



# **bathhouse intercourse: structural and behavioral aspects of an erotic oasis**

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Drawing on participant observation data this article examines the social and sexual dynamics of gay bathhouses. Focusing on the setting as an erotic oasis, this research addresses one of the least studied forms of social settings, and presents a unique opportunity for insight into the sexualized aspects of gender and deviance. This article explores the pervasiveness and range of sexual activity among bathhouse patrons, the environmental features of bathhouses that facilitate sexual activities, and the ways that men construct and negotiate (usually anonymous) sexual interactions.

Gay bathhouses, also sometimes referred to as gay saunas, sex clubs, or “the tubs” (Hogan and Hudson, 1998) have been a part of urban gay communities for several decades and have served as centers of sexual and social interactions. As a social institution bathhouses provide a setting in which men can gather, meet other men (often anonymously), and engage in sexual activity. Bathhouses provide men seeking male

Received 23 October 2000; accepted 1 February 2001.

I am grateful for the assistance and feedback at various stages of this project from Jeff Helms, Harry Allen, Bruce Ponder, and Patricia Gagne. Their input was extremely valuable to the successful completion of this project.

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sexual partners an environment where they can have a high degree of confidence of finding willing and interested sexual partners. Bathhouses have stood as a central, although infrequently discussed, aspect of urban gay culture for nearly five decades (Hogan and Hudson 1998).

On the threshold of the twenty-first century bathhouses remain one of the "dirty secrets" of many gay communities. As commercial establishments bathhouses continue to flourish and attract large numbers of men seeking men for sexual purposes. However, community perceptions of bathhouses have ranged from benign tolerance to intense disdain. In the 1980s bathhouses were vehemently attacked as scourges of the gay community, institutions contributing to the downfall of communities and relationships and to the deaths of many men (see Bailey 1998; Brigham 1994; Miller 1995; Rabin 1986).

## THE PRESENT STUDY

The purpose of the present research is to revisit gay bathhouses and examine the social and sexual dynamics of the setting. In essence, this work seeks to explore the way that men use the bathhouse, and how interactions are structured and conducted. Focus is centered on understanding how, where, and when sexual opportunities are encountered and constructed, how the physical features of the setting both bind the experience and provide a safe environment and how both physical and social features of bathhouses promote congeniality among patrons, comfort, and hence sexual interactions. In short, the present study seeks to enhance, complete, and update understandings of bathhouses as provided by others, with a focus on physical and social structures, interactions, and setting-specific norms.

The sociological study of bathhouses—assessing the culture, organized facilitation of sexual activities and patrons—has been essentially neglected, especially in the past two decades. In fact, Bolton, et al. (1994:257) have gone so far as to say that "no serious ethnographic work on saunas has ever been published" (however, see Weinberg and Williams 1975). To be accurate, Bolton and his colleagues may have overstated the issue. It would be more accurate to note that while overall relatively few researchers have ventured into

bathhouses (as is the case with many, if not most, erotic oases), there has been some research, but it was produced either during the "sexual revolution" of the 1970s (Styles 1979; Weinberg and Williams 1975) or during the initial years of the HIV epidemic. The present study seeks to fill this significant gap in our understanding of the culture, activities, and patrons within this largely understudied social context.

## **HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF BATHHOUSES**

Peaking in popularity during the pre-AIDS sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, bathhouses provided gay men with one-stop social and sexual outlets. However, in the past two decades bathhouses have come under fire from public health officials, gay activists, and the media for their role in promoting multiple-partner, anonymous sex (presumed to facilitate the transmission of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases). As a result, many bathhouses closed (some voluntarily and some under governmental order), and those that remain have largely moved out of the public light. Consequently, both the establishments and the men who patronize them have come to be associated with sexual deviance and are widely stigmatized (Bolton, Vincke, and Mak 1994).

Gay baths gained significant popularity in the 1960s and 1970s "as government interference in the rights of gay men to assemble declined" (Bolton et al. 1994:257). As the gay liberation movement increased the visibility of gay men in society, gay establishments and businesses became more populous and popular. Bathhouses were simply one of a host of gay settings that emerged in number, largely to capitalize on the economic benefits that could be realized by catering to this "new" demographic market. As explained by one set of researchers, bathhouses can be thought of as "an expression of capitalist efficiency as applied to sexuality" (Bolton et al. 1994:257). However, bathhouses were not a new development in the era; public bathhouses catering to male homosexual patrons existed in New York as early as 1902, gaining popularity in the 1910s and 1920s (Chauncey 1994; Miller 1995). Interestingly, baths actually preceded the proliferation

of gay bars, which did not appear with consistency until the late 1930s (Chauncey 1994).

In the mid-1980s, however, bathhouses came under strong criticism from public health officials (as well as some members of the gay community) for promoting "irresponsible" and unhealthy sexual practices that contributed to the spread of HIV (see Bailey 1998; Brigham 1994; and Rabin 1986). In some cities (e.g., San Francisco) bathhouses were closed down by health officials; in other cities (especially smaller, lower HIV prevalence cities) bathhouses weathered the storm and remained open. In the late 1990s bathhouses began to make a resurgence in many cities. In his book, *Hustlers, Escorts and Porn Stars: An Insider's Guide to Male Prostitution in America*, Adams (1999) lists 77 bathhouses operating in the United States. Today, bathhouses can be found both in major cities (Los Angeles, New York, Houston, Miami) as well as in many smaller urban areas (Akron, Rochester, Toledo). However, the current configuration of bathhouses shows some important differences from those of decades earlier; gone are the dance floors and live entertainment (with the exception of the occasional sex shows and strippers), although most have retained at least some physical fitness equipment. Bathhouses at the turn of the millenium appear to be more focused than ever on the provision of a safe space for sexual activities, and not much more. Since their inception bathhouses have been widely reputed as promoting rampant sexual encounters, usually among anonymous or semi-anonymous partners as well as group sexual encounters (see Chauncey 1994; Weinberg and Williams 1975). There is some research that disputes the "purely sexual nature" of bathhouses. This too, however, is not a new perspective; especially in the early decades of the twentieth century gay bathhouses were very social settings, one of the few settings in which gay men could openly interact with other men as gay men, without concern about their physical safety and threats to their social standing (Chauncey 1994).

## **THE BATHHOUSE AS AN EROTIC OASIS**

The bathhouse is a prime example of what Delph (1978) defined as an "erotic oasis" (see also Tewksbury 1995). By

definition, an erotic oasis is a location considered physically and socially safe (according to subculturally defined standards) from threats to exposure. Erotic oases provide individuals with opportunities to gather and pursue mutually desired sexual interactions and include both private and public settings. Some such settings are commercially-operated businesses (such as bathhouses or adult bookstores) while others are natural environments co-opted by men for sexual purposes (public restrooms, public parks, etc.). Generally speaking, then, there are two basic varieties of erotic oases. First, some erotic oases are public settings usurped for erotic activities. The best known work in such locales is Humphreys' (1970) *Tearoom Trade*. Alternatively, some erotic oases (as in the case of a bathhouse) are subcultural sites expressly designed for sex and "that specifically encourages erotic posturing if not outright sex. Privately owned, they are not nearly as accessible to the public as natural settings" (Delph 1978:36). However, regardless of the specific nature of the setting, the defining characteristic of an erotic oasis is that sexual expressions are not only permitted, but openly encouraged.

To facilitate sexual expressions and activity, erotic oases are physically bounded and guarded settings that employ screening devices to separate the sexual world from the conventional world (Delph 1978). Bathhouses clearly fulfill such a definition. Although they typically advertise and present themselves as "social clubs" or "health clubs" catering to gay men, in reality, there is little confusion about the real purpose of such commercial establishments. Bathhouses are social venues, but environments that "provide a highly charged erotic environment where the possibilities for sexual gratification are always just around the corner. It is small wonder, then, that baths became extremely popular institutions for gay men, especially in view of the ethos of sexual freedom that was part of the process of gay liberation" (Bolton et al. 1994:258).

Because of both the normative structure of the setting and the fact that most patrons strive to hide the fact that they patronize such settings (Bolton et al. 1994; Tattleman 1999; Weinberg and Williams 1975), relatively little is known about the men who go to the baths. Bolton et al. (1994), studying Belgian men and Richwald, Morisky, Kyle, Kristal, Gerber,

and Friedland (1988) studying men in Los Angeles show that while bathhouse clients are diverse in age, more than three-quarters are under the age of 40, most are White, are typically college educated, are most frequently involved in a steady, long-term relationship, and are diverse in terms of their religious affiliation (see also McKusick, Horstman, and Coates 1985). Furthermore, the majority self-identify as "exclusively homosexual" or report only male sex partners; however, between 4% (Richwald et al. 1988) and 14.9% (Bolton et al. 1994) report either being currently or previously in a heterosexual marriage. Similarly, Earl (1990) reports that 15% of men engaged in same-sex sexual interactions in bathhouses and pornographic bookstores are married, and essentially none of the men who also reported female sexual partners informed their female partners of their sexual activities with men.

As discussed above, the primary reason for patronizing a bathhouse is for sexual purposes, but this is not universal. Although Richwald et al. (1988) report that 72% of their sample attend a bathhouse "to have sex," other nonsexual purposes are also cited as alternative or complementary reasons for bathhouse patronage. For instance, nearly one-half (48%) report going to the baths to use the health club facilities/equipment, more than one-third (37%) go to meet friends, and 6% go to have a safe place to sleep. In terms of the sexual nature of the settings, baths also provide an outlet for men who have voyeuristic tendencies (Bolton et al. 1994; Tattleman 1999; Weinberg and Williams 1975). Due to the pervasiveness of sexuality, opportunities for observing the sexual activities of others are common. However, a few men in bathhouses do not engage in sexual activities; fully 18% of men in one study reported engaging in no sexual contact during bathhouse visits (Richwald et al. 1988; see also Tattleman 1999).

As a sexualized setting, bathhouses are especially attractive to men with a wide range of sexual tastes and desires (Bolton et al. 1994). When comparing the sexual activities of a predominantly gay male sample, Bolton et al. (1994) found that men who went to bathhouses were more likely to engage in group sex, rimming (oral-anal contact), water sports (inclusion of urine in sexual interactions), and anal intercourse (but only when condoms are involved), and actively cruise a variety of

public settings for sexual partners. However, drawing on data from the mid-1980s Richwald et al. (1988) report that “only” 29% of men in Los Angeles bathhouses reported engaging in anal intercourse during their most recent bathhouse visit, and only 10% of all men in bathhouses engaged in anal sex without condoms. As the political and public outcry against bathhouses in the mid 1980s shows, common belief is that bathhouse sex is high-risk. However, at least one set of researchers (Bolton et al. 1994) claim that gay men who do go to bathhouses have high rates of condom use. Therefore, they conclude that bathhouses, “may be safer sexual venues than the alternatives” (p. 269; see also Richwald et al. 1988).

### **Structural and Cultural Aspects of Bathhouses**

As an institution designed to facilitate and host sexual activities between men, bathhouses possess unique sexually facilitating features. This structure has been best and most comprehensively discussed in Weinberg and Williams’ (1975) work on the organization and activities of gay bathhouses. Specifically, they identify six critical factors for the facilitation of impersonal sex: protection; a good opportunity structure; a known, shared, and organized opportunity structure; bounding of the experience; congeniality; and comfortable physical settings. All six factors—critical for the attraction and success of any erotic oasis—are maintained by the organization and structure of bathhouses.

The anonymity of any erotic oasis, and the (near) exclusive focus on sex are perhaps the most important aspects for attracting patrons. In the case of the bathhouse, patrons enter a world centered on depersonalization and objectification, and can interact with a set of other men seeking similar experiences and interactions (Weinberg and Williams 1975). However, attendance at an erotic oasis (including bathhouses) has always been believed to be confined to a minority of gay-identified men (see Bolton et al. 1994; Miller 1995:445; and Communication Technologies, 1986 cited in Richwald et al. 1988). Men have almost always hidden their participation, or shown some degree of embarrassment when “caught” in an erotic oasis by others they know (Bolton et al. 1994; Styles 1979; Tattleman 1999; Tewksbury 1990, 1995, 1996; Weinberg and Williams 1975).

As with any subcultural setting, participants in erotic oases are regulated by a set of situationally defined norms. In baths, these norms include restrictions on modes of communication, style of comportment (i.e., "no campy behavior"), and regulations about the appropriate use of physical space (some areas are unofficially deemed "nonsexual zones"). The importance of these norms is that they are central to the structuring of interactions and sexual opportunities (Tattleman 1999; Weinberg and Williams 1975). However, despite the best of intentions of some (Tattleman 1999), a full explication of the norms and structure of activities, and how the setting functions to structure sexual communications, negotiations, and encounters remains absent in the literature.

In terms of situational norms, bathhouses show important divergence from the structure and organization of other erotic oases in terms of the communication modes the men use. In most instances, erotic oases are largely silent environments (see Delph 1978; Desroches 1990; Donnelly 1981; Humphreys 1970; Tattleman 1999; Tewksbury 1990, 1993, 1996). Silence is important in most erotic oases, as a way of both maintaining anonymity and protecting oneself from committing to a course of action before deducing whether others are seeking similar lines of action. However, bathhouses are generally not silent places where patrons actively avoid verbal communication; the reason for this difference is that silence is only necessary in "spaces susceptible to direct coercion and control" (Delph 1978:25). However, when verbal exchanges occur, anonymity is eroded. Therefore, while not necessarily silent locations, conversation has traditionally been discouraged by bathhouse management (see Hogan and Hudson 1998:74). A lack of verbalization is intended to provide opportunities for anonymous sex (Weinberg and Williams 1975).

The fact that conversation is typically held to a minimum does not mean that communication between men in bathhouses does not transpire (see Tattleman 1999). Rather, intentions, desires, and propositions are not communicated verbally, but rather through nonverbal communication. Messages and intentions are communicated through eye contact, posturing, body language, and movement (Tattleman 1999). However, the ways in which these means of communication are used remain unexplored.

Erotic oases host such pervasive sexuality that Delph (1978) claims that posturing and performances designed to attract sexual partners begin as soon as an individual enters the setting (see also Humphreys 1970). The posturing and performing is most commonly based on initial communications exchanged via eye contact. Meaningful eye contact is “not merely an empty glance but a holding or penetrating look shot directly into the other’s eyes” (Delph 1978:49). If a line of communication is opened in this way, the exchange of signs and cues between potential sexual partners will usually escalate in intensity and directness. It is in this exchange of increasingly direct and focused signaling that individuals determine if they will have sex with one another. As with all sexual oasis interactions, conversation is held to a minimum, although some researchers have indicated that any conversation between patrons can be interpreted as an indication of sexual interest (Styles 1979; however, see also Tattleman 1999; Weinberg and Williams 1975).

The anonymity of the bathhouse, and the pervasive sexuality, “generate a high level of sexual excitement—so much so that the physical characteristics of participants seem to recede in importance” (Weinberg and Williams 1975:130). This is not to say that those who rank lower in patrons’ eyes in terms of cultural definitions of attractiveness are not at a disadvantage in finding sexual partners. For “the standards of the wider homosexual culture, in which youth and physical attractiveness are highly valued, pervade the baths. Thus, older or very overweight patrons may spend much of their time cruising with little success” (Weinberg and Williams 1975:129). Delph (1978) suggests that there is a competition between the attractive/desirable and unattractive/undesirable in erotic oases for sexual partners, and perhaps roles. In some instances the presence of physically less attractive men may discourage others from engaging in sexual communications and transactions. Similar arguments have been made regarding other erotic oases (Tewksbury 1990, 1996) as well.

## **METHODS**

The present analysis is based on 45.5 hours of participant observation in two bathhouses located in a major midwestern

city. The use of data gathered by way of participant observation allows the research to assess the actual activities and culture of the settings, while avoiding obstacles of response bias and respondent selection. The reliance on participant observation data allows the research to assess the actual events and cultural patterning of both social and sexual activities "as they really are."

The use of participant observation in the study of gay bathhouses is not a new approach (Styles 1979; Tattleman 1999; Weinberg and Williams 1975). This approach is advocated as the best way to truly understand the culture and dynamics of settings, although the approach does create some restrictions. Although others (McKusick et al. 1985; Richwald et al. 1988) report effective use of questionnaires with bathhouse patrons, they report low response rates; the representativeness and generalizability of survey data need to be viewed cautiously. As Styles (1979) argued, the participant observation approach to studying bathhouses may call into question researchers' abilities to maintain objectivity and access to all activities. However, Styles advocated (and used) a full-participation approach (including engaging in sexual activities), which raises ethical and objectivity questions of its own (see Goode 1999). Therefore, the current research employs what Styles (1979:151) defined as an "outsider" strategy of observing, but not fully participating.

The present research utilizes the research role of a potential participant in bathhouse activities (see Tewksbury 2001). The potential participant role:

combines aspects of complete observation, complete participation and covert observational research designs. Whereas the researcher adopting a potential participant role seeks to appear to those being researched as a 'real' setting member, the 'science' activities are conducted in covert manners. To anyone noticing the potential participant, the researcher is a real member of the setting being studied. To the scientific community, the potential participant is a complete observer, acting in a covert manner *inside* the research environment" (Tewksbury 2001:6; emphasis in original).

The author entered and spent several hours in the bathhouse, circulated with and among patrons, and carefully

observed others, their activities, movements, interactions and the use of the physical features of the environment. Field notes were written during periodic retreats (usually every 10 to 15 minutes) to one of the private rooms available for rent to patrons.

After leaving the setting, field notes were elaborated and expanded, with methodological and analytical notes added to the documentation of witnessed events (see Berg 1998). Field notes comprised the primary data for analysis. An analytic-inductive process was used in organizing and interpreting the data (Miles and Huberman 1984). Data analysis included three activities: data reduction (identifying emergent themes in the data), data display (organizing and clustering of information for deriving conclusions), and conclusion drawing and verification (interpreting the meaning and patterning of experiences).

## **Research Settings**

### ***Facility A***

Facility A is located in the downtown, business area of the city, on a street with little pedestrian traffic. The building is close to the street, with glass double-doors providing entry off of the sidewalk; an inconspicuous sign on the front of the building identifies the establishment. A parking lot for about 30 cars is immediately adjacent to one side of the building.

Immediately upon entering the front doors there is a glass window through which a clerk greets, checks or sells memberships, and rents patrons either a locker or private room (with or without closed-circuit porn videos). Rates vary by day of the week and number of hours a patron wishes to stay. The facility is open 24 hours a day.

There are approximately 100 lockers located in a room immediately adjacent to the front entrance. Just inside the front door is a television lounge with seating on either benches or couches for approximately a dozen men. The large-screen television shows network programming. Also immediately inside the door is a gym area, enclosed by glass walls, with treadmills, universal weight machines, and stationary bicycles; the gym area is used rather frequently, always by men dressed in shorts and (usually) t-shirts. As

one progresses down the hall, going deeper into the facility, there is a small area with vending machines and three small tables with two chairs. Beyond the snack area is a large restroom, and then the private rooms. All areas between the entrance and the private rooms are brightly lit, carpeted, and very clean.

There are 50 private rooms on two floors, with rooms on the second floor having 19" televisions suspended from the ceiling showing pornographic videos on closed-circuit. Each private room is approximately 8' x 8' with dark wood paneling, a light on a dimmer switch, and a 8" x 8" window in the door. On the inside of the door, above the window is a clothes hook, allowing a room occupant to cover the window with their clothing. Each room has a small shelf and a bed parallel to the door. Mattresses are approximately 4" thick and accompanied by a worn, very thin pillow. Rooms with televisions have the television suspended from the ceiling behind the door, allowing a room occupant to lie on the bed and simultaneously watch the video and other patrons walking past the open room door. In the hallways where private rooms are located lights are dim, carpet has well-worn traffic patterns, and speakers play pop and dance music at a fairly high volume.

On one end of the second floor is a 19" television hanging from the ceiling in the hallway showing porn videos; this hallway also has one small bench about 10 feet from the television, and a larger bench at the far end of the hallway for patrons watching videos. On the opposite side of the second floor is a railed balcony overlooking a two story glass wall separating the "wet area." As one enters the wet area on the first floor there is a five-head open shower area on the left, and on the immediate right is an eight-person sauna with a large glass window in the door. Next to the sauna is a large steam room. The glass doored steamroom has three primary areas. As one enters the steamroom there is a narrow, approximately 25' long passageway leading to a 6' high wall. Around the wall is a two-tier, tiled set of benches, and standing room for approximately ten men. The third area of the steam room is a sitting area with a bench for four men immediately inside the door, separated from the passageway by a 6' high wall. Beyond the steamroom and showers is a whirlpool that can accommodate eight men, and beyond the whirlpool is a door

to an outdoor, in-ground pool, surrounded by tables and lounge chairs.

### **Facility B**

Facility B is located in a commercial area of town, along a major, four lane road. The building is all brick, with an inconspicuous sign on the front of the building. Surrounding the front and one side of the building is a 8' high wooden fence; a driveway along one side leads to a well-lit parking lot behind the building. As in Facility A, immediately inside the building entrance is a glass window through which a clerk greets, checks or sells memberships, and rents patrons either a locker or private room (with or without closed-circuit porn videos). Rates vary by the day of week and number of hours a patron wishes to stay. The facility is open 24 hours a day.

There are a total of 50 private rooms on three floors and 40 lockers. All lockers are located in a hallway at the bottom of a stairwell on the first floor. Private rooms are on all three floors; one-half of all rooms are on the top floor, with one quarter on the first and second floor each. Additionally, there are two televisions showing pornographic videos in public lounges (one 52" television is located in a third floor lounge with bench seating along three walls for about ten patrons, and one 19" television is located at one end of the workout area on the first floor). The gym equipment is located in the middle of a large first floor room lined on three sides by private rooms. The second floor contains a large, projection screen television lounge, a small snack area with four small tables, a 19" television (showing network programming), and a room with a tanning bed. Restrooms are located on each floor. Each private room is approximately 6' x 8' with dark wood paneling and painted metal doors. Each room is equipped with a mattress (about 5" thick and with dark maroon sheets) and one thin pillow on a bench positioned either parallel or perpendicular to the door. All rooms are carpeted and have a wall hook for hanging one's clothing, a small shelf, and a dimmer switch. The carpeting throughout the facility is indoor-outdoor with a dark blue and gray pattern; little wear shows on the carpet. Lighting is by recessed ceiling lights throughout; most areas are kept fairly dim.

The wet area is located on the first floor and consists of an open four-head shower area, steam room, sauna, two sinks, and a wall of benches facing the showers, sauna, and steamroom. This facility also has a large outdoor patio with approximately 30 lounge chairs and four tables and chairs which are shielded from outside view by the surrounding wood fence.

## FINDINGS

### **Pervasiveness of Sex**

As a physical and cultural institution devoted to providing men with a safe, clean, and open environment for sexual activities the bathhouses studied are highly successful. In the simplest of terms, sex in the bathhouses is common and pervasive. Men can be found engaging in sex in a variety of locations throughout the setting, participating in a variety of sexual acts, partaking in sexual endeavors with a number and range of partners, and centering their time in the setting around the pursuit and consummation of sexual activities.

It is rare to see a man who leaves without having been seen engaging in at least some form of sexual activity. Throughout all observation periods, nearly every man in the setting was witnessed negotiating, engaging, or leaving a sexual encounter at least once. Many men were witnessed sexually involved with more than one individual, and on more than one occasion during their time in the setting.

Each bathhouse provides a maximum length of time that an individual may stay in the setting (without paying an additional fee). When first entering the bathhouse an individual rents either a locker or a private room for a specified period of time. Depending on which bathhouse an individual patronizes, lockers and rooms can be rented for either 3, 6, or 12 hours. Most men remain in the setting for all (or nearly all) of the time they purchase. When an individual's allotted time has expired they will be paged through the public address speaker system (using their locker or room number, not their name), and informed that their "time is up." Such announcements are common, especially during the hours between 11 p.m. and 8 a.m.. After midnight it is common for ten or more room/locker numbers per hour to

be announced and informed their time has expired. Clearly then, men do often remain on site for the duration of the time they purchase.

Sexual activity is common in numerous areas of the bathhouse at a variety of hours. The number of men onsite is highest in the late evening (after 10:00 p.m.), but the greatest amount of sexual activity appears to occur during the early evening hours (from approximately 8:00 p.m. until 10:00 p.m.). It is interesting to note that patron turnover occurs every few hours. This is especially noticeable during mid-afternoon, early evening, and late evening hours. The majority of men present during the early evening leave, and a new influx of men arrive between 10:00 p.m. and midnight. Also, lights are often dimmed even further sometime after 10:00 p.m.. When this occurs there is a corresponding increase in the frequency of public nudity and public/semi-public masturbation to be witnessed. This suggests that the dimming of lights not only facilitates a sexual environment, but is also perceived as an enhancement of the setting's protective features. However, regardless of the hour, men can be found engaging in oral and anal sex in private rooms (with doors sometimes widely, or more often, slightly open), in the sauna and steam rooms, in the pool or whirlpool, or, less frequently, in the television lounges and hallways.

Sexual activity is most common when the bathhouse is only moderately busy. During the late evening, or during weekend days when the facility is very crowded, sexual activity (both in publicly visible areas, and presumably in private rooms) is less pervasive. On a typical day during the late afternoon and early evening hours the bathhouse may have between one-quarter and one-third of the rooms occupied and lockers in use. During these hours there is a less intense attitude among patrons (evidence by more relaxed facial expressions and body posture), and cruising involves more overt and obvious sexual posturing and propositions. It is during these hours that any physical touching between men in public areas is most likely to occur, especially when passing in the hallways. Additionally, these hours are when men are more likely to simply approach a man in a public area and commence massaging his chest, legs, ass, or genitals, or simply to say hello and verbally invite another to engage in sexual activity. However, as the facility becomes more crowded

(which generally correlates with late night hours) the patrons become younger on average and less aggressive in approaching others and cruising takes on a more subtle (or, perhaps more selective) nature. (See below for a discussion of the means by which men communicate sexual interests and negotiate sexual contacts.) This suggest that either a greater density of patrons reduces the setting's protective features or that as men age they become more sexually forward ("free?") and less concerned about the consequences of a rejected sexual proposition/approach.

During late mornings, afternoons, and early evenings, most men in the setting are in their 30s and 40s; relatively few (perhaps 10–15%) bathhouse patrons appear younger than 30, and only somewhat more common are men in their 50s or older. However, during late-night/early-morning hours (after 11:00 p.m.) almost all older men leave and the mean age of patrons becomes significantly younger (late 20s or early 30s). Additionally, bathhouse patrons are primarily white. African-Americans, Hispanic-Americans, and Asian-Americans are present, but only in small numbers (this is likely due to the demographic homogeneity of the community in which the bathhouses studied are located<sup>1</sup>). Hispanic and Asian men appear well-integrated to the setting, interacting and engaging in sex with men of all races; however, this is not the case for African-American men. First of all, African-American men are far more likely to be present during later hours, when younger patrons are also more common. Those African-American men observed on-site were primarily either very young and effeminate men or extremely overweight. When present, African-American men are only rarely seen interacting or sexually engaged with white men.

## Where Sex Occurs

Sex primarily occurs in three areas of bathhouses: inside private rooms, in communal, semi-private facilities (saunas, steam rooms, whirlpools, and dormitories), and in communal, open facilities (pools, Jacuzzis, porno lounges, etc.).

<sup>1</sup>According to the 1990 census for the county in which both facilities are located, the population of men 18 years of age and older is 80% white, 18.5% African-American, and 1.5% other races (United States Census 1999).

Also, on rare occasions men will engage in some sexual activities in public areas intended for nonsexual uses (hallways, restrooms, and gyms).

There are a clear set of norms structuring the seeking, negotiating, and consummating of sexual activities. As others (Weinberg and Williams 1975; Tattleman 1999) have shown, there are physical areas inside the baths that are designated "sex free zones." These include the "regular television" lounge (as opposed to lounges showing pornography), the areas containing vending machines and the areas immediately surrounding the main entry to the facility. While some sexual activity does occur in these areas, it is rare and most often consists only of manual stimulation of self or a partner. The fact that sex and sexual approaches are clearly "deviant" in these areas is communicated to patrons by the fact that these are the areas with the brightest lights, the most open space, and areas in which some men can be found fully clothed as they enter or exit the facility. In this way, these sex-free zones of the bathhouse serve as transitional areas, mediating between the norms and culture of the "regular world" and the sexual oasis of the bathhouse.

The most common locations for sexual activities are private rooms. There are two basic varieties of private rooms in bathhouses: those with and those without closed circuit sexually explicit videos. Most sex in private rooms is performed behind closed doors. This means that most sex that occurs in private rooms is not directly witnessed; however, when seeing men enter a room together, or one man entering a room already occupied by another man, it is assumed that sexual activity does follow. Men that are witnessed entering or exiting private rooms are of all demographic categories. However, two patterns can be discerned about men's ages and the use of private rooms. First, the youngest men only rarely rent a private room, instead opting for a locker.<sup>2</sup> Second, among men who cruise hallways seeking possible sexual partners there are relatively few men under the age of 30; those who cruise rooms are typically older men. When younger men do cruise the halls, they tend to walk more

<sup>2</sup>This may or may not be a function of economics; the data collection strategy does not allow for assessment of patrons' economic status.

quickly than older men, and to gaze into rooms less frequently and for shorter durations.

Whereas the very young men tend to not cruise other men in private rooms, those who do rent a room frequently present themselves as sexually available from inside the room. Men who remain in their private rooms with open doors (i.e., presenting themselves as sexually available to others) represent the full range of ages of patrons, but are almost exclusively white men. When presenting themselves as sexually available in a private room it is typical for the lights in the room to be dimmed, although not so much as to inhibit passersby from adequately assessing the desirability of the room's occupant. Only in instances where the man in the room is elderly, excessively overweight, or extremely unattractive will the lights in the room be completely off while the door is open. In most instances men in their rooms will sit or lie on the bed in a way that exposes either their genitals or ass. When exposing one's genitals, it is normative to slowly masturbate, or in some way maintain either a partial or full erection. The presentation of men inside private rooms is focused, if not exclusively centered, on sexualized body parts: genitalia, asses, chests/abdomens, hands, and, on occasion, mouths. This focus on sexualized body parts is most clearly seen in instances when men shield their faces, while positioning their genitals or ass directly toward the open room door, maximizing exposure to passersby. Rooms containing men with the lights off, or men shielding their faces but presenting their genitals or ass to the door, are more commonly seen during very late-night/early-morning hours.

If a passerby is interested in a man in a room he will pause outside the open door (sometimes after making one pass without pausing) and attempt to make eye contact with the man in the room. Alternatively, some men will enter the threshold of an open room and offer brief comments about how crowded (or not) the bathhouse is, or will comment on the porn playing on the video screen (if a room has video). At this point the responsibility for determining the outcome of the possible interaction shifts to the man in the private room; he can either indicate a lack of interest (breaking eye contact, shaking his head no, or covering himself) or invite the other into his room (with a nod of the head, a gesture to enter, or, much less frequently, a verbal

invitation). Only on very rare occasions do men inside rooms initiate contact with passersby.

In Facility A room doors contained a small (approximately 8" × 8") window that could be covered from the inside by hanging one's clothing on a hook just above the window. Many times this will leave a small portion of the window uncovered, allowing passersby to easily see inside the room. Also, some private rooms in bathhouses have doors that close but leave small cracks between the frame and the door. It is common to see men stop in front of these doors when they are closed and peer through the cracks.

On occasion men will engage in sex in a private room leaving the door open or ajar. In these instances, the men in the room are inviting others to watch, or even join in. It is common for men to stop in the hallway outside an open door and watch those inside engage in sexual activity. The men watching are usually older men who are among the least attractive patrons. Some men outside rooms with open doors will initiate sexual contacts with other men watching, not infrequently leading to two or more men moving to another private room, presumably to continue with a sexual encounter. This is a pattern seen throughout bathhouses—one set or group of men initiate sexual activity and others witnessing the encounter frequently and quickly initiate a sexual contact of their own. The occurrence of sexual activity appears to clearly communicate to others a "permission" to be sexual, in what is then constructed as a safe location within the bathhouse. Once one man (or couple or group) crosses the boundary from cruising to engaging in sexual contact others witnessing the movement often quickly follow suit.

The second common type of area in which sex occurs in a bathhouse is communal, semi-private areas. Communal, semi-private areas of the facility include all areas that are open to any patron, but are secluded from general observation, unless an individual passes through or beyond a visual barrier (such as a wall or door).

Communal, semi-private areas are primary areas of sexual activity for three reasons. First, these are areas in which most, if not all, men will spend at least some time. Second, some men do not rent a private room, and therefore will spend all of their time in public or semi-public areas of

the facility; this means their sexual activity must occur either in the room of another man, or in a public/semi-public area. Third, communal areas offer gathering places that are semi-private (as well as semi-public), thereby facilitating exhibitionism, multiple-partner sexual encounters, and opportunities to receive visual "permission" to engage sexually.

The most common communal, semi-private area for sex between men is the steam room. In both facilities a steam room is located immediately adjacent to a dry sauna, but the sauna is rarely the site of sexual activity (with the exception that some men will openly masturbate in the sauna, usually in an attempt to gain the attention or interest of another). The primary reason the steam rooms serve as central locations for sexual activity is that although their doors are entirely made of glass, they provide a visual barrier that is not provided by the saunas. In both facilities the sauna door is more than 75% glass, and located so that all men passing through the area can easily see inside. In Facility B the sauna also has a small, shoulder-high window (approximately 18" high and 3' feet wide) that allows continuous surveillance by passersby. In fact, as most men pass the sauna, if anyone is inside they will significantly slow their pace or stop and peer in the window. However, the steam rooms' doors are continually fogged over, preventing seeing anything more than the outline of a body immediately inside the door. Additionally, once inside the steam rooms, there are areas that cannot be seen from immediately inside the door. Rather, one must enter and walk at least ten paces and proceed around a wall to a darker area. It is in these areas, behind two visual barriers that most steam room sex takes place. However, especially when the steam room is crowded, initial contacts and manual, oral, and anal sex will occur in the "more public" areas (i.e., closer to the doors) of the steam rooms.

In most instances, men who engage in sex in communal, semi-public areas enter the areas completely naked, either carrying or leaving their towel outside. Nudity in the steam-room facilitates efficient assessments of one another as sexually desirable objects; this is in line with Delph's (1978) claim that assessments of the size of others' penises is perhaps the most important way men in sexual oases assess

potential sexual partners. Sexual contacts typically begin by one man stroking his genitals or slowly masturbating, which will lead to an observer mirroring this behavior. Touching of another rarely happens without at least a brief period of mirroring self-manipulation of one's genitals. In most (although not all) instances, the first touching of another is initiated by the man who first touched his own genitals. Once contact between two men begins, it is not uncommon for other individuals to either insert themselves into the dyad or to replace one of the participants when he exits the interaction or location.

There are no apparent patterns or sets of traits to distinguish men who do and do not engage in sexual activities in communal, semi-public areas of the bathhouse. However, younger men are somewhat more likely to be found in communal, semi-public areas. Older men are slightly more likely to seek sexual partners in private rooms.

The mere presence of a man in a steamroom, and to a lesser extent a sauna or whirlpool, is taken by others as an indication of one's sexual availability; this is further enhanced by one's self-presentation in the nude. Availability as a function of presence can be seen in the apparent acceptance of touching in these locations. Whereas touching another is only rarely or "accidentally" done in other areas of the bathhouse, inside these areas to touch and be touched is situationally normative.

Men of all races, all ages (although younger men are somewhat more common), and all degrees of physical fitness are found engaged in manual and oral sex in communal, semi-public areas; however anal sex is relatively rare in communal, semi-public areas, and typically involves younger men. However, anal sex is the only form of sexuality for which there appears to be a pattern (in terms of age) regarding who is and is not involved in sex in communal, semi-public areas of a bathhouse.

Communal, semi-private areas are attractive locations for sexual activity because they bring many men together in close physical proximity, and while open to observation, they also provide some degree of seclusion. Also, due to either temperature, humidity, or immersion in water, most men will (either prior to entering or immediately after entering) remove their towels and present themselves completely naked. This,

clearly, facilitates the continued and constant assessment of one another as potential sexual partners (especially as the penis is revealed), as well as creates a yet more sexually charged air for the area.

However, the fact that these locations are not entirely private is also an important facilitating factor for their frequent sexual activity. In a communal location men can truly “perform” sexually for others, both those with whom they are engaged and others in search of sexual contacts. In this way a man can demonstrate his desirability, sexual skills, and the fact that he is able to attract sexual partners while others have not or cannot; in essence, sexual activity in a communal location allows a man to display his virility and his “evolutionary superiority.” The communal, semi-private areas of the bathhouse, then, are the truly sexualized—and most sexually active—regions; although the bathhouse as a whole serves as a host and facilitator of sexual activity, it is in these communal, semi-private areas that sexual activities are most strongly facilitated and (apparently) most commonly performed.

Communal, public areas of bathhouses are relatively sex-free zones. In hallways, restrooms, snack areas, and gyms men may initiate sexual negotiations—going so far as briefly groping another or exposing their genitals—but sexual activities are rarely performed in these locations. On the rare occasions when sex does occur in these areas it almost always involves men who appear to be younger than age 25. It is the youngest men in the setting that engage in truly public (i.e., performing) sex, but even they do so very rarely.

What is most common in communal, public areas is solicitations for sex. When an individual passes another man in whom he is sexually interested in a hallway he may make and hold eye contact, “inadvertently” allow his hand to touch or stroke a hand, arm, or leg, or may initiate a short verbal exchange. However, communal, public areas are restricted to these types of interactions. Patrons as a whole enforce the general norm of “no sex” in public areas through their rejection of advances that are too strong, or displays of frustration or disdain for those observed crossing the line.

## **Sexual Acts Performed**

There is a restricted range of sexual acts that occur between men in bathhouses. What distinguishes bathhouse sex, however, is the anonymous nature of many sexual interactions, and the inclusion of multiple partners, both sequentially and concurrently. Although a variety of sexual acts can be witnessed in a bathhouse, the vast majority of sexual interactions involve either one man masturbating another (sometimes reciprocated, sometimes not) or oral sex. Anal intercourse does occur, but with significantly less frequency. Contrary to the expectations of some, both "more exotic" forms of male-male sexual interaction (fisting, watersports, bondage, sadomasochistic scenes) and displays of intimacy (kissing, caressing, holding hands) are relatively rare, if present at all.

Manual stimulation of another is the most commonly observed and most frequently engaged in form of sexual interaction for men in bathhouses. There are several structural reasons that facilitate this fact. First, in communal, semi-private areas stroking, grasping, and fondling another man's genitals is a typical "first step" in any sexual encounter. This means that regardless of what an individual desires for his sexual interaction with another, he will almost always initiate "actual sex" with manual stimulation. Touching another man's genitals is also a way of assessing his willingness to engage in sex. If, when an individual touches another man's genitals, the second man either allows the contact to continue or reciprocates, there is an enhanced likelihood of contact progressing to oral or anal sexual contact.

A second structural factor facilitating manual stimulation as the most common sexual activity in the bathhouse is that in communal, semi-private areas of the facility touching of genitals will often occur in a group setting, and men may move from partner to partner relatively quickly. Most sexual contacts and interactions in a communal, semi-public area do not result in ejaculation. Rather, many men will engage in sexual contact with numerous men sequentially, seemingly seeking a range of diverse and varying sexual contacts rather than one (or several) longer interactions. In this respect, then, manual stimulation of another is an easy, quick, and ex-

ploratory form of sexual interaction. For most men in a bathhouse they will have manual-genital contact with a large number of others, and oral or anal sex with only one or a very few others. (This is not a universal, however, as some men will engage in oral or anal sex with multiple men during a single visit to a bathhouse.)

Oral sex is the second most commonly observed form of sexual interaction in a bathhouse. When men engage in oral sex it is usually a nonreciprocal interaction; one partner performs oral sex on another without the second man performing oral sex on the first. This appears to be a desirable arrangement for most men in the bathhouse.

When soliciting another man for a sexual encounter a man seeking only to perform or receive oral sex will communicate his desired role in several ways. If a solicitation is verbal it will almost always be clearly articulated. When verbalizations are clear, direct, and unambiguous, statements are short and usually preceded by little if any additional conversation. As such, men who verbally solicit will simply approach another and inquire in words such as "Can I suck your cock?" or "Do you suck?" However, verbal solicitations are not the norm: Even when soliciting another for a sexual encounter using nonverbal communications, though, roles are clearly delineated. When a man is seeking someone to perform oral sex on him, he will approach a desired sexual partner and either expose or present for manual stimulation his own genitals, avoiding contact with the desired partner's genitals. In most instances the man soliciting another for oral sex will avoid touching the desired partner, unless it is to guide a hand to his genitals, or to grasp, stroke or massage the back of the other's head and neck (as an indication to move one's head, so as to be in a position to perform oral sex).

When seeking to perform, rather than receive, oral sex a man may solicit another by first touching a targeted sexual partner; this may be a caress of the buttocks, chest, leg, or groin. Or, an approaching man may reach under or open another man's towel to gain access to his genitals; in these cases the approaching man will keep his own towel securely knotted. If the approached man attempts to touch the body—and in most cases especially the genitals—of the approaching man, he will have his hands redirected or simply pushed

away. If he attempts again to gain access to the first man in a sexual manner he can expect to be told in a succinct, direct, yet polite way that such is not expected nor desired. Such messages are communicated with language such as "It's okay, just let me do this" or "I'm fine ... sit back" or "Just enjoy."

In a somewhat more subtle, yet just as clear approach, desired sexual activities are communicated by how and where a man positions himself in the environment. Men who rent private rooms will typically spend at least some of their time in their room with the door open. During this time they will position themselves in the room in such a way as to inform passersby about the type of sexual activity they are seeking. A man who wishes to receive anal intercourse will lie naked on his stomach with his buttocks facing the door, perhaps with his legs spread or his ass slightly elevated. A man seeking to perform anal intercourse will sit naked on his bunk, often with an erection, with lubricant (and perhaps condoms) visible and within arms' reach.

Those seeking oral sex also use body posture and positioning to communicate sexual desires. A man wishing to perform oral sex will sit on his bunk wearing his towel and when a desirable other looks into his room he will lick or slowly move his lips, usually while shifting his gaze to the passing man's groin. A much more direct approach would be a man inside his room squatting in the doorway or otherwise positioning himself so as to have his head approximately at waist level for those passing by. Similar approaches are used in communal, semi-private areas where a man squatting in the sauna, steam room or porn lounges can be assumed to be seeking others upon whom he can perform oral sex. The least clearly communicated sexual role—and the role that is populated by the most men—is that of someone seeking another to perform oral sex. To communicate this desire a man might sit on his bunk and display his genitals (perhaps masturbating slowly), or he might sit or lie on the bunk (with or without his towel covering his genitals) and when another man looks in he will shift his gaze or nod his head toward his own groin. However, men seeking others to perform oral sex are the least successful at soliciting those passing a private room. However, these men are not without opportunities to find

others interested and willing to perform oral sex on them; men seeking to perform oral sex can easily and quickly be found in their own private rooms or (sooner or later) in any of the communal, semi-public areas of the bathhouse.

Anal sex also occurs in bathhouses, in both communal, semi-public areas and in private rooms. It is assumed that anal sex most often occurs in private rooms, and therefore the typical dynamics and frequency of this sexual interaction are more difficult to assess. However, on all observation visits men were observed engaged in anal intercourse in communal, semi-public areas, and numerous men were seeking anal sex partners in open-door private rooms. In communal, semi-private areas of the facility anal sex is often an activity in which the receptive partner either has sequential partners or is simultaneously involved performing oral sex on other men.

The other common form of sexual activity found in bathhouses is manual self-manipulation (i.e., masturbation). At least 75% of all men in a bathhouse will engage in some form of masturbation during their visit in a location visible to other men. For some this means sitting, standing, or lying in a private room and masturbating with the door open; this is typically a slow and unfocused activity that is not necessarily intended to achieve sexual stimulation or release, but rather is a means for either attracting a sexual partner or maintaining an erection. The other common places to observe men masturbating are in communal, semi-public areas and in porn lounges. When men gather in a sauna, steam-room, or other communal area that hosts significant amounts of sexual activity men will masturbate both as a way to attract a sexual partner, and as a way of sexually stimulating themselves while watching others engage in partnered sex. Similarly, men watching videos in communal lounges will often masturbate.

An interesting aspect about masturbation, however, is that men never appear to masturbate to the point of ejaculation. Masturbation, then, is clearly not for sexual release as much as it is for maintaining an erection and for signaling one's sexual readiness and availability to others.

Across all sexual activities and all men in the bathhouses, there are virtually no condoms used despite being readily available. This finding is in direct contrast to those of Bolton

et al. (1994) and Richwald et al. (1988). The reasons for this difference in findings is unclear. It may be a difference based on geographic location of the study sites, it may be that condom use has decreased since these earlier studies were completed, or it may be that what men actually do in bathhouses differs from what they report on surveys. When a man first checks in he is provided with a key to his rented private room or locker, a towel and (usually) at least one condom. Condoms are available in at least two locations in both facilities studied (and on occasion in private rooms), and safer sex posters and messages are located throughout both facilities. In fact, on the inside of all rooms at Bathhouse B is a list of "Safe, Possibly Risky, and Risky" sexual activities, and instructions that using condoms can reduce the risk of contracting a sexually transmitted disease. Despite their availability and pervasive messages about safer sexual practices, at no time were any condoms seen being used, and no used, discarded condoms or open condom wrappers were ever seen in either facility. This does not mean that condoms are never used; it is probable that condoms are most likely used for anal sex (Tewksbury and Moore 1997) which presumably is most likely to occur in private rooms. Therefore, if condoms are used for anal intercourse it would not be readily known to an observer. However, based on verbal solicitations of the researcher it is clear that condoms are not consistently used even for sex in private rooms. Comments such as "Want to fuck? You don't have to use a condom" were heard on multiple occasions.

### **Interactions and Communications Among Men**

Although advertised as "social clubs" for gay men, bathhouses are places where conversation is minimal, and interactions are focused and based on the pursuit of individual not social goals. Bathhouses are not silent locations, such as adult bookstores and video peep shows (Tewksbury 1990, 1993) but rather more similar to cruising (i.e., seeking of sexual partners) that occurs in usurped public areas that serve as erotic oases (Delph 1978; Tewksbury 1995, 1996). Communication takes place, often frequently and for protracted periods of time, but it is primarily nonverbal in nature. Men

communicate with their gaze, gestures and body language, and touch, in addition to occasional brief verbal statements.

Verbal statements, when they are uttered, come in three forms. Men who speak do not possess any distinguishing set of characteristics compared to men who do not speak; however, almost all conversation is brief and in a volume that is lower than that of normal daily conversation. As indicated above, when negotiating a sexual encounter some men will verbally state what they are seeking or offering to a potential partner. However, these are almost always short, succinct, and direct statements that are made in a hushed voice, and usually spoken when the speaker is less than arm's length away from the man to whom he is speaking. A second general form of verbal interaction is the short conversation that occurs in communal, public areas. Men will interact in "regular" ways in the sex-free areas of the facility. On numerous occasions men have been observed sitting, standing, or otherwise lounging in front of televisions and having exchanges about news, sports, or movies. Some men will make comments about other men present; such comments are usually about the very high or low level of attractiveness of particular others, or inquiries about whether a particular man (or type of man) has been seen. Information that is shared in these conversations is almost always of the "public information" variety; conversation very rarely reveals personal information. Some men do ask "personal" questions (name, where one is from, occupation, age, etc.); such questions almost always elicit nervous responses, and conversations tend to end rather quickly. There are exceptions to this, however. The third general form of conversation that is observed is between men who are friends or acquaintances. Among men who come to the bathhouse together, conversations do have a "normal" appearance, although they are usually conducted in hushed tones, and are not lengthy exchanges. For other men, those who encounter others they know, but did not expect to see, verbal exchanges are short, and often include either an acknowledgment of embarrassment at being "caught" in the setting, or individuals will attempt to explain their presence as a "first time" thing, or something that they have done on a "lark" or "dare."

The primary modes of communication among bathhouse patrons are nonverbal forms of communication. This includes

gazes and looks, touch and gestures, and body language. Each of these communication modes is used to indicate interests, sexual preferences, and an individual's commitment to both current activities (or lack thereof) and desire for making sexual contact with particular others.

The most subtle, yet perhaps most constant, means by which men present messages and seek to establish "conversations" with other men in bathhouses is through directing, holding, and shifting of gazes. Where a man directs his gaze is an important means of communicating interest (or lack of interest) in another man, or sexual activity in general. When an individual is interested in another man he will look at him. On the initial level it does not matter how one looks at another, or where on another's body one looks; to direct a gaze at another individual communicates an interest in communicating, and possibly sexually connecting.

While it may be sufficient for communicating a general interest in another (and possibly a sexual exchange) to simply gaze at or toward another man, the direction and placement of one's gaze communicates more specific messages. Gazes directed toward and held on another man's eyes or crotch are especially informative communications. When a man directs a held gaze at another man it conveys a message of either general or specific sexual interest. A gaze into another's eyes expresses a desire to make a connection, without specific sexual activities intended. However, when a man holds a gaze on another's eyes, and strokes, gropes, or otherwise draws the gazed-upon object's attention to a location on the gazer's body this is an indication of the type of sexual activity that one is seeking. Men also communicate specific sexual desires by where they direct their own gaze. A look directed and held at a specific location on another man's body indicates a desire to have sexual contact with that area of the gazed-upon individual's body.

Commonly accompanying communicative gazes are gestures and body language. Sexual interests communicated via gestures typically involve movements of a hand or the head. Meaningful gestures include hand waving for a man to come closer (or enter a private room into which he is gazing), rubbing or caressing of one's own body, and nods of the head indicating a direction for another to move.

Gestures are most commonly employed when an individual seeks to communicate with a specific man, but attempts to do so when in the presence of multiple others, or when he wishes to conceal his message from others. Gestures are silent and can be employed without the knowledge or notice of others nearby. A simple wave, while keeping one's hand hidden from view of others, or a nod of the head from inside one's room will communicate a message to an intended recipient, but be immune from observation by others. Or, as is fairly common in communal, semi-public areas (especially steam rooms and saunas), men will look towards (but avoid eye contact with) a desired other and slowly stroke or manipulate their genitals. Simultaneously gazing at another while manipulating one's genitals rather clearly communicates a sexual interest and availability.

Body language is also a powerful mode of communication inside a bathhouse. Body language—as discussed above as a means for presenting oneself in open-door private rooms or communal semi-public areas—can be used in both subtle and obvious ways. The way a man presents himself, and how he emphasizes his body (and the parts of his body he emphasizes in presentation), are ways to suggest one's sexual interests and availability.

One of the primary ways that men communicate sexual interests and availability via self presentation is through the wearing (or not wearing) of a towel. Nudity is generally seen only in wet areas (pool, showers, sauna, or steamroom) or when a man is displaying himself in a private room. However, even in these locations some men will be attired, whether in a bathing suit, designer underwear, or a towel. When presenting himself nude in a private room, a man will usually be lying or sitting on the bed, or less commonly, simply standing (and idly occupying himself with a menial task such as arranging clothes or adjusting a video monitor) in a private room.

Some men do present themselves naked in communal areas of the bathhouse, however they are the rare exceptions. There are two varieties of men who present themselves in the nude. First, there are older, White men who, although having a towel, will openly display their genitals (and often masturbate) while viewing pornographic videos in a communal, public area. The second variety of men who present them-

selves in the nude are more physically fit, smooth-chested, white men in their 30s. Most often these men will walk through the hallways or loiter near showers, steam rooms, or saunas, while either holding or draping a towel over their shoulder. In almost all instances men who present in the nude avoid eye contact with other men, projecting an indifferent attitude about their nudity. In essence, it appears that these men use nudity to present themselves as available for sexual solicitations, although they do not actively solicit others.

Clearly, the way a man presents himself in a communal, semi-public area (including his attire), is an important means for communicating interests and desires. Although there are variations, the vast majority of bathhouse patrons wear a towel, and in similar fashion: unfolded, somewhat loosely wrapped around the waist and knotted at one side, with the entire upper half of the legs covered. Variations on this mode of attire are seen in only about 10% of all bathhouse patrons, and are primarily seen either during late night/early morning hours or when the bathhouse is less crowded.

Variations on how men wear towels are present (also see Tattleman 1999). Each variety of attiring oneself emphasizes different body parts (through what is and is not revealed). The way a towel is worn can be varied by folding or rolling it to make it shorter, or by knotting it in varying ways and at differing places around the hips (so as to have an opening at the side, front or back of the body). For men who modify their attire by knotting their towel so that the ends do not overlap and an opening remains, the location of the opening is important for understanding their pursuit of sexual partners. Additionally, the part of the body that is revealed via the opening is an important indicator of a man's sexual desires. A towel that is knotted in the front of a man's body, so as to reveal his inner thighs and genitals indicates a man who is seeking a partner to stimulate his genitals. Men wearing their towels in such a way are always among the youngest men (early 20s) and White men. Similarly, men who wear their towels in ways that facilitate views of the backs of their legs or ass are communicating a desire to receive anal intercourse. A bit more complex are men who knot a towel at the side of their body, revealing essentially all of one leg.

Men who wear their towels in very revealing ways (i.e., very short or with wide openings) are of two general varieties;

either these are older, overweight, and frequently bald or balding men or they are very young and often rather effeminate appearing men. For some overweight men the fact that their towel does not cover their legs or hips entirely is a matter of body size, not necessarily a sexual message. Interestingly, in contrast to many of the other behavioral patterns in the bathhouse, race does not seem to be correlated with the ways men wear towels. However, age is important in differentiating men who wear towels in revealing ways. Older men are typically among the most dedicated cruisers, continually circulating throughout the facility and attempting to negotiate sexual contacts. Younger men, however, further distinguish themselves by folding or rolling their towels, and presenting themselves in the equivalent of a short, tight around the hips, slit skirt. As stereotypes in open society suggest, such individuals are actively seeking sexual contact, and also possess a high degree of confidence in their ability to attract sexual partners. The comportment of these younger men supports this belief; these individuals carry themselves in a very confident manner, and can be seen rebuffing the advances of many "average" or unattractive others.

Presentation of self includes more than simply one's attire, however. Gestures and body language are also powerful (yet complex) means by which men communicate inside the bathhouse. Between the subtle complexities of body language and verbalizations, however, is a means for communicating sexual interest that is more direct than body language while also less direct than verbal solicitations: touch. Men communicate with other men using both "intentional" and "accidental" touches.

Intentional touches are most often done in the context of a verbal exchange. These include one man reaching out to touch or grasp another man's hand, a rubbing of another's shoulder or upper arm, or, less frequently, an intentional touch to a man's chest, leg, or ass while commenting on the attractiveness of that particular part of the individual's body. Intentional touches are most often friendly and may or may not be explicitly sexual in nature. Intentional touches are the same type, duration, and pressure of touching that would occur in conventional interpersonal interactions.

"Accidental" touches, however, are (contrary to their apparent accidental nature) a more direct means for commu-

nicating sexual interests. Accidental touches most often occur when one man passes another in a semi-public, communal area and lightly brushes a hand—or on rare occasions, his leg, crotch, or hip—against another man. Men who touch others are usually older men (almost always at least mid-30s) and those who engage in sex in communal, semi-public areas. In this respect, it appears that men who “accidentally” touch others are among the more sexually active and most forthright in seeking out sexual contacts.

Men touched by other men most often receive accidental touches on the hip, leg, or hand. When an accidental touch occurs it is almost always light in pressure, and the touch is held for a second; accidental touching is not a bump or deflected touch, but a light brushing or stroking. When one man accidentally touches another he almost always significantly slows (if he is moving) or holds still, as he awaits a response. It is not uncommon for touching men to combine an accidental touch with a direct gaze into the eyes of the other man.

The importance of nonverbal communications through gaze, gestures, suggestive body language, or “accidental” touches is that such modes allow for efficient communications, yet minimize the possibility of awkward or embarrassing propositions. When an individual employs nonverbal means to express a desire to sexually connect with another and his interest is rebuffed, he can quickly, easily, and with relatively little loss of composure withdraw from the interaction. This is not so easily done when an interest or proposition is verbally presented. Therefore, the reliance on nonverbal communication modes are important for their efficiency regarding both communicating and withdrawing from interactions where one’s desires are not reciprocated. These means of communication also allow for a man to psychologically cope with rejections more easily. Although bathhouses are very sexual environments (i.e., erotic oases) not all men are sexually interested or willing to sexually engage all other men present. By signaling or propositioning another nonverbally it may be easier to define a rejected advance as a failed communication, not a personal rejection.

## DISCUSSION

Gay bathhouses clearly meet the definition of an erotic oasis: They are open yet secluded settings that facilitate and promote the pursuit of sexual gratification. Additionally, these are locations that are known (and ostensibly accessible) only to those who are knowledgeable about male–male sexual subcultures. However, due to the greater seclusion that bathhouses offer as compared to other erotic oases (public restrooms, public parks, etc.) there are some important normative differences found. Most notably, bathhouses (although containing only a minimal degree of conversation) are not silent locations, and they offer men a greater degree of security and comfort as well as greater assurances that copresent others are also present for sexual purposes.

Common assumptions are that bathhouses are simply about sex, despite the fact that they are advertised as social clubs catering to gay men. Sexual activity is the central focus of the bathhouse, but not to the degree that many critics may believe. Frequent, and multiple partner sexual encounters that occur do, however, introduce cause for concern in numerous arenas. Most notably, since the mid-1980s these concerns have centered on issues of public health and control of the spread of HIV.

Bathhouses host an abundance of high-risk sexual activity; oral and anal sex are common, and condoms are rarely used. In response to this concern, the mid-1980s saw the closure (both voluntary and forced) of numerous bathhouses. However, in the 1990s, many bathhouses reopened, and began to appear in some cities that previously did not have such facilities. Consequently, as the HIV epidemic has continued, bathhouses need to be considered as important foci for HIV prevention and intervention efforts. At present, the likelihood of HIV transmission among bathhouse patrons appears to be quite high.

Sex is present, common, and consummated between partners who know little if any information about one another. Those who are present in a bathhouse are considered sexually available by copresent others. Sexual relations, are however, guided by locally-specific social structures, situational social norms, and imported values and expectations about potential sexual partners. As previously argued by

Delph (1978), as soon as an individual enters a sexual oasis, he begins posturing and performing as a sexually available actor. This is largely true of the bathhouse, although bathhouses provide patrons with a brief transitional period not seen in other sexual oases. Specifically, once entering a bathhouse an individual is not engaged in sexual posturing and is not defined as a potential sexual partner until he moves through communal public areas, secures his room or locker and disrobes. Similarly, in transitioning out of the facility, once an individual begins the process of disengaging from sexual availability (via dressing or presenting himself in street attire) he is freed from the expectations and norms of sexual posturing.

One area in which sexual oases, such as bathhouses, both borrow from and modify larger society's norms and structures regarding sexual competition and negotiations is in regards to competition between more and less attractive men for sexual partners. Whereas stereotypical assumptions about which men do and do not pair off for sexual liaisons in open society suggest that only the attractive engage the attractive, and the unattractive (i.e., older, overweight, deformed, etc.) are relegated to few if any sexual contacts, these assumptions (and the reality) are much less valid inside the bathhouse. Although it is not common for men of different "tiers" or "classes" of desirability to sexually interact, it does occur, and the presence of the less attractive does not present a wholly deleterious effect on others' sexual negotiations and activities. This is especially true in the most highly sexualized areas of the bathhouse (i.e., communal, semi-public areas). What transpires in the bathhouse is simply a much softened form of sexual and desirability competition and classification. Although the less physically attractive are at a disadvantage compared to (generally younger) more attractive patrons, they are not relegated to a marginal status, and denied sexual opportunities. In this respect, bathhouses can be seen as providing somewhat of a balancing effect on social stratification. While not reaching the point of being a truly equal opportunity environment, bathhouses do begin to blur the lines of differentiating variables. And, perhaps most important for many patrons, bathhouses provide opportunities for men who have sex with men to interact in a safe, sexpositive, generally nonstigmatizing environment. This clearly can ac-

count for at least a significant degree of bathhouses' popularity and continued existence.

The findings of this research provide strong support, as well as an updating, of previous work in bathhouses. What is significant here, however, is identifying how bathhouses and the men who patronize them have perpetuated the basic social structure and primacy of sexual activities that characterized bathhouses of the pre-AIDS era. Bathhouses continue to function as erotic oases, with men presenting and approaching one another in manners consistent with previous assumptions and research findings regarding interactions. However, where the present work goes beyond the existing literature is in analyzing the micro-aspects of the structure, organization, and interactions between and among patrons.

The identification and documentation of interactional norms, structured use of physical environmental features, and the contribution of norms to the organizational structure inform our understandings of the function, popularity, and maintenance of erotic oases. The role of sexuality and sexual activity in establishing contextual organization is highlighted in the homosocial environment. In this way the fluid nature of gender and sexuality are highlighted. Similarly, the contribution of broader social statuses such as race, age and physical attractiveness for social organization can be seen more clearly in the physical confines of the bathhouse.

Bathhouses have been strongly criticized for their supposed role in the spread of sexually transmitted diseases (including HIV) in the past two decades. The present work shows that there clearly is cause for concern regarding health aspects of bathhouses. Safer sex practices are generally not practiced and patrons typically engage in sex with multiple, usually anonymous, partners. However, bathhouses are social environments; the socializing among patrons is structured significantly differently than in areas outside of erotic oases, but contrary to the conclusions of others (Delph, 1978) men in bathhouses do interact, and not only in sexual manners.

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