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HIV Risk and Sense of Community:French Gay Male Discourses on Barebacking

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Abstract

This paper analyses the use of the concept of 'barebacking' as a risk category in the discourses of French gay men. It discusses how the rise and spread of the term barebacking contributes to reframing gay men's personal experiences of HIV prevention and their sense of belonging (or a lack thereof) to a gay community. The study is based on 30 qualitative interviews with French gay men conducted between 2005 and 2008. An import from the USA, the term barebacking emerged publicly in France in the late 1990s and was first used to describe intentionally unprotected sexual practices. Debates surrounding this risk category were marked by violent controversy over its use and its definition among HIV prevention actors. There remains a general lack of consensus on the definition of the term, despite its use by activists, in porn culture, and in the daily discourses of gay men. By focusing on the relational roots of risk perception, I consider how uses of the term barebacking invoke a moral framework around risk taking.

Keywords

HIV, gay men, barebacking, risk, France

Introduction

What does 'barebacking' reveal about the evolution of gay communities? This question still represents a challenge for researchers, activists, and gay men fighting against HIV. It has been the subject of numerous analyses in the Anglo-Saxon world. But its spread and use in other linguistic areas has rarely been studied. This article examines lay uses of the term barebacking in the discourses of French gay men. It does not focus solely on gay men who engage in unprotected sex or who define themselves as "barebackers". Drawing on interviews with gay men – both HIV-positive and HIV-negative – this paper aims to contribute to a better understanding of the cultural appropriation and use of the term barebacking in France. It analyses the uses of the term by gay men themselves to define their own practices and/or identities as well as those of other gay men. In order to do this, the paper focuses on the complex links between the self, the gay community, as well as guilt and responsibility surrounding prevention. The analysis offers a deconstruction of barebacking as a concept, considering its use in both social and moral contexts.

The rise in barebacking has often been analysed as indicative of division within gay communities. For some scholars, barebacking has been perceived as a challenge to collective responsibility (Sheon and Crosby 2004), while other authors have focused on the complex evolution of gay men's sense of belonging to a gay community since the introduction of antiretroviral therapy (Dowsett 2009; Holt 2011). This paper proposes a critical contribution to analysing the evolution of community ties and the individualisation of prevention standards. It aims to analyse the complexity of moral reasoning among gay men regarding HIV prevention, by rejecting the oversimplified dichotomy between altruistic strategies and transgressive practices, and highlighting the existence of negotiated options that reflect strong moral concerns (Davis 2007; 2008). Thus, it offers a reconsideration of "practical moralities" in HIV prevention: "studying practical morality involves examining the discourses that people draw on in order to account for their actions" (Adam 2005: 334). To do so, it is based on a framework inspired by a social anthropological analysis of risk (Douglas and Calvez 1990). It proposes to consider risk-taking as one factor used to designate individual and/or collective responsibility when facing a social problem. This approach contributes to a more sociological understanding of the moral and relational dimensions of barebacking.

Barebacking: controversies and research

Barebacking has spread quickly among gay communities in the Western world. Since the term's emergence in the mid-1990s (O'Hara 1997), it has sparked numerous controversies (Rotello 1997; Rofes 1998; Warner 2000) within an international context of rising HIV-infection rates and decreasing condom use among gay men (Kippax and Race 2003; Hart and Elford 2010). Analysis of the phenomenon has opened up a new field of investigation for researchers working on HIV prevention issues (Berg 2009). A term with multiple meanings, barebacking generally refers to intentional sexual practices without a condom. However, according to some authors, it can also refer to specific identities and/or spaces (Parsons and Bimbi 2007; Carballo-Diequez et al. 2009). Although the phenomenon is more prevalent among HIV-positive men, it is also a concern for those who are HIV-negative. Academic research has explored possible motivations behind the practice (Suarez and Miller. 2001; Mansbergh et al. 2002; Crossley 2004; Halkitis et al. 2005; Woltiski 2005). Researchers have also taken interest in the psychosocial factors associated with bareback sex culture: Internet use (Davis et al. 2006; Carballo-Diequez et al. 2006; Mowlabocus 2007; Léobon et al. 2011), porn culture (Dean 2009; Vörös 2014), and drug use (Halkitis, Parsons, and Stiratt 2001; Green and Halkitis 2006; O'Byrne and Holmes 2008). Other authors have analysed the socio-political meanings of barebacking (Race 2007; Halperin 2007), demonstrating the complexity of preventive decisions in a neo-liberal context (Adam 2005), but also shedding light on situated rationalities of prevention (Davis 2008; Rowe and Dowsett 2008; Frost, Stirratt, and Ouellette 2008; Dowsett 2009; Grace et al. 2014). These studies have revealed the diversity of meanings of bareback, which vary according to the particular social and political contexts in which it is evoked. Thus, researchers have shown how the different understandings of unprotected sex both of public health officials and of gay communities has had an impact on how barebacking is addressed as a social problem, for example in the US (Warner 2000; Halperin 2007) or in Australia (Race 2003).

Barebacking: a French controversy?

However, research on barebacking has primarily taken place in the Anglo-Saxon world (Berg 2009) and few authors appear interested in its international reach, particularly in the French-speaking world (Broqua 2006; Le Talec 2007; Girard 2013). In France, barebacking became a

public concern at the end of the 1990s even though HIV community-based organisations had been echoing American debates on the subject since the middle of the decade (Lestrade 2000). It is the translation and publication of Michael Scarce's article on barebacking in the French gay newspaper *Têtu* in April 1999, however, that marked the term's first appearance in a broader public context¹. That same year, a violent controversy erupted between Act Up Paris and two HIV-positive authors, Guillaume Dustan and Érik Rémès, who described their personal experiences of unprotected sexual and who claimed the right to engage in them (Dustan 1997, 1998; Rémès 1999). In 1999, the Lesbian Gay Pride event in Paris was the scene of a spectacularly provocative Act Up slogan: "Fucking without a condom gets you off?" For the first time, the organization was shaming both gay and HIV-positive men who did not use condoms:

"A strange kind of pleasure, really, that pretends to laugh in the face of death but is actually a poorly-hidden denial of the disease. We can't just forget our experience of AIDS. We can't get off without a condom. The risk of infecting ourselves or someone else remains an obstacle to pleasure." (Act Up-Paris poster, 1999)²

After this provocative campaign, barebacking became an increasingly important subject in French debates surrounding HIV prevention. During the first phase, from the 1999 Lesbian and Gay Pride to 2002, a vicious debate erupted between pro and antibarebacking groups in the gay media with Act Up claiming authority over the issue (Le Talec 2007; Girard 2013). For activists like Didier Lestrade, barebacking constitutes a political category that highlights the irresponsible practices of certain gay men and refers to a set of sexual behaviours that do not correspond to the community's standards of prevention (Lestrade 2000, 2004). For Dustan and Rémès, the issue is freedom of expression and sexuality with willing partners (Dustan 1999; Rémès 2003). During this period, Act Up-Paris functioned as a "moral entrepreneur" (Becker, 1963), delimiting the meanings of barebacking by denouncing it.

For other actors such as AIDES, SIDA Info Service, and the SNEG³, the violence of these debates led them to carefully observe the debates rather than participate in them. These organisations, although they did not support barebacking, were wary of the public shaming

¹ Scarce M., (C. Martet trans.), (1999) 'Bareback, la fin du safe sex?' *Têtu*, 33, p.54-57. Published originally as 'A ride on the wild side', *POZ*, 44, February 1999

² Translated by the author

³ AIDES: a French CBO created in 1984 by Daniel Defert after Michel Foucault's death; Sida Info Service: a French ASO hotline for HIV; SNEG : Syndicat National des Entreprises Gays (National Union of Gay Companies)

carried out by Act Up Paris (Girard 2013). Public health authorities refused to comment on the controversy, both because they considered the phenomenon to be too marginal and out of fear of stigmatising gay men by doing so⁴.

During the second phase, which began in 2002, prevention debate changed focus. In the spring of 2002, AIDES, the largest French HIV organization, promoted a sexual “risk reduction” approach. Unlike Act Up, AIDES was active in places where gay men gathered: saunas, bars, backrooms, and parks. Risk-reduction messages were based on existing HIV-prevention literature (Elford 2006) and were also modelled on the work of other prevention organisations around the world. The “Enjoy Fucking? You can reduce the risk!” 2001 campaign by the British group Gay Men Fighting AIDS⁵ was cited as an example. A range of strategies was promoted: withdrawal before ejaculation; positioning (topping is less risky than bottoming); the proper use of lubricant; and information about viral loads, STIs, and the possible abrasion of mucous membranes during rough sex. For AIDES, risk reduction was a pragmatic way to recognise the difficulties faced by gay men who use condoms - difficulties evident in the organisation’s work and among AIDES volunteers themselves.

The reaction of Act Up-Paris was swift: its members saw risk-reduction strategies as a way to justify barebacking and encourage risk-taking. The conflict between AIDES and Act Up, which first erupted when risk-reduction flyers were distributed in a sauna in Marseilles in 2002, later escalated with the advent of several new developments. The conflict between these two groups reflects their opposing moral interpretations of gay sexual relations. More generally, these conflicts reveal disagreements around the idea of a ‘moral community’ to combat HIV.

For Act Up Paris, condom use is inextricably linked to individual and collective responsibility. Members condemn risk-reduction strategies because they imply accepting the probability of risk rather than transmitting a clear prevention message. For AIDES, however, prevention must take into account gay men’s actual practices in all their diversity. Risk reduction is predicated on the necessity of proposing alternative choices for men at high-risk of contracting HIV. AIDES supports a considered approach to preventive options based on a partners’ HIV status

⁴ In order to understand the debates around barebacking in France, one has also to take into account the contentiousness of the concept of community. In French Republican ideology, universalism must have precedence over the interests of particular groups

⁵ <http://www.adrespect.org/common/adlibrary/adprintdetails.cfm?QID=4692&ClientID=11064> (accessed 5 May 2014)

(concordant, discordant, unknown), sexual practices (top, bottom), and the nature of the relationship (steady, casual). Raising awareness about risk from the perspective of individual autonomy and empowerment is a common approach adopted by community-based movements. For AIDES, individual and collective issues are interconnected: recognising the diversity of preventive practices is a way to create a more inclusive community. For these organisations, the idea of community does not have the same meaning.

Although debates between organisations concerning HIV prevention and barebacking are widely reported in the gay press, this paper aims to analyse the influence they have on the everyday choices and sexual behaviours of gay men. It questions and exposes the multiple laymeanings of barebacking. In doing so, it sheds light on the moral framing of HIV prevention among French gay men.

Theoretical framework

This paper seeks to employ the form of cultural analysis first developed by Mary Douglas as a social anthropological approach to the social uses of risk (Douglas 1992). Douglas' work suggests that the selection and interpretation of health threats contribute to the organisation of social relationships. Institutions and groups condition the actions and thoughts of individuals. Cultural analysis provides a theoretical framework and a model through which the organisation of social relationships can be examined. This typology is established in two dimensions: the claims made by the collective on the individuals of which it is made (*group*), and the definition of social roles (*grid*).

By distinguishing between these two dimensions, one can analyse specific interactions between collective norms and individuals. This mode of analysis offers a particularly interesting way to conceive of how individuals develop values and principles in connection with others and, by extension, a shared vision of the world. The approach particularly focuses on the diverse conceptions of individual and collective responsibility. Cultural analysis is used as a tool to study how individuals interpret and navigate social risks, considering the organisational forms of different social relationships (fatalist, hierarchical, individualistic, egalitarian) coexisting within the same society. These theoretical tools facilitate an examination of the cultural dimensions of HIV risk perception (Douglas and Calvez 1990). In this paper, the resulting

specific typology reveals different conceptions of barebacking rooted in specific relational contexts.

Methodology

This article is based on a qualitative survey of a sample of gay men living in France. Data were collected between 2005 and 2008 through semi-structured interviews that varied in length from 60 to 150 minutes. In order to be included in the study, participants must have had sex with one or more male partners in the previous year. Respondents were recruited online as well as through LGBT community networks. All 30 participants were aged between 19 and 59 years old. 12 were from Brittany in western France and 18 from Paris. 11 participants were HIV-positive, 18 were HIV-negative, and one had never been tested. All defined themselves as gay or homosexual and most of them reported also having had heterosexual experiences. Interviews employed a narrative approach, exploring: sexual biography; perception and experiences of HIV risk; personal definitions of barebacking; and a feeling of belonging to the gay community. Interviews were fully transcribed and participants remained anonymous. Data analysis involved the identification of recurrent themes and led to the inductive development of a typology of HIV risk perceptions and meanings of barebacking (presented below).

Exploring sense of belonging (or a lack thereof) and risk perception

A sense of belonging to a community (or a lack thereof) is the first element explored in this analysis, which focuses on the subjective experiences of participants and their perception of belonging to, or feeling disconnected from, the gay community. The analysis of community is not based on presupposed definition. In interview, participants were asked: "Do you feel you a sense of belonging to a gay community?" This type of question is far from neutral in France, where "community" is historically a suspect notion because of Universalist Republican ideology (Fillieule and Duyvendak 1999; Caron 2001). The subsequent questions left room for participants to describe their conception of community and their perceived links to it.

Based on the participants' comments, I propose an analysis of their relationships to community along two axes. The first axis refers to the group dimension of Douglas' framework. It indicates

the degree of perceived membership to a social group based on the experience of shared sexual orientation: on the one end is the assertion “I belong to a gay community” and on the other is “I do not belong to a gay community”. The second axis refers to the grid dimension of Douglas’ cultural analysis. This axis deals with the degree of criticism expressed by participants: at one extreme are respondents who are very critical of the gay community and the social relationships developed within it, regardless of their feelings of belonging (or exclusion) to the group. At the other extreme are participants who emphasise the advantages and resources that the community provides, whether they feel that they belong to it or not.

Figure 1. Four cultural contexts [about here](#)

The four poles indicate cultural contexts or ways of thinking about risk linked to different forms of sociability. In this sense, the typology is meant to illustrate ways of thinking rather than characteristics of individuals.

Different forms of community belonging

A minority (11/30) of participants expressed a feeling of belonging to a gay community, all of whom based their sense of belonging on sexual identity, according to the typology presented above. They also defined sexual orientation as an important, sometimes even central, part of their personality. However, this feeling diverged on one essential point concerning group definition, a process that reveals some of the dangers to which the “community” is exposed. Some respondents focused their criticism on the group’s internal characteristics: the community is defined primarily by what it is not, or what it no longer is (A: “The desired community”). Other participants concentrated on threats from outside the group, such as heterosexual society, which they defined as oppressive (B: “The lived community”).

Plural individualism

What of those who distanced themselves from or rejected the idea of a community? A majority (19/30) of participants fit this description. These men perceive sexual orientation as part of their identity but not the defining element that organises their social relationships. They do, however, situate themselves in various gay environments (community, world, ghetto, etc.) or in the places where community congregates (gay commercial venues, Le Marais⁶ in Paris, specific organisations, etc.). It is important to emphasise that, regardless of the strength of their criticism, the idea of community is not denied here - it is simply considered an external reality.

These respondents' comments differ in their perception of the gay milieu. For some, belonging to a community is seen as limiting and the group is thought to homogenise and limit one's personal expression ("detached individual"). A member's presence in community spaces, sometimes unavoidable, is seen as a constraint. Others, although also critical of the group's normalising effects, are more concerned with the resources offered by the community in meetings and social spaces, in terms of support but also in terms of sexual encounters ("socialised individual"). The distinction lies in the degree of criticism aimed at the gay community.

Cultural contexts and barebacking

Next, the established typology provides a framework which is useful in analysing perceptions of barebacking. During the interviews, the issue of barebacking was introduced by asking several different questions: "Have you heard of barebacking?"; "If yes, how would you define it?"; "Have you engaged in behaviours that you would qualify as barebacking?"; and lastly, "If yes, what behaviours and in what contexts?" The aim was to understand the way in which participants perceive this category of risk and how they personally define the phenomenon. I was also interested in the sources (gay and community media, debates, websites, discussions in their social networks) from which they forged their definitions and conceptions of barebacking.

Findings

Barebacking and Community Belonging

⁶ Le Marais is the gay area in the center of Paris since the beginnings of the 1980s

For some participants (“desired community”), HIV risk was part of a series of dangers that threaten the group. Homophobia and stigmatisation are the main threats identified. For example, Louis⁷(48, HIV-negative) stressed the risk of suicide among young gay men. He pointed to the community’s failure to help young gay and bisexual men deal with the challenges they face. This confirmed his belief in an increasing individualism that undermines potential solidarity. This criticism is also present in his analysis of barebacking. According to Louis, who lived through the community’s intense mobilisation against AIDS in the 1990s, reduced vigilance against HIV risk has historic roots. He believes that gay men are shedding their preventive responsibilities.

Louis: People have the right to their opinions and act the way they want but I’ve got to say that I get annoyed and frustrated when I see someone knowingly taking risks. People are free to do what they want, but it’s too bad.

These comments were based on Louis’ experience with community groups and his experiential knowledge seems confirmed by what he reads in the gay media and the epidemiological information to which he has access. For Louis, the issue is not how many people participate in barebacking, but rather the phenomenon’s very existence. Claiming the right to take risks is interpreted here as an illustration of deteriorating community cohesion.

The importance of collective responsibility is clearly expressed in the idea that young gay men must be protected. For Albert (21, HIV-negative), “youth” should be a priority target for HIV-prevention. He stated that a responsible community must pass on its history and ethics of HIV prevention from generation to generation. This reflects a historic and political reading of the epidemic, one in which community membership implies remembering the people who died of AIDS in the 1980s and 1990s. Refusing high-risk sex is about “respecting” the deaths of both friends and strangers. According to Albert, people who claim the right to unprotected sex should not be a priority for prevention campaigns - their reprehensible choices should exclude them from targeted action:

Albert: People who choose to bareback, who knowingly have unprotected sex, they’re aware of what they’re doing... It’s better to warn people, to help them avoid the temptation to bareback, than to go to a group of barebackers and tell them that condoms are good. They already know that condoms are useful. The prevention message is already a non-starter for those people, in my opinion.

⁷ Discourses have been anonymised and all names are pseudonyms.

For Albert, barebackers are the exception, a minority whose choices endanger the community. He suggests that prevention efforts should concentrate on the more vulnerable young men who may be tempted to engage in unprotected sex. Thus, Albert employs a moral understanding of risk in his commentary on barebacking. Preserving the community requires isolating some (barebackers) in order to better take care of others (younger men).

For this group of respondents, critical of the gay community, the fact that certain gay people claim the right to have unsafe sex confirms the need to strengthen group structure.

Risk of stigmatisation

For participants who identify with the gay community (“lived community”), barebacking is seen differently. For these men, danger comes primarily from outside the group. They see the instrumental use of media discourses on barebacking as the potential stigmatisation of the gay community as a whole.

Several of these participants highlight the existence of sexual practices without condoms well before the emergence of the term barebacking. One of them was Stéphane (44), who has been HIV-positive since the middle of the 1980s and had always lived in the Paris region. His first lover died of AIDS in 1992. Assuming that the disease was a death sentence, he engaged in numerous sexual encounters without condoms, mainly with HIV-positive partners. He explains that, at the time, it was not difficult to meet men looking for unprotected sex:

Stéphane: I wasn't surprised when the debate about barebacking happened... it wasn't a new thing. It had always been my experience, so I didn't find that people were having more sex without condoms than before. I didn't see a difference.

Starting at the beginning of the 1990s, Stéphane regularly had sex without condoms. According to him, this is acceptable if partners have concordant HIV status. At the end of the decade, the public debate between Dustan and Lestrade provoked contradictory feelings in him. On the one hand, he was relieved that an HIV-positive gay man publicly admitted his unprotected sexual practices. It made him feel less isolated: “Finally, someone dares to say it out loud!” Stéphane explained that up until then he had tried, unsuccessfully, to understand his own irrational behaviour. Although he had never read Dustan's novels, this discourse established a positive point of reference. On the other hand, however, Stéphane was also ambivalent. An activist in an

AIDS organisation since his lover's death, he saw a contradiction between his message on the front lines (condom use) and his own sexual practices. Like Stéphane, other participants mentioned the existence of sexual practices without condoms well before barebacking began to be discussed in the media. Far from being an emerging and marginal practice, barebacking can be situated within a collective history of unprotected sex.

While some participants found the term barebacking problematic, others appropriated it. Guillaume (28, HIV-positive), for example, used the term barebacking to signify a certain type of sexuality characterised by the eroticisation of sperm and multiple partners. He claimed to have “two sexualities”. Although he uses a condom for anal penetration with his HIV-negative lover, he sometimes engaged in unprotected sex with others. Some of these other lovers were also HIV-positive, even though he disapproved of “serosorting”⁸. This distinction between sex with a committed partner and casual encounters is a reference point that helps him characterise and define barebacking:

Guillaume: When you're barebacking, you're not looking for 'love'. And then there's the whole sperm fantasy... I mean barebacking is really broad; it's really complicated. It's not just fucking without a condom [...] barebacking is, for me, about riding bareback. It really means doing it without a condom regardless of HIV status. I think that barebacking is an expression of a more... what am I trying to say? of a deeper sexuality that can be shared to the point of feeling a cock in your ass. When you wear a condom it's just not the same thing, obviously.

According to Guillaume, media attention has led to an oversimplification of the phenomenon, and even to a certain “moralism” in the gay press. He felt that barebackers lack visibility in these debates and that this invisibility reinforces caricatures of the phenomenon in the mainstream press. Moreover, he stated that sex without condoms should be discussed at the community level.

This analysis reveals two readings of a community facing the risk of HIV (see figure 2, below). The first reading (“desired community”) emphasises the importance of a health standard (the condom) anchored in a historically-based moral requirement. The second reading (“lived community”) sheds light on the protective role of community cohesion, thought to protect against the threat of stigmatisation from the outside and show solidarity toward risk-takers. Through these two interpretations, barebacking challenges collective norms and, in this particular case, participates in reinforcing participants' membership claims.

⁸The practice of selecting partners according to their HIV status.

Figure 2. Perceptions of barebacking among respondents (1) about here

Barebacking and Individualism

Barebacking: a matter of “free will”?

Some participants distanced themselves from the community lifestyle and this attitude influenced the way they perceived public debates on prevention and risk (“detached individual”). They considered the very notion of barebacking, a concept originating in the gay community, to be outside of their reality.

Analysis of respondents’ comments led to two main observations. The first is that several respondents harboured a strong mistrust of the gay scene. Jérémy (39, HIV-negative) offers a good example of this. He has always lived in Paris and has been in a relationship for 14 years. He believed that a community exists, particularly in “Le Marais”, Paris’ gay district, but he did not feel the need to be a part of it. He indicated that he feels fulfilled by his committed relationship and aspires to the same kind of normalcy as a heterosexual couple. He considers homosexuality to be only one element of his identity. In terms of HIV prevention, Jérémy is very pessimistic about the behaviour he observes among gay men. For him, barebacking is evidence of a general lack of awareness about HIV. Since combination therapy drastically reduced mortality rates from HIV, gay men are much less afraid of catching it and are less informed about the consequences of the disease. This pessimistic view has led to a distanced and critical view of prevention debates between HIV organisations such as AIDES and Act Up-Paris. The decline in preventive behaviours, for Jérémy, confirms the validity of this criticism of the gay community and proves the group’s inability to take care of its members. Having never been in a community organisation, he does not think that he will find a place within the gay community. He does not believe in the possibility of effective collective action and therefore prefers to keep his distance from public debates on HIV and continues to live his life away from the community.

This critical detachment reflects the will to act outside of community norms. The discourse of Nicolas (24, unknown HIV status) also demonstrates this view. For him, debate on barebacking appeared distant and unrelated to his experience of prevention. He felt that he was capable of

“saying no” to someone who proposes having unprotected sex with him. As a result, he does not feel threatened by the existence of intentional unprotected practices. When asked about his view on barebacking as a collective phenomenon, he stated that he is not in a position to offer a general opinion, but feels that lying about HIV status may be a “criminal” issue. He linked his feelings of disconnectedness to his distance from the gay community. The existence of risky practices is not something that he feels concerns him.

Interviewer: Right now there is a lot of debate about barebacking, responsibility, etc. Is that something that concerns you?

Nicolas: I’m not in a position to judge. Of course, there’s something criminal about it... In the end I don’t really care because it doesn’t concern me. It may concern other gay men, but I don’t consider myself part of a community, I mean, it doesn’t concern people close to me. Once again it shows how I’m not part of a community. I don’t get the impression that it has anything to do with people close to me. I see them as people who do their own thing.. It really doesn’t concern me. I’m not involved in all that.

This same group of respondents was not particularly interested in the public debates on barebacking because they take place within a group to which they felt they did not belong. However, the issue of preventive responsibility is not entirely absent. Nicolas emphasised free will and situated ethical issues at the level of the individual, commenting that people can “do what they want”.

Prevention and “shared responsibility”

Another group of participants positioned themselves outside the community and perceived barebacking somewhat differently (“socialised individual”). Past or present participation in the gay community implies greater interest in the phenomenon. Unlike the previous group, these participants did not reject the term barebacking. In fact, almost all of them discussed its meaning. Does it only refer to encounters between casual partners? Does it imply a wilful desire to transmit HIV? Their comments often implied a desire to de-homosexualise barebacking- many noted that there has also been a decline in prevention among heterosexuals. The thoughts of the respondents in this group suggest that they have very mixed social networks (gay/straight). The attitudes and behaviours of heterosexual friends towards HIV prevention has demonstrated to them that risky sexual practices are not limited to gay men. None of them referred to the difference in prevalence

of HIV between gay and straight populations, which affirms that the gay community is not an important point of reference for their experience.

Eric (20, HIV-negative) rarely goes out to the gay district, but has gradually formed a network of gay male friends not tied to conventional social spaces (bars, nightclubs, etc.). Although he acknowledges the existence of a community, he does not feel the need to claim membership. Currently, Eric volunteers with a local LGBT organisation while remaining critical of the notion of gay pride. As an individual and a gay activist, he is interested in community debates on HIV prevention. He criticises the strategies developed by Act Up-Paris because they focus exclusively on barebackers and portray them as irresponsible. He feels that, in most situations that involve risk, both partners share the responsibility:

Eric: Personally, I have a big problem with Act Up and people like that who are so horrible to barebackers... treating them like 'criminals', 'monsters', even 'serial killers', and I have a huge problem with that! [...] This is because I feel that it's not just the barebackers' responsibility. I mean, when I meet someone and want to sleep with him, I know what the risks are. I don't ask him about his HIV status beforehand. [...] It seems to me that when you sleep with someone you assume a certain responsibility: either you protect yourself or you don't. Either you use condoms for everything and there's no risk or you don't use them for everything and you accept the risk.

According to Eric, the debate is about shared responsibility in prevention. But far from perceiving responsibility as "free will", he proposes a relational reading involving all participants in a given sexual interaction. Other respondents questioned the relevance of public debate on barebacking. They consider condoms an obvious means of effective protection and the fact that certain people consciously reject their use seems absurd to them.

The notion of shared responsibility developed here by Eric is situated within a normative context of sexual interaction. The community is never mentioned. Comments from Loïc (37, HIV-negative) reflect this view of HIV risk. He considers condom use an individual choice that involves the will to protect oneself. But this choice also involves the partner, insofar as he accepts (or not) to have unprotected sexual contact. According to Loïc, a responsible attitude is an "adult" behaviour, a term that implies risk consciousness.

Interviewer: Do you think that prevention is slipping?

Loïc: Yes, there's less discussion of prevention. And then there's the infamous barebacking phenomenon. So...I don't really know what to think. I think that, really,

if you have sex with someone you have to be responsible. Personally I don't really want to say, "Are you HIV positive?", to someone. You know? If he doesn't say anything and doesn't use a condom, he knows what he's doing. He's willing to take a risk with me.

Interviewer: Or you with him?

Yes. Some people say it's criminal, I'm not so sure. You have to be an adult. People have to be responsible for their own actions. It's not murder.

For Loïc, being an adult means behaving responsibly and being responsible for one's own behaviour. For him, the gay community is not the regulating authority on prevention. By refusing to consider barebacking a strictly criminal act, Loïc implicitly refers to judicial authority, but he only qualifies the explicit intention of transmitting HIV (e.g. by lying about one's HIV status) as a criminal practice, and not the act of barebacking in and of itself.

Two readings of responsibility can be identified. The first involves the autonomy and ability to protect oneself regardless of external norms ("detached individual"). In the second, the decision whether or not to use condoms may differ depending on the sexual partner ("socialised individual"). These two approaches reflect different conceptions of the gay community. For those who feel that they are distant or excluded from the gay community, their sexual behaviours were not always the same. Ultimately, two moral readings of risk emerge: one that emphasises freedom of choice and the other that highlights shared responsibility.

Figure 3, Perceptions of barebacking among respondents (2) [about here](#)

Discussion

The objective of this paper has been to analyse the cultural contexts of moral reasoning of gay men regarding HIV prevention. This analysis looks at social contexts in order to better understand how respondents perceive the barebacking phenomenon. The objective was to uncover their definitions of this word and the meanings they attributed to it according to social context. Several common features appear in the interviews. Firstly, participants were all familiar with the term. The gay media's coverage of barebacking over the last decade has contributed to the term being familiar to gay men no matter how close they considered themselves to be to the gay community.

Secondly, this phenomenon is the focus of strong moral shaming, even among people who claim the right to have sex without condoms. Lastly, barebacking reveals several different conceptions of responsibility concerning prevention and diverse interpretations of the social world. Beyond the term's multiple meanings, which have already been demonstrated, several other uses of the term barebacking emerge, many of which are of significance because of the uniqueness of the French-speaking world, and because the term initially had no significance in the French language⁹.

The typology presented in this article does however have some limitations. Firstly, it creates a categorisation that inevitably tends to be reductive of the diversity of experiences of the men interviewed. This analytic tool utilises several significant factors which influence the way that these gay men perceive risk. An endeavour such as this one necessarily places more focus on some factors rather than others such as age/generation and each individual's path towards the acceptance of their own sexuality for example. Secondly, the sample was composed of cisgendered men, mostly white and middleclass and, as such, the analysis does not directly address issues surrounding gender, race or class. These factors should be addressed through further research. The choice was made in this study to focus firstly on the complex relationship between the self and gay community in the context of barebacking.

In this paper, the gay community is considered as a significant notion for gay men. This does not necessarily imply that they all feel a sense of belonging to it. This way of viewing relationships among same sex attracted men does not presume that they have set forms of social organisation (Holt 2011). For certain participants, the community appeared as a moral authority; for others, it was a place of support. For those who felt most distanced from the community, they did, however, consider it to be a place of interest for them for certain activities (sexual and platonic encounters), even though they did not feel they were a part of it. In fact, gay men spoke to us of community on two levels: socio-political (feeling of belonging or distance) and personal (their social network). These two levels of analysis seem inextricably linked and can help explain the normative context around HIV prevention.

In order to comprehend how the concept of the barebacking has been received in France, one has to understand the political context of homosexuality in the country. From a French Republican

⁹Though the term "bareback" has not significance in French, coincidentally, depending on how it is pronounced, it may sound like the colloquial "barebaque", which may evoke the barbecue or meat.

perspective, the notion of community is suspect in the eyes of public health officials. But HIV organisations also have some trouble with the concept of community: an analysis of this controversy reveals that the disagreements around risk-taking are rooted in different perceptions and conceptions of gay community. In this perspective, those affirming collective norms are confronted with a problem defining them, but also with the question of their legitimacy. In other words, both expert and profane discourse on barebacking in France is influenced by the politically-charged nature of the notion of barebacking in this context.

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Figure 1: Four cultural contexts

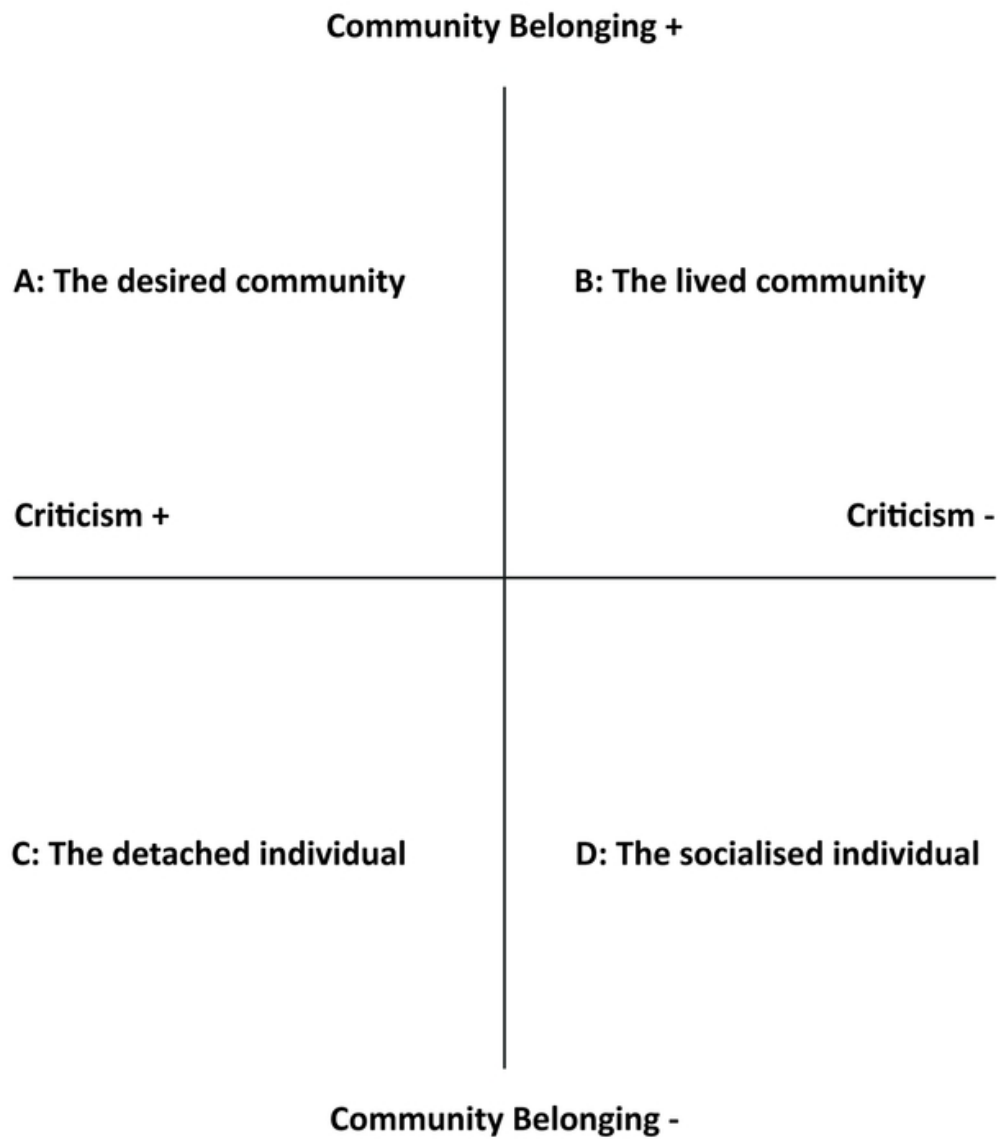


Figure 2: Perceptions of barebacking among respondents (1)

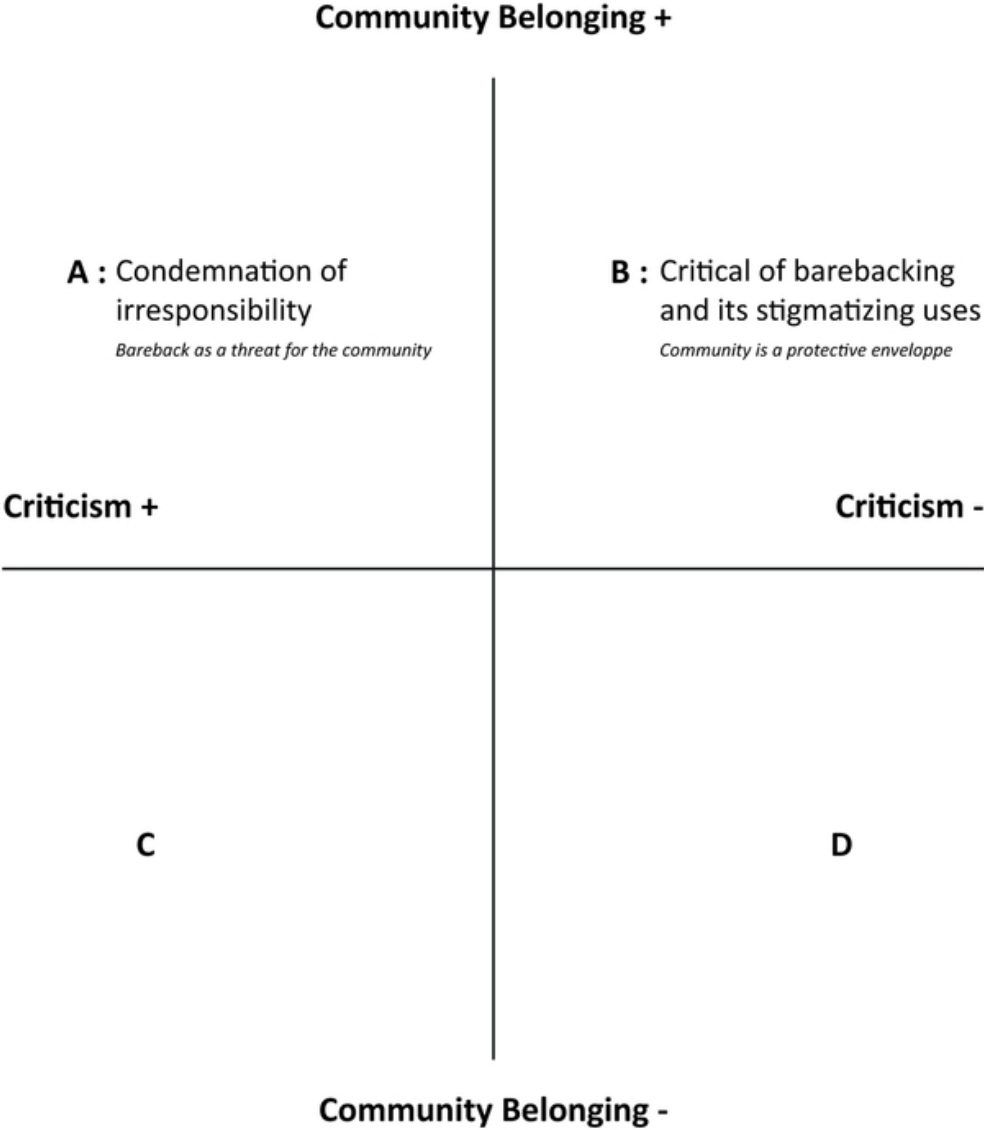


Figure 3: Perceptions of barebacking among respondents (2)

