

For men, 'straight' label is inflexible

September 9, 2007

J. Peder Zane, Staff Writer

Can a man seem to seek sex with another man and not be gay?

No way, answered most Americans as scandal engulfed Idaho Sen. Larry Craig.

When the 62-year-old grandfather insisted "I'm not gay" after pleading guilty to charges from an airport sex sting, his declaration was met with derision and disbelief.

"It's the tragedy of homophobia," Matt Foreman, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, told The Associated Press. "People create these walls that separate themselves from who they really are."

In contemporary America, you can't be a little bit pregnant or a little bit gay. Just as our old racial caste system relied on the one-drop rule -- a drop of black blood made you a Negro -- a similar logic informs our culture's basic assumptions about male sexuality. Men who engage in any homosexual activity are considered gay. That's who they "really are."

Craig may have been married to the same woman for 24 years. An exhaustive investigation of his sex life by the Idaho Statesman may have uncovered just one man's claim that he had sex with Craig in a Washington bathroom. And the senator may have denied that story while insisting his arrest in Minneapolis was a misunderstanding.

No matter. The public concluded he was gay.

The thinking went: No heterosexual man would have placed himself in Craig's position -- at a known cruising spot for gay men such as the bathroom at the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport, using a series of foot and hand signals that would lead an undercover police officer to decide he was soliciting sex. Since he did not appear to be acting straight, he must be gay.

Craig may be homosexual -- that's his business (and it's shameful that Republican homophobes immediately pushed him toward the door). More interesting are the ways his case illuminates the rigid norms society imposes on straight men, especially the one-drop rule concerning sexual encounters.

Consider this: Almost half of all men who have sex with other men in public bathrooms consider themselves straight, according to William Leap, a professor of anthropology at American University, who has studied this behavior since the early 1990s.

"They insist, 'I'm not gay, I'm not homosexual, I'm straight,' " Leap told me. "The general description for these guys is they are married and they often talk about these encounters as recreational -- fun, excitement, a break from the long workday."

One man told Leap that the encounters offered "dangerous excitement" in contrast to his emotionally dull second marriage. Another man said he would stop off at a known cruising spot after work, have sex, then pick up a quart of milk before returning home to his wife and kids. "It was almost like a scheduled activity he had in his day planner," Leap said.

A complex continuum

Leap, who edited the essay collection "Public Sex, Gay Space," agreed that most people would conclude these men are gay -- a view he described as overly simplistic. For starters, he said, that judgment defines these men by one aspect of their behavior, discounting, for example, their lives with their wives. It also presumes that society's general assumptions about how straight men should act are more accurate than their own conceptions of themselves as heterosexuals. Finally, Leap said, it defines homosexuality exclusively in terms of sex.

"Being gay is not just a sexual position," he said. "It also involves a self-acceptance and a public declaration, a willingness to say 'I am gay' and to make that clear to one's self. Perhaps these men are in denial, but if we just write them off as closeted or repressed, we limit our understanding of what straightness might entail."

I wasn't completely convinced. The taboos on homosexual activity are so strong that, it seems, only powerful urges could impel men to cross that line. At heart, it must be something they feel they must do to satisfy a fundamental need.

The issue, Leap countered, is not whether these men are gay but the constricted ways American society views straight male behavior. The rest of the population -- women and gay men -- are not bound by the one drop rule.

Few would suggest, for example, that a self-identified gay man who sleeps with women on occasion is secretly straight. Or consider the images of young women making out with each other in the "Girls Gone Wild" videos. I don't know anybody who immediately concludes that they are lesbians. Show people videos of men kissing, and people will instantly say they are gay.

Questions of power

A survey conducted in 2002 and 2003 by the National Center for Health Statistics found that 14 percent of women 18 to 29 said they had had at least one same-sex encounter; a little less than 10 percent of women 30 to 44 reported such activity. Yet only about 4 percent of women described themselves as lesbians. Would anyone explain this gap by arguing that 10 percent of so many American women are closeted and repressed lesbians?

This same survey found that 6 percent of men reported a same-sex experience; 4 percent identified themselves as gay. Clearly, cultural forces discourage men from exploring their sexuality -- or from disclosing to pollsters that they have.

These differences highlight the fact that the sexual conduct of men is "heavily, heavily regulated," Leap said. "Power and authority in our society have long rested in the hands of men so there's heavy cultural pressure to define what it means to be a man. Women are afforded some room to experiment, whereas a man who plays around with other men is seen as walking away from his responsibilities, threatening the stability of his home and his country, challenging the specific images of masculinity our culture enforces."

Leap's findings are provocative. Although most political scandals do not deserve the attention they receive, I hope the questions raised by Craig's troubles linger, prompting us to consider the assumptions we apply to complicated questions of sexuality and identity.