

## opinion

# Books and Their Covers: Examining the Gay Stereotype

BY LARRY RUDIGER

Most people acknowledge the negative stereotype of gay men (and, to a lesser degree, lesbians, though I'll mostly talk about men here). Why is that so bad?

Stereotypes are not always bad, nor inaccurate or exaggerated. At least that's the case with gender differences, which are, in lay peoples' descriptions, about equal to those made with careful, scientific observations.

Alas, there have been fewer investigations of 'the' gay stereotype. But lately I've found myself somewhat intrigued by some discussions of this topic on the Internet. There are entire Web sites devoted to self-described 'straight-acting' gay men and their particular concerns.

Part of what I've found interesting is a theme of perceived oppression: many of these men seem to feel slighted and mistreated by stereotypical gay men.

Moreover, many of them emphatically insist their behavior is perfectly natural and *automatic*: they don't give a bit of thought to it. There's often more than a little pride in their belief that people can't tell they're 'that way,' though sometimes it's tempered with a 'some of my best friends are nelly' defense, lest they be misunderstood.

What, if anything, does psychological research have to say about this? I believe it offers

some critique to this notion that 'straight-acting' gay men are both not acting and they have it so bad. First, let me talk about the stereotype issue.

Individuals can hold their own pet notions of what constitutes masculine and feminine behavior. But the most straightforward way to think about this, though, is to instead look at what people do: if more common of women, then it's feminine; of men, then it's masculine.

There is overlap, and plenty of unusual cases. But there is quite a bit of consistency. As a group, gay men are less masculine than straight men—a finding so durable and consistent that it incites no controversy among personality researchers. Even among men wanting to become police officers (a very masculine occupation, right?) the differences are quite sizeable.

It is also generally accepted that gay men's gender-atypicality goes way back: about 80 percent of 'sissy boys,' which is to say overtly feminine boys, grow up to be gay or bisexual. And a similar majority of adult gay men recall feeling 'different' from other boys in this regard.

But what about all those 'straight-acting' gay men: where do they come from?

I don't quite know. In discussing this issue, though, my sense has been of two well-documented trends in how people describe their own behavior.

First, the false uniqueness

effect (oh, that research isn't about me; I'm different!). Second, the false consensus effect (I'm different — a masculine gay man — but there are also lots of men just like me). As is so often the case, I really wonder if people are reliable sources on their own behavior.

In discussing this topic, I found some men's mental gymnastics a little confusing. They would say they wanted a masculine partner (like them-

## A gay man trapped in a straight man's body? The mind reels with the complexities.

selves).

But they also wanted feminine traits (emotional sensitivity, for example, which is consistent with research that's shown most people — men and women — prefer women as friends). However, it seems that the ideal man was somehow emotionally sensitive in a masculine way — whatever that might be.

Of course women have no exclusive franchise on sensitivity. And feminine behavior doesn't make a man less human. But I found it odd that admittedly positive traits were preferred, and then labeled 'masculine.' A gay man trapped in a straight man's body? The mind reels with the complexities.

As to the second issue — how bad it is for straight-acting

gay men — I have been impressed by some interesting research on newspaper personal advertisements. In a set of research projects on the topic, a team first compared ads placed by the expected groups: men looking for men, men looking for women, and so on. Unlike women, men frequently specify their desire for gender-typical partners: heterosexuals want feminine women; homosexuals want masculine men.

als) and rarity (according to personality research), I'd expect they are more likely to be interested in each other — and in such demand, well, why would they need to place ads anyway?

Researchers have even examined how, when photographs were presented with a self-description that either featured masculine or feminine traits, for most gay men — particularly the ones who thought themselves butch, masculinity correlated with overall attractiveness. This is interesting, given that the same pictures were shown with different sets of descriptions to different men.

So if straight-acting gay men are in fact suffering, I'm a bit at a loss to pinpoint the source. By virtue of its scarcity, being masculine seems a highly desired trait. And research on gender-typicality shows a correlation with all sorts of undesirable outcomes, at least in part due to the generally dim view of people who fail to toe the gender line.

It makes me wonder: what exactly is the source of this discontent? Then again, in my own ho-hum gayness— (Loves opera. Can arrange flowers.) — I've also wondered just how straight one can act when having sex with another man? Now there's an intriguing research topic.

Larry Rudiger has a Ph.D. in psychology and lives in Burlington. ▼

Interestingly, though, straight men were far less likely to describe themselves as masculine: it seems to be a bit of a given (the authors likened it to having two legs: so common as to be taken for granted). Yet if careful research is to be trusted, the gay men, far more likely to tout their butch credentials, are as a group, relatively unmasculine — except perhaps in their own imaginations. Or maybe only the butch ones place personal ads.

Anecdotally, I've heard it's a familiar outcome: a self-described man's man turns out to be, well, a gay man (which hasn't seemed too surprising to me) and thus not so butch as he thinks he is. Now there are bound to be extremely masculine gay men. But given their desirability (as per the person-

Tired of planning a event only to find out that 3 other events are taking place on the same day?

List your event on MPM's Web calendar.

You can do it up to two years in advance!

[www.mountainpridemedi.org](http://www.mountainpridemedi.org)



Bill Desautels  
Realtor, CRS

Bill Desautels  
welcomes  
Sarah Harrington  
to his team at



**RE/MAX**  
North Professionals



Sarah Harrington  
Realtor

553 Roosevelt Highway, Ste. 201, Colchester, Vermont 05446  
Bill: 802-655-3333 X17 • Sarah: 802-655-3333 X30 • Toll Free: 800-639-4520

Each Office is Independently Owned and Operated



Jacqueline Marino  
REALTOR  
Senior Associate



**Prudential**

Realty Mart

120 Kimball Ave. Suite 110  
So. Burlington, VT 05403

802-846-5637 Direct Line  
800-488-5609 x237 Toll Free  
jackie@together.net

"Out" and Serving  
Our Community Since 1989

Selling, Buyer Representation and Relocation Specialist