold the most important clues to understanding what is happening to us and our sexuality. This chapter is thus an exploration of those forces that have told me and other Latino gay men like me that there is something wrong with us. It is a journey into the sources of profound restlessness and shame, and the underlying reason why many of us have always overachieved with a sense that it is never good enough.

In retrospect, I am fully aware that the damaging effects of machismo and homophobia were possible not only because we have been the object of substantial verbal and physical abuse, but mainly because *we have seen ourselves with the same eyes as our oppressors*. Therefore, this chapter is more about internalized machismo and homophobia, about internalized oppression, rather than about machismo and homophobia in our culture, objectively defined as external to us. I embark on this exploration with a great deal of hope and conviction that healing our self-esteem—through proud self-affirmation—is indeed possible.

#### Homosexuality as a Gender Category

The most destructive link between the messages of machismo and homophobia is achieved by a cultural definition of homosexuality as a gender problem, rather than a difference in sexual orientation. Homosexuals are defined as not real men, as less than men or, more appropriately, as failed men. *Maricón*, the culturally equivalent word for *faggot*, denounces those who are effeminate, those who fail the masculinity test.

As socialized members of the culture, many Latino homosexuals, especially those who have not been touched by gay liberation ideology, share this oppressive, homophobic cultural definition. An extreme preoccupation with masculinity/femininity of self and sexual partners, a personal sense of shame for being or appearing effeminate, and the frequent adoption of an internal and external feminine identity, are just a few of the many manifestations of such self-oppressive ideology. Even though many Latino gay men have creatively and humorously dealt with the cultural definition of failed manhood, "My family loved me, I

was the princess of the house" or "We were five, I mean, four-and-a-half, brothers"—in my opinion, this internalization constitutes and continues to be one of the most devastating wounds to our self-esteem. The end product is a pervasive feeling, often quite vague and diffuse, that something is deeply wrong with us.

Nowhere is the interpretation of homosexuality as a gender category so obvious as in a poem entitled "*Me siento lindo y hermoso*" (I feel pretty and beautiful), written for a Spanish-speaking gay audience in Miami. The poem provides us with a clear example of a gay man who, while he doesn't dress up as a woman or aspire for a sex change, has internalized and adopted society's gender definition of homosexuality. Indeed, the most interesting and intriguing aspect of the poem is that it was written by a gay man using the pseudonym *Tatiana*, for *Perra!* magazine (note the feminine names for both author and publication) for an audience of mostly Latino gay men. It is far from being considered an insult. According to Eduardo Apariço, editor of *Perra!* magazine, the poem's author intends to mock and ridicule the machista attitude or "masculine façade" displayed by many Latino homosexuals. The poem witnesses the depth of acceptance and internalization of a gender definition of homosexuality in our community. This occurs apparently with little awareness that this perspective effectively links, in an oppressive manner, machismo and homophobia in our culture.

The poem was originally written in Spanish and, on the right side, I offer my translation.

<i>Me siento lindo y hermoso porque estoy bien musculoso. Pero las locas no saben que entre las piernas hay poco.</i>	I feel pretty and beautiful because I am so muscular. But the queens don't know there is little between my legs.
<i>Me miran con ilusión, pensando que soy bugarrón. Pero están equivocadas porque más hembra que yo no encontrarán en la cama</i>	They see me with desire thinking I am <i>bugarrón</i> but they are totally wrong more <i>hembra</i> than me in bed they'll never find.
<i>Esto es una frustración, tener este bello cuerpo,</i>	This is such a frustration to have this beautiful body,

*pero te digo, mi hermana,  
que me cuesta mantenerlo.*

but I tell you, my sister,  
it is hard to keep up.

*El problema de este cuerpo  
es que me siguen las viejas  
y las locas, todas ellas,  
y yo lo que estoy buscando  
es una tranca bien regia.*

The problem with this body  
is that I'm followed by old ladies  
and by queens, all of them,  
but what I'm really looking for  
Is a royal (huge) dick.

*Casi desnuda, en la playa,  
paro el tráfico y me dicen  
"papi rico" y "mi machón"  
Y no saben que soy hembra  
con este perro cuerpón.*

Half naked at the beach  
I stop traffic, and they tell me  
"yummy daddy," "my big macho"  
They can't tell I'm truly *hembra*  
with this amazing body of mine.

*Pero no he perdido la ilusión  
de que llegue Superman.  
O irme a vivir a la selva  
y ser la mujer de Tarzán!*

But I have not lost my fantasy  
that Superman will arrive.  
or go live in the jungle  
and become Tarzan's wife!

The poem speaks about the distress of a gay man whose masculine muscular body makes people, especially other gay men, believe that he is a real macho man (i.e., straight) or *bugarrón*, the word for heterosexual-identified men who sexually penetrate other men. In the poem, the gay man confesses that he really is an *hembra* (a real woman, feminine version of macho). The distress is caused by the fact that he is pursued by women and by *locas* (queens, homosexuals) rather than by real men, which is what he so deeply longs for.

The poem's logic is complex but clear: When homosexuality is defined in terms of gender, and homosexuals are not considered real men, it follows that homosexuals should not be sexually appealing to other homosexuals. The homosexual man, so the culture dictates, would desire another man, a real man, and therefore would not be interested in having sex with other homosexuals who are ultimately considered less than men.

When I first read the poem I had two different reactions. On one hand, I found the poem extremely humorous and provoking. The poem flaunts and cracks open what is supposedly the "big secret" of homosexuals: they may look masculine or even look like desirable real men—

"*mi papi rico*" (my sweet daddy), "*mi machón*" (my big macho man)—but they are truly women in men's bodies. Breaking the silence, and proudly flaunting society's ridiculing definition of homosexuality, the author expresses shamelessly his sexual desire for other men, his shameless longing for a huge dick. Somehow, there is humorous relief in such defiance of society's silence about homosexual desire.

On the other hand, I felt somewhat saddened by the fact that the familiar way to break the silence about homosexual desire, even in a gay magazine, is by taking a feminine identity. It is as if we can express our homosexual attraction openly only by talking not as men but as some type of woman or *hembra*, adopting the Latino culture's homophobic definition and point of view. I wonder if a similar lusty poem, written from one masculine man to another, would have appealed as much to the readership of *Perra!* I wouldn't be surprised if such a poem made many readers uncomfortable, stirring internalized homophobia. Or simply, from this particular perspective, it may not have made much sense to write such a poem for a gay audience. Not believing that homosexuals can be masculine, the reaction of many gay men could be: Why hide the *loca* inside, when you are among understanding friends? Or as one of my research participants once commented about a masculine-looking, masculine-acting gay man, "Who does she think she is, she's a woman!"

Many times in the focus groups I conducted with non-aculturated, Spanish-speaking men, who in my sample were the ones less touched by gay liberation ideology, publicly coming out was referred to as "*se soltó la trenza*" (he undid his braid), meaning the achievement of a sense of freedom to be more effeminate, more womanlike. Others, when confronted with homophobic attitudes, mentioned that they would become more masculine in order to "pass" as straight men: "In my case I used a mustache to cover a bit."

Richard Parker, the noted ethnographer of Brazilian sexuality, once told me that in Brazil people would not blink an eye if they saw very effeminate men walking provocatively down the street, a sight not uncommon in many urban centers in Brazil. On the other hand, traffic would stop and riotlike conditions would develop if two masculine men with mustaches would dare to walk hand-in-hand down the street. The riots might be a comical exaggeration, but Richard's observation makes a lot of cultural sense from the perspective presented in this chapter.

I had similar mixed reactions when I saw the popular Cuban movie *Fresa y Chocolate* (Strawberry and Chocolate), which portrays an intelligent, handsome, sensitive, and simply adorable homosexual man befriending a somewhat naive, and unusually sensitive, straight man with whom he falls in love. The movie truly represents a great advance in Cuban society's tolerance towards homosexuality by breaking the silence about this otherwise taboo topic in such a positive way. (Remember that not too long ago, Cuban open homosexuals were put in jail, sent to work camps, or conveniently expatriated in the Mariel boat lift.) The fact that the gay man in the movie is portrayed as a likable, lovable character—even more deeply sensitive, cultured, and humane than his straight friend—is quite a feat in homosexual tolerance in comparison to other Latin American media, where homosexuals have been portrayed as depraved, immoral, low-world criminals or child molesters.

However, *Fresa y Chocolate*, directed by a self-identified heterosexual man, does not break free from the culture's gender definition of homosexuality. While the main character is still in man's clothes, his effeminate demeanor and non-masculine identification (symbolized by his choice of strawberry-flavored ice cream, rather than the more "masculine" chocolate) is made explicit time and again throughout the film. Not to mention the fact that the story is about a homosexual who sexually and romantically pursues a straight man. In fact, diverting from the original script written by a gay man, the heterosexual director added to the story a girlfriend with whom the straight man becomes sexually involved and falls in love. The addition of a girlfriend to the movie script by the heterosexual director was done apparently to make the straight character undoubtedly straight. As in Richard Parker's story about Brazilian men with mustaches, the possibility that a masculine man (our chocolate-identified character) could have homosexual feelings, especially nurturing and romantic feelings toward another man, is perhaps still too threatening for Cuban audiences to see. The girlfriend was a constant and convenient reminder that Mr. Chocolate was, indeed, no *Maricón*.

For many men, the path of liberation from oppressive gender ideologies includes being in touch with more "feminine" aspects of the self. No one can deny that the personal development toward human wholeness must include the integration of characteristics traditionally

ascribed as masculine or feminine. Moreover, psychological research is very clear about the positive relationship between androgyny (defined as receiving test scores in the middle range between feminine and masculine extremes of gender identification) and psychological adjustment. However, I do not believe that the feminine identification seen in many Latino gay men is indeed a path toward wholeness or greater psychological adjustment. In fact, I see many of us deeply trapped in the oppressive gender ideologies that fuel homophobia in our communities. Rather than helping Latino homosexuals get in touch with feminine characteristics, the gender definition of homosexuality reinforces the macho ideal and its feminine counterpart, the *hembra*. For homosexuals, the outcome is not an increased social space for becoming whole, more integrated persons, but rather a caricature of an *hembra* in a macho body, as Tatiana's poem so well conveys.

The desperate attempts to prove our wounded masculinity or to experience the masculinity of our sexual partners keep us in the same macho-*hembra* dichotomous world and away from wholeness. Note, for example, that Tatiana's poem is filled with resigned self-deprecation, "*entre las piernas hay poco*" (there's little between the legs), while the most precious sexual object is "*una tranca bien regia*" (a royal huge dick). For the distressed gay man in the poem, only the realm of fantasy, rather than whole persons, can quench the thirst for the desired macho object: Superman or Tarzan might do.

Similarly, other homosexuals are put down and laughed at by homosexuals for not being men enough. It was not unusual for men in my research project to talk about other gay men as "*esas locas*" (those queens) in a true deprecatory way, or even worse "*esas locas pasivas*" (those passive queens), making it clear that the deprecation was in relation to taking "the woman's role" ("*el que hace de mujer*") in sexual intercourse. And these self-deprecatory comments were made by men who openly admitted their homosexual interest in passive anal intercourse; in other words, they were putting down men like themselves. The character in Tatiana's poem, an admitted "*loca*," mocks "*las locas*" that pursue him unsuspectingly. Moreover, such deprecatory mockery is not perceived as insulting to the gay men (the audience of *locas*) for whom the poem is written. This ever-present self-deprecation and deprecation of other homosexuals around the masculine ideal—though done mostly in the context of humor—in my opinion is a reflection of wounded self-

esteem rather than a movement toward more integrative and liberating wholeness.

For many of us, it is true that if we want to be ourselves we need to do so by becoming softer and, from the point of view of the culture, more "effeminate." The path of liberation and wholeness does require giving up the need to prove our manhood and the compulsive need to conceal and repress the feminine in us. However, coming out has been defined not necessarily as a welcoming of the feminine, but rather as becoming more like the culturally defined *hembra*. It has become more a way to live the definition of homosexuality given to us by the culture, rather than a path of self-expression. The fact that coming out is defined as the freedom to be more *hembra* has bound us even further to a genderized, oppressive culture that seems to gender-type everything, even ice cream flavors. It is no surprise that homosexuality is gender-typed and sexual intercourse is clearly defined as active (masculine) or passive (feminine). Therefore, many men who sexually penetrate other men can do so in our culture without questioning their "heterosexual" (in their minds "masculine") identity.

#### Sexual Penetration: The Royal Road to Machohood

Our culture not only poses the challenge to prove masculinity but also provides specific means and avenues for doing so. The culture's definition of what constitutes manly or masculine behavior is acquired with particular poignancy by young Latino boys in the world of elementary school. Thus, a great deal of time and effort in the lives of Latino boys and youth is devoted to proving or showing off their masculinity through excellence in sports, through fights that establish hierarchies of power, through stories of defiant risk-taking activities, and, above all, through boasting sexual prowess.

Boys' stories about their sexual activity take on a particularly important role in establishing that they are indeed masculine macho men. It is not unusual for Latino youth to boast their sexual prowess through stories of sexual intercourse with older women who seduced them; stories of penetrating homosexual, effeminate boys who "let them do it" or older men who may "pay them to do it"; and, in rural areas, even stories of penetrating animals. Stories abound about fathers taking their sons early in their teenage years to be with prostitutes "so that they can

finally become men." Needless to say, in this world of Latino male culture, sexual penetration becomes, to paraphrase Freud, the royal road to "machohood."

The strong connection between masculinity and penetration leads to a construction of sexuality as the favored locus to prove masculinity, an optimal place to restore the often wounded male ego. It is my belief that this construction is also present in men who enjoy passive intercourse. For them, the macho characteristics of the insertive partner and the potential strong and rough qualities of anal intercourse between two men play a major role in what is defined as pleasurable and erotic. The preoccupation of the insertive partner to maintain a long and strong erect penis for penetration, and the preoccupation of the receptive partner to be penetrated hard and heavy by a "real man," constitute two sides of the same coin: A sexuality designed to create, mend, and restore a sense of masculinity and macho ideal that are always under threat by the culture's demand to prove masculinity.

It is no surprise then that for many men in my qualitative study, especially the least acculturated, sex was defined narrowly and exclusively as penetration practices. Other sexual activity, such as deep kissing, caressing, and mutual masturbation were seen simply as preludes to the "real thing," penetration. Some men spoke about their sexual encounters as if orgasm and ejaculation were only possible in the context of penetration. Many feared that unless penetration occurred, their partners would be disappointed—that is, partners would perceive the encounter as bad sex or as having no sex at all. In fact, sexual activity without penetration was described often as "nothing really happened."

#### Impact on HIV Risk

The central thesis of this book is that important aspects of Latino culture—such as the link between machismo and homophobia in a gender definition of homosexuality—have been internalized by Latino gay men through our socialization and development. Such internalizations, in turn, have undermined our capacity for sexual self-regulation and become barriers to the practice of safer sex. In this section, therefore, I would like to explore the impact of machismo and homophobia on our sexuality and sexual behavior, especially those effects that are relevant to HIV prevention and the practice of safer sex.

This section is written with two underlying assumptions. The first assumption is that homophobia and machismo have deeply shaped the way we understand and perceive our own homosexuality, as well as how we sexually behave with other men. Thus, these barriers to safer sex are logical and meaningful through the cultural lens of how machismo and homophobia operate in our lives, as described in earlier sections of this chapter.

The second assumption is that barriers to safer sex will be more prevalent in those men who have been most deeply affected by the cultural link between machismo and homophobia. Latino gay men do vary in their internalization of the cultural factors, and also in their exposure and adherence to gay liberation ideologies. Fortunately, gender definitions of homosexuality are not present to the same degree in all of us, and the effects of machismo and homophobia are tempered by the increasing liberating awareness that men can sexually love other men without any detriment to their masculinity or masculine identity. Barriers to safer sex are stated, therefore, as variables that differ across individual members of the culture, rather than as fixed entities shared by us all.

#### Condoms and Erections

Because of the culture's connection between masculinity and penetrative practices, many men whom I interviewed expressed a great deal of concern about the negative effects of condoms on the sexual act. The main concern is that condoms, and their implicit connection to illness and death, would make them lose their erection.

Sometimes if I think too much about it I might lose my erection. Because sex isn't enjoyable anymore 'cuz you are thinking about disease, disease, disease, you know.

Moreover, the loss of erection is perceived as a source of great embarrassment by the insertive partner, yet another failure at masculinity. The loss of an erection is apparently equated with the collapse of the macho façade that reveals the true *loca pasiva* inside, giving precisely the wrong message to the demanding, now disappointed, receptive partner: "And he kept on saying, why can't you get it hard? why can't you get it hard?"

The concern with maintaining erections at all cost does not allow the time needed for the gradual familiarization with and erotization of condoms.

#### Impact on Non-Penetrative Practices

Mutuality and nurturance in sexual behavior is often interpreted as non-masculine, taking away the erotic charge for those men who have accepted the gender definition of homosexuality. For men who enjoy their masculinity and thus have trouble identifying themselves as homosexual, caressing, kissing, and passive oral sex to other men is out of the question. Many acculturated men complained a lot about those non-acculturated Latino macho guys, who do not consider themselves gay and who defend their masculinity by not doing "gay things" in homosexual acts. These heterosexual-identified men who have sex with men, in fact, define their manhood by what they do and not do in bed with another guy. Moreover, denial of gay identification in homosexual activity goes hand-in-hand with a denial of HIV risk:

I know there's a lot of straight "macho" Latin guys that think, "Oh, you're just sucking my dick or I'm gonna fuck you and I have a wife or I have a girlfriend so it really doesn't mean that I'm gay and we can have unsafe sex because I only have sex with girls" and, you know. That whole sort of thinking that goes along with other Latin men.

For those men who share the gender-definition of homosexuality, anything other than actively fucking another man is considered non-masculine and a threat to the heterosexual, macho identity. In turn, self-identified homosexuals who have adopted the feminine *loca* identity may be sexually turned-off by attempts at sexual mutuality. As one of the men in the study said, "If he touches my dick, I am not interested anymore." The comment implied that any attempt at mutuality would mean that the sexual partner was also an effeminate *loca* and therefore not sexually appealing to the study subject, who was interested only in masculine "real" men.

It is clear that the construction of sexuality as a place to create and prove masculinity poses some major challenges and obstacles for the enactment of safer sex intentions. The exclusive focus on penetration

does not allow Latino gay men to explore and develop a repertoire of non-penetrative safer sex practices that can be enjoyed as true expressions of sexual desire. The machismo message given by the culture does not allow much space for the kind of caring and nurturing that is needed for the negotiation of safer sex between sexual partners.

#### *Substance Abuse and Anonymous Sex*

Homosexual activity in the context of machismo and homophobia messages is loaded with a deep anxiety that what is happening is disgusting and forbidden. It is no surprise that sex between gay men often occurs anonymously, with strangers in strange places, with no communication, and under the influence of drugs and alcohol, or both.

A large number of men in the study reported that they were intoxicated while looking for sexual partners as well as during homosexual encounters. Some of them talked about needing alcohol and drugs to give them the "courage" to meet and approach other men for sex. Others talked about using substances to help them engage in practices that they wanted to do but felt very uneasy about, especially anal intercourse. Men told stories about using alcohol and drugs, especially before coming out to themselves and others, as a justification for "not remembering" things they wanted to do or had done, but were too embarrassed to admit. For example, being under the influence of substances was the only possible way to have sex between friends who were sexually attracted to one another but who had never discussed or revealed their homosexuality to each other; being under the influence allowed the friends to make believe that they did not remember so at a later date they could face one another without shame.

For men who want to be sexually penetrated, but for whom playing the passive role in anal intercourse creates masculinity conflicts, drugs and alcohol have become the facilitating factor. Recent increases in the use of methamphetamines ("crystal" or "speed") among gay men have been also observed among Latinos as a way to deal with ambivalent feelings regarding anal intercourse. For some, the drug facilitates taking the passive role: "It [crystal] makes me an eager bottom." Many men welcomed drug intoxication as a true oasis of relief from the masculinity anxiety brought about by homosexual sex. In the words of a 31-year-old Latino gay man, for whom the crystal methamphetamine

(speed) intoxication allowed him to enjoy the sense of (gender-role-free) mutuality he craved with his lover:

I felt more like the top in the relationship, in that I kind of controlled things more. Again, it was like my space and I brought him into it. You know, I was more in charge of like paying bills and things like that. So I felt like more of the—I don't want to say masculine and feminine because, you know, I don't find these roles like, you know, okay, that's what that means. But I was more like the husband in the situation and just sexually I was more aggressive. And so, I mean, I think that the speed just turned everything kind of like really topsy-turvy where we were just kind of like, you know, not been thinking about roles any more, just kind of what felt good.

For other men, for whom keeping erections is a problem, stimulant drugs was the only way to maintain their erection in the midst of anxiety-provoking situations.

In one of the in-depth interviews conducted by the San Francisco AIDS Foundation, Antonio (fictitious name)—a 31-year-old, HIV-positive, Latino gay man—told the interviewer about a risky sexual encounter where neither he nor his partner used a condom. The two men met through one of San Francisco's (900#) sex phone lines; the service connects via phone lines men who are interested in meeting other men for sex and who call the service for that purpose. I would like to cite long excerpts from this narrative because the sexual episode described involved many of the cultural factors and barriers to safer sex discussed in this section. Both partners, one gay-identified Latino (Antonio) and a presumably straight man of Italian descent, attempted to construct the sexual situation in terms of an exchange between two "straight" men, ensuring that the sexual event is truly an experience of masculinity. Furthermore, the event occurred in secrecy, as a hidden encounter, behind closed doors, so that the "straight roommates" would not find out what was going on. Both men were intoxicated with drugs and alcohol, including crystal. In fact, Antonio makes the attribution that it is crystal that has allowed him to carry out all this forbidden activity. Early on in the interview, he had talked about being a top in the majority of sexual situations. However, for this episode, he had taken crystal and, because impotence can be one of the paradoxical

effects of methamphetamine use, commonly known as "crystal dick," the drug made him lose his erection and made him "an eager bottom."

*Antonio:* . . . I met this guy on the phone line, he was an Italian guy . . . you know he's very "macho" and straight and, you know, has a girlfriend, and no one would ever know that he was doing something like this but he felt like doing it tonight, because he had been partying too. He had been doing "coke" the night before with his friends. And—

*Interviewer:* And you were feeling?

*A:* Like I wanted to have sex.

*I:* OK. Specifically, you wanted to fuck?

*A:* Yeah. I think that's what the drug does to, at least it does to me. It just puts you in that whole mind set of like, I have to go out and find something.

*I:* Something meaning a . . . sex?

*A:* Sex!

*I:* A sexual partner.

*A:* Right.

*I:* OK. So you talked to him on the phone?

*A:* Yeah.

*I:* Made the arrangements?

*A:* Right. Went over to his place.

*I:* In [name of a "straight" neighborhood in San Francisco]?

*A:* Yes! Um, he was pretty partied-out. So we smoked some "pot" when we got there and had a couple beers. Had we just had the pot and the beers I could handle that because I've done that a lot.

*I:* You mean handle in terms of what's gonna happen next with sex?

*A:* Right. What's gonna happen with sex. I'm very in control but I don't think I am when I've been doing crystal. So, um, he was pretty, he, I don't know, he tried to be insistent at one point on having safe sex but then he changed his mind like really quickly.

*I:* Were you still dressed when he was being insistent? Do you remember?

*A:* Oh. Well, let me go back. So we got there, okay. We talked for a while and he had some porno on the TV and we had to be really quiet because he had straight roommates coming in and out and

they had no idea that this was goin' on in his bedroom, so we never left the bedroom.

*I:* So you walked into the apartment and went right to his room?

*A:* Right.

*I:* And none of his roommates knew that he had sex with men?

*A:* Supposedly. I mean I heard the front door slamming and pots in the kitchen. I tried to ask him some questions about his roommates but he wouldn't answer me. Uh, he was pretty secretive.

*I:* So that was okay though?

*A:* Yeah. For the way I was feeling at that time, yeah. Had I been a little more clearer thinking, I think I probably wouldn't have gone over there. But he said, you know, do you wanna come over, we'll keep partying and I was like already in a party mood so I said, "OK." And I got there, he was very attractive, very, I would never thought if I saw him on the street, you know, that he would do something like this. Whatever.

*I:* You mean the partying part or the . . .

*A:* Uh.

*I:* . . . the keeping you in his bedroom while his roommates are running around, part or . . . ?

*A:* Having sex with a guy.

*I:* I can't tell who has sex with guys or with gals on the street.

*A:* I know, you know, it's like supposedly gay men have this "gay-dar" and they can tell who's gay and who's not, and I'm pretty much on the dot all the time as to who's gay and who's not, and who would maybe fool around if you convinced him and who wouldn't. And I just woulda never thought looking at this guy. He looked like very, like he coulda been a butcher or a cook in like an Italian restaurant. Sort of burly, hairy, short, stocky, muscular, I could see him with like a wife and kids. Who knows. So I think he called a friend of his when I got there, to bring over some more coke. And in the meantime we smoked some pot, had a beer, slowly disrobed 'til we were naked in bed. His friend got there and I think I did . . . yeah, some coke. Yeah, after being on crystal, which was . . .

*I:* Did his friend see you?

*A:* No. He met him at the door. And, um, so he wanted to be fucked too, which I thought was very peculiar. I mean, I don't know. I, and

- I tried for a while but I couldn't get an erection because of the crystal.
- I: Did he know you had taken crystal?
- A: Yeah, I told him.
- I: Does he know, since he's not part of the community, does he know things like what "crystal dick" is?
- A: He didn't. Yeah. I was kind of amazed, I guess. Because he kept on saying, "Why can't you get it hard? Why can't you get it hard?" And I was like, "I told you because this drug affects me this way that I did last night." So he goes well, "Just relax, just relax and don't think about it and it'll happen." So, whatever, so, you know. So then he said, "Well, why don't I fuck you?" So um, so we started talkin' about using a condom and then I don't know exactly how it happened but we didn't.
- I: So you're already in bed, you already had your clothes off? Did you take each other's clothes off each other or . . .
- A: No. There wasn't any sort of sensual, intimate . . .
- I: No foreplay?
- A: No. It was kind of sort of almost like a raunchy aspect of it.
- I: Did you think he was attractive?
- A: Yeah.
- I: So you talked about using a condom but then it didn't happen?
- A: Well actually what happened was I think at one point, he put one on and he was having problems keeping an erection himself, so then he took it off and we continued.
- I: So he just simply took the condom off? Did he masturbate, anything like that?
- A: Uh, yeah, we masturbated for quite a while by just watching porno, and I was oral with him, he wasn't oral with me, he didn't want to do that. He didn't want to kiss, he didn't want to suck my dick. So I was doing all the work.
- I: Why didn't he wanna do those things, do you think?
- A: Because maybe that meant to him that he was gay. If he didn't kiss you and he didn't suck your dick if you just sucked his dick and he fucked you, then he's not gay. But then he also wanted to be fucked, which I thought was kinda weird but he said it was because, and this was a clinical problem for him, that his brother had sex with

- him growing up. So maybe he's going through this whole incest thing. I don't know.
- I: So he volunteered up that information . . .
- A: Yeah.
- I: . . . about himself but he didn't volunteer . . .
- A: Yeah, and the sick . . .
- I: . . . a lotta other . . .
- A: Well, the sick thing about it was that he wanted, he wanted me to even make up stories that we were having sex, like acting like I was his brother having sex with him. I mean it was kind of unsettling.
- I: For you?
- S: Yeah. But I didn't . . .
- I: What did it feel like?
- S: Uh, feeling like this was really weird. It was just like one a' those weird experiences.
- I: Did it feel dangerous?
- S: Yeah, it did.
- I: How dangerous? Because we've used the word danger in relationship to other things. How did it feel dangerous?
- S: Um, it didn't feel dangerous in the aspect that I thought that he would get violent with me. It got dangerous in the fact that I felt somehow I was gonna get an erection. He was gonna convince me to have sex with him without a condom and I was gonna come inside him which I did not wanna do.
- I: Did you talk about HIV at all when you were with him?
- S: No.
- I: He never mentioned it? So did you talk about condom usage as safe sex or just using one?
- S: We didn't even talk about it, he just got up and went over and got one.
- I: Ah! OK. Because it wasn't . . .
- S: And said something like, "We should be using one of these," or something like that.
- I: So the word HIV didn't come up?
- S: No.
- I: Did he ask you about your serostatus?
- S: No.

- I: Did he see you as gay?
- S: Um, you know, that's the funny thing, not really. I mean he asked me a couple questions. And I said "I mainly have sex with men and it's been ages since I had sex with a woman." And uh, he said, "Wow! You don't seem to be gay to me." Which I think I can be pretty gay, you know. So whatever that is. I don't know if it was just because he was partying and he was flying high. But he seemed to wanna make me feel like you're not gay you're just a straight buddy a' mine and we're gonna play, sorta thing.
- I: So it sounds like you understood. And did you understand this in the moment or did you understand it later, that he had a big fantasy thing going on?
- S: While it was happening I was like, even though I was high, I was like, I think he's fulfilling a fantasy right now and I'm being part of it.
- I: Um hm. OK. So did he come inside of you?
- S: Yes.
- I: Um hm. How'd you feel about it?
- S: Really stupid! I mean, it felt good but, you know, have you ever done something and know you're doing something wrong and you should not be doing it, and you should stop yourself but you continue to do it?

In this amazing narrative we see the intertwining of a masculinity fantasy with perhaps what could be the compulsive repetition of a sexual abuse experience, all of it embedded in the stupor of heavy drug use, allowing men to do what they would otherwise be too anxious to do without the use of substances. The end result is, of course, a highly risky episode from the perspective of HIV transmission. Even though our Latino respondent blames crystal, the narrative does conclude with a pervasive feeling of helplessness, contributing to a perception of low sexual control that is familiar to many other Latinos for reasons other than drugs.

#### *Perceptions of Sexual Control*

A consistent theme throughout the interviews I conducted was the perception that Latino men have little control of their sexuality. The belief is that Latino men are supposed to experience intense feelings,

urges, and sensations that cannot or should not be controlled. For example, the men I interviewed often used the notion of being "passionate" as a justification for unprotected intercourse. Passionate, however, refers not only to the intensity of the feelings and sensations experienced, but also to the surrender of inhibitions, the surrender of self-control and regulation in the presence of intense sexual feelings. In other words, passionate meant that intense "hot" feelings took precedence over and were not mediated by "cold" decision-making or thinking processes that could temper the intensity of the experience. I should add that this self-perception of intense, passionate, and personal surrender to the dictates of sexual arousal is often reinforced when projected on Latino gay men by members of the mainstream gay culture in a stereotypical fashion.

The perception of low sexual control is, I believe, also strongly connected to the machismo values of the Latino culture. The idea is that men's sexual urges are felt delightfully but painfully strong and thus require immediate release; men's sexual urges cannot be ignored, postponed, or ultimately controlled. Accordingly, males are expected to have multiple casual partners and their sexual activity is expected to occur more often as a response to strong, biologically based impulses rather than as an expression of love and affection in the context of interpersonal relationships. Females, in contrast, are expected to control and not even feel their sexual desires; if their sexual desires or behavior do not occur in the context of relationships then they are considered immoral, depraved, or prostitutes. In the words of a Latino gay man I interviewed:

I was very close to my father's mother. She would always tell us about all the women my father slept with and it was something everybody knew and we had to accept it. . . . I remember she would say "this is your father's other woman, he is just sleeping with her, but that's OK." My grandmother would also tell me that was OK. My uncle would say things like I love your aunt but you know its OK to have another woman. . . . I have a very big problem with that and it really hurt me and it always really hurt me that my father would do that to my mother but no I guess its OK and then I started looking at the women my father was sleeping with like sluts, whores because they're doing that knowing that he was married. My grandmother was the type of woman that

would degrade women that cheated on their husbands but on the other hand it was OK for my father to cheat. Looking back I think that was the thing about machismo that bothered me the most about it.

In support of a self-perception of low sexual control, the men interviewed shared the belief that regulatory control of sexual behavior is not possible at times of high sexual arousal; the higher the arousal, the less control possible. This perception was epitomized by the well-known phrase, "*Cuando la de abajo se calienta, la de arriba no piensa*," literally translated as, "When the one below gets hot, the one on top can't think." the "one" refers to "head," of which males have two: the head of the penis (below), and the head that contains the thinking brain (on top). The belief is that sexual arousal interferes with or inhibits thinking processes, as if sexual arousal and rational decision-making processes cannot happen simultaneously within the person. It is not surprising that many men used this perception or colorful phrase as a way to justify instances of unprotected sex in what they believed was a socially accepted pattern of Latino male behavior:

You know, when you're in the heat of passion, you're not going to be concerned with wearing a rubber, you are just going to go for it at that point, but I think a lot of people aren't going to stop and say, "now I have to put on a rubber." . . . Part of that is the natural passion that's going on . . .

#### Coda: The National Context

In October 1995, the Public Media Center in San Francisco produced an in-depth (and in my opinion), brilliant analysis of the impact of homophobia on the spread of HIV and AIDS in the U.S. The report, entitled "The impact of homophobia and other social biases on AIDS," describes how the definition of AIDS as a gay disease, and the linkage between AIDS and gay issues in the mind of the general public, has produced what is perhaps the major barrier—AIDS-Related Stigma—against a focused, coherent, and effective national effort to fight this devastating disease. The report forcefully concludes that

the unaddressed issue of homophobia remains the unseen cause of the spread of AIDS-Related Stigma within U.S. society. We believe that

until the issue of homophobia is properly and adequately addressed in America, our nation is unlikely to generate an objective, focused response to the epidemic of HIV and AIDS. (PMC, 1995, p. 5)

In seemingly parallel universes, approximately one month before the 1996 presidential elections, our country was bombarded with a distressing homophobic discourse. President Bill Clinton signed the ban on homosexual marriages and the California legislature held hearings on Governor Wilson's proposal to restrict adoptions to heterosexual parents.

The news is not good. Keeping with the highly politicized homophobic debates, the *San Francisco Chronicle* recently published the results of the 1991 General Social Survey, periodically conducted by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago. The title of the article "Public opinion of homosexuals stays negative," is somewhat deceiving, because the article in truth reports a slight worsening of public opinion regarding homosexuality. The article states:

According to the 1977 General Social Survey, the country's most-watched barometer of social trends and attitudes, 67 percent of those questioned said that sex between two adults of the same sex was "always wrong." In the 1991 survey, 71 percent said gay sex was always wrong.

Similarly, perhaps in more subtle ways, the nation's machismo discourse is very much alive. The words of praise for Scott O'Grady, the Air Force captain who survived six days behind enemy lines after being shot by Serbian rebel forces, were definitely about his masculinity: "This is a tough *hombre* we are talking about—Adm. L. Smith" (*S.F. Chronicle*, June 9, 1995). Setting aside the provocative fact that Admiral Leighton Smith used the Spanish word for man (*hombre*) when talking about the manhood of an Irish American, it is important to note that both the military and the press constructed the heroic events in terms of the culture's masculine ideal.

About the same time, published in 1995, Michael Kimmel's insightful analysis of masculinity links the resurgence of social prejudices in our country to the often wounded male ego of American men. In the words of the book's reviewer:

The pattern recurs throughout American history. Men feel their power waning on account of an economic downturn or, so they believe, on account of the gains of previously subordinated groups. Feeling threatened as men, they react defensively. Some seek new avenues to prove their manhood: Westward Ho!, making war, building stronger bodies, escape into imaginary worlds peopled by superheroes, etc. . . . Then, failing these pursuits, they project the menace onto classes of people over whom they still wield some power, be these people of color, immigrants, women or gays. (Kupers, 1995, p. 19)

Considering the issues raised in this chapter, and reflecting on the nation's sociopolitical discourse as we approach the second millennium, I am tempted to re-write the conclusion of the Public Media Center report as follows: "Until the issue(s) of homophobia (and machismo) is(are) properly and adequately addressed in America . . ."