


GAY BATHS AND THE SOCIAL ORGANIZATION OF IMPERSONAL SEX*

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The conditions described by males as ideal for impersonal sex include protection; ample, accessible opportunities; a known, shared, and organized reality; bounding of the experience; congeniality; and a comfortable physical setting. This paper examines gay baths in relation to these conditions. It also develops—from the male participants' perspective—a general model of the successful territorial and interactional organization of impersonal sex. Finally, the findings are related to the conceptualization of social organization, the market mentality, and the study of deviance.

Rarely do social scientists write about the social organization of sexual activity. Theories of sexual conduct usually deal with motives or attitudes and ordinarily ignore the social conditions that facilitate the translation of such predispositions into behavior (Mileski and Black, 1972:1). A social organization analysis would take the predisposition as given and focus instead on these supra-individual conditions.1 Such an analysis should increase our understanding of both human sexuality and the nature of social organization in general.

Examining the social organization of homosexuality, Mileski and Black (1972:4) note that "... at the level of the community ... the mechanisms [of social organization] are organized territories, and at the level of the face-to-face encounter ... the mechanisms are rules regulating the coming into being of sexual situations." It is within this framework that we examine gay baths. First, we report the modal complaints voiced by male participants in impersonal sex—whether heterosexual or homosexual—and what they view as the ideal social conditions for alleviating these complaints.2 These conditions and concerns relate to the social organization of territories and face-to-face encounters. Second, we take a detailed look at how gay baths succeed or fail in meeting such ideal conditions. Third, in concluding, we discuss the implications of our findings for a

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1 A dominant individualistic perspective is the "sexual scripts" paradigm developed by Gagnon and Simon (cf. 1973:1-26). It has been described as "... process-oriented, focusing upon the gradual accretion of meaning, its crystallization, and the commitment of the individual to it" (Laws, 1975:227). Though of great importance, this approach pays little attention to the fact that scripts and scripting are also located, organized, and sustained within social settings (cf. Weinberg, 1970; Ball, 1967; Emerson, 1970; and for an example outside of the sexual realm, Wieder, 1974).

2 We are continuing our research on impersonal sex by focusing on a variety of settings and also on the perspectives of female participants.

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basic model of the social organization of impersonal sex, as well as for general social theory.

METHODS

The methods employed in gathering data for this paper were fieldwork observation and informal interviews. Five gay baths—all relatively new and modern—were studied in cities in the southeastern, midwestern, and western parts of the United States. Observations were conducted at different times (e.g., afternoons and late in the evening, weekdays and weekends) in order to obtain as broad a picture as possible. Fieldnotes were taken in private areas or immediately after leaving the bath, and observations were interpreted and validated by interviews with bath patrons contacted and interviewed away from that setting. In addition, we attended a week-long convention of owners and managers to learn more about the operation of gay baths.

In formulating our ideas, we utilized other sources of data as well. We had considerable knowledge of the gay world from our previous research (cf. Williams and Weinberg, 1971; Weinberg and Williams, 1974); and we also drew on our fieldwork and interviews from other contexts of impersonal sex. These contexts included massage parlors, tearooms (men’s restrooms where homosexual sex takes place), pick-ups, Sexual Freedom League (group sex) parties, and prostitution. Finally, materials in the Institute for Sex Research collections were consulted, further confirming our impressions.

IMPERSONAL SEX—CHARACTERISTICS, CONCERNS, AND IDEAL CONDITIONS

A pure case of impersonal sex would be sexual activity without any personal involvement whatsoever between the sexual partners (cf. Downie, 1971:129-31). In effect, none of the aspects of a primary relationship would appear. The interchange would be easily transferable from one partner to another and narrowly confined in its social depth and breadth (cf. Broom and Selznick, 1963:135-9); the partner would be a means to an impersonal, purely sexual, objective. This description is ideal-typical, exaggerating the impersonality commonly surrounding sex in such contexts as gay baths, prostitution, massage parlors, pick-ups, and tearooms.)

Male participants generally construe the meaning of such sex within the framework of “easy sex”—i.e., sex without commitment, obligation, or a long-term social relationship. Ordinarily, they do not regard impersonal sex as qualitatively better than personal sex, but simply as more expedient given their circumstances (cf. Humphreys, 1971:372; Piro, 1973). Not all participants, however, interpret impersonal sex as a substitute for personal sex. Indeed, impersonal sex may be pursued as an end in itself—e.g., for variety in sexual experience—rather than as a way of compensating for a lack of personal sex. Moreover, the attendant sexual enjoyment can, at times, be a catalyst in the development of a more personal relationship.

From the standpoint of male participants, however, the effective social organization of impersonal sex can be difficult to achieve. (For example, in tearooms there is almost constant fear of intrusion or arrest [cf. Humphreys, 1970]; in massage parlors, patrons often pay exorbitant prices to be masturbated, or find after paying a considerable amount that the parlor provides no sex at all [cf. Hong et al., 1975]; in pursuing sex with pick-ups [especially heterosexual],

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because there may be nonsexual as well as sexual aims and modes of relating. participants may experience anomie, misunderstandings, or resentment [cf. Davis, 1973]: men patronizing prostitutes are sometimes robbed or treated in a demeaning manner [cf. Ross, 1959; Gray, 1973]; and the settings available for impersonal sex can be unpleasant and sleazy [e.g., smelly tearooms, cheap hotels]. Thus, male participants (whether homosexual or heterosexual) voice a number of concerns regarding the pursuit of impersonal sex, and they recognize some circumstances as more ideal than others for that pursuit. As noted, these concerns and ideal conditions point primarily to social organization. 3

1) Male participants are often concerned about sanctions and dangers. Thus, ideal conditions include features that protect the participant—e.g., a safe setting with low public visibility and with arrangements that inhibit intrusion and facilitate anonymity.

2) Male participants often consider the opportunities for impersonal sex inadequate. Thus, ideal conditions provide ample access to good sexual partners and settings at a reasonable cost—e.g., a field of attractive and potential partners who will be amenable to and readily available for the desired sexual acts, at minimal expense.

3) Anomie and conflict often occur in soliciting and carrying out impersonal sex. Thus, ideal conditions promote a known, shared, and organized reality within the opportunity structure—e.g., the existence of a known and shared intent and of clear and simple “road maps” for transforming the intent into interaction.

4) Male participants often have a singular purpose. Thus, ideal conditions bound the experience—e.g., limiting nonsexual interaction as well as the horizons of the relationship.

5) Abrasive interaction is often experienced as demoralizing or degrading. Thus, ideal conditions include a congenial atmosphere—e.g., the masking of rejection, and nonabrasiveness in the solicitation, acceptance/nonacceptance, sexual process, and departure.

6) Uncomfortable physical settings decrease enjoyment. Thus, ideal conditions include physical settings that promote relaxation and convenience—e.g., cleanliness, facilities for relaxation, and the availability of desired sundries.

GAY BATHS AND IMPERSONAL SEX

Gay baths are licensed men’s health clubs that provide a setting for impersonal homosexual sex. Traditionally, baths offered little to their patrons except sex (cf. Young, 1973; Bates, 1972). Most of the owners were not themselves homosexual, and they were generally lax about the upkeep or development of facilities.

In recent years, however, the bath scene has begun to change. In larger cities, homosexuals have themselves become bath owners, and there is a nationwide chain of baths run by gay businessmen. Homosexual owners have improved the baths to better meet the needs of their clientele. Some of the older baths have been upgraded because of this new competition. Increasingly popular, baths are becoming better maintained and better able to meet a variety of needs in addition

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2 In many instances these conditions overlap, relate to, or exacerbate one another. They are kept distinct in this paper for analytic purposes, and each is elaborated in later discussion. These conditions are not applicable solely to the pursuit of impersonal sex. They are often relevant (though less highlighted) in more personalized forms of sex and in nonsexual activities as well.
to the traditional sexual one—e.g., many now provide entertainment and recreational facilities. Thus, at present, the bath scene is in a state of flux. Coexisting are plush baths, dilapidated baths, and baths somewhere between these extremes. (As noted above, this study was conducted in baths of the newer, more modern variety.)

While the physical arrangements may vary from bath to bath, certain features are common. Gay baths have a steam room or sauna (used more as a legal facade than for its standard function), and they usually contain private bedrooms (for which one pays extra), lockers, shower and toilet facilities, and a “dormitory” or “orgy room.”

After paying for admission, the patron goes to either the locker room or a private room. Here he leaves his clothes and valuables and dons a towel around his waist. He may then utilize whatever amenities the particular bath offers (snacks, showers, TV), or he may begin his search for a sexual partner. If he has a private room, he may simply leave the door open and lie on the bed waiting for an interested passer-by. If he finds a passer-by attractive, he may invite that person in. Private rooms also serve as home bases for ventures into other areas where sex may occur, as places to return to with a partner, or as convenient places to rest after sexual activity. If the patron does not have a private room, he may walk through the hallways around the rooms, looking for a sexually desirable partner. Thus, the hallways adjacent to the private rooms are characterized by a continual parade of towel-clad men who glance into the rooms and occasionally stop to smile at, or briefly chat with, an occupant. Cruising, in the form of eye contact, a smile, or a gentle grope, also occurs between the men walking through the hallways.

Another center of sexual activity is the “orgy room.” This dimly lit room, sometimes designed with recesses and cubbyholes, usually contains mattresses, water beds, or benches. Patrons rarely talk in the orgy room. They typically stand against the wall, sit or lie on a bed or bench, or circulate in pursuit of sexual activity. Group sex is a common occurrence here, and patrons sometimes join in sexual activity already in progress. In this room, one also finds spectators who are not, at the moment, attempting to participate in sexual activity.

In addition to these two areas for sexual activity, sex can occur in most other areas of the bath, especially on a crowded night. The following is a description of a large bath late on a Saturday night.

The whole bath is extremely crowded, with all facilities—bar, discotheque, TV, utilized. The hallways around the private rooms are full of people, and it is difficult to circulate because sexual activity has begun in one of the corridors. Group sex involving at least five persons has also begun in another corridor, and the covey of spectators makes passage even more difficult. Few words are spoken, but the air is filled with grunts and moans, exacerbated by a great deal of sexual activity going on in a concentrated space.

The orgy room is equally crowded. Two males are engaging in anal intercourse on a central bed, surrounded by some 15-20 spectators. Throughout the

* As the bath scene changes, so does the meaning of the baths for homosexuals. Some claim that the newer, more famous baths are at the forefront of the gay movement. Others claim that baths, no matter how luxurious, still ghettoize the homosexual and, by promoting impersonal sex, retard the development of social relationships among homosexuals. Between these ideological extremes is the traditional clientele who more or less simply accept the sexual function of the baths.
room, cruising and sexual activity are taking place. When they come into the room, patrons move clockwise around the room, squeezing through the crowd. The room is very hot and humid, with a great deal of traffic and no conversation.

Upstairs in the discotheque, an audience of towel-clad males roar their appreciation of an elderly female burlesque star doing a striptease.

Now we consider how the social organization of the baths succeeds or fails in meeting the ideal conditions for impersonal sex.

Protection

Given contemporary proscriptions against homosexual sex, gay baths and their patrons are usually liable to both legal and social sanctions. Since official intervention into “deviant” institutions is often prompted by public pressure or notoriety, the very survival of such institutions may depend upon their ability to operate without attracting public attention. Furthermore, the ability of such institutions to attract customers depends in large part on the security they can offer their patrons against public embarrassment and legal harassment. This aim is accomplished in a number of ways.

First, gay baths tend to be inconspicuous. They are not often found in smaller cities, and in larger cities they are often located in nonresidential, interstitial areas. Gay baths are usually muted in appearance, with no external indication of what they are except a cryptic sign such as “Men’s Health Club.” In addition, advertisements for gay baths ordinarily appear only in gay and underground publications.

Second, gay baths take other precautions to reduce their vulnerability to intrusion by authorities or by heterosexuals. One national chain of baths requires that each member bath must be operated as a private membership club. This gives some safeguard against police intrusion on the grounds of invasion of privacy. For baths in this chain, other rules that limit the possibility of legitimate intrusion by authorities include compliance with health and safety regulations, the actual existence of a steam room or sauna to give the semblance of a health club, keeping an orderly place, and prohibiting drug use. In one bath, a sign notes that police have received complaints about bath patrons’ parking illegally on residential streets and concludes, “Please do not let parking endanger the __________ Baths.”

Attempting to enter a gay bath can involve some screening, including such questions as where one heard about the bath and whether one knows what type of place it is. In addition to “homosexual” credentials (such as familiarity with gay newspapers), ID’s are sometimes requested. Also, in case a raid should occur, there is often a series of locked doors to delay intrusion and to allow time for patrons to stop sexual activity.

Third, the baths protect their patrons by fostering anonymity. For example, patrons wear only a towel, leaving behind such social identifiers as clothing and uniforms. In addition, in dimly lit areas (such as the orgy room, the steam room, and recesses) it is often difficult to identify participants. Most important, though, is a custom that exists in many baths against conversation, even in such areas as the TV room or snack bar. When there is conversation, there is an informal rule against prying.

The baths also alleviate another anxiety sometimes associated with the pursuit of impersonal sex—the fear of theft or assault. Among male homosexuals this
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fear is exacerbated by the isolated places (e.g., parks) sometimes used for sexual activity, and by the limited protection and recourse offered to homosexuals by legal authorities. In the baths, the patron locks up his valuables when he arrives, and—although violence is almost unknown—others are near enough to be summoned if needed.

While baths provide considerable protection for their clientele, however, they are not completely successful. In their day-to-day operation, gay baths face numerous problems of survival in a hostile environment. There are, for example, occasional police raids (cf. The Advocate, 1971, 1972, 1975), and the owners and managers we interviewed made it clear that the police are well aware of which baths are gay and of what goes on inside them. Thus, many owners concentrate on maintaining good relationships with the local authorities in charge of safety, health, fire, and zoning regulations. We have been informed of some direct payoffs to the police, as well as indirect payoffs in the form of contributions to such things as police-run charities.

Also, anonymity is far from complete. As noted above, in some baths one must take out membership, and in many one must provide an ID. In baths with parking lots, license plates could be used to identify those inside. And in smaller baths, the limited clientele makes it possible to recognize "regulars" whom one would also recognize outside the bath. Recently, one large, popular bath with its own night club adopted the policy of allowing nongays into the night club. This threat to anonymity upset many of the bath patrons, and the policy has since been discontinued.

Nonetheless, insofar as protection is concerned, gay baths do fairly well. The rules promoting anonymity contribute to a sense of concealment and ease. In addition, participants appreciate the protection offered by a location that is relatively safe, inconspicuous, private, and unknown to "outsiders."

A Good Opportunity Structure

As with any other behavior, in order to engage in impersonal sex one needs not only the motivation, but also the opportunity. The ideal opportunity structure is one where everyone is attractive and available at minimal expense. To a large degree, the baths are territories that provide such an opportunity structure. Their clienteles include many attractive men, with enough diversity in physical types to satisfy customers’ varying notions of attractiveness. Moreover, everyone at a gay bath is a potential partner. (We observed few "couples" and few situations in which a person could not be approached.) In addition, the orgy room provides an area where sex can usually be obtained. Finally, the baths are not expensive. Prices ordinarily range from two to twelve dollars, depending on the time of day and day of the week, the lavishness and popularity of the bath, and whether or not one rents a private room.

At the same time, the opportunity structure is not perfect, with disappointments sometimes arising at the level of face-to-face interaction—namely, acceptance and reciprocity on the part of the prospective partner. Thus, while the bath patron can probably find a partner, he may not get the one he desires. In addition, the partner may limit the range of sexual acts, or he may fail to reciprocate sexual acts (e.g., some patrons will receive but not perform fellatio). Moreover, 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.
Certain features of gay baths, however, mitigate these potential problems. For example, because of the ample field of partners, there is a high probability of eventually finding a partner interested in the same type of activity. In addition, in areas that are poorly lit, it is difficult to fully ascertain the attractiveness of a partner. Indeed, the very anonymity of these places appears to generate a high level of sexual excitement—so much so that the physical characteristics of participants seem to recede in importance. (In one bath, there is a particularly dark corridor known as “Pig Alley” because it reputedly is a place for the old and unattractive. This is, however, a very popular place for sex, and our impression was that the participants entering and leaving this corridor differed little from participants elsewhere in the bath.)

A Known, Shared, and Organized Reality

Soliciting and carrying out impersonal sex often makes participants uneasy. Anomie is inherent when one person does not know whether or not the other recognizes and shares the intent to have impersonal sex, and participants may fear embarrassment or the other person’s anger. Also, in most settings there are no simple, institutionalized rules for transforming the intent into various stages of interaction (from solicitation on). Thus, awkwardness may prevail, and considerable time and energy may be expended without any sexual outcome.

Ideally, then, the sexual intent would be known and shared by all parties, and there would be some kind of organized “road map” for transforming the intent into various stages of interaction. Gay baths meet these conditions fairly well.

Regarding a known and shared intent, baths are well-known among homosexuals as territories for impersonal sex. Furthermore, the open and continuous cruising, the orgy rooms, and the sale of such sundries as KY lubricant leave no doubt about the interests to which the baths cater.

Because of the known and shared intent, cruising is much less furtive in the baths than in most other settings. At the baths, “road maps” for transforming the intent into interaction are manifest in the form of interactional rules involving body language and other nonverbal signals. For instance, one patron may signify sexual interest in another by displaying his room key. More generally, an open door to a private room usually indicates the occupant’s availability. He may signify a desire for anal intercourse by lying on his stomach, a desire to receive fellatio by lying on his back and displaying an erection. A potential partner indicates interest by lounging in the doorway to the room, perhaps engaging in small talk, and waiting for an invitation to come in.

Invitation in the orgy room consists primarily of touching another person (usually, but not always, on the genitals) or sitting next to someone on a water bed, mattress, or bench. One then waits for some indication of reciprocal interest. If group sex is occurring, one may simply attempt to join the gathering.

A system of body language continues to orient behaviors throughout the sexual activity. (These “road maps” are usually an import from the wider homosexual culture.) A rule of experimentation exists whereby one partner explores the other with his fingers, which the latter removes from those areas he does not want stimulated or penetrated. We have also observed one partner’s attempting to motion the other into a particular position, as well as mutual repositioning. Communication is usually restricted to body language, especially in the orgy room, where talking is uncommon. In the private rooms, a limited amount of talking is more likely, and sexual requests are sometimes verbalized.
Although less clear in its details, the “road map” for departure provides for a simple exit. Participants sometimes use verbal scripts like “Thank you,” or “Time for a shower.” Often they leave with a friendly clasp of the partner’s shoulder or with no ritual at all.

Despite all of the above, interaction at the baths is not totally free from awkwardness. Interational rules are, of course, incomplete guidelines. For example, a number of informants say they use the orgy rooms because they are shy and reluctant to initiate sexual contact with persons in private rooms. Likewise, in the orgy room, we have often seen a number of persons apparently waiting for something to happen without being quite sure who should do what. In the orgy room, there are also occasions where departure seems problematic. A common observation, for example, is uncertainty after one partner has brought the other to orgasm. Confusion centers around whether or not there will be reciprocation. A person who has been fellated often just stands still while his partner does a backward and forward step movement, undecided as to whether to go or stay. (In such cases, usually nothing develops and the pair dissolves.)

Thus, in the baths we have a culture of impersonal sex, fed and sustained by the wider homosexual culture. One implication is that homosexuals from one part of the country can easily use baths in another area, although they must orient themselves to minor variations among baths and get a sense of what is “normal” for each bath.

**Bounding of the Sexual Experience**

Because of the singular purpose often involved in impersonal sex, many males do not want a complex or broad social relationship. Thus from their perspective it is desirable to limit nonsexual, social interaction. This desire is often related to the wish to conceal the activity or to avoid involvements that could compete with established relationships (e.g., romantic relationships). It also is sometimes related to shyness or a wish psychologically to compartmentalize the activity. With regard to the latter, for many males involved in homosexual activity, their self-image does not easily commit them to any more of a relationship than is required by the sexual goal itself (cf. Hoffman, 1968:177-8).

In the baths, social relationships can be curtailed in a number of ways. In the first place, the baths are not regarded in the homosexual world as a place to develop a lasting relationship; thus, few persons go there with that intent. Also, even though many of the newer baths contain social-recreational facilities, there is no pressure on patrons to use these facilities. Furthermore, there are subterritories (such as the orgy room) that limit socializing and “road maps” that can supply simple means for transforming the sexual intent into appropriate interaction within these subterritories.

In short, bounding of the sexual experience is described by many male participants as a desirable condition for impersonal sex. It is facilitated by interactional rules and territories that clearly define sex as an outcome, that limit socializing, and that sustain the expectation of closed horizons regarding the future of the relationship.

**Congenial Interaction**

In situations of impersonal sex, the absence of a known and shared intent, “road maps,” and rules of bounding can make for awkward, demoralizing, or hostile interaction. Even situations that have such features, however, may fail
to promote congeniality. In gay baths, additional rules exist that make for relatively congenial interaction.

Sexual invitations follow an etiquette involving simple and nonabrasive rituals (already described) that are characterized by their gentleness; usually they are not forceful or persistent. Nonacceptance is ordinarily communicated in a way that is nonabrasive and that masks rejection. In the hallways, one declines another’s invitation by avoiding eye contact or by smiling but not sustaining eye contact. In private rooms, such simple scripts as “I’m just resting,” “Sorry, I’ve just come,” or “Not now,” accompanied by a smile, are customary forms of not accepting an invitation. In the orgy room, one gently removes the hands of the solicitor and/or moves on. If group sex is occurring, a participant merely turns his head, shifts his body, or raises his arm to signify that a newcomer is not welcome.

During the sexual activity itself, concerns over sexual performance do not disrupt an atmosphere of congeniality to the degree that they often do in other contexts. For example, since trial-and-error positioning is routinized, it does not communicate rejections or a sense of incompetence. In addition, erection and orgasm (which are often demanded for heterosexual performance) are not much of an issue in the baths. An erection is not necessary to perform fellatio or receive anal intercourse, and the possibility that one has recently experienced an orgasm can mask impotence problems. Moreover, anxiety about gossip regarding one’s sexual performance is reduced by the relative lack of conversation. Participants also note that after sexual episodes verbal and nonverbal communications of congeniality are not uncommon (e.g., an embrace or expression of thanks).

Since participants expect the interaction to be restricted to sexual activity, departures after a sexual episode are also simple, routine, and nonabrasive. Participants melt away with little or no ceremony. And since participants expect as much, such departures do not ordinarily engender feelings of disappointment or emptiness.

Although the atmosphere in the baths is courteous and relatively congenial, it does not quite reach the level of friendliness that some patrons would consider ideal. Many of the rules of interaction (e.g., against conversation) that contribute to meeting other ideal conditions (e.g., bounding) limit that degree of friendliness.

Moreover, we occasionally did observe open breaches of congeniality, usually directed at participants who had themselves broken other interactional rules. For example, contrary to the rules of etiquette in one bath, a person cruising in the corridors between the rooms clumsily groped at passers-by, who looked indignant and quickly walked away. We also observed negative reactions toward persons who were particularly persistent. Thus, in the orgy room we observed occasions of open rejection of people who persistently tried to join sexual episodes already in progress. (Again, overweight or older patrons sometimes complain of uncongenial treatment.)

Physical Settings

Important features of the physical settings for impersonal sex are the facilities, cleanliness, and decor. A lack of facilities that provide comfort for the sexual act may impede the sexual episode. Also, participants may avoid or hasten their departure from settings that lack provisions for their nonsexual comfort (e.g., air conditioning, bathrooms). Moreover, if the physical surroundings are dirty or unattractive, participants are more likely to experience the episode
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as degrading and to fear that they might "catch something." Finally, attention-
focusing facilities such as a television set may prevent boredom or self-conscious-
ness in the time surrounding the sexual episode. Thus, social and psychological,
as well as physical, comfort are affected by the physical setting.

The greatest change in gay baths during recent years has been the improved
quality and scope of their physical facilities and layouts. The newer, more modern
baths are, as a rule, very clean and attractive. Lounges are carpeted and comfort-
able, and attendants continuously sweep, empty ashtrays, and change sheets in
private rooms. Facilities that enhance relaxation include steam and sauna rooms,
showers, whirlpool baths, TV rooms, snack bars, swimming pools, movies, pool
tables, and libraries. In some baths, there are dance floors and live entertainment.
A variety of sundries and services are available for the convenience of patrons,
including towels and mouthwash. There are also notice boards advertising events
in the gay community.5

Too many recreational facilities, however, are evaluated negatively by some
patrons. They are seen by these participants as detracting from the traditional
focus of the baths (the pursuit of impersonal sex) and/or as a threat to anonymity.

In general, though, impersonal sex, like probably any other social activity, is
more positively evaluated when it takes place in physical settings that are clean,
relaxing, and solicitous of the participants’ needs.

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper we have examined the territorial and interactional organization of
impersonal sex in gay baths. We believe this analysis also develops a basic model
of the social organization of impersonal sex and has implications for several more
general themes in social theory as well.

The ideal conditions presented in this paper can be effectively utilized for
identifying and delineating—from the male participants’ perspective—the areas in
which other contexts besides the baths succeed or fail in the social organization
of impersonal sex. Tearooms, for example, fail to provide protection and a
pleasant physical setting. Massage parlors often exploit an unknown reality to
"con" their customers, and the cost/reward ratio of most parlors is too high to
constitute a good opportunity. With pick-ups, there may be confusion and awk-
wardness about whether or not one’s intentions are shared, how to transform the
situation, or the degree to which the experience will be bounded. And, as a final
illustration, streetwalkers are often denounced for failures with regard to protec-
tion, congeniality, and the physical settings to which they take their patrons.

Turning to more general themes in social theory, the first has to do with soci-
ology’s conceptualization of social organization. While there is little consistency
between various conceptualizations, they generally connote “the orderly func-
tional correlation and coordination of...interdependent parts” (Hertzler,
1961:6) and “the process of merging social actors into ordered social relations-
ships” (Olsen, 1968:3). Such abstract conceptualizations—though useful in
organizing the social scientist’s observational field—tell us nothing about the
specific meaning and relevance structures of the human beings who think and be-
have within this field (cf. Schutz, 1954:266-7; Bittner, 1965).

4 In the most plush baths, there are also massage and manicure services, laundry and valet
services, hair dryers, hair stylists, weight-lifting and body-building instructions, and yoga
classes.
In the course of our research, it became clear that what sociologists label "social organization" is at times recognized and experienced by the participants. In effect, they recognize what we call social organization as existing to the degree that social arrangements promote a sense of ease for at least some class of participants.6

Regarding this sense of ease, both environmental and individual referents are invoked (cf. Merton, 1957:161-2 on anomie vs. anomy). In terms of environment, the sense of ease usually refers to an easily locatable and accessible setting, the layout and program of which promote a controlled and efficient achievement of goals. In this sense, gay baths are seen to provide "easy sex" in the same way that neighborhood shopping centers provide "easy shopping." In terms of the individual, the sense of ease refers to a related state of mind—an absence of confusion and aggravation. For example, a sense of ease may mean that, for at least some class of participants, social organization coordinates activities in a way that requires relatively little psychological effort on their part. Known, shared, and organized rules of interaction, thus, decrease confusion vis-à-vis sexual as well as other activities. Who intends to do what, how, and with whom can be taken for granted, at least in its general form.

The emphasis placed by our subjects on ease and efficiency in obtaining a variety of sexual partners also relates to a second theme in general social theory—the concept of the market mentality. Tönnies, Marx, Weber, Simmel, Wirth, Fromm, Slater, and other commentators represent a long tradition that has addressed the topics of the market mentality and the depersonalization of relationships. This tradition describes people as objectified "things," considered solely in terms of the way they serve as impersonal means to ends.

Depersonalization and objectification are salient features of our participants' ideals regarding impersonal sex. Note, for example, their construction of an ideal opportunity structure—"where everyone is attractive and available at minimal expense." From this point of view, sex partners should be there for the picking with nonsexual interaction and the horizons of the relationship kept to a minimum. Thus, the market mentality is demonstrated not simply as a theorist's conceptualization but also as an empirical finding (cf. Becker, 1974).

At the same time, our findings suggest a modification of the traditional "market mentality" concept. For example, it was clear throughout our research that human beings often have a difficult time sustaining complete impersonality, even given optimal conditions. Also, participants sometimes feel shy and embarrassed, hurt and rejected, envious and jealous, friendly and intimate—emotions that call into question the image of complete detachment that we usually associate with the market mentality. Such emotions attest to the capacity of humans to attribute a variety of meanings to their experiences and to react emotionally rather than in the simple and solely cognitive manner often depicted by sociology (cf. Douglas, 1971:Chapter 1). Thus, as other empirical studies of impersonal situations have also shown (e.g., Jacobs, 1969; Zimmerman, 1970), the "market mentality" should be regarded more as a sensitizing concept or variable than as a strict and literal description of the phenomena to which it is applied.

In addition, sociology traditionally conceptualizes impersonal relationships

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6 Participants may recognize, however, that they themselves are not included in the class of participants for whom there is successful organization. (For example, con victims often recognize, in retrospect, that the con was remarkably well organized for the operators but not for the victims.)
as superficial, tawdry, depressing, or pathological. This conception ignores the fact that such relationships may be defined as positive by the people involved. It ignores the fact that participants may interpret the impersonal experience as fun, enjoyable, or satisfactory, and that a market-type social organization may indeed be the best for facilitating such experiences.

Finally, we believe our research supports the view that "deviance" and its facilitation can be understood better in terms of social organization than social disorganization. Activities that are considered deviant (like those that are not) are often collective enterprises. As such, networks of people cooperate in their production, and rules (which permit, organize, control, and protect the behaviors defined as deviant) coordinate separate lines of action (cf. Becker, 1974).

Within this framework, one can address the empirical questions of how successful or unsuccessful the social organization is, from whose point of view, and with what variables contributing to or detracting from its success. This seems preferable to a social disorganization analysis, which ignores the organization of so-called deviance and which traditionally has had subjective, vague, and value-laden connotations. For, as other critics of the social disorganization framework have made clear, what is labeled as social disorganization is often simply an instance of multiple and conflicting systems of organization (cf. Clinard, 1957; Cohen, 1959; Martindale, 1957).

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