



BUT DO NOT IDENTIFY AS GAY: A Proleptic Genealogy of the MSM Category

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TOWARD AN ANTHROPOLOGY OF HISTORICITY

My analysis in this article pivots on a question of anticipation. Growing numbers of persons worldwide now call themselves “men who have sex with men,” finding in this phrase confirmation of a selfhood felt to have already been there. How has this subject position come into being so swiftly, without the social and political organizing associated with so many claims to identity, or even fractured dissemination via popular media (Boellstorff 2005)? How might considering this novel form of selfhood help us craft anthropological responses to cultural phenomena whose conditions of historical emergence appear untimely?

This last question, phrased in a variety of ways, goes back to anthropology’s beginnings, from 19th-century evolutionary thought (and Boas’s historicist counter to that paradigm) to the continuing rediscovery of the importance of history to anthropological analysis (Geertz 1981; Sahlins 1987; Wolf 1982). In a sense all cultural phenomena are culturally emergent, but my concern here is with the untimely as “that which marks itself as beyond or outside” (Grosz 2004:10). How can a cultural phenomenon whose temporality appears suspect—out of joint, anachronistic, or ahead of its time—help us reconsider the historicity of culture itself? My goal in the limited space of this article is to address this question regarding what untimely cultural phenomena teach us about historical emergence through the category “men who have sex with men but do not identify as gay.” Commonly shortened to “men who have sex with men” and further abbreviated as “MSM,” this apparently trivial category has become central to a range of debates over

selfhood, community, health, and justice. The MSM category may be on its way to becoming a globally dominant identity category; we need to better understand its characteristics and implications.

I came to “MSM” through ethnographic work on *gay* subjectivity and HIV/AIDS activism in Indonesia, including participation in a range of HIV/AIDS conferences, past positions of the Board of Directors of two community-based HIV/AIDS NGOs in the United States, and work as a member of the Advisory Board for two community-based HIV/AIDS NGOs in Indonesia itself (see Boellstorff 2005, 2007a, 2009).¹ Through this work I have watched this once-obscure category play an increasingly influential, and sometimes disturbing, role in global HIV/AIDS discourse, displacing terms like *homosexual* and *gay*. Yet I also highlight unexpected and potentially laudatory effects of the MSM category, all without offering any better term to take its place.

Why refuse to seek a more perfect nomenclature? Quests for a “better term” are doomed to failure because they are based on a logic of enumeration (Boellstorff 2007b), founded on an impoverished theory of language as having the potential to transparently label reality. The problem is not that “MSM” might be better or worse than “homosexual” or “gay.” Rather, the case of the MSM category shows how the problem is the notion that finding a terminology isomorphic with social reality is possible, a notion shaped by a view of emergence that fails to provide for the untimely itself. In place of a search for terminological perfection and historical closure, in this article, I use a genealogical approach to track three unforeseen transformations in “MSM”—from a category primarily excluding other notions of sexuality and gender to a category primarily including them; from a category primarily referencing behavior to a category primarily referencing identity; and from a U.S.-based category to a category transnational in scope. These transformations have cultural consequences—from new possibilities for community and selfhood to new forms of transnational organizing—and in turn, these social realities shape the scope and referents of “MSM.”

I draw inspiration from Foucault’s interest in how radical transformations in a category—“reverse discourses” (Foucault 1978:101)—lead to unexpected new possibilities for subjectivity. In the case of Foucault’s study, however, “homosexuality” had already been in existence for a century; by the time of his research it had been drawn into highly visible social struggles. In comparison, the category I examine here has a much shallower history and emerged in conversation (indeed, in opposition) to the far better-known category “gay.” Most authors using “MSM” note that the category is problematic; it was questioned almost from the outset

(King 1994; Scott 1993; Watney 2000a), and has increasingly come under sustained critique (Khan and Khan 2006; Muñoz-Laboy 2004; Patton 2002; Reddy 2005; Young and Meyer 2005). I add to this body of research by theorizing the consequences of fundamental shifts in “MSM” for the category as well as for what I call the anthropology of historicity.² I thereby link my analysis with the broader scholarly attention to “the complicity of social scientists and social theorists in producing the objects they are investigating, and the politics of this process” (Valentine 2007:19), such that “the data are not given, but rather achieved” (Maurer 2005:14; see also Elyachar 2005; Fortun 2001; Patton 2002).

In what follows, I first explore the origins of “MSM.” I then track the three key transformations in the category noted above, turning briefly to India and Indonesia to examine how these transformations shape emerging socialities. My primarily historical approach is indebted to scholars like Geertz and Sahlins, as well as scholarship showing how documents can constitute social realities that “emancipate themselves from the issuer” (Vismann 2008:73; see also Riles 2006). Because the MSM category remains nascent, exploring it anthropologically poses specific challenges: it is not possible to research it ethnographically in the same way that, for instance, I have studied *gay* men in Indonesia. Yet there is value in responding anthropologically to “untimely” discursive formations that may not yet unequivocally correspond to actual communities. Linkages between the MSM category and public health discourse in the context of global developmentalism mean that the category has been fairly well-documented even when not a readily recognizable subject position.

This presents an opportunity for a critical anthropological analysis that anticipates its ethnographic object. In his essay “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” Foucault cautioned against a search for origins; in his view, such “an attempt to capture the exact essence of things, their purest possibilities, and their carefully protected identities” is limited “because this search assumes the existence of immobile forms that precede the external world of accident and succession” (Foucault 1998:371). In place of a search for origins, Foucault advocated an approach sensitive to the constitutive power of accident and succession. Nikolas Rose called this a “genealogy of subjectification” which can be used “to unpack the ways in which ‘the self’ that functions as a regulatory ideal in so many aspects of our contemporary forms of life . . . is a kind of ‘irreal’ plan of projection, put together somewhat contingently and haphazardly at the intersection of a range of distinct histories” (Rose 1996:129). Keeping in mind these emphases on contingency, accident, and the self as an “irreal,” even virtual project (see Boellstorff 2008:ch 5), I find it helpful to turn to

“prolepsis,” which in narrative and rhetorical theory refers to a “flashforward,” to the existence of the future in the present (as in the phrase “I’m a dead man”). This notion appears only occasionally in queer studies scholarship—to my knowledge, most notably in Carla Freccero’s reference to “prolepsis” as a “playful and relatively unused” term that can work to trouble “question(s) of temporal propriety” (Freccero 2006:2). “Prolepsis” also makes infrequent appearance in anthropological scholarship—to my knowledge, most notably in Michael Fischer’s reference to the possibility of “constitutive prolepsis” (2003:166). Fischer and Freccero can be read as linking prolepsis to an anthropology of emergence and a queering of temporality; in coining the phrase “proleptic genealogy,” I build on such work to explore contingent transformations of the MSM category. I thereby ask after the consequences of anticipatory histories for untimely selfhoods-in-formation, for such histories challenge “the implicit analytical framework that presumes guaranteed trajectories impacted by ‘external’ events” (Maurer 2005:5). In this sense any proleptic genealogy (not just the proleptic genealogy of “MSM”) is queer in that it destabilizes the heteronormative biogenetic logics shaping dominant conceptions of genealogy itself.

My inspiration for this analysis was the realization that most documents employing “MSM” include a first footnote bemoaning its awkwardness while affirming no better alternative exists—noting, for instance, that although “there has been heated debate in both developed and developing contexts about its use . . . there now seems to be international consensus” (MSM Initiative 2009:6). What interests me here is that going back to early uses of the category, there has been a sense that we already know “MSM” will not work. From the beginning, it has seemed to be at an end. A sense of breakdown and supersession is built into its own history; the term anticipates its own failure, yet consensus and even unexpected confirmation emerge. What discursive regime undergirds this temporal logjam—this sense that we cannot live with, or without, “MSM?”

ORIGINS OF THE MSM CATEGORY

Crucial to constructing a proleptic genealogy of “MSM” is charting the assumptions that characterized its origin, but have a decidedly nonlinear relationship to the term’s present meanings and uses. Thanks to a body of excellent scholarship, we know that “homosexual” originated in a sexological discourse of mid-19th-century Europe, becoming a subject position via a “reverse discourse” in which “homosexuality began to speak on its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or ‘naturalness’ be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which

it was medically disqualified” (Foucault 1978:101). We also know that “gay” and “lesbian” originated about 50 years later in subcultural contexts; they were subject positions from the outset (Chauncey 1995; Kennedy and Davis 1993).

In contrast, no scholar has yet written a definitive history of “MSM.” From available documentation it seems clear that the category originated in no household or bar, no park or disco, no poem or protest. Instead, “MSM” (like “homosexual”) was a scientific and bureaucratic coinage, created to signify behavior without identity, as can be seen in its originary form “men who have sex with men but do not identify as gay.” It was almost certainly formulated in the United States in the mid-1980s, but just as evidently globalized from the outset (particularly in the United Kingdom, Australia, and other English-dominant countries) via research and then activist networks. The MSM category coincided with the rise of the Internet: websites, email, and the global circulation of PDF documents have thus played a far more foundational role than for “gay” or “homosexual.” “MSM” did not emerge via pride marches, community newsletters, or mass media. Instead, the category appeared in response to a need to analytically describe, for purposes of HIV/AIDS surveillance and behavior change—and thus of social control—men who engaged in anal intercourse with other men but did not identify as gay, as encapsulated in the saying “it’s not who you are, it’s what you do.”

In other words, at this originary point in the category’s history (and compared to many categories, there is a relatively delineable origin, even though this is an “origin” in a technical rather than ontological sense), “MSM” was meant to invoke behavior in complete distinction from identity. In this epidemiological imaginary, behavior could stand alone—after all, a gay-identified man who was celibate was not at risk for sexual transmission of HIV, while a straight-identified man who had anal sex with other men was at risk; he was offered no protection from infection by the mere fact of his self-identification. To my knowledge, the first published references to the MSM category appeared in 1988:

Of the women who acquired AIDS through heterosexual contact with a person at risk for AIDS, 67% were sex partners of IV drug users while 16% were sex partners of men who have sex with men. [Mantell et al. 1988:21]

The challenge now is to expand the education effort to reach IV drug users not in treatment, women at risk, men who have sex with men but do not identify themselves as gay or bisexual. [Petzke 1988:376]

The following year, “MSM” appeared in several other articles dealing with HIV/AIDS issues (e.g., Connell et al. 1989:386; Fay et al. 1989:338; Gagnon

1989:48). The next set of early published mentionings of the category occurred in abstracts for oral presentations delivered at the Sixth (1990) and Seventh (1992) International AIDS Conferences. With one exception (Magis et al. 1992), these oral presentations were all by U.S. researchers; largely focused on demography, they treated “MSM” as familiar enough to not require detailed explanation (e.g., Beeker et al. 1990; O’Reilley et al. 1992; Thomas et al. 1990).

By the mid-1980s, activists in communities of color in the United States were challenging the dominance of white gay men in the response to HIV/AIDS, but it does not appear that this activism was central to the formation of “MSM.” Those writing on men of color and HIV/AIDS in the 1980s and 1990s often intentionally distanced themselves from the category, favoring phrases like “Latino gay men” (e.g., Díaz 1997). Additionally, HIV/AIDS activists within and outside the West noted from the early years of the epidemic that in many non-Western contexts, “gay” was seen as oppressive or inaccurate.³ Yet both with regard to men of color in the West and men outside the West, it seems that “MSM” was not frequently used prior to the early 2000s—that is, nearly 15 years after the concept gained wide currency in HIV/AIDS discourse. The most pivotal set of social actors behind the origin of “MSM” were the public health workers, epidemiologists, and other professionals who saw HIV/AIDS first and foremost as a virus spread significantly by sex between men, regardless of identity or community membership.⁴ The WHO Global Programme on AIDS (GPA) played a central role in these initial formulations. Gary Dowsett, a researcher involved in these early debates, provides a crucial piece of that history:

I first heard the term “MSM” as part of AIDS-speak at the only meeting that the GPA ever held on gay men and HIV. Called the Workshop on AIDS Health Promotion Activities Directed towards Gay and Bisexual Men, Geneva, it took place between May 29–31, 1989. During that meeting, the phrase “men who have sex with men” was raised as a term for discussion. . . . I assume it was a fight (compromise?) to find a term epidemiologically and politically suitable for the United Nations, but which didn’t use “gay,” as no one there really wanted to say “gay” out loud too much in those days. Indeed, we were dressed down during the meeting by one staffer for developing a too-political and too-gay agenda. Part of the debate at that time was how to describe male-to-male sexual transmission where clearly gay community and culture didn’t exist . . . eventually MSM became the overarching category in UNAIDS, and the rest is history.⁵

“MSM” was opposed to “gay,” but ironically this was only possible because gay activists had been successful in politicizing HIV/AIDS and linking it to broader contexts of discrimination and silencing. The concept originated in two specific and linked insights. First, there are men who have sex with men but do not see themselves as “gay” and indeed can be hostile to the term. Second, HIV/AIDS programs targeting “gay men” will exclude a range of “men who have sex with men but do not identify as gay.” GPA advisors (and other public health professionals), influenced by HIV/AIDS activism, increasingly concluded that such exclusions could reproduce inequalities of race, class, and gender, setting forth a teleological hierarchy privileging Western, middle-class, white gay men. This led to the conclusion that HIV prevention activities meant for “the gay community” would fail to reach many at-risk men:

By about 1989, advisors to the GPA were able to . . . gain official adoption and normalization of the term “men who have sex with men” (MSM). Although unwieldy, this term presented an important conceptual move away from the European and American tendency to ground homosexuality in psychic processes or to posit queerly desiring bodies as proto-gay subjects would could be organized into an identity and a community. [Patton 2002: 81–82]

Because HIV obviously cannot determine the identity of those it infects, “MSM” held the promise of sidestepping identity, leading to a more scientific understanding of the virus’s location and transmission, a more effective use of resources, and ultimately more lives saved.⁶ The MSM category thus originated as a kind of bureaucratized reverse discourse, consciously opposed to a more everyday category—“gay”—in the context of HIV prevention. It emphatically did not originate in a domain of queer politics, even though it proleptically foreshadowed the disidentification with gay identity that has characterized many forms of queer politics. Had the HIV/AIDS pandemic never arisen, “MSM” would never have taken form at the time or in the manner that it did, in terms of (1) a binarism of identity–behavior, mapped onto binarisms of (2) Western–non-Western, (3) elite–working class, and (4) white–nonwhite. This quadruple isomorphism set the figure of the non-Western, working-class, nonwhite man “having sex with men” against the figure of the Western, elite, white gay-identified man. The fundamental role of HIV/AIDS in the history of the MSM category—and how that medicalized genealogy has been linked to specific subject positions construed in terms of constitutive dichotomies—is crucial to understanding the transformations in the

category discussed later in this article, as well as the ways in which the category has, so to speak, anticipated its own deconstruction.

The MSM category has certainly helped turn attention to neglected communities and persons. However, at the time of its originary formulation, what was not addressed was how to conceptualize (1) men of color in the United States who have sex with other men but identify as gay (despite the common association, at the time, of “gay” with “white”), or (2) men outside the West who have sex with other men but identify as gay (despite the common association, at the time, of “gay” with “Western”)—particularly if, in either case, these men were not wealthy elites. Rather than acknowledge expansive transformations in the meanings of “gay,” the MSM category worked to narrow its scope, solidifying the conflation of “gay” with whiteness and the West. As some commentators noted early on, the term “reflected a rather subtle form of de-gaying” (King 1994:203) of a piece with the ostensibly euphemizing language of “exchanging bodily fluids” for “sex,” “digital intercourse” for “fingering,” and the like (King 1994:200).

“MSM” thereby made “gay” more exclusionary at a conceptual level, even as it named exclusionary effects of “gay” in practice. Given the fundamental role HIV/AIDS discourse played in the forging of the MSM category, these confluences fed a racial imaginary associating men of color in the West and non-Western men in general with disease, associations with well-documented colonial genealogies (see Stoler 2010). Of course, this does not mean that the category “gay” was no longer pathologized. Instead, it means that the emergence of the MSM category, tightly linked to HIV/AIDS and nonwhite and non-Western men, allowed for new forms of racialized pathologization linked to the figure of the diseased body of color, thus proleptically referencing forms of belonging and exclusion articulated through paradigms of biosociality (Rabinow 1999).

Additionally, as originally formulated the MSM category took the constituent terms “men” and “sex” as stable and self-evident. The notion of “men who have sex with men but do not identify as gay” treats identity as a social construction, but reifies “men” and “sex” as prediscursive, conflating sex with penetration (above all, anal–penile intercourse) and maleness with biology. Indeed, given that “men with men” implies sameness, “men who have sex with men” represents an Anglicization of “homosexual,” albeit one that excludes women.⁷

Looking forward to the present (and to the discussion that follows), we can see that the clause “but do not identify as gay” has become largely implicit; it is rarely spelled out in contemporary documents or debates regarding “men who have sex with men.” Yet in three crucial ways the clause remains efficacious even in its

apparent absence. One proleptic entailment has been the assumption that “MSM” names men who do not “identify as gay” because they will use other terms. A second and contradictory entailment has been that “MSM” names men who “do not identify” at all in terms of sexual practice; it encodes an assumption “that such men have no sexual identity whatsoever” (Watney 2000a:76). This makes thinkable a vision of HIV prevention that hones in on sexual acts, without the need for politically charged and programmatically daunting projects of community building and civil rights. For instance, under the section of the UNAIDS “2009 AIDS Epidemic Update” addressing “men who have sex with men” in sub-Saharan Africa, the issue of “laws prohibiting same-sex activity between consenting adults” is rightly pointed out as an issue of concern, but these laws are mentioned in isolation (UNAIDS 2009:34). This displaces questions of law onto sex practices, sidelining issues like violence, marriage equality, religious intolerance, and workplace discrimination. A third way that the phrase “but do not identify as gay” still lurks proleptically at the core of the MSM category—the entailment whose contemporary effects may prove to be the most pernicious and far-reaching—is as an anticipatory injunction. “Do not identify as gay,” because “gay” is always already a term of whiteness, the West, or contemporary capitalism, while “MSM” is somehow innocent of such connotations. It is in this regard that some observers noted from the beginning that the term is “primarily a product of projective homophobic fantasy, concerning what is perceived as the most immediate source of possible contamination to heterosexual men” (Watney 2000a:76).

TRANSFORMATIONS OF ENUMERATION

Although all categories shift over time, “MSM” has undergone three extreme transformations—involving enumeration, identity, and translocalization—that render it radically disjunctive or even diametrically opposed to key presumptions that shaped its original formulation. These disjunctures play a pivotal role in the untimely character of “MSM” itself. In terms of enumeration, the original exclusion of gay men from the MSM category—an exclusion that was nothing less than the primary motivation for coining “men who have sex with men but do not identify as gay” in the first place—was almost completely reversed by the early 2000s. By this time one could encounter phases like “sexual minorities therefore include gay men and other men who have sex with men” (Global Fund 2009:24), “the term MSM includes gay men” (MSM Initiative 2008:9), and “the term ‘men who have sex with men’ . . . includes . . . gay and bisexual men” (UNAIDS 2006b:110). This transformation remains incomplete: an antagonism to gay identity continues

to animate “MSM,” particularly when “gay” is assumed to refer solely to white Western men. In such contexts the category can highlight white gay privilege, but with two stiff prices to pay: first, the exclusion, even denigration, of gay men of color and gay men outside the West; and second, a failure to acknowledge that “MSM” is arguably a more Westernized term than “gay,” certainly one far more medicalized and linked to forms of surveillance and biological citizenship (Petryna 2002; Rose and Novas 2005).

Because the original formulation of “MSM” took “men” as a stable referent, male-to-female (MTF) transgendered persons were, along with gay men, consistently excluded. This understanding of maleness remains common, to the extent that some definitions of “MSM” will rename the term “males who have sex with males,” with the proviso that “the word Male specifically refers to biological sex” (Khan and Jafar 2004:9), or define “MSM” as “biological males engaging in sexual activities with other biological males” (Global Consultation on MSM and HIV/AIDS Research 2008:1). “Transgender” is often still separated as a keyword from “MSM” in international HIV/AIDS conferences (e.g., International Conference on HIV/AIDS in the Asia Pacific [ICAAP] 2003:9). However, because many people still regard MTF transgendered persons as fundamentally male, one surprising consequence of this biologized understanding of maleness has been a redefinition of “MSM” to include MTF transgendered persons, so that now “the term ‘men who have sex with men’ . . . includes . . . transgendered males” (UN-AIDS 2006b:110), there can exist “significant differences in HIV risk among subsets of MSM, including transgenders” (Baral et al. 2007:1902), and “the term MSM includes . . . transgendered people” (MSM Initiative 2008:9).

However, there are four problems with including transgendered persons in the MSM category. First, “many [MTF] transgender people object to being labeled as MSM, since they do not identify themselves as men” (Hawkes 2008:10) and “are not generally perceived to be engaged in homosexual activity” (Beyrer et al. 2005:1536). As a result, phrases like “MSM and transgenders” and “MSM/TG” have become more common (e.g., Global Fund 2009; Hawkes 2008). Second, these uses of “transgender” never refer to female-to-male (FTM) transgendered persons, in line with the continuing biological essentialism at the core of the MSM category. The third problem is that if MTF transgendered persons are “men” and thus “MSM,” then logically the normatively masculine men who are their sex partners are also “MSM.” Such men are now oftentimes included in the MSM category, despite the fact that these men would not have typically been construed as MSM under the term’s originary rubric. The inclusion of MTF transgendered persons and their

normatively male sexual partners in the MSM category is understandable, because the fourth problem is that once the originary unity of “MSM” has been broken with “MSM/TG,” there is no clear way to halt the enumerative logic. It is not wrong that these persons be named; however, it is worthwhile to question the thinking that motivates this unending addition of categories to an ever-expanding list. This is the logic of enumeration working in a proleptic fashion: it anticipates its own failure to adequately name its intended referents, paralleling the history by which “gay” became “gay and lesbian,” then “gay, lesbian, and bisexual,” then “LGBT” (where the “T” stands for “transgender”), to the current “LGBTIQQ” (with the addition of “intersexed,” “queer,” and “questioning”).

TRANSFORMATIONS OF IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY

Another crucial transformation of “MSM” has concerned identity and community. “Homosexual” itself was originally created to signify behavior without identity, but this proved impossible to sustain:

As defined by the ancient civil or canonical codes, sodomy was a category of forbidden acts; their perpetrator was nothing more than the juridical subject of them. The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood . . . it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul. [Foucault 1978:42]

What originally distinguished “MSM” from “gay” was its separation of same-sex behavior from identity, recalling older notions of “homosexual” and even “sodomite.” Early critics of the term seized on precisely this implication—noting, for instance, that the MSM concept “simply labels [these men] with a term around which they are highly unlikely to mobilize” (King 1994:205). In exasperation with the HIV/AIDS awareness materials being distributed at the time, in 1994 the well-known British activist Simon Watney asked “Has anyone ever existed who thinks of himself in such terms—for example, ‘Hello, I’m a Man Who Has Sex With Men?’” (Watney 2000b:173). Although this question will turn out to be proleptic in ways Watney could not have anticipated, the idea that “MSM” works to separate behavior from identity has persisted:

MSM [was coined] to reduce stigma against gay, bisexual, transgendered, and self-identified heterosexual men who engage in sex with other men, by describing behaviors rather than social or cultural identities. [Baral et al. 2007:1902]

MSM identities . . . have less immediate utility. . . . Identifying at-risk behaviors . . . is fundamental to public health efforts to limit the spread of the epidemic. [Hawkes 2008:10]

“Men who have sex with men” (MSM) is an inclusive public health term used to define the sexual behaviors of males having sex with other males, regardless of gender identity, motivation for engaging in sex or identification with any or no particular “community.” [India Naz Foundation International 2008:6]

This enduring understanding of “MSM” in terms of behavior explains how a United Nations policy brief from 2006 could state that “Sex between men . . . may involve men who identify as homosexual, gay, bisexual, transgendered or heterosexual” (UNAIDS 2006a:1). “Identify as MSM” does not appear in this list: it appears self-evident that “MSM” is not an identity term.

But appearances deceive: “MSM” has metamorphosized into an identity, the very thing it was coined to avoid. Three overlapping conceptual steps have been involved in this reversal. First was the shift from individual to group: “MSM” increasingly referred to a “risk group”—a population—rather than just individuals with risk behaviors. By the mid-2000s, it was common to see calls for “more evidence of the cost-effectiveness of MSM interventions to understand the value of investing in programs for most-at-risk groups” (Health Policy Initiative 2008:4).

The second step involved reframing this “risk group” as an actually existing community, rather than an epidemiological conceit. It became possible to encounter claims that “group consciousness and community organization among men who have sex with men are increasing in many countries” (UNAIDS 2008:87), that “the community-based infrastructure among men who have sex with men has historically been poorly developed throughout much of Asia” (UNAIDS 2009:46), or that “prevention strategies tend to work better when community-level rather than individual risks are targeted. . . . Globally, only 5–10% of MSM have access to programs such as these” (MSM Initiative 2008:12).

The third step followed logically from the first two. If we shift the meaning of “MSM” from individual to group, so that there can exist socially recognized “MSM communities,” then members of these communities must, by definition, have “MSM identities.” We return full circle from individual to group back to individual. No longer is “MSM” an “awkward typology” that is “meaningless in everyday conversation” (Lyttleton 2008:7), because the epidemiological category has become a subject position. The etic has become emic, and in sharp contrast to Watney’s 1994 (2000b) rhetorical question it is now possible to speak of “self

recognized men who have sex with men” (Pisani et al. 2004:536). In a single document we can find the statement that the MSM category “is used to denote those for whom homosexuality connotes a behavior, not an identity,” but only a few pages later encounter reference to “the MSM community” and “MSM activists,” based on the observation that “some public health activists have declared that MSM is an identity, in and of itself” (Katyál 2002:153, 155, 159, 156).

This transformation of the MSM category makes new problems thinkable and suggests new solutions as well. From the original formulation of men who “do not identify” as gay, it is now possible to be concerned that “[there is a] difficulty reaching many MSM because large numbers of these men do not identify themselves as such and are consequently hidden from MSM-specific programming” (Global Consultation on MSM and HIV/AIDS Research 2008:1). It is possible to worry that “the problem with the MSM category is that many men do not identify with this label, which leads to their increased alienation from HIV prevention strategies” (Muñoz-Laboy 2004:58). Of course, in the original formulation of “MSM,” the fact that many men (indeed, all men) would not identify with this etic “label” was not a problem to solve. This morphing of “MSM” into an identity has been furthered by forms of public health governmentality. For instance, when helping an Indonesian NGO apply for funding from the American Foundation for AIDS Research’s “MSM Initiative” in 2009, I was fascinated to see that the sample application suggested that “out and closeted MSM in three districts of my city” might be the target of an HIV prevention program.

This distinction between “out MSM” and “closeted MSM” is more than the paradoxical returning of the MSM category full circle to the kind of identity category it was coined to avoid. It is indicative of a broader recursion in which the transformation of “MSM” into a sexual identity has spawned a new binarism—not between “gay” and “MSM,” but between men who identify as “MSM” (“out MSM”) and those who do not, but still have sex with men (“closeted MSM”). This recursion is proleptic in that from its origins, the MSM category has been articulated contrastively with some ostensibly dominant category: the earlier opposition to “gay” anticipated an emergent opposition with “self-identified MSM.” This newer opposition seems to have taken form by the late 1990s. It is certainly the case that by the 2001 ICAAP, I was encountering activists speaking of the need to reach out to the “male partners of MSM.” As I have noted elsewhere (Boellstorff 2005:100), at first blush this phrase appears nonsensical. By definition, the male partner of an “MSM” should also be a “man who has sex with men”: it is legible only if “MSM” has become an identity. By 2006, the “male partners of MSM” category had made

its way into no less an official document than the fifth UNAIDS *Global Report on the HIV/AIDS Epidemic*, which spoke of the need to address the “sexual partners (male and female) of men who have sex with men” (UNAIDS 2006b:114).⁸ That same year, an official study in Vietnam could name as an epidemiological category “MSM who had sex with consensual male partners” (National Institute of Hygiene and Epidemiology 2006:32). The only intelligible way to understand such a “consensual male partner” as something other than an “MSM” is if they are distinguished by the lack of an MSM identity.

TRANSFORMATIONS OF TRANSLOCALIZATION

A third significant transformation of the MSM category has involved its translocalization. In a powerful sense, “MSM” anticipated its own globalization: as noted above, while likely originating in the United States, the category was from the outset taken up internationally. This was linked to a growing awareness that because “gay” was neither universally used nor had a universal meaning, HIV/AIDS interventions predicated on the category could have exclusionary effects. As early as 1993, Timothy Wright noted in an unpublished report to the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) the potential dangers of prevention work predicated on the category “gay” for what he termed “the world of men-who-have-sex-with-men” in Bolivia—but as remains common, did not subject the MSM category to analogous scrutiny (see Wright 2000:99).

Throughout its history, “gay” has been primarily translocalized via mass media, albeit in a largely unintentional manner (Boellstorff 2005; Jackson 1999). In contrast, “MSM” has been largely translocalized through grants, conferences, educational materials, and technical assistance programs, down to small NGOs whose mandate to be community-based has often led to the retroactive “discovery” that the community they serve is none other than “MSM.” For instance, while the MSM category was originally “not meant as a substitute identity,” in the Philippines it became “a floating descriptor” such that people could ask if someone was “an MSM” (Tan 2001:134; see also Padilla 2007:177). Thus, “MSM [has been] employed all over the world precisely because it has been recognized that. . . . Western gay modes of social and subjective identification cannot be transposed to other cultural settings” (Lyttleton 2008:11). A lack of attention to prolepsis, to the untimely “flashforward” that renders the future causal (like telling someone “you’re a dead man”), helps explain why an understandable concern with “Western gay modes of social and subjective identification” being “transposed to other cultural settings” is not extended to “MSM” itself—why there has been so little recognition that with

regard to the “globalization” of identities, “MSM” is, if anything, more Westernized and medicalized than “gay.”

The Case of India

Although limits of space preclude extensive case studies, brief discussions of India and Indonesia will help illustrate these dynamics of the MSM category’s translocation. In India, English is a dominant language of higher learning and administration, in part because of its promulgation under British colonial rule. One result of this is despite the fact that only about 20 percent of the population has any facility in English (Khan 2001:103), the MSM category has largely been taken up in its English-language form.¹⁰ This has occurred in a context including a range of “indigenous” sexual and gendered subjectivities such as hijras (very roughly, male-to-female transgendered persons) and kothis (very roughly, effeminate men who have sex with more masculine men). By the mid-2000s:

In a bid to be more “culturally sensitive” . . . the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) [in India] . . . adopted the category of “MSM” or “men who have sex with men” to replace the earlier category “homosexual.” Within this new classification, communities such as hijras and kothis—who do not necessarily identify as “homosexual”—are now targeted as “MSM.” [Reddy 2005:262–63]

Reddy noted that among other emergent consequences of this translocation of the MSM category was that “in the same discursive move, hijras are both included as a recognizable gay or MSM subjectivity/community, and simultaneously excluded” because of their stigmatized status (Reddy 2005:259). One provincial court even “deemed invalid the recent election of at least two hijras for seats reserved for women; hijras are not women, the court ruled” (Reddy 2005:266). Furthermore, “the hijras’ incorporation into the wider MSM rubric expressly criminalizes their activity, bringing them under the purview of the anti-sodomy law” (Reddy 2005:266). This exemplifies how one unexpected consequence of the globalization of the MSM category has been the reconceptualization of subject positions hitherto regarded as traditional, local, or indigenous as “country-specific populations of MSM” (MSM Initiative 2008:8).

Although “MSM” has proven helpful in Indian contexts where “gay” might be seen as a “form of sexual neo-colonialism” (Khan 2001:105), “MSM” can also appear as a neocolonial category. Other subject positions can be reduced to ostensibly “local” instantiations of the category, even when the “indigenous” terms seem not to have been subject positions prior to the rise of “MSM,” as in the case of

“kothi,” which in India “over the last decade . . . [has become] reiterated in HIV and AIDS interventions as if it were *the* culturally obvious way of designating putatively ‘passive’ men who have sex with men” (Boyce 2007:178; see also Cohen 2005:272). This is one reason why the MSM category in India “is showing distinct signs of wear in recent years. Not only has there been a proliferation of ‘sexual identities’ or categories . . . all laying claim to the MSM label . . . but the boundaries between these categories have become increasingly more rigid . . . to capitalize on such ‘difference’ and funding potential” (Reddy 2005:265).

The Case of Indonesia

Despite centuries of cultural interchange with India indexed by the very term “Indonesia,” this fourth-most populous nation is of course historically and culturally distinct, including many aspects of the colonial encounter. A relevant issue is linguistic: in contrast to the British goal of producing “a class of persons, Indian in blood and color, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect,” as Thomas Babington Macaulay put it in his famous 1835 “Minute on Indian Education,” the Dutch (who were the predominant colonial power in Indonesia) focused on profit, discouraging widespread use of the colonial tongue. At independence in 1945, less than two percent of Indonesians could speak Dutch (Groeneboer 1998:1), a number that has been dropping ever since.

Although I know of no detailed historical scholarship on the Indonesian case, it is certainly true that in the early 2000s—but emphatically not during my dissertation activism and research between 1992 and 2000—I first encountered HIV/AIDS activists using “MSM.” By 2009, this term had enjoyed a remarkable ascent in the archipelago, standing alongside “sex workers” and “injecting drug users” in a triumvirate of “high-risk groups.” Consider how one 2007 document discussing the formation of a new network, in the context of a meeting with a high-level public health official at a national conference, included the following (emphasis added):

The *MSM groups* involved in this meeting had met a few days earlier and decided to create a network, which was given the name “gwm-ina,” standing for “*gay, MSM, and waria—Indonesia*” . . . the official was very open to listening to suggestions from *MSM groups and other groups*.

The title of the newly created network names *gay* men, “MSM,” and *warias* (roughly, MTF transgendered persons), thus operating under the same logic of enumeration that changed “MSM” to “MSM/TG,” as well as changing “gay” to “gay and lesbian” and all the way to “LGBTIQQ.” A later report by the Indonesian

delegation to a regional meeting of HIV/AIDS NGOs stated that “the term ‘MSM’ has been made more complete as ‘MSM and warias’” [istilah “MSM” dilengkapi menjadi “MSM & Waria”], but that another suggestion was “*gay*, other MSM, and warias.” As in what Reddy termed a “proliferation” of sexual categories following the emergence of “MSM” in India (Reddy 2005:265), we find in the Indonesian case an incitement to discourse, “a new specification of individuals” (Foucault 1978:42).

However, as in the West the relation of “MSM” to MTF transgendered persons (and their male partners) remains unsettled. At one key meeting I attended in the city of Surabaya in 2007 involving a range of Indonesian NGOs focusing on *gay* men and warias, the *gay*-identified leader of one NGO discussed how “MSM” and “transgender” needed to be conceptually separated. Another *gay* man involved with a different NGO then joked that “transgenders have left MSM” (*transgender keluar dari MSM*). The waria leader of a third NGO just smiled and said, “[we’re] different, of course” (*beda dong*).

Since this first transformation of the MSM category translocated to Indonesia, it should not be surprising that the second transformation—of identity and community—did as well, as suggested by the idea of “MSM groups” in the quotation above. This understanding of “MSM” is succinctly exemplified by the following September 14, 2008 email exchange on an electronic mailing list for Indonesian HIV/AIDS NGOs, in which one activist congratulated another who had been invited to attend an MSM conference in Europe:

Selamat jalan ya. . . . Moga ini awal “go international” Anda di kancah per-MSM-an (he..he..he..). Moga mendapat banyak hal yang nantinya bermanfaat bagi kita semua. Sudah saatnya ada regenerasi “tokoh” di kalangan MSM.

[Have a good trip. . . . Hopefully this is the beginning of your “going international,” into the depths of [MSM society], hee hee. Hopefully you’ll get many things [from the conference] that will be useful to all of us in the future. It’s certainly time that there be a regeneration of “leadership” among MSM.]

Here, the English phrase “go international” indexes a recognition that the MSM category participates in global imaginaries;¹¹ talk of “all of us” and the need for “leadership among MSM” indicates a sense of national selfhood and community. Most striking, however, is that “MSM” has become partially grammaticalized with regard to the Indonesian circumfix *per-an*, which tends to create relatively concrete nouns (e.g., *pustaka* [book] becomes *perpustakaan* [library]). The neologism *per-MSM-an* could thus be translated as “MSM-ness” in a relatively concrete sense, perhaps even as the “MSM society” that an activist might enter.

However, the grammaticalization of the MSM category has gone one step further. Unlike *gay*, “MSM” can be broken down into its constituent elements and translated word for word, which makes particular sense in Indonesia (compared to India) given the small number of English speakers. This is precisely what has happened with “LSL,” an emergent category in Indonesian HIV/AIDS discourse. Its original meaning was “Lelaki yang [berhubungan] Seks dengan Lelaki” [a calque for “men who have sex with men”].¹² However, one of the most common Indonesian words for desire, *suka*, begins with an “s” as well. Increasingly (and to the frustration of some HIV/AIDS activists), “LSL” is reconceptualized as “lelaki [yang] suka lelaki” [men (who) desire men] (see, e.g., Departemen Kesehatan 2007).¹³ Desire stands in for sex. It would be hard to imagine a more succinct demonstration of the conceptual futility of prising behavior from identity, the failure of the notion “it’s not who you are, it’s what you do.”

CONCLUSION: UNTIMELY FUTURES OF “MSM”

In this article, I work to craft a genealogy of the MSM category responsive to its untimely potential to reshape local communities, global networks, and the scalar logics that shape assessments of what counts as “local” or “global” in the first place. In response I have employed a approach that traces proleptic transformations in “MSM” that anticipate the selfhoods and communities the term has come to invoke. I find working toward an anthropology of historicity in this manner to be crucial, as the MSM category continues to spread worldwide on the crest of increasing (although still inadequate) HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment activity. These channels of funding, organizational know-how, and legitimacy dwarf the resources available to global LGBT networks. Yet “MSM” has had salutary effects extending far beyond HIV prevention and AIDS treatment. The concept of men who “have sex” with men can be used to raise the topic of sex in contexts where talking about sex is difficult, and form networks that would be impossible if framed solely in terms of gay men. A key question for future research will be to investigate when this might represent forms of self-actualization predicated on nonidentitarian and practice-based categories, and when this might represent the construal of “MSM” as an identitarian category of practice (“sex with men”) in its own right.

I underscore these effects because my goal has been neither to condemn the invention of “MSM” nor call for its abolition. There is no Archimedean point from which such a critique could be made, nor would the search for alternative terminology stand outside the discourses that have shaped the category since its inception. The MSM category is not an agent in its own right, but a cultural

logic deployed through human practice in fields of power. It could thus be used in ways that, for instance, do or do not sanction forms of gay identity, as astute commentators noted all the way back to its invention:

[T]he aim is not to incorporate [men who have sex with men but do not identify as gay] into gay communities, for many of them are happy with their sexual identity and lives, and have no wish to participate in gay-community life. For those less content with their lives, however, it is important to tackle the isolation which their sexual interests tend to produce. [Dowsett 1990:192]

More recent observers have highlighted these possibilities as well:

This behavior-oriented term [MSM] has effectively masked the sexual identity of men who engage in same-sex behavior, potentially impairing long-term goals of self-actualization and social justice. [Khan and Khan 2006:766]

Despite all its transformations, “MSM” can still act as a prohibition: do not identify as gay. It can paradoxically retrench the stereotype that gay men are white, Western, and wealthy, even insinuating that the concept of identity itself is a white Western imposition: “the growing reliance on the fiction of MSM is so disturbing [because] it is simply assumed that gay identity exists as a monolithic, universal type of person” (Watney 2000a:76). This potentially “undermines the self-determined sexual identity of members of sexual-minority groups, in particular people of color, [and] deflects attention from social dimensions of sexuality that are critical in understanding sexual health” (Young and Meyer 2005:1144). The MSM category has contributed to the medicalization and depoliticization of homosexuality. For instance, authorities in HIV/AIDS work often still claim that “MSM” is “a technical phrase intended to be less stigmatizing than culturally bound terms such as gay, bisexual, or homosexual” (MSM Initiative 2008:9). This presumes “MSM” is not “culturally bound” because it is “a technical phrase,” but it is precisely through such ostensibly value-free, technocratic terminologies that forms of modern social control are powerfully exercised. Indeed, one implication of claiming “MSM” is transcendental and unbound in this manner is that it can be taken as insulated from forms of queer politics.

What is not interrogated when “MSM” is assumed to be “less stigmatizing” than “gay” is the source of the stigma. Why might a man see “gay” as stigmatizing? It cannot be simply that “gay” is “culturally bound,” for all terms are culturally bound. All too often, what is not addressed is the possibility that homophobia and heterosexism make gay identification undesirable. It is certainly appropriate

to state that “the illegality of MSM behaviors in many countries, coupled with social stigma and widespread discrimination, serve to make MSM behaviors and populations hidden” (Hawkes 2008:11). But what this document and others like it fail to address is how “MSM” sometimes contributes to the “hiding” of these persons and practices. For instance, it was recognized even by the mid-1990s that for queer youth—whose very existence is untimely to heterosexist discourses that presume all persons are born straight—“the very category of MSM can only serve to obscure the concrete social processes of personal and institutional prejudice which may put [them] at increased risk of HIV by effectively delaying or even preventing their adoption of confident gay or post-gay identities” (Watney 2000a:76). Significantly, the 2006 Yogyakarta Principles, a set of international guidelines regarding human rights, sexual orientation, and gender identity, never uses the MSM category. Instead, Principle 3 simply states that “each person’s self-defined sexual orientation and gender identity is integral to their personality and is one of the most basic aspects of self-determination, dignity and freedom.”¹⁴ The enrollment of “MSM” into global human rights discourse remains incomplete.

Clearly, it would be foolhardy to predict the futures of “MSM,” given that the category has been characterized by transformations which have radically altered its meaning. But this history does indicate that a vulnerability to reconfiguration will continue to shape emergent characteristics of the category. It is neither possible nor desirable to put the MSM genie back into the bottle of epidemiological categorization. The question is how to foster notions of “MSM” not predicated on the implicit injunction “do not identify as gay,” notions that move beyond the logic of enumeration and a quixotic goal of segregating identity from behavior. At stake is nothing less than an emerging global vision of sexual selfhood and social belonging.

ABSTRACT

Growing numbers of persons worldwide are beginning to call themselves “men who have sex with men” or “MSM.” How has this subject position come into being so swiftly, without the kind of social and political organizing associated with so many claims to identity? And how might considering this novel form of selfhood help us craft anthropological responses to cultural phenomena whose conditions of historical emergence appear “untimely?” In this article, I develop a notion of “proleptic genealogy” to explore the origins of the MSM category, as well as transformations in the category with regard to enumeration, identity, and translocalization. In doing so, I show how anthropological inquiry can engage with emergent cultural logics through forms of anticipatory analysis. [anthropology, history, queer studies, HIV/AIDS]

NOTES

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1. As in my other published work, I italicize the Indonesian term *gay* throughout to indicate that it is not identical to the English term “gay,” despite their clear linkages.
2. The only other usage of the phrase “anthropology of historicity” to my knowledge is Sissons 2006, but his use of the phrase differs from mine.
3. Throughout, I intend the phrase “the West” to refer to dominant Western discourses; the phrase should thus always be read as if in scare quotes.
4. Of course, some of these persons were people of color or non-Western.
5. Gary Dowsett, personal communication, September 2, 2009.
6. Persons involved in HIV/AIDS work during this period also recall the utility of “MSM” when members of Congress would seek to defund grant proposals to federal agencies like the National Institutes of Health and the National Science Foundation if “gay” or “homosexual” appeared in them (Douglas A. Feldman, personal communication, October 3, 2009). However, there is ample evidence of grants being targeted even though they use “MSM” (Young and Meyer 2005:1147).
7. Although space limits a sustained discussion of the concept of “WSW” or “women who have sex with women” within the scope of this article, this term has apparently been in existence since the mid-1990s, and used almost exclusively in public health contexts. The earliest example I can find is from a website last updated on January 1, 1997 (Staten Island AIDS Task Force 1996). To the degree the WSW concept comes into use, many of the same discursive instabilities I note with reference to “MSM” emerge as well (for discussions of these problems, see Wieringa 2010; see also Wekker 2006; Wieringa and Blackwood 2007). In the HIV/AIDS discourses I discuss, male-to-female (MTF) transgendered persons have been linked to the MSM category, not the WSW category; this is why I mention MTF transgendered persons in this article when relevant to the analysis.
8. For another example, see National HIV Prevention Conference 2009:141.
9. “Gay” has been shaped by HIV/AIDS discourse as well, but not in such an exclusive manner.
10. The WSW category has no analogous status: the English phrase “women who love women,” notably referencing love not sex, emerged from feminist organizing as an alternative to the term *lesbian*—assumed, despite its obvious non-Indian origins, to “evoke no extranational genealogy” (Dave 2010:614).
11. This phrase is common in colloquial Indonesian and I have heard gay Indonesian men use the term since at least the mid-1990s.
12. As early as 2000 a document from UNAIDS (the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS) translated into Indonesian used the phrases *hubungan seks antarpria* (“sexual relations between men”) and *pria yang berhubungan seks dengan pria* (“men who engage in sex with men”; UNAIDS 2000:6). Analogous calques can now be found in many languages (for the Tagalog calque, see Tan 2001:134).
13. The “gwm-ina” network discussed earlier switched to the phrase “gwl-ina” (*gay, waria, dan lelaki suka lelaki* [LSL] *lain*).
14. See www.yogyakartaprinciples.org.

Editors' Note: Cultural Anthropology has published a number of articles on queer anthropology, including S. Lochlann Jain's "Cancer Butch" (2007), Alyssa Cymene Howe's "Queer Pilgrimage: The San Francisco Homeland and Identity Tourism" (2001), Anne Allison's "Cyborg Violence: Bursting Borders and Bodies with Queer Machines" (2001), and Matt Bunzl's "Outing at Performance/Outing as Resistance: A Queer Reading of Austrian (Homo)Sexualities" (1997).

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