

'Serosameness' or 'serodifference'?: Resisting polarised discourses of identity and relationality in the context of HIV

Damien W. Riggs, School of Psychology, University of Adelaide

Abstract

HIV promotion campaigns and common sense understandings of gay men's identities and sexuality often depict gay men's lives as being structured around serostatus. One outcome of this is that some gay men may feel the need to engage in practices, such as barebacking, with the intention of seroconversion. Such practices may be motivated by a desire to 'overcome difference', the assumption being that this is a useful way to relate to one another as gay men. In this paper I examine how narratives of barebacking evidence particular neo-liberal understandings of freedom and control, and the impact this has upon some gay men's sexual practices. By drawing attention to the problems that may arise from relying on an individualised, biologically driven discourse of 'HIV polarity', I propose that gay men need to critically examine how a reliance upon such polarities may only feed into stereotypical constructions of gay men's sexuality. To counter this, I outline the notion of 'working through difference', and suggest that it is important to examine how practices such as barebacking may be mediated by access to privilege.

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It is an inevitable consequence of interrogating systematic oppressions... that the resultant critique partakes (in however oppositional a way) of the very discourse which it intended to disrupt (Wilton, 1997: 9).

We never talk about the objective of safe sex. That's not an objective. That's a method for doing prevention. The objective of prevention is to keep uninfected men uninfected. The minute that you introduce the idea that it's better to be uninfected some positive men become hurt and angry (Walter Odet).

Talking about gay men's sexual practices in the context of HIV never fails to be a sensitive and difficult topic. Likewise, talking about any social practice that holds the potential to both resist and be complicit with heterosexual hegemony raises the problem of reification. As a result, when examining such practices we must challenge ourselves to find ways of speaking that are mindful of our potential complicity. This is keenly the case in the instance of barebacking, where much of the academic, public policy and activist focus thus far has been on managing behaviours or questioning the reasons why individual gay men may continue to engage in barebacking (referring here to HIV positive or negative men who actively engage in unprotected anal intercourse with men whose serostatus is either unknown or known to be different from their own), or indeed may actively seek to seroconvert through barebacking, rather than looking at the contexts that make this possible (e.g., Gauthier, & Forsyth, 1999; Goodwood, Kirksey &

Butensky, 2000; Halkitis, Parsons & Wilton, 2003). In order to address this imbalance between examining individual investments and social contexts, this paper explores the concepts of 'serodifference' and 'serosameness', and the ways in which they are implicated in narratives of barebacking. To do this, I utilise Tamsin Wilton's (1996) notion of 'heteropolarity' to examine how gay men's sexuality may potentially be reinscribed within polarised discourses of HIV status if gay men uncritically engage in practices (such as barebacking) that for some men may be reliant upon the idea of 'overcoming difference'.

As a result, the analysis that I provide does not seek to weigh up the pros or the cons of barebacking, nor does it seek to understand barebacking as a 'gay male identificatory practice' *per se*. Rather, my aim is to a) examine how discourses surrounding barebacking evidence particular neo-liberal understandings of control and freedom (see also Stephenson, 2003a), and b) explore how this relates to safer sex promotion that has typically focused on differences in serostatus. From this perspective, then, barebacking may be understood as the enactment of a particular form of self-regulation that results from its location within heteropolarised understandings of gay men's sexuality. Whilst such an approach to understanding the social practices of barebacking ignores to some extent the experiential aspects of sexuality and the investments that individuals may have in particular sexual practices (but see Ridge, 2004), it does so with the intent of rendering visible the frameworks of sexuality that make such experiences and investments intelligible. As a result, barebacking is understood in this paper as a meaning-making practice that is reliant upon the privileging of certain hegemonic understandings of gay men's sexuality in the context of HIV.

Barebacking and the 'polarity of HIV status'

Modern techniques of power make use of sexuality in order to attach us to a personal identity, defined in part by our sexual identity, by attaching that identity to us, they attach us to themselves (Halperin, 1995: 95).

Suspending difference is an important strategy with broad applications. But, when it is a way of including someone on the basis of ignoring what matters to them, it is a form of negation, a refusal to try to realise the malleability of the universal...

Inclusiveness always raises a question as to the terms of inclusion (Stephenson, 2004: 179).

In her review of research that focuses on so-called 'high-risk sexual behaviours', Catherine Campbell (2004) suggests that much of such research concentrates on 'individual factors'. Similarly, Tamsin Wilton (1997) suggests that the vast majority of safer sex promotion has been directed towards individuals, and in particular, those people positioned as being members of 'at risk groups'. The problem that arises from these individualised foci is that sexual behaviours, and by extension sexual identities, are understood as being located within individual people, rather than as occurring in the relational nexus between people. In the context of discussions about gay men's identities, this has to some degree been the result of a long history of identity politics within the gay liberation movement that has privileged the notion of a coherent, individualised, 'gay

identity' (Halperin, 1995). Historically (and indeed, perhaps still at times in the present) this has been a useful political strategy for accessing rights and for challenging heterosexism and homophobia. However, the question that I raise in this paper is in regards to the ongoing utility of such an individualised approach to identity, particularly as it may result in understandings of identity that encourage some gay men to seek 'sameness' through seroconversion.

One of the implications of locating identity within individuals as discrete, autonomous entities is the association between 'individual identity' and 'biology'. Much research in the social sciences continues to examine 'individual behaviours', and 'person specific traits' in order to distil out a set of essential truths about human nature. When this logic is extended to identity, and applied to safer sex promotion (and thus potentially either taken up or refused by gay men), then there exists the potential for biological explanations of identity and behaviour to become central to the ways in which we understand ourselves (cf. Halperin, 1995).

This logic of a biologically based identity would appear to be evident in the example of barebacking (particularly with the intent of seroconversion), where an aspect of identity (i.e., serostatus) becomes a defining factor. This results in some gay men defining themselves through the biological category of 'serostatus', the result being that they may find seroconversion to be a necessary choice. In other words, in order to relate to other gay men who are HIV positive, some gay men may feel the need to do so on the shared ground of being HIV positive. Such discourses of HIV polarity are evident in research that focuses on

barebacking and the 'discordant serostatus' of gay men and their sexual partners (e.g., Denning & Campsmith, 2005; Halkitis, Parsons & Wilton, 2003; Suarez & Miller, 2001). In this research, HIV status is constructed through the categories of 'haves' and 'have nots', thus privileging biomedical accounts of HIV. As a result, the subject position 'HIV-positive' is rendered concrete, the corollary being that other HIV-status subject positions are accorded an 'outsider (or non-) status' (Davis, 2002).

The problem that arises from focusing primarily on a 'polarity of HIV' is that it constructs HIV status, and in particular its connection to gay men's sexual practices, as being central to gay men's subjectivities. In this way, and particularly in relation to barebacking, gay men's subjectivities are thus defined through discourses of sex – the prioritising of sex makes available to gay men a viable subject position under heteropatriarchy that confirms the normative status of heterosexuality (through the assumption that gay sex=bad sex and heterosexual sex=good sex. See also O'Donnell, 2001). In other words, the 'sameness' that results from a shared serostatus (particularly one that results from barebacking with the intent of seroconversion) is founded upon polarised categories of difference - seroconversion is only valorised as a positive outcome of barebacking if differences in serostatus are prioritised as important aspects of gay men's subjectivities in the first place. Thus, whilst practices of barebacking have been read as transgressing the heteronorm and as privileging gay men's interpretations of health and sexuality (e.g., Crossley, 2002; Sheon & Plant, 1997), it may also be the case that such readings result from the reification of heteropolarised differences. Having said that, the important question to ask

here is not how barebacking is positioned as either good or bad sex, but rather to look at the effects of discourses of HIV polarity in a social context where gay men are positioned as 'unhealthy others' (cf. Crawford, 1994).

Neo-liberalism, identity and privilege

Contagious relations break self-identity, enabling a movement beyond; they are the means for navigating incommensurable worlds (Stephenson, 2004: 182).

Modern liberalism has eliminated certain modes of domination only to produce many others (which do not present themselves as modes of dominance and are all the more difficult to challenge or oppose); it has championed an ethic and an ideal of personal freedom while making the exercise of that freedom conditional upon personal submission to new and insidious forms of authority, to ever more deeply internalized mechanisms of constraint (Halperin, 1995: 19).

Polarised discourses of serostatus also impact upon how gay men respond to HIV. Thus by understanding sex (and by implication, serostatus) as being of primary importance to gay men's subjectivities, HIV is positioned as being a key aspect of some gay men's communities. This of course is not to deny the importance of community support for men who are HIV-positive, nor the importance of community efforts to enable gay men to respond to HIV in

informed ways. Instead, the question I ask here is whether the centring of sex (as is evident in safe sex promotion and everyday understandings of gay men's identities) works to create supportive gay communities, or whether it works to individualise HIV (positive) bodies. In her work on medicalisation and neo-liberalism, Niamh Stephenson (2003a; b) suggests that the increasing focus on HIV as an individual, personal, problem works to depoliticise HIV, and indeed gay men's subjectivities. This is partly the result of a long history of HIV prevention promotion within the media that has focused on HIV as a 'danger to society', which has therefore encouraged people (particularly gay men) to 'control themselves', and thus to monitor their sexual relations on behalf of the state (Kitzinger, 1998; Wilton, 1997).

This understanding of serostatus as a social practice of self-monitoring thus results in some gay men 'enact[ing] their own regulation through attempts to realize a liberal notion of freedom' (Stephenson, 2003a: 140). From this perspective, freedom may be understood as the ability to choose from a narrow range of behaviours, circumscribed within a polarity of HIV status that is employed to regulate gay sex under heteropatriarchy. As a result, whilst barebacking may represent an attempt at transgressing the limits imposed on gay sex since the advent of HIV promotion and treatment, it may at the same time reinstate those limits. Again, the work of Stephenson (2004) is informative here for better understanding how 'contagious relations' (such as those experienced between gay men of differing serostatus) may be one means for destabilising the individualised focus of HIV polarity. This may involve recognising the importance of relating across difference, rather than trying to

obliterate it. Otherwise, the outcome may be that serostatus becomes yet another form of neo-liberal control whereby gay men accept the forms of identity granted to us under heteropatriarchy. It should go without saying that such identities have typically constructed us as 'disease carriers', 'deviants' and 'pathological'.

Further compounding the issue of relating through serostatus is the often exclusive focus of research into barebacking on the experiences of *white, middle-class* gay men. Such a focus, in the respect that it emphasises sexuality as a primary site of oppression, works to deny the privilege that many white middle class gay men hold in relation to groups of people who are positioned outside of this location (Riggs & Riggs, 2004; Riggs, 2006). Thus as an anonymous reviewer of this paper suggested, "it is one thing for a wealthy gay man in Adelaide or New York to choose to become HIV positive; it is quite a different thing for his counterpart in Delhi or Beijing". Whilst I may not necessarily agree with the moral implication of this argument, nor with the need to use such extreme differences in location to illustrate the point (surely it would mean very different things for two men living in the same location but with disparate access to health services, community support and income to make the choice to seroconvert), it is important to recognise that under the auspices of neo-liberalism, particular 'choices' are far more widely available to those of us who are white and middle-class (amongst many other privileged positions). Examining narratives of seroconversion is thus an important way of understanding the implications of a HIV polarity within gay communities.

Narratives of serosameness and serodifference

The narratives that I analyse in this section are all taken from a documentary by Louise Hogarth, entitled *The Gift*. Importantly for my argument in this paper, it should be noted that the two men's narratives that I explore here were presented in a context within the documentary whereby the interviewees spoke about seroconversion and notions of sameness and difference in regards to HIV status. Obviously the interviewer asked particular questions to elicit these answers, but it would appear that the narratives that resulted represent the two gay men's accounts of serostatus, rather than as contrived or forced responses to a broader question. I raise this point as my central argument in this paper thus far has been to look at the implications of discourses of HIV polarity. I have little interest in identifying particular moral or individual 'reasons' for seroconversion in this paper (what Michelle Crossley, 2004, has naively referred to as a 'resistance habitus'). Instead, in putting forth the notion that a focus on serostatus can very well be counterproductive and lead to the biologisation of gay men's identities, I would suggest that we may see some of the outcomes of these discourses in gay men's narratives of serostatus.

It is also important to note that both of these men are white Americans. As I suggested earlier in the paper, race privilege (amongst other forms of privilege) allows white individuals the liberty to engage in certain 'choices' that may not be available to people racialised as non-white. Such privilege may also make it possible to deal with the consequences of these choices in ways that may not be accessible to people who do not benefit from unearned race privilege (for

example due to economic considerations such as being able to afford protease inhibitor medications). Obviously this will not always be true for all white people, but it is nonetheless the case that race privilege affords those of us who are white a considerable range of choices that are not *a priori* taken as negatively reflecting upon our race. (Even if it may be the case that barebacking in general is considered under heteropatriarchy to reflect the pathological status of all gay men, white gay men who bareback do not experience further stigmatisation as a result of our racialised subject position in a society where whiteness is the norm).

The narratives of barebacking and serostatus evident within the documentary often appeared to draw upon a discourse of 'shared serostatus' in their accounting for active attempts at seroconversion. Such accounts emphasise the positive benefits of seroconversion, which include; no longer feeling different to other (HIV positive) gay men; no longer having to worry about seroconverting; and being able to relate to loved ones (who are positive) through a shared ground of serostatus. Thus to some degree, these accounts accept serostatus as a defining feature of gay men's identities, and as central to gay men's modes of relationality and communities. Indeed, as the following extract demonstrates, seroconversion is understood as an important way of accessing particular gay communities.

Doug Hitzel:

I was desperate to have gay male friends. To make it work. And

I was so different from all of them. For years I tried. I'm like

'how do I fit in to, how do I clique with you, what do we have in common?' When I would go to clubs and everyone was so built up, and I wasn't, and I felt 'how do I fit in with this?' So that made me feel well, if I don't fit in here I had to fit somewhere.

Here Doug elaborates his feelings of difference from other gay men. No matter what he tries he can't find a way of identifying with the men he interacts with. As a result, he becomes involved in barebacking, and engages in sex with a man who offers to seroconvert him. Doug draws on a discourse of 'fitting in' that evidences a particular model of relationality, which we may understand as being prioritised within Western cultures. This discourse encourages 'individual people' to attempt to overcome isolation, ironically, by focusing precisely on their 'individual differences'. Rather than celebrating differences, or working through them, it promotes a homogenising approach to identity, whereby 'to fit in' is to be 'just like'. Thus Doug feels he must ask questions such as 'what do we have in common?' Whilst this may suggest a desire to relate through a common element, it also reinforces the notion for Doug that people can't relate through difference – that unless you are in some way 'the same' as someone else, you cannot 'fit in with them'. This effectively individualises difference, and locates it as a facet of 'individual people', rather than as something that is socially negotiated and constructed. When Doug goes on to seek out seroconversion he thus takes on board the assumption that biological identity is one way in which he may find the 'fitting in' that he desires.

Doug's narrative also demonstrates how notions of 'community-through-seroconversion' run the risk of reifying neo-liberal discourses of freedom and control. Thus Doug's narratives which focus on living with HIV draw attention to the fact that whilst seroconversion may have seemed to him to be a 'choice' based on individual freedom, it may instead have only served to further enshrine him within the scopic field of social regulation, and to increase the distance that he feels from his peers. Thus he states that:

The gift [i.e., seroconversion] pulls you in. Because it seems like the best out of all the presents. It has the biggest bow and the biggest ribbon, and it looks like the biggest and the funnest, and you open it up and it's just like a ball of nothing and it just sucks all the life from you.

Whilst this narrative may only hold true for Doug's experience of seroconversion, the following extract from another interviewee reinforces the dilemma that 'serodifference' presents to gay men, where it is unimaginable for the speaker that he could be different from his partner in this way.

Walter Odet:

Maybe the most painful thing that's happened with HIV and gay communities is that it has divided communities. And, at a smaller level, divided people, I mean it has divided couples. It's unimaginable to be that different from someone that you love. [Having found out that my partner Rob was HIV positive], I was

talking to some very old friends John and Ella, and telling them that he was positive, and Ella said 'what about you?' ... And I realised in a way that I hadn't thought about it... or I just assumed that I was. But it wasn't that simple either - there was something else going on. And I thought about it, and I realised that I *hoped* I was. Assuming that if he was positive then I *had* to be like him about that. I couldn't be different about something so important. So Rob wanted to get another test and I wanted to get a test, and when I think about it I wanted to get the test to confirm that I was positive... [Once the county worker told me that I was negative] I immediately burst into tears. I drove immediately to John and Ella's house: John answered the door, and I was standing there [saying] like 'help me', and crying. And John... said to Ella 'my God, Walter's positive'. And I said 'no, I'm negative'. And John kept saying 'Walter's positive' and I kept saying 'no I'm negative'. And when they finally understood it... they asked 'why are you crying?' And I said 'because I'm negative and Rob is not'.

Walter provides a very powerful account of his experience of finding his life 'structured through difference'. For him it is impossible to conceive that he could be different from his partner 'about something so important'. Obviously part of his reaction comes from the fact of living with HIV, and the implications of this for his partner Rob and their future together. Yet, at the same time, the fact that Rob died seven years later does not necessarily mean that serostatus had to

automatically create an incommensurable difference between Rob and Walter, or that if the difference *was* incommensurable in their eyes, that they couldn't find ways of relating through that difference. As Tamsin Wilton (1997) has emphasised in her work, people don't die of HIV. People don't die of AIDS either. People die of the effects that HIV drugs have upon their bodies, or from the susceptibility to illness that comes from a damaged immune system. My point being here that whilst Rob's serostatus may have signified a shift in their relationship, and held the potential for the relationship to end through death, serostatus itself need not have been the absolute point of difference between two people involved in a loving relationship.

For Walter to cry due to the implications of Rob's serostatus is one thing, but to cry because he is now 'different' signifies something else altogether. It suggests that safer sex promotion has in many ways elevated HIV from being a serious health risk to gay men to being a central aspect of our identities. That both Doug and Walter can feel so incredibly alienated by differences in serostatus suggests that safer sex messages may have done much more than raise awareness. As a result, if serostatus is a key point of identification, then 'serosameness' becomes an important, and indeed understandable, way of relating for some gay men (Riggs, 2004). Thus as Walter goes on to say:

There is the problem of dealing with the conflict when you have a group of positive men over here and a group of negative men over there, and saying 'listen guys, it's very important not to be like them'. Before there were very explicit messages

about not getting infected, and we had to stop these as they scared positive men and produced guilt in negative men.

Here Walter draws attention to the problems that arise from a focus on HIV polarity. Whilst safer sex messages have been directed towards preventing infection, they have also promoted the idea that a) serostatus is a key aspect of gay men's identities, b) being HIV positive is something to be scared about, and c) that being either HIV negative or positive makes you incommensurably different from someone whose serostatus differs from your own. This is not to negate the important interventions that HIV promotions campaigns have made over the past two decades, but rather, my point is that by focusing on serodifference as a barrier between gay men, such campaigns have both introduced and reinforced divisions between gay men. Thus as Walter suggested in the previous extract, "HIV [has] divided people, I mean its divided couples". All of the attention that has been paid to polarities of HIV status has therefore encouraged gay men to further submit ourselves and our relationships to the scrutiny of a society that defines our identities primarily through notions of sex and biology (cf. Stephenson, 2004).

Conclusions

If we are asked to relate to the question of identity, it has to be an identity to ourselves. But the relationships we have with ourselves are not ones of identity, rather they must be relationships of differentiation, or creation, of innovation. To

be the same is really boring. We must not exclude identity if people find their pleasure in identity, but we must not think of this identity as an ethical universal rule (Foucault, 1996, 385).

If safer sex becomes positioned on the 'wrong side' of the porn/homosex/life versus repression/heterosex/death binary... the implications for continued HIV transmission among gay men is grave (Wilton, 1997, 121).

Of course, my intention throughout this paper has not been to deny the importance of HIV awareness, the effects of HIV upon life and health, or the right that gay men have to choose how they relate to one another. Rather my point in this paper has been to draw attention to some of the challenges that barebacking and discourses of shared serostatus present to the logic informing safer sex promotion. Talking about community, and developing supportive ways of relating across serostatus thus requires us to critically examine how serostatus has gained its position as a practice of identification within gay communities. Likewise, I believe it is important to honestly talk about the implications of this for our understandings of gay identificatory practices, and how we research and understand sexuality itself.

One important aspect of such research will be to better understand how the eroticisation of HIV prevention for gay men has drawn into apparent metonymy discourses of gay men's sexuality, gay men's health and serostatus (cf. Wilton, 1997). How has the focus on 'individual differences' reified sexuality as an

immutable essence, and how has this engendered a context within which gay men may theorise and practice in ways that seem to *a priori* privilege polarities of difference, for example, butch/femme, HIV positive/negative, top/bottom etc. (cf. Kippax & Smith, 2001)?

The question that this begs, then, is how can barebacking ever be a political practice that challenges heteropatriarchy, rather than simply engaging in a set of polarised identity practices that reassert it? In his insightful work on Foucault, Halperin (1995: 82) proposes that Foucault outlined some of the possibilities for what may be termed a 'queer politics'. One of the aspects of such an approach that Halperin gives attention to is the question of 'how we might pluralize the currently available kinds of legally institutionalized personal relationships'. This question goes directly to heart of some of the issues raised in my analysis in regards to the notions of freedom and control that would appear to underpin the practices of barebacking reported here. As a response to this, Halperin's proposal questions the need to validate already existing categories of difference in order to create supportive gay communities, and instead suggests that gay men may explore alternate conceptualisations of relationality and belonging. This is not to suggest that we should do away with the concept of 'HIV status', nor that it can be ignored in the everyday lives of gay men. Rather, the suggestion is that gay men may develop ways of relating that do not privilege the heteropolarised categories of difference that prop up heteropatriarchy (Riggs, 2005a). Such an approach need not be reliant upon a notion of 'eliminating difference', but rather may look at 'ways of dealing with difference so as to guard against whatever effects it might produce that would post obstacles to the engendering of

[supportive gay communities]' (Halperin: 85). In other words, identificatory practices that work through difference may refuse the individualised 'I' as their starting place, and instead recognise that difference is foundational to our being. Overcoming difference in this light is therefore an impossibility – attempts at doing so may thus create the very problems that we seek to correct.

Halperin also elaborates on Foucault's questioning of 'the idea that bodily pleasure should always come from sexual pleasure, and that the idea that sexual pleasure is the root of all our possible pleasure – [as Foucault states] I think that's something quite wrong' (Foucault, 1978, cited in Halperin: 88). From this perspective, then, and one that draws on Foucault's notion of 'desexualisation', comes the idea that gay men's sexuality does not necessarily need to presume the category 'sex' (and in particular penetrative anal sex) to be the defining feature of gay men's subjectivities. This is not to decry 'sex' as an important aspect of any person's subjectivity, but rather to look at what exactly constitutes sex, and how particular renderings of sex may be more closely aligned with those of heteropatriarchy. In this regard, barebacking, and in particular its seeming reliance on polarised discourses of serostatus, may instead come to resemble a practice that instantiates a reading of sex that is not about polarities *per se*, but instead may focus on aspects of subjectification that render visible the unstable foundations of all gendered performances. This may contribute to the decentring of 'sex' in two ways: first, that other aspects of gay men's subjectivities may be explored as meaningful, thus challenging the rendering of gay=sex, and second, that gay men's actual sexual practices may be understood in a framework that recognises the multiple meanings and contingencies of any sexual practice, thus

exceeding the categorisation of gay sex=bad sex by refusing to privilege polarised accounts of sexuality (cf. Kippax and Smith, 2001; O'Donnell, 2001).

As gay men we differ from one another in so many ways, rather than simply through serostatus. Working through our differences, rather than denying them or 'changing' them, may thus represent an important intervention into the ways in which we understand identity and sexuality (Riggs, 2005b). This is a particularly pertinent issue in regards to neo-liberalism and who has the right to speak out about oppression. Thus it is most often the case that gay identity politics have served to recentre the values of white middle-class men. As a result, notions of serosameness in this context may only serve to perpetuate the hegemony of white ways of knowing about our selves and our relationships to other people. Relating through difference may thus represent one means through which we can draw attention to the multiple subject positions that we occupy, and the intersections between our potential privileges and oppressions. In this way, difference becomes an important site for intervention: rather than claiming that we are 'all the same', we may examine how as gay men we differ from one another, and how these differences signify the existence of incommensurabilities that must be given more attention within gay rights rhetoric (Riggs, 2006). As I have shown throughout this paper, simplistic notions of biology, identity and HIV prevention run the risk of complicity with heterosexual hegemony. To resist this, we must develop ways of relating to one another as gay men that challenge normative polarities, whilst also examining the cultural values that often inform gay politics. To do otherwise would be to perpetuate the notion that a 'sameness

model' of sexuality is sufficient to both overcome heterosexism and to enable gay men to develop supportive, inclusive communities in the context of HIV.

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