

New book makes case for fluidity of male sexuality

August 24 2015, by Bettye Miller



Jane Ward's new book explores fluidity of male sexuality.

Straight white men have engaged in gay sex for centuries, and not just in circumstances that can be explained away as momentary aberrations, says Jane Ward, associate professor of gender and sexuality studies at the University of California, Riverside.

In her new book, "Not Gay: Sex between Straight White Men" (New York University Press, July 2015), Ward contends that homosexual contact between straight [white men](#) is ubiquitous and is a way of affirming masculinity and racial identity.

"When straight white men approach homosexual sex in the 'right' way – when they make a show of enduring it, imposing it, and repudiating it – doing so functions to bolster not only their heterosexuality, but also their masculinity and whiteness," she writes.

Much 20th century psychological research on sex between straight white men has suggested that it most often occurs in situations of heterosexual deprivation such as in prisons and the military, Ward says. Conventional wisdom holds that these homosexual encounters are little more than "a blip on the otherwise static sexual radar screen. They signal nothing particularly meaningful" about male sexuality.

Ward, however, contends that male sexuality is as fluid as female sexuality (think the onstage Madonna-Britney Spears kiss, or Katy Perry's hit song "I Kissed a Girl") and is not a new phenomenon.

"[Not Gay](#)" explores the history of straight white men engaging in homosexual behavior since the late 18th century, and how Americans have understood this. " ... (F)rom saloons and tenement houses, to military barracks and fraternal clubs, and to truck stops and bathrooms, 'normal' (heterosexual) white men have long found ways to have hetero-masculine sex with one another," she writes.

Ward also analyzes the ways in which psychologists, sociologists, sexologists and others are attempting to make sense of straight white men who have sex with men and educating the public about "a new menu of heterosexual options."

She says she focused on straight white men to study how whiteness and masculinity "enable certain kinds of sexual contact, sexual mobility, and sexual border crossing that are not possible, or at least don't carry the same cultural meanings, when enacted by men of color."

"While much attention has been paid to the ways that race and culture crosscut the sex practices of men of color, including and especially straight men of color who have sex with men 'on the down low,' the links between whiteness and male sexual fluidity are mostly unacknowledged," she finds. "Most accounts of the 'down low' suggest that straight-identified men of color who have [sex](#) with men are doing so because they are actually gay, but cannot come out due to elevated levels of homophobia in their ethnoracial communities.

Straight white men benefit from "white privilege – an 'invisible package of unearned assets' – to circumvent homophobic stigma and assign heterosexual meaning to homosexual activity," she contends.

Ward's research "shows that homosexual contact has been a regular feature of heterosexual life ever since the concepts of homo- and heterosexuality were first created – not just in prisons and frat houses and the military, but in biker gangs and even conservative suburban neighborhoods," journalist Jesse Singal writes in New York Magazine. "Given how prevalent this behavior is in so many different sorts of settings, Ward suggest it's time to stop explaining it away—and argues that society's conception of male heterosexuality is an unrealistic, expedient one."

Provided by University of California - Riverside

Citation: New book makes case for fluidity of male sexuality (2015, August 24) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2015-08-case-fluidity-male-sexuality.html>

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