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Queering the Adult Gaze: Young Male Hustlers and Their Alliances with Older Gay Men

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Based on ethnographic data collected at a gay bar with sexual minority youths as dancers or strippers, this study calls attention to the gazes through which adults view and position male youths. It highlights a dancer named Austin, who at times engaged in the underground hustling economy centered in the bar. The findings suggest that the social assets he developed allowed Austin to leverage certain advantages. An argument is presented for rethinking (or queering) the use of the administrative gaze of professionals who work with sexual minority youths. Implications for educators, youth workers, and researchers are discussed.

KEYWORDS Agency, gay relationships, hustlers, intergenerational, male prostitution, resilience, risky behaviors, sex workers, sexual minority youths

In the experience of many sexual minority youths, any notion of “family” necessarily involves both connections and disruptions (Sadowski, Chow, & Scanlon, 2009), sometimes leading to various creative reconfigurations that include members who are chosen and fictively designated rather than biologically or legally related. This case study invokes a tension between gay youths’ redefinitions of family and friendships alongside mainstream preoccupations with sexually active “bad boys” and concerns over their risk-taking behavior. By focusing on the strategic approach to relationships of a certain subgroup (in this study, sexual minority youths who work as strippers and hustlers) that is frequently overlooked in academic discussions regarding lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youths, this discussion calls...
into question more typical adult perspectives on kinship, intergenerational friendships, and sexuality.

This case study is framed between two distinct but related questions: What are contemporary adult obligations to upcoming generations, particularly to those from marginalized or stigmatized subgroups? How might investigating the strategic relationships employed by sexual minority youths inform academic understandings of identity, family, gender, and sexuality? It features the voice and experience of an individual who self-identified as “gay with bisexual tendencies,” and who, at times, engaged in hustling (i.e., the exchange of sexual favors for cash and other tangible goods).

Given that many forms of nonheteronormative desire and behavior are construed as dysfunctional, the behavior of those who engage in male hustling can be viewed as troubling. Adult concerns over youthful risk taking become all the more understandable given the ongoing HIV/AIDS crisis. Even so, or perhaps in defiance of the sense of dread that often accompanies discussions of intergenerational relationships and male-on-male sex, for many in the urban gay subculture that served as the context for this study the mystique of male hustlers connotes a certain cachet (Preston, 1994). The findings suggest the knowledge sets and skills that some male hustlers develop in these contexts allow them to leverage certain advantages as visibly queer youths (i.e., identifiably gay or transgender individuals) embedded in complex webs of social relationships. The experiences of one such individual are the focus here in the hope that researchers, educators, and others can learn from marginalized youths who are frequently overlooked, particularly those who struggle to lead lives of dignity and meaning, even as adult society misunderstands them or writes them off as deviant and inconsequential.

While it will be argued that any investigation of social networks among contemporary queer-identified youths that participate in the larger urban gay subculture requires a recognition of the phenomenon of hustling, this case study nevertheless is not a voyeuristic investigation of risky sexual behavior. Rather, it should be read as an exploration of the intersections of sexuality, friendship, and fictive kinship. Concurrently, it offers at least the beginnings of an interrogation of various adult gazes that hold sexual minority youths in multiple and contradictory ways—for instance, as objects of desire, contempt, revulsion, fear, pity, and fascination, and more important, as immature, unfinished, developing “projects” in need of adult supervision, intervention, and guidance.

**METHODOLOGY**

Over a period of three years (2007–2010), I conducted ethnographic research in and around a popular gay bar located in a city in the southern United States, collecting data using participant-observation (Spradley, 1980). This
particular bar was known for the entertainment provided by strippers or
dancers, all of whom were young-looking anatomical males that performed
on stage wearing revealing outfits. Conversing with the performers in be-
tween their individual ten-minute sets on stage, I got to know a few of
them personally and learned intimate details of their educational and family
histories.

One of the most popular dancers, 19-year-old Austin (a pseudonym),
befriended me and later consented to serve as my informant and guide
through this gay subculture. Austin allowed me to interview him on three
separate occasions about his experience as a dancer in the bar. In addition to
a series of recorded interviews with him, I gathered ethnographic data and
recorded field notes based on my interactions inside the bar at night and in
various locations at other times with some of the other dancers when they
were not working. Prior to conducting the interviews, Institutional Review
Board approval was obtained, along with the consent of the interviewees,
all of whom were over the age of eighteen. The recorded interviews were
later transcribed. These transcriptions, the field notes, and other textual doc-
uments from the community were analyzed as primary data sources.

The study drew on in-depth interviewing (Seidman, 1998) and grounded
theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and involved a re-
current process of data collection, analysis, and theory construction. After
transcription of the first interview, a thematic analysis was conducted by
coding the interview data. This process involved analyzing transcripts and
field notes for recurring themes such as family and friendship, as well as
noting any theoretical implications that emerged. In addition, to enhance the
reliability and validity of the data, field notes and observations were system-
atically reviewed for accuracy through member checking (Lincoln & Guba,
1985) via ongoing informal discussions by e-mail and telephone, and during
structured face-to-face sessions with Austin and other participants. A cyclical
process of analysis ensued, between the interviews, then data analysis, and
back to gathering more data through additional interviews and participant-
observation, in the process narrowing the range of interview topics as the
theoretical framework was constructed, as it were, from the ground up.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Young people have long been held in the scrutinizing gaze of concerned
adults and not always with youths' best interests in mind (Giroux, 1997;
Lesko, 2000; Meiners, 2007). The very categories that demarcate childhood,
youth, and adolescence reflect a discourse of development that has been
critiqued as ageist, colonizing, infantilizing, and patronizing (Janssen, 2009);
Lesko, 2000; Mitterauer, 1992; Rofes, 2005). Moreover, a growing chorus
of voices from scholars, cultural workers, and activists working in various
communities has begun, in recent years, to connect the dots between pressing social issues affecting the young, including the burgeoning prison-industrial complex and the school-to-prison pipeline (American Bar Association Council on Racial and Ethnic Justice, 2007; Lewis & Vazquez-Solorzano, 2006; Lipman, 2003; Wald & Losen, 2003), increasing numbers of children and youths of color in the public child welfare system (Bussiere, Pokemner, & Troia, 2005; National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2007), and the health care and education crises that grip many youths in poor communities ravaged by HIV/AIDS, widespread addiction, failing public schools, gang violence, and illicit drug trade.

Academics and activists working across disciplines have provided provocative analyses of the ways in which certain professional interventions in response to these issues may be understood as colluding, however unwittingly, with an escalating assault on poor and working-class youths as a class (Giroux, 2000; Grossberg, 2005; Saltman & Gabbard, 2003; Sudbury, 2005), a war that is currently being waged in the name of neoliberalism, globalization, and through the implementation of a “conservative family values domestic policy agenda” (Trenka, Oparah, & Shin, 2006, p. 8). As recent scholarship has observed, young people who assert various minority identities are particularly vulnerable to finding themselves in the crosshairs.

Targeting Youthful Bodies and Sexuality

In addressing the ideological positioning of youths as a class, Giroux (1997) explains how the surveillance of youth sexuality, in particular, reflects conflicting adult anxieties, wherein the young become “a central focus of adult fascination, desire, and authority” (p. 37). Rather than dismiss young people with targeted class, ethnic, and sexual identities as irresponsible, “disposable” (Giroux, 2000), “superfluous and dangerous” (Lipman, 2003) deviants, or as “public enemies” (Meiners, 2007), this case study argues for a more nuanced understanding of the experience of sexual minority youths, signaling that a refocusing of the adult gaze and subsequent interventions may be in order.

Extending his discussion of the current attack on youths, Giroux (1997) further connects young people to the ideologies and social practices that structure society as governed by adults:

Within the new representational politics of youth, the body increasingly is being commoditized and disciplined through a reactionary, postmodern cultural politics. The struggle over the body and sexuality as a sign becomes as important as the more traditional practices of containing and disciplining the body as a threat to the social order. (p. 46)
Youths as a group, and particularly those who do not conform to mainstream gender roles and sexual orientations, are especially put at risk to be singled out. Giroux amply demonstrates why concern over the budding sexuality of the young intertwines with the cultural wars taking place throughout society. This concern can be traced back to early-20th-century anxieties around the moral development of the young. For example, Meiners (2007) and Lesko (2000) have discussed adult surveillance of youths, pointing out its special function within traditionally female-dominated professions, including social work and teaching. Meiners argues that gendered relations have played a significant role in investing certain women with a modicum of male-granted authority through their professional training within patriarchal institutions. As female professionals, women in such roles have been mandated historically to monitor and manipulate the next generation by keeping youths under their watchful authoritative gaze, with an eye toward policing behaviors deemed problematic:

The role of teaching (and social work) was to execute class-based surveillance and monitoring. Female social workers and teachers were not trusted to create the template for this surveillance, but they were viewed as cheap, malleable, and relatively unthreatening mechanisms to execute this work. Built into the foundation of these “semi-proessions” is the work of surveillance designed to identify “outlaw” behaviors and emotions. (p. 47)

According to Meiners, female social workers and teachers who, as women, largely remain relegated to positions of subservience to male interests are nevertheless able to gain a degree of legitimacy by collaborating in the surveillance and containment of the young. However, social workers and teachers alone are not to be blamed for ageism and intergenerational conflict. Such tensions reflect entrenched systems of domination and hierarchical power relations—including patriarchy, racism, and classism—that privilege and defend the interests of particular powerful elites.

Youthful bodies have long been objectified by the adult gaze of professionals, who have organized surveillance bent on corolling potentially dangerous, yet simultaneously titillating, adolescent energy. For example, Lesko (2000) traces the “technology of regulation” (p. 7) to the early-20th-century social reform movements spearheaded by self-appointed professionals who took it upon themselves to oversee the sexual behavior of youths and govern the development of the next generation according to certain economic and class interests:

The administrative gaze of juvenile justice workers, teachers and educators, as well as parents, psychologists, play reformers, and scout leaders,
was everywhere cultivated as the primary means of control. Precocity had to be prevented. ... Working against youthful precocity enhanced economic dependency as well as the removal of any adult-like responsibilities. A slow, steady coming-of-age was prescribed ... keeping youth asexual, unintellectual, and dependent. (p. 7)

According to Lesko, the administrative gaze that policed the young attempted to influence their development in adherence to a patriarchal and distinctly American nationalist morality.

Moran (2000) has similarly observed that contemporary discourses of adolescence are rooted in the alarmist project to regulate the behavior and morality of youths, which he, like Lesko (2000), traces to the moral panic at the start of the 20th century. Moran points out how the current approach to sex education, for example, has been shaped by three historical conceptual trends, namely,

the dominance of danger and disease in thinking about adolescent sexuality, a deep faith in the instrumentalist model of sex education [i.e., focused on behavioral and societal changes], and a conviction that adolescence is somehow a thing apart from adult society. (p. 217)

Moreover, Moran reveals how, over the years, ongoing debates about sex education in the schools ideologically “reflect a general American tendency in the twentieth century to conceive of sexuality and adolescence primarily in terms of danger” (p. 216), thus reinforcing a view of the young as a problem in need of containment through adult guidance and interventions.

My work as a researcher and educator attempts to bring into conversation a broad concern for youths, their families, and communities as well as a commitment to social justice, via an examination of the intersections of multiple identities and pertinent diversity issues (e.g., race, class, gender, families, and sexuality), by calling attention to the positioning accomplished through professional gazes in various social contexts. The significations placed on youthful bodies, therefore, logically become a site of inquiry, with close consideration of the manner in which individuals respond to their positioning and attempt to assert agency within contested discourses.

Strippers, Hustlers, and the Gaze/Gays

Bodily surveillance and concerns over youth sexuality have been linked to particular socioeconomic interests and sociopolitical regulation goals, thus adding to the analysis of an orchestrated assault on the young as a class. But they are also connected to the patriarchal male gaze, which is given a queer twist within the urban gay subculture. This case study highlights the significance of male hustling and discusses it in the broader context of
strategic or utilitarian relationships as configured by sexual minority youths. Hustling is discussed as an extension of dancing on stage as a male stripper.

For Austin, the focal participant in the study, working on stage as a stripper served as a means to exploit the gaze that eroticizes youthful bodies. He understood fully some older men’s attraction toward younger bodies and this factored into his decision to use his body as a marketable asset in the bar scene. As will be shown, Austin’s move from dancing on stage to hustling can be seen as a strategic attempt to leverage financial and other benefits from the relationships that become possible between young male strippers and their admirers.

**CONTEXT OF THE STUDY**

In contrast with much of the existing literature that positions sexual minority youths within “crisis discourses that limit what can be known about LGBTQ students” (Sanders & Ballengee-Morris, 2008, p. 317) and represents them primarily as victims of homophobia (Igartua, Gill, & Montoro, 2003; Meyer, 2007; Whitbeck, Chen, Hoyt, Tyler, & Johnson, 2004), this case study utilized a strengths-based approach to investigate youths’ personal and social assets. Further examples of the limited, although valuable, ways in which gay males and sexual minority youths are often portrayed in the research literature may be found in studies of sexual minorities and particular risk factors, including antigay violence and bullying (Bontempo & D’Augelli, 2002; Kosciw & Diaz, 2006; Rivers, 2001; Sadowski et al., 2009), sexual minorities and HIV/AIDS (Hedge & Sherr, 1995; McFarlane, Bull, & Rietmeijer, 2002), queer youths and self-destructive behavior (DuRant, Krowchuk, & Sinal, 1998; Garofalo, Wolf, Kessel, Palfrey, & DuRant, 1998), and gay youths and suicide (Bagley & Tremblay, 2000; Morrison & L’Heureux, 2001; Silenzio, Peña, Duberstein, Cerel, & Knox, 2007; Van Heeringen & Vincke, 2000), to name a few. Collectively, the literature paints a pessimistic picture of sexual minority youths, which only recently has begun to be challenged by the work of such scholars as Savin-Williams (2001, 2005), Rofes (2005), and others.

Informed by the pioneering research undertaken by Savin-Williams (2005), who has argued that the models of gay youth psychology developed since the 1970s have not kept pace with the lived complexities and realities of youths’ actual identities and behavior, this study took a more comprehensive view of youths employed as dancers and strippers. I investigated their definitions and assertions of agency in relation to families, friends, and economic independence. Following the work of Rofes (2005), this case study also recognized youths’ volition to choose “renegade identities” (p. 10) and, in the process, transform traditional gender rules while reconstructing notions of family. Rather than vilify male hustlers primarily as troubled deviants, this project focused specifically on their innovative approaches to friendship
and family, which came to be appreciated as indicators of resilience and creativity. The data suggest that, partially in response to estrangement from their families of origin, intergenerational friendships take on added significance in the lives of many of the bar strippers and hustlers, paralleling the fictive kinship networks (Ebaugh & Curry, 2000) that are sometimes referred to colloquially as chosen family in the urban gay subculture.

The Urban Gay Subculture

In defining the urban gay subculture, Rofes (2005, p. 14) described it as “characterized by a heightened attention to gender performance and gender play, to patterns of kinship traced through friendship networks rather than through nuclear families, and to an innovative and daring relationship to our bodies and desires.” In doing so, Rofes articulates a commonly accepted gay view of queer community that celebrates its distinctiveness in comparison to mainstream society.

Regardless of which major city one travels to within North America (or arguably, in the 21st century, around the globe), the urban gay subculture is recognizable. It consists of a comprehensive network of gay-owned or gay-friendly businesses, including bars, discotheques, clubs, bookstores, novelty and gift shops, hotels and resorts, travel agencies, entertainment media and news outlets, restaurants, saunas, bathhouses, and gyms, all of which cater to the needs or desires of gay men. In more developed urban communities, one finds additional health organizations, LGBT community centers, service and interest groups, athletic clubs, and other social, political, civic, and religious organizations. In some urban communities, gay establishments also welcome (or in some cases address exclusively) lesbians, bisexuals, transgender individuals, and sexual minority youths.

Gay bars historically have served as the foundation of the urban gay community, providing central meeting places for men seeking to connect with other males for sexual encounters (Friedman, 2003) as well as allowing for camaraderie and companionship away from the constrictions of mainstream society.

For centuries, prostitution has been a part of the social landscape in which men engage in sexual relations with other males, young and old (Friedman, 2003). Sex workers have always been part of the gay scene, despite the disapproval of some self-appointed leaders in the gay community, persecution from mainstream law enforcement, and disapproval of public opinion. In one Australian study, Dennis Altman (1999) found that as many as a one-fifth to one-quarter of all men who identify as gay have accepted money for sex at some time in their lives. And, as Altman points out, richly textured qualitative studies “help the reader understand and empathize with what can too easily be dismissed as alien and perhaps distasteful” (p. xv).
I became interested in the phenomenon of hustling as a researcher when it became apparent that a number of youths I have known were at least peripherally involved, usually on a part-time or short-term basis. In talking with these young men, who identified variously as gay, bisexual, questioning, or transgender, I began noticing a pattern of estrangement from their families that emerged in their histories.

Disrupted family connections showed up in a number of different ways. For example, some youths had experienced adoption or spent time in foster care as children. Others were more recently estranged from parents who could not accept their gay or transgender identities or for other reasons usually having to do with conformity. Still other youths had spent time in residential schools, group homes, psychiatric hospitals, or other out-of-home facilities for young people deemed by their elders as troubled or rebellious. While it is overly facile to conclude that their disconnections from family caused their homosexuality or led them into prostitution, I became curious about the prevalence of the pattern of disruptions and wondered how the meaning of family might shift in response to their varied experiences.

CASE STUDY

During my interviews with Austin, I came to know a multifaceted individual who expressed strong interests in singing, drag performance, and spirituality. Austin self-identified most of the time as a “gay, southern, Christian, white boy.” Many of his closest friends were gay, African American, Latino, and multiracial; some, like Austin, moved in and out of visible transgender or gender-fluid identities. Austin reported that he did not identify as gay until he left high school. After graduation, he moved from the rural community where he was raised to an urban center in the southern United States, an area that is becoming known for its increasingly visible and politically active LGBT population.

The city that served as the locale for this study is recognized as a destination for gay vacationers. It boasts a growing number of hotels, resorts, bars, restaurants, and shops catering to what has come to be known colloquially as the gay tourist dollar. In this dynamic environment, Austin found work as a dancer in a gay strip club, where he was employed for eight months. As a stripper, Austin was expected to dance on stage wearing skimpy outfits, always shirtless, but never going as far as full nudity, which was prohibited by local ordinances.

The club, known pseudonymously as Gino’s, had a reputation for its young-looking dancers. Most strippers were, like Austin, in their late teens or early twenties. The bar manager preferred to hire dancers who were of slender builds, lithe, devoid of body hair, and under six feet tall—virtual “boys” as opposed to bigger, more muscular, hirsute “men.” Working at
Gino’s afforded Austin relative freedom and safety to perform gender in self-expressive ways, since he often mixed male and female clothing and wore makeup, both when he was working and outside the bar in other contexts.

According to Austin, dancers earned no pay other than the tips they were able to finagle from the audience. Austin quickly realized that income depended on his stage allure and, more important, on his flirtatious interactions in between dance sets, when the performers were expected to mingle with the patrons around the barroom: “I had to pretend to like every person who walked into that bar—sit on their laps, and get a dollar bill here and there.” As they worked the crowd, Austin and the other dancers could be found leaning against various patrons, putting their arms around their shoulders, and allowing themselves to be fondled by certain men, particularly when they discovered the generous tippers. “It’s kind of degrading if you think about it, but that’s why if you didn’t have a dollar bill within the first five minutes, I moved on.”

Austin Explores the Economy of Hustling

Austin’s reasons for choosing employment as a stripper were varied and complex. Prior to this experience, he worked in service jobs, from a coffeehouse waiter to a telemarketer. As an identifiably queer, gender-bending, recent high school graduate who was not able to afford to go to college, Austin felt he had limited options for employment. This could be traced partially to his high school experience and estrangement from his parents. According to Austin, “In ninth grade I got kicked out of regular public high school, and I got sent to an alternative school. In tenth grade, I got pissed at my alternative school, and my parents said, ‘To hell with this, you’re going to a military academy.’” For the most part, he had survived financially on his own since graduating from high school.

Along with another openly gay youths he met at the military school, he traveled to the big city. In need of income, Austin and his best friend, Damien, investigated the two rival gay strip clubs. They determined that Gino’s provided a slower paced, less pressured work environment, which to them was preferable: “Not monetarily, but it seemed better because it was more personal than Boomtown. Boomtown just seemed a lot like business. I wanted somewhere that I could still have friendship and have business.”

At Boomtown, where Austin and Damien both auditioned, dancers had to consent to nude photo shoots and allow their images to be used however the management decided to use them. In contrast, Austin discerned that Gino’s was more compatible with his secondary goals for working there:

I wanted to work in a place where I could talk to people and get to know them and hopefully make friends. It was never my intention to
become a hustler. Hustling was something you heard about on TV or in
the movies. [Before this experience], it didn’t really exist.

As it turned out, Gino’s had a long-standing but quietly kept reputation
as a hustler bar. (The bar has been in existence for more than 20 years.)
Austin quickly became aware of the transactions taking place once he began
dancing there. “It is a hustler bar; it’s just behind the scenes. It’s just not as in
your face as some bars are.” Austin went on to distinguish between the male
and transgender sex workers who frequented Gino’s in search of clients and
the dancing strippers who were hired to work in the establishment:

The dancers’ side is where the dancers and the patrons who want to tip
the dancers go. . . . Hustlers are supposed to stay on the other side of the
bar [in another room]. They’re not supposed to come onto the dancers’
side and hustle the customers.

As he acclimated to the business transactions taking place around him, Austin
confronted outright propositions from bar patrons as well as pressure from
the management: “We were told, ‘Make your money here, but don’t have
sex in the bar. Do whatever you want on your own time.’” Austin listened
as the more experienced dancers talked about going home with various bar
customers:

You would hear things like, “Never go home with anyone for less than a
hundred dollars.” You could see other dancers making a ton of money,
way more than you’d make in tips on any given night. It was very
tempting, even though I didn’t want to be a hustler, because, let’s face
it, you’re basically a whore. But here I am, nineteen years old, trying to
survive in a big city where the rent is a hundred times higher than it
would be back in [my home state].

Entering the hustling economy, Austin related his strategy for keeping himself
physically safe and staying free of sexually transmitted diseases:

I was propositioned constantly, all the time. I would never go home with
just anybody. I’m not into one-night stands. I would want to get to know
you first and check out the vibes. Usually I can tell right away what type
of person they are. I was always looking for someone I could be friends
with.

This emphasis on friendship underscores Austin’s motivation and rational-
ization for engaging in hustling. He views his friends as people he can rely
on and turn to for advice and assistance, including financial help. Austin’s
friends range from his age peers to men in their 60s:
I have been seeing one guy I met at the bar for over a year. I would spend the night with him, and I would get two hundred dollars just to stay in his company. I mean, I would sleep naked, but that’s it. I was more like a company keeper for him. Like I said, at first it was a business thing and then later on down the road it felt more like I was his nephew to an extent, and he was just helping his nephew out with a few dollars here and there. I still maintain contact with him a year later. We’re still pretty good friends.

Strategic Relationships with Clients

Establishing relationships with older men that he could regard as friends allowed Austin to believe he was not actually using the men for their money but simply graciously and gratefully accepting assistance when they offered it in the spirit of friendship. Austin never set an explicit fee schedule for his services as a sex worker or escort “because, to me, that felt too much like hustling. I wanted it to feel like, you know, he’s going to give me what he feels like giving me, not what I feel like him giving me.”

Austin’s blurring of the boundaries between clients, friends, and chosen “uncles” reflects a pattern among many participants in the urban gay male scene. According to insiders such as Rofes (2005) and Browning (1994), men in the urban gay subculture tend to approach their relationships with one another in more fluid ways than men typically do in mainstream society:

Among bourgeois heterosexual Americans, especially among heterosexual American men, roles are usually separated by impermeable boundaries: brother, father, son, buddy, colleague. Gay people, however, do seem to enjoy greater fluidity in their relations as they explore a continuum ranging from lust to love to nurture to mentorship to friendship in the search for a new kind of family. (Browning, 1994, p. 156)

Austin’s description of how he selected older clients to become either his “friends with benefits” or an “uncle” parallels Browning’s point about the queering of same-sex relationships. “At first, I kind of thought of that as hustling, but not anymore. Now, like I said, I almost view it from a family standpoint.” Referring to his 68-year-old client, Austin clarified, “He probably feels like he’s my uncle and we just have a platonic relationship where he just happens to give me money.”

For Austin, sexuality was de-emphasized while fellowship took on more prominence: “I picked the one I don’t have to do any sexual favors for because I’m not a very sexual person. Even though I’m nineteen, most people, you know, the first gust of wind and they are turned on by something. Me, on the other hand, I’m not really big in that. I just enjoy talking.”
Austin’s approach is a creative response to his disconnection from his family of origin, his need for acceptance by peers and elders, his emotional desires for affection, support, fellowship, and sexual contact, and his goal for a more secure financial future. Austin claimed he had three clients that I can depend on . . . I was never big on taking home or going home with everyone. My thing was just finding very, very few, maybe one or two, people that I could actually trust. . . . There’s one that I’ve known for a few months, and another one that I’ve known for a few months. Just people that I can trust. And usually it’s people that have a similar religious belief as I do.

Austin also described his relationship with another wealthy, older man who has taken him on vacations:

I wouldn’t really call him a client. He would be the fourth, but he doesn’t live in [this state]. He lives out of state, and he travels a lot. Once again, you really don’t have to do much with him. He just likes to take you to a place, because he likes to—he calls himself bi. So whenever he comes back to town, he’s my fourth. But when he’s not in town, I just have my three.

DISCUSSION

Four main themes emerged from this study: (1) traditional boundaries between friends, kin, and clients became blurred as Austin redefined his relationships strategically; (2) sexual minority youths may actually be far more multilayered and contradictory than the way they are frequently portrayed in the research literature; (3) marginalized youths like Austin may resourcefully seek out spaces where they can fully be themselves and live out their multiple and complex identities; and (4) gay youths’ sexuality, gender, and sexual orientation may be more fluid than previously believed.

Alliance-Building Through the Strategic Blurring of Boundaries

The friendship and fictive kinship networks forged by Austin who works in the hustling economy may offer particular benefits that help to offset the consequences of parental estrangement. Yet these benefits come at a price. For example, during the time this research was conducted, a young street prostitute (not one of Gino’s dancers) was murdered not far from the bar, in a neighborhood known to be a meeting place for transgender sex workers. (One might argue that allowing hustling to take place in and around bars actually decreases the risk factor significantly, making it safer than street
prostitution.) Engaging in bar hustling part time (as opposed to street hustling), while clearly acknowledged as a risky activity, offered Austin certain appealing opportunities. For instance, hustling gave him access to material resources and travel experiences that he might have had to otherwise forgo as he sought to make his own way after high school.

Austin’s experience at Gino’s, and those of some of his peers, illustrates the dynamics within this urban gay subculture in which mutuality between males is fluid enough to encompass, at times, needs for fellowship, sexual intimacy, and occasional financial assistance.

The roles of chosen kinship and friendship are not mutually exclusive categories but may overlap. Austin, for example, described his relationship with a man in his 60s that began as a client–hustler connection but evolved over time into friendship and fictive kinship, whereby this chosen “uncle” was said to be providing financial assistance to Austin as his “nephew.”

Expanding Academic Views on Sexual Minority Youths

A variety of roles became available to Austin and the other dancers in terms of how they viewed and interacted with individuals they came to regard as their friends and family. Some men, usually older and wealthier, were designated as sugar daddies or benefactors who provided access to material goods in the form of clothes, vacations, and monthly rent payments, and so on. Others, typically closer in age, were designated as friends with benefits, a term gaining in popular usage to delineate individuals with whom one has a sexual relationship that is not romantically based nor monogamous. Meanwhile, chosen family refers to certain individuals who are emotionally adopted and with whom the youths forge strong bonds of loyalty or other close attachments, such as Austin’s fictive uncle. The web of overlapping roles suggests that, in contrast to the pessimistic view of sexual minority youths at risk for depression and suicidal ideation, Austin became adept at navigating the subculture, accruing social assets with aplomb.

The complex web of motivations and relationships that exist among dancers and strippers, like Austin and older bar patrons, reflect similar dynamics at play in the larger urban gay subculture as described by Browning (1994). Austin articulated an understanding of the attraction to youthful bodies among certain older men, yet attempted to rewrite the narrative that prizes youth by turning his “fans” and admirers into actual friends.

Significance of Intergenerational Relationships

Austin’s intergenerational relationships (whether formed through hustling, dancing at Gino’s, or by other means) can be seen as creative resilience
in response to family estrangement. Whereas for many heterosexual youths support comes reliably and predictably from the family, Austin, lacking such support, created a network of extrafamilial support within the context of the urban gay subculture. Part-time hustling allowed Austin to form what amounted, for him, to meaningful relationships with men who started out as patrons or clients and whom he turned into friends with benefits or chosen uncles.

Transitioning to an adult lifestyle as an autonomous, self-supporting individual involves the renegotiation of identities. Traditional cultures typically provided initiation rituals to facilitate the movement of sexually maturing male youths from the feminine sphere of the mothers and aunts to the male world of the fathers and uncles (Eisler, 2000; Meade, 1993; Somé, 1993). This psychological need for acceptance and approval from the male elders of one’s community and the benefits of apprenticeship and initiation may be contributing factors that compel some modern sexual minority youths, like Austin, to pursue intergenerational relationships in this urban gay subculture. In this regard, Austin was quite resourceful. Moreover, while many middle-class heterosexual youths gradually transition from dependence on parents through the quasi-independent stage of the college years to starting new families of their own in marriage and by becoming parents themselves, sexual minority youths like Austin may alternatively rely on the resources within their subculture as they claim a place for themselves in the adult world. More experienced friends and mentors can offer support in this regard.

Fluidity of Sexual Orientation and Gender

While all the dancers working at Gino’s at the time of the study identified as male or transgender, not all identified as gay. Austin and Damien alluded to youths they knew who, as bisexual or straight-identified hustlers, were known to be “gay for pay.” For participants within the urban gay subculture, where hustlers and their clients may identify as straight, bisexual, or “on the down-low” (i.e., outwardly heterosexual but clandestinely having occasional sex with other males), a fixed binary construction that simplistically divides “heterosexuals” from “homosexuals” can hardly be said to apply. Moreover, for some youths, being gay—in behavior as well as identity—may feel like a given; for others, the label simply doesn’t match self-perceptions or the full range of their sexuality (Savin-Williams, 2005). For others still, such as Austin, sexual orientation and gender indeed represent a kind of choice. When pushed to describe his sexual orientation, Austin responded emphatically and without ambiguity: “I have my inclination to bisexuality, but I’m not going to succumb to that. I’m going to go with the gay because, you know, it’s one thing or the other. Pick a side.”
Austin’s sentiments echo the notion that sexual orientation and gender, as social constructs, are experientially fluid and often situational. Partially as a result of conducting this study, I have come to concur with Rofes (2005) and others who break with the view that sexual orientation is never a choice but largely biologically determined. Youths who choose to participate in the urban gay subculture may, like Austin, often find opportunities to assert sexual orientations and gender identities in ways that may not have been possible, for instance, in high school or other less accepting environments. Finding work in a social environment in which Austin could freely mix male and female articles of clothing, for example, and where a gay identity was not exclusive of hetero- or bisexual behavior, is in keeping with the increasingly complex identities of youths in this century (Raible & Nieto, 2008).

IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

Austin’s case study, while limited in terms of generalizability, stands as a profound reminder of the extent to which questions of identity and agency remain riddled with contradictions. From Austin’s experience we recognize that youths do not always fit into neat boxes of clearly delineated categories. Austin asserted a gay identity yet freely admitted to bisexual feelings; he enjoyed mixing traditionally male and female clothing, even when he was not made up in full drag.

He was not exclusively a hapless victim because, as a stripper on stage, Austin allowed himself to be an object of desire, leveraging the gay male gaze to reap economic and social perks. Although clearly subject to economic exploitation (receiving not even a minimal paycheck yet still expected to perform for Gino’s patrons), he asserted agency (by strategically choosing Gino’s over Boomtown) to meet his professed secondary goals (friendship and socializing).

These apparent contradictions point to the possibilities of adopting a both/and approach to understanding the experience of some sexual minority youths, which could replace an either/or view. In this context, it is no longer useful to think only in dualities such as either male or female, either a victim or agent, either friend or kin, and, for that matter, either boy or man. Individuals may “be” all of these simultaneously.

Due to the rigors of the methodology employed, I am reasonably confident that the study adequately captured the dynamics of Austin’s experience, but I am less confident of full disclosure. I remain somewhat skeptical about his self-reported participation in the hustling economy; he may have been far more deeply implicated than he let on.

Another limitation of the study was my social proximity to the focal participant, which is related to the exigencies confronted in ethnographic research that involves participant-observation. Documenting Austin’s story
and observing him in action at the bar and in the community admittedly made me uncomfortable at times and worried for his safety and well-being. Becoming attuned to my worries could have influenced Austin’s disclosures, perhaps in an effort to spare me from hearing even more alarming anecdotes, resulting in less than a full picture. Moreover, as my relationship with Austin continued, I admit that my parent and teacher selves wanted nothing less than to “fix” his situation. I felt relieved when he announced that he had been fired from Gino’s, even though he had to endure the financial challenges of unemployment for a time.

Nevertheless, documenting Austin’s experience reinforced the idea that we, as older professionals, must revitalize our collective relationship to queer youths and rethink our obligations to them, particularly those who are socially, politically, and economically marginalized. Despite how uncomfortable Austin’s voice may make us feel, there is something in Austin’s experience of value to researchers and others who care about GBT youths.

Further, in representing Austin’s experience, I run the risk of overvaluing what I term his strategic relationships by casting the men he was involved with primarily as chosen family and mentors. In the urban gay sub-culture, as elsewhere throughout the mainstream society, younger people are vulnerable to abuse at the hands of unscrupulous older men (gay or not) bent on their manipulation and exploitation. At the same time, it should be recognized that all sexual relationships involve a degree of risk and unequal power dynamics. Nevertheless, from a perspective of social justice, it would seem appropriate for older members of the LGBT community to construct more spaces and opportunities where sexual minority youths can be included in ways that are focused on the needs of young people themselves and not driven primarily by adult desires, anxieties, and agendas. Yet, as Austin’s story underscores, there can be overlap between the needs of gay youths and adults—and that problematizes the concept of the adult gaze.

Rather than shun contact with such youths out of fear of reprobation or association, professionals who are sensitive to the needs of sexual minority youths can reinvigorate efforts to better them. One way to begin is to queer the professional “administrative gaze” (Lesko, 2000) that sees youths largely as objects of adult anxieties and in need of containment or fixing. By suspending knee-jerk interpretations of behaviors that may at first strike us as troubling, adults can begin to appreciate youthful inner strengths, resilience, and inventiveness where our training previously allowed us to see only dysfunction and danger.

To reiterate, developing a deeper understanding of the hidden lives of sexual minority youths necessitates a rethinking of common approaches to “working with” or engaging with young people. Austin’s case study suggests that adults can learn to reframe the various gazes that are acquired from professional training, which discipline the interpretation of youth experience in reference to adult agendas, discourses, and value systems, too often to the
exclusion and detriment of the very youths about whom we say we care. In solidarity with them, professionals can simultaneously verify the legitimacy of adult concerns and related interventions and more effectively link those that are, in fact, legitimized by youths themselves to the needs of the young in the here and now. To this end, this effort will require that adults resist the compulsion for immediate fixes or moral approbations and instead seek opportunities for authentic collaboration with marginalized populations. The good news is that we can retrain ourselves to view the world through subaltern eyes, and learn to listen to—and act alongside—marginalized individuals who, though they may live quite different lives, nevertheless share with us common and all-too-human needs and desires.

REFERENCES


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