Gay bashing—a rite of passage?

THEO VAN DER MEER

Most of what is known about the perpetrators of anti-gay violence is reported by victims of such violence. None the less, it is obvious from such reports that ‘gay bashers’ are overwhelmingly young men who operate in groups, sometimes at gay cruising sites or near gay bars. Drawing on finding from interviews with 30 gay bashers in the Netherlands—whose cooperation was mediated by the police—this paper analyses gay bashing as a rite of passage into masculinity. Most interviewees, regardless of their ethnic background, shared a common psychological habitus and cultural ontology. All were poorly individualized, lacked autonomy and often their self-esteem was low or highly exaggerated or both. What they feared most was to become the object of desire for gay men, whom they considered to be dishonourable, weak and effeminate. Interviewees believed themselves to have acquired a masculine status, which above all meant that they were strong. The suggestion is made that with its growing visibility, homosexuality plays an increasingly problematic role in male socialization.

Introduction

In the West, violence against gay men is generally perpetrated by groups of 15–22-year-old male youths. This is true not only in Holland but is apparent from studies and reports in other Western countries (Comstock 1991). Violence against lesbians on the other hand is often more difficult to distinguish from general forms of gender violence (Van Oort 1994). Almost everything presently known about the perpetrators of anti-homosexual violence has been gleaned from victim reports (e.g., Comstock 1991, Dobler 1993). This paper describes findings from one of the very few studies that has sought to elicit information directly from the perpetrators of anti-gay violence.

As a part of the project, some 30 offenders were interviewed. Respondents were mainly recruited through the police. A number of them had already had been convicted, while some were awaiting sentence. Initial attempts to recruit respondents through other intermediaries, youth workers for example, had not proved successful because these intermediaries claimed they did not want to stigmatize those in their care (Drogt 1994). Interviews took place in the early 1990s; they had a structured format, and all were all conducted on an individual basis. As interviewees

Theo van der Meer is a research fellow at the Faculty of Law of the Free University in Amsterdam. All correspondence should be addressed to: Theo van der Meer, Faculty of Law, Free University of Amsterdam, De Boelelaan 1105, 1081HV Amsterdam, The Netherlands; e-mail: tvandermeer@planet.nl
came from different parts of the country, the interviews occurred in different settings: some of the interviewees were still incarcerated, some of the interviews took place at police stations, and some at community centres.

The young men interviewed came from diverse ethnic backgrounds: more than half of the interviewees were of Dutch, Caucasian background. One of them was a girl who had not participated in actual acts of violence, but had stood by. Four were Moroccan, two Turkish, one was Ambonese and one was Kurdish. Each of those non-Dutch ethnicities has its own history in Dutch culture: Ambonese immigrants came to Holland in the late 1940s and early 1950s after Indonesia gained its independence. Moroccans and Turks came to Holland as migrant workers in the 1960s and 1970s, with their families joining later. Kurdish immigrants either came as migrant workers or as refugees. Today Holland (16 million inhabitants) has a sizable—700,000—Islamic population.

While some of the information may appear dated, it is difficult to come by new data on anti-gay violence in Holland. Whereas it was definitely a point of interest in the 1980s and early 1990s no specific data are gathered anymore on anti-gay violence. On the other hand, tensions in Dutch society over homosexuality, in particular with parts of the Islamic population, have grown, coming to such a clash in the summer of 2001, when reports dominated the media for more than a month.

For several years previously, newspaper reports and the gay press suggested that education on homosexuality in schools was becoming increasingly difficult because of problems caused by Islamic students, or because school principals out of fear of alienating such students cancelled those parts of the curriculum dealing with homosexuality. News reports in 2000 and 2001 also suggested that in some of the major cities in Holland with a majority Arab population, gay/lesbian residents were being subjected to harassment.

Interviewed on television in May 2001 about this issue, an Imam in Rotterdam declared that homosexuality was a disease and that if it were condoned it would become the undoing of society. This statement caused an unprecedented outcry and condemnation from a wide spectrum of Dutch society, including the then Prime Minister and other members of the cabinet, members of both ruling and opposition parties, numerous non-governmental organizations, as well as the media. Many of the major Islamic organizations in Holland also distanced themselves from the Imam’s views, which resulted for the first time in meetings between representatives of Islamic and of gay and lesbian organizations.

It is important to recognize that these tensions over homosexuality arose in a particular context, just 1 month after the law was changed to put gay marriage on a completely equal footing with heterosexual marriage. As some observers have pointed out, immigrant groups in Holland are still so far removed from mainstream politics that few had made their voices heard in debates over the issue of gay marriage or, for example, in the more recent debates that resulted in a new law in 2001, regulating euthanasia.

The means of recruiting respondents, as well as their motives for taking part in the study, undoubtedly influenced the interviews. How
representative the gathered information is for gay bashers in general remains questionable. Importantly, nearly all interviewees had committed their acts at public meeting places for homosexual men (‘cruising sites’), whereas data gathered in Holland in the 1980s suggest that anti-homosexual violence occurs more often on the street than in these more restricted settings (Verslag 1989).

Although the vast majority of the respondents came from the (lower) middle classes, police records revealed the involvement in anti-gay violence of the son of a small town mayor, as well as of youths whose parents were involved with law enforcement, teaching, or who held management positions in TV companies. A large number of the interviewees were in lower vocational education, others in secondary education; there was an occasional college student and others were manual labourers. Most of the interviewees had already been in trouble with the police for vandalism, graffiti, football hooliganism or shoplifting; a couple for burglaries or robberies of petrol station attendants or taxi drivers.

A third of the youths had divorced parents. Most seemed to have had a particularly inconsistent upbringing; respondents talked about having been showered with affection and expensive presents by their parents, only to have received apparently senseless beatings the next moment. In this respect there was very little difference between young men from different ethnic backgrounds.

Most interviewees reported conflicts with parents that had usually began at the onset of puberty. Many let it be known that they were totally unwilling to be told what to do. Their fathers, in turn, seem often to have blocked any attempts at autonomy. There came a moment, particularly for youths with an Islamic background, when the fathers, after a period of conflict, washed their hands of the situation: ‘You can do what you like as long as we don’t get the police at our door’. Some had been expelled from their homes by their parents after a series of escalating conflicts.

Interviewees were extremely vague about leadership or taking initiative. One of them said that in the groups with which he went gay bashing was much less rigidly organized than groups of football vandals or graffiti painters, for example. The ‘bashers’ were usually not even friends. In groups of youths hanging around by chip shops or in bars, someone would make a joke about ‘queers’, somebody else would put his word in, and the next thing you know they would form a group of potential perpetrators, some of whom would back out at the last minute. Coincidence seemed to have played an important role in the formation of these groups. Nevertheless, there was repeated mention of experienced ‘bashers’ who would initiate novices at a cruising site.

All interviewees claimed to have ‘only’ wanted to rob their victims because there was so much money to be made from mugging gays. Gays, in their perception, were also soft targets because they would not fight back, nor would they dare to go to the police. The spoils, however, were seldom more than just a couple of guilders, certainly no more than a few ten-guilder notes. But this did not stop these youths from doing it again and again. They described their experiences as addictive.
A recurring theme in their stories is that the ‘bashers’ would initially have agreed not to use violence if their victims should give up their money. In reality, any excuse to use violence seemed to have been good enough. Even those who gave up their possessions voluntarily were attacked, some with weapons. The idea that they only wanted to mug their victims was therefore something of a fiction, yet one that provided them at least with an excuse, ‘If only we had stolen the money and left it at that, then it wouldn’t have been so bad’. This fiction also seems to be used as a means of justifying themselves, or of assigning a place to the otherwise incomprehensible experience of what interviewees described as their addiction to violence.

Starting points for an analysis

Anti-homosexual violence is unique in a number of respects: it affects a particular group of victims (even though victims are not by definition homosexual); it has explicitly to do with sexuality; and, in contrast with other forms of juvenile delinquency, individual agency is transferred to higher authorities. Respondents considered themselves to have acted on behalf of, or with the approval of, society. They consider themselves to be performing a service to society and projected this attitude onto everyone in their vicinity. The youths interviewed—irrespective of their ethnic origin—were all surprised and resentful about the fact that they had been arrested and punished, attributing this to the personal motives of prosecutors rather than to what they had done. At the same time, almost all of them claimed to have heard remarks from police officers, probation officers, lawyers and judges that although violence could not be condoned, they did not approve of homosexuality either. One youth went as far as saying that although the judge dealt him a tough penalty and lectured him about his despicable behaviour, he could see in his eyes that he agreed with what he, the youth, had done.

Given the earlier established similarities between youths of different ethnic backgrounds, a priori differences are of little concern here. Without ruling out the possibility of ethnic differences, for the purpose of analysis interviewees are considered as one group. No attempt has been made to reconstruct individual psychological profiles, even had this been possible on the basis of the interviews. The focus of this paper is rather on the phenomenology involved as well as on interviewee’s way of being in the world or, in other words, their ontology.

For the sake of analysis, terms as homophobia and gay hatred are avoided here. Both assume defensiveness or an aversion to homosexuality or homosexuals, and also imply a state of mind informed by ‘wrong’ or ‘untrue’ knowledge (for conceptualizations of homophobia and heterosexism, see Harry 1992, Herek 1990, 1992a, b, 1995). Such terminology thus pathologizes the behaviour of those involved (see, for example, Uhle 1994) which even may victimize the perpetrators, most notoriously in the so-called ‘homosexual panic’ defence. Terms like homophobia also tend
to individualize behaviour by suggesting that negative responses can be explained solely in terms of individual preoccupations with homosexuality.

Instead, and in order to understand the anti-gay violence of interviewees, it is perhaps better to look at what connects their individual idiosyncrasies with the belief systems involved. Herdt’s (1991) concept of sexual ontology may here serve as a useful analytical tool. According to this mode of analysis, each culture as far as sexuality is concerned is made up of an apparent seamless unity of notions concerning sex, gender, eroticism, psyche, mind/body distinctions, and nature. These combine individual characteristics with cultural features. Whereas Herdt originally developed the notion of sexual ontology to better understand local sexualities, it may help facilitate an understanding of local common fears in regards of unwanted sexual practices.

**Psychological ontology**

During the interviews, young men exhibited barely integrated polarities in their emotional states. They described themselves as friendly, shy and sensitive and professed an aversion to arguments and violence. If they quarrelled, however, and it went very wrong, then ‘they went for it’. One of the interviewees summarized these extremes: ‘I’m very sensitive, but I can be very hard’. ‘Hard’ or ‘soft’, ‘strong’ or ‘weak’ were key words for all of those interviewed.

Almost all showed signs of a poor individuation. That which they experienced as their common or shared problems played a particularly strong role in their relations with each other. Talking about another’s problems led to these becoming their own: ‘We’ve cried together, laughed together. If he was unhappy, I was unhappy, I began to cry with him. If I was unhappy, he began to cry’. ‘He’s like a brother to me’, said another, ‘because we have the same problems’.

Irrespective of sexual orthodoxy and despite the fact that most of them had (had) a girlfriend, girls were strange creatures to them. They could talk about their problems only with members of their own sex, and only with them were they capable of intimacy. Intimacy apparently equalled an indulgence in problems and self-pity.

Defective individuation was not the only characteristic of these adolescent offenders. Growing up ultimately implies a process young people must go through in order to obtain a certain degree of autonomy. In the case of the gay bashers, however, there seem to be numerous rationalizations actively hindering the taking of this leap. Sudden and vehement identifications went hand in hand with feelings of having to protect ‘your own’ against real or imagined—and sometimes bizarre—threats from the wicked world outside. One after another they stated that, ‘If they harm my car, my friend, my sister, my girlfriend, then they harm me and I’ll get them’. In such statements ‘they’ is an amorphous and anonymous entity.

Interviewees also projected similar threats onto ‘cruising sites’ and their visitors. These sites (usually parks or bushes near parking lots along free ways) inspired fear; it was dark there and maybe those ‘fags’ had built
underground lairs. Above all, they were afraid that the gays would be in the majority and would rape them. Time and again they claimed to have heard stories about boys that this had happened to. Youths of different ethnic backgrounds were unanimous in this respect.

The outside world was treated with resentment. Resentment was directed at parents, the church, teachers and adults in general. The young men constantly let it be known that they felt unjustly treated—and with malicious intent, whatever the circumstances. A bad mark or a failed examination was by definition the fault of a teacher who had something against them. Resentment was naturally directed towards gays. All gays are rich; gays are always adults. Above all homosexuality is something from somewhere else. Gay bashers from the countryside believed it to be typically ‘from the city’. Youths from the south of the Netherlands said that their victims were ‘Hollanders’ (i.e., from the western provinces). In eastern parts of the country, perpetrators had seen many Germans on the ‘cruising site’. Immigrant youths considered homosexuality to be typically ‘Dutch’.

Resentment provided at least one excuse: you had to ‘Not give a shit about anything’. This was also a key phrase for these youths. You should take what you can; you don’t let anyone lay down the law to you; it is always somebody else’s fault. This attitude enabled them to break with whatever bound them to their environment. ‘Not giving a shit about...’ provided them, it seems, with an illusion of omnipotence and invulnerability.

**Cultural ontology**

Some Dutch authors have described gay bashing as a form of vandalism against people (Van den Boogaard and Van Stolk 1992). Bashers were thought to lack any form of compassion towards their victims, and to experience hardly any difference between the destruction of public objects and the beating up of a living being. In some interviews, however, perpetrators did declare themselves to have moral doubts. They talked of feeling pity for their victims and said that they had wanted to withdraw from the violence, but had not dared to show this to their fellow attackers. This has everything to do with the dynamics of peer groups. Perpetrator groups, however, also exhibited features of a shame culture supported by rigidly upheld notions concerning honour and dishonour, masculinity and femininity, strong and weak (Elias 1996).

Such notions allow us to see why respondents did not identify with their victims, or why some of them did not dare to make their concerns known to their fellow perpetrators. In a shame culture, everything depends on public status. Without exception, all those who admitted having doubts where afraid of being considered ‘weak’, or of being rejected by the group. On the other hand, they were convinced that they had won status and prestige by taking part in acts of violence. Otherwise than one would expect on the grounds of the cultural backgrounds of immigrant perpetrators,
The concept of a shame culture also provides insights into the cultural ontology of respondents, particularly with regard to their perceptions of (homo)sexuality. Members of a culture experience the world through apparently shared conceptions of nature, sex, eroticism, mind/body relationships, and through social, communal and political differences. Here, I shall only consider a couple of these concerns.

In guilt cultures, with their emphasis on individual autonomy, people are considered on principle to be each other’s equals. Shame cultures are cultures where, through the unequal distribution of honour, inequality exists by definition. Although the transference of agency mentioned earlier also occurs in guilt cultures, its authority-sensitive character sheds light on the way in which perpetrators classify the world. Most of the youths of Dutch origin were certainly not overt racists, but they nevertheless believed that immigrants had a lower place on the social ladder than the Dutch. When asked about the position of homosexuals, the youths of both native and immigrant origin pointed to the bottom rung.

Interviewees were in absolute agreement about one thing: one can recognize gays by their physical appearance, clothing, hairstyles and movements. Even when describing their victims as particularly big and strong, they remained convinced that all gays are effeminate. Besides which gays are scared, weak and cowardly: they immediately take to their heels; they do not hit back; they never defend each other. Gays represent everything that these perpetrators of anti-homosexual violence considered to be dishonourable. Because all gays are effeminate, they flaunt their lack of honour. The only good gays are the ones that you cannot recognize as such.

And then there is the ‘look’ or the ‘gaze’. Although difficult to objectify, looks can be threatening, insulting, and desiring, or hopeful, and they can provoke violence. ‘If they look at me or laugh ... it makes me really furious, really mad’, said one offender when interviewed years ago in a Dutch magazine (Berkel and Visser 1977). ‘The look’ therefore plays an important role in unexpected anti-homosexual violence on the street. According to personal reports from victims of this form of anti-homosexual violence, there is a recurring pattern. They have—usually barely consciously—looked at a passing youth for a fraction of a second too long. If this youth is in the company of a group of other youths, totally unexpected violence can break out.

‘The look’ can also play a role at cruising sites. One of the youths stated:

Respondent: You know, it’s scary, when you see all those men looking at you like that.
Interviewer: How do they look at you?
Respondent: Really horny, they just want to fuck you there and then.

A touch is of course even worse than a look. However badly organized the perpetrators claimed themselves to be as a group, they almost invariably assigned one of their number to act as bait. The moment that the bait was approached or touched, the ‘victim’ of the advances and his fellows became overcome by an intense fury that vindicated their actions. All the youths—even those who claimed (afterwards) to feel remorse—said that they would
hit back ‘if they touch me’. The aforementioned fear of rape must undoubtedly be seen in this perspective. In shame cultures, however, being touched by a dishonourable person is unbearable: it means that the person touched also loses his own honour and status and should be shunned by their compatriots. In a German interview a gay basher told how ‘of course’ he had lost his respect for a friend of his who had nearly been raped in prison (Braun 1990).

The most essential aspect of ‘the look’ or ‘the touch’ seems in this case to be that it marks the person concerned as an object of desires of another man. If a youth should become such an object of desire in the company of his peers, this would mean an unheard-of injury to his status and could only be averted by immediate violent action. A German Schwulenticker explained that he beat up gays because they even dared to look at him when he was in the company of a friend (Edinger 1992). Even if there was only a minimal degree friendship or emotional bonding between the respondents in a group, their mutual understanding demanded that they should protect each other on this point and that they should tackle it together.

For some of the youths, the above had much to do with what they considered to be ‘the cause’ of homosexuality. A portion of the respondents of Dutch origin thought that homosexuality was an innate (feminine) disorder. Others thought that homosexuals had played with dolls as children and had thus become feminine. One or two Dutch perpetrators, and especially the immigrant respondents, believed that men became homosexual through having sexual experiences with members of their own sex. It was just like drugs, said one youth, gay sex is addictive. Interviewees who entertained these notions were also generally convinced that homosexual men who exercised the necessary degree of self-control could master it. They professed to know men who had been homosexual in the past and had overcome their inflection.

The fundamental idea implicit in such thoughts is that everyone can become homosexual. This throws more light on the often-stated fear of rape. Such thoughts are based on the idea that desires are first and foremost physical desires. The physical experience itself makes one yearn for more. Without self-control, the spirit is no match for the body. Indeed, the youths of Islamic origin in particular had problems with the Western concept of homosexuality. In their cultures other notions apply. For instance, mutual masturbation used not to be considered a homosexual act, and until recently the word ‘homosexuality’ did not even exist in Islamic vocabulary (Martino and Schmitt 1985, Schmitt and Sofer 1992, Tapinc 1992). There is no place for homosexuality in such an ontology. Some youths doubted whether homosexuality was even legal: ‘Homosexuality must go’, said one of them, ‘wanted to make it clear to him [the victim] that he had to stop being gay’, said another.

Should we consider all this as (irrational) gay hate? Comments such as, ‘If I see a queer, I lose control’, or, ‘When I see a poof like that, it makes me furious’, are uttered repeatedly in the interviews as well as in newspaper reports. Nevertheless, this must possibly be seen as one of the more ‘normal’ aspects of anti-homosexual violence. In a book with and about
juvenile delinquents in Holland, *Laten zien dat we beesten zijn* (Let’s show that we are beasts), a supporter of the Amsterdam based soccer-club Ajax spoke in precisely the same terms about Feyenoord (Rotterdam) supporters (Gielissen and Vonk 1985). He hated them intensely; if he saw a Feyenoord supporter he totally lost control, he said. The distinctive factor would seem to be ‘us’ against ‘them’. ‘We are good and they are bad’, stated one youth. ‘They’ can be Feyenoord supporters or gays, but they—as is obvious from the above examples, and particularly in the case of the latter—are in no way ‘they’ by coincidence.

Although some perpetrators of anti-homosexual violence are undoubtedly attempting to hide or drive out their own homosexual feelings (Schippers 1989), interviewees refused to recognize this either in themselves, or in each other. Fear of being considered homosexual by their peers or by others played a role for them if they became objects of another man’s desires. They were primarily concerned with ‘hard’ versus ‘soft’, ‘strong’ versus ‘weak’, and they wanted to create a ‘hard’, ‘strong’ image for themselves. In their view, ‘weak’ was indeed associated with homosexuality, but in as far as it concerned themselves, they did not make this conceptual leap during the interviews. Those who entertained the notion that one could become homosexual through experience did indeed betray uncertainty about their sexual desires, but in their ontology it was possible to erect barriers in oneself to stave off homosexuality.

It is in this context that gay bashing becomes a singular activity. For the perpetrators, the violence provides above all a sense of meaning through which they believe they can attain a place in their culture. Anti-homosexual violence contributes to the process of attaining mature male status. Gay bashing thereby becomes a rite of passage on the boundary between puberty and maturity (Van den Boogaard 1989).

**Gay bashing as rite of passage**

Rites of passage can be found in numerous cultures. They are often extensive and institutionalized rituals and practices by which people can pass from one life-phase or social position to another. The rituals are usually not limited to single events, but sometimes extend over a period of a number of years (Van Gennep 1960). Even though gay bashing is obviously not an institutionalized rite with a clearly demarcated and socially acceptable aim, perpetrators sanction their behaviour and even the social aim itself by their belief to have acted on behalf of society.

Rites of passage most usually occur in three phases: isolation of the novice from everyday relations, the liminal period and the eventual return to everyday relations and incorporation as a culturally reborn person (Van Gennep 1960). The first phase can here be recognized in the remarks about ‘Not giving a shit about anything’ and in the conflicts with parents over budding aspirations to autonomy. The indulgence in introspection, manifested by the interviewees as their commonly experienced problems, is also an aspect of this phase. Behind this probably lies the existential questions
asked by all adolescents: Who am I and where do I belong? Interviewees
told that they had initially felt as if they were nothing or nobodies, wimps.

Group solidarity is characteristic of the liminal phase. This forces one
to participate. One of the most concrete aspects of the violence was the
fact that the more experienced members in particular made sure that no
one withdrew from the action. Group solidarity also provided protection,
particularly if one of the group was in danger of becoming an object
of desire.

Rites of passage usually take place under strictly controlled conditions
and under supervision of adults, with a view to fulfilling their aims. The
experienced ‘bashers’ can be recognized in the role of adult. But what
about the strictly controlled conditions? There is sometimes ruthless viol-
ence, and tales of murder on cruising sites are not unusual. One or two
youths told of losing control or even going into a sort of trance. On the
other hand, those with fighting skills (and that was most of them) said that
after their initial fury they quickly took control of themselves, went to
work efficiently and could eventually limit the violence.

For the perpetrators of it, anti-homosexual violence is a way of giving
personal meaning to life. This has, amongst other things, to do with the
fact that interviewees, when they began with their actions, considered
themselves to be nothing and no one. Even when they told of wanting to
withdraw from the violence their participation produced results. All the
youths told that they achieved a feeling of belonging. They had been aware
of each other’s fears. Through their shared conquest of these fears they
had risen in esteem, both in their own eyes and in those of the others, and
they felt that they were ‘somebody’. They also felt this in respect to their
victims.

For the interviewees, honour, status and power over a dishonourable
other belonging to the wicked world outside are the ingredients for realizing
meaning in life and attaining a new manhood. On this point they tried to
net the earnings of their agency and demanded their position in life. They
often returned to the place from where they had started—sometimes in a
euphoric mood—to boast of their deeds to the others present. Sometimes
they would even show off the bloodstains on their clothing. Some began
to boast at school, at work or in the company of other young men about
what they had done. Sometimes they would need to initiate others in
their rites.

Participation in a rite of passage is also painful. Taking leave of old
thoughts and feelings is a frightening experience for many and can bring
about feelings of loss and mourning. This was also not unknown to the
interviewees. In particular their inability to stop, the often stated fear that
their abuse of others would get even more out of control and the gradual
realization that they could not remain unpunished forever resulted in
dejection. These youths seemed particularly to have lost sight of a perspect-
ive on a self-evident future. This of course applied especially after their
arrest. Above all their deeds were difficult to relate to their, in a certain
sense, disconcertingly ‘ordinary’ ideals concerning the rest of their lives: a
job and a harmonious life with a wife and children. They had indeed gained
status amongst their peers, but were now confronted with the fact that
they had to create their own future.
Most of the perpetrators of anti-homosexual violence will probably never be brought to justice, not in the least because their victims often do not file charges. The interviewees had also attacked more victims than were known to the police. In most cases, both those who are never caught as well as those who are, will characteristically stop committing anti-homosexual violence together with other forms of youth delinquency. Most gay bashers, just like other young delinquents, will indeed incorporate, marry and have children as adults—even if the incorporation of those who have been in trouble with the police will take another course than those who avoided arrest. It is clear that the homosexuality of others has fulfilled a functional role in their own socialization.

It is also maybe not overstated to say that this is true of many youths, even if they are not inclined to anti-homosexual violence. A phenomenon such as bullying, for example, is often organized around notions of ’strong’ and ’weak’ and of attaining power in much the same way as it happens in gay bashing. Often enough, adolescent boys use the strategy of undermining each other’s sexual and gender status by calling one another queers, fags or sissies. Although often dealt with as just a nuisance, I consider this as functional behaviour. With the increased visibility of homosexuals in the last decades, homosexuality has become less and less something only concerning homosexuals themselves. This leads us at the very least to the realization that homosexuality plays an increasingly problematic role in the socialization of men in general.

Notes

1. The original interviewer, Henk van den Boogaard, was not able to complete the research project. In 1995, the present author was asked by the SAD-Schorer Foundation (a gay and lesbian mental health and aids prevention center in Amsterdam) and the NISSO (Netherlands Institute for Social Sexual research) to prepare a report for the Dutch Department of Justice, based on Van Den Boogaard’s original interviews (see Van der Meer 1995, 1996).

2. Interestingly, similar difficulties in recruitment have been reported in Germany (Uhle 1994).

3. Such a form of ’panic’ is claimed to occur when another man unexpectedly makes sexual overtures to a perpetrator. Homosexual panic is a rather obscure notion as it is not clear whether it is the perpetrator’s response to becoming an object of desire, or the sudden realization that he harbours homosexual desires himself, that triggers the negative response.

References


Résumé

L’essentiel de ce que l’on connaît sur les auteurs de violences anti-gay provient des récits des victimes de ces violences. De ces récits se dégage cependant l’évidence que les « casseurs de pédés » sont très majoritairement des hommes jeunes qui agissent en groupe, quelquefois à proximité des lieux de drague ou des bars gay. S’inspirant des conclusions d’entretiens avec trente « casseurs de pédés » aux Pays Bas – dont la coopération a été arbitrée par la police –, cet article analyse la violence anti-gay comme un rite de passage vers la masculinité. La plupart des hommes interrogés, toutes origines ethniques confondues, partageaient le même habitus psychologique et la même ontologie culturelle. Tous avaient une personnalité...
fragile, manquaient d’autonomie, et avaient un amour-propre faible ou fortement exagéré, ou les deux à la fois. Ce qu’ils redoutaient le plus était de devenir des objets de désir pour des hommes gay qu’ils considéraient comme des êtres déshonorants, faibles et efféminés. Ils croyaient avoir atteint un statut de masculinité qui, par-dessus tout, était pour eux synonyme de force. L’article suggère qu’en raison de sa visibilité grandissante, l’homosexualité joue un rôle de plus en plus problématique dans la socialisation masculine.

Resumen

La mayor parte de lo que se sabe sobre los perpetradores de actos de violencia contra los homosexuales es lo que reportan las propias víctimas de esa violencia. Sin embargo, a partir de esos testimonios es bastante obvio que los "golpeadores de gays" son principalmente chicos jóvenes, que actúan en grupos, a veces en los sitios de esparcimiento gays o cerca de los bares gays. Retomando algunos hallazgos a partir de 30 entrevistas a "golpeadores de gays" en Holanda –cuya cooperación fue conseguida por intermedio de la policía–, este documento analiza la violencia contra los gays como un rito de pasaje a la masculinidad. La mayoría de los entrevistados, independientemente de su origen étnico, compartía la misma ontología cultural y el mismo hábitus psicológico. Todos mostraban una pobre individuación, carecían de autonomía y con frecuencia tenían la autoestima baja, o exageradamente alta, o ambas. Lo que más temían era volverse objeto de deseo para los hombres gay, a quienes consideraban poco honorables, débiles y afeminados. Los entrevistados creían haber alcanzado el status masculino, que por sobre todas las cosas asociaban con la fuerza. Este estudio sugiere que, al ser crecientemente visible, la homosexualidad juega un papel cada vez más problemático en la socialización masculina.