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## “Just Getting Off”: The Inseparability of Ejaculation and Hegemonic Masculinity

*This paper offers the notion of the “ejaculation imperative” to describe the theoretical and pragmatic processes by which physiological ejaculation becomes intrinsically inseparable from discourses of time, sexual performance and social expectations. By applying theories about male bodies originated by Susan Bordo and Lenore Tiefer and while expanding on Judith Halberstam’s concept of “queering” repronormative time, I illustrate the complex negotiations social actors play in the development of hegemonic notions of masculinity through the ejaculation response. By offering this critique, this paper attempts to complexify the seemingly “natural” relationships drawn about physiological sexual performativity and what it means to be male in contemporary US society.*

**Keywords:** masculinity, queer, sexuality, ejaculation, hegemony

Understanding how male anatomy operates and more importantly, the meaning attached to the male body’s anatomical function, directly affects how masculine identity is socially constructed, understood, and perpetuated while also offering insights into why those meanings persist in the dominant culture. I offer the notion of the “ejaculation imperative” to describe and explain how the anatomical function of ejaculation embodies and perpetuates dominant masculine identity. I argue that ejaculation symbolically represents “maleness” within the United States, where males are taught from a young age to produce an erection that results in ejaculation, thereby learning to inextricably link their identity with their physiological performance. For many adolescent males in the United States, ejaculation is a common rite of passage that has powerful symbolism. Adolescent males who have achieved this physiological ability are seen as to have “become men” in a way that other males who have yet to develop this anatomical ability are not and therefore deemed inferior (Diamond, 2002). The social meaning attributed to ejaculation is powerfully equated with the dominant masculine identity.

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To date within dominant US culture, ejaculation is imbued with meaning as the single most important event in which all sex acts must result. Other sexual partners, reifying the hegemonic discourses of power that define masculinity in US society, can also negatively interpret sexual nonconformity to this socially constructed ideal. Sexual “success” is contextually linked to the mechanics of time and performance. Socially dominant males aspire to be “genuinely” male by producing an ejaculative response according to a rigidly observed and ruthlessly imposed timing; ejaculation at every sex act becomes necessary, because the social value of this physiological function demands their conformity and punishes failure by indicting the validity of their “maleness”.

From pop cultural examples found in *Saturday Night Live* skits like “Jizz In My Pants”<sup>1</sup>, to pornographic movies by such performers as “Johnny Castle”<sup>2</sup> (whose scenes cross sexual boundaries) or “Brent Everett” (2008) (for gay male audiences) both notable for their sexual performances, there are numerous examples in which this superficially seeming, innocuous physiological function becomes powerfully equated with *the* masculine ideal. Indeed, the “ejaculation imperative” is imbued with such high social value as a signifier of sexual success, that it can be found throughout all forms of pornography regardless of the race, culture, or sexual identity of the actors. The ability to ejaculate, the quantity of semen produced, and the forcefulness of their ejaculation all become the hallmark of a hegemonic masculine ideal, to which males aspire.

#### INTERPRETATIONS OF AND THROUGH MALE BODIES

The penis and its “successful” physiological operation is crucially important for an “acceptable” masculine identity because, as Susan Bordo simply points out “... not all sexual body parts scream out their gender and definitively as the penis does” (1999, p. 23). And it is in this way that the “ejaculation imperative” operates as a perfect metaphor for a “masculinity that demands constant performance from men” (1999, p. 34). Bordo argues persuasively for rethinking the “metaphors for manhood,” while also advocating that endeavor include the tacit acknowledgement of biological and anatomical differences (1999, p. 64). Unlike Bordo, I do not focus on the penis, how it is constructed or what it means to a man in a phallogocentric society; I start from a position that notes within our dominant culture how ejaculation and the mechanisms of time and performance define “success,” which in turn cause this imperative to become the embodiment of men’s masculinity. The “biometaphors” that Bordo identifies apply not simply to the penis itself but also what it “produces” and how that “production” is codified in the mind of social actors participating in phallic sex acts. In much the same way, Tiefer comments on scholarship regarding the “naturalness” of human sexual response. Tiefer (2004) furthers this argument by commenting on the need for a fundamental, physiological origin in “nature” by the medical professions, when discussing human sexual response.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.hulu.com/watch/47604/saturday-night-live-digital-short-j-in-my-pants>

<sup>2</sup> <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=7414411429038494723#>

I submit that the term natural is used so frequently in sexologic discourse because of rhetorical needs for justifications and legitimacy. Nature and natural argues to persuade, not to describe or to give information. (p. 33)

However, the “ejaculation imperative” operates by utilizing these exact “bio-metaphors” that Bordo has identified and Tiefer has elucidated, by capitalizing on a sexual partner’s capitulation to expectations surrounding the value of ejaculation. Indeed as Tiefer suggests, the “ejaculation imperative” is an example of the “biological reductionism which separates genital sexual performance from personalities, relationships, conduct, context, and values but also overvalues the former at the expense of the latter” (Tiefer, 2004, p. 61). It is in this way that ejaculation essentially means “male” in the same way that penis operates in phallogentric society; but ejaculation by female bodies does not carry the same ideological weight because the “ejaculation imperative” operates for and through an exclusively masculine identity regardless of anatomical abilities (Kok, 2004, p. 13).

Similarly, the ejaculation imperative theory questions the “allusions to procreation (which) inevitably connects sexuality to gender, reminding us of the necessary roles of biological male and female” (Tiefer, 2004, p. 135). There is a psychic importance associated with the penis in a phallogentric society and most especially, what it produces. In much the same way, that semen exudes the “odor of masculinity” (Holmes, 2005), an erection of the penis performs the same function, when “successfully” operating through ejaculation. The “ejaculation imperative” seeks to distinguish between the “phallogentric beliefs (which) burden and pressure men, at the same time maintain sexual privilege” (Tiefer, 2004, p. 204) of and for men, from the needs of the “naturalized erection” associated with the social constructions of male genitalia which define masculinity. To analyze how the “ejaculation imperative” operates, I conduct a detailed sociocultural examination of male anatomy and its physiological function in the ejaculatory response. The value of this knowledge helps to explain the uniformity of men’s sexual experiences and the complex physiological processes, which precede ejaculation, as well as providing an explanatory, theoretical framework by which “timing” and “success” are wedded giving sociocultural value to male sexual performance.

#### THE PHYSIOLOGY OF MALE EJACULATION

In much the same way that Ann Koedt (1970) advocates a rethinking about the anatomical functions for female bodies, I argue that ejaculation is similarly misconstrued as the physical manifestation of hegemonic masculine identity. Koedt’s analysis reveals that information or ideas about female reproductive organs have been conveniently misconstrued and therefore the resulting confusion about the locus of orgasm for women required a closer examination. Koedt’s analysis powerfully illustrates how the social mechanisms of confusion contribute to the greater weakening of women’s authority over their own sexuality. The socially misunderstood process of female arousal, arousal’s physiological origin, and the cultural importance imbued in this

process is equally implicated in male genitalia and male bodies as a geographic, social space.

Human anatomy continues to complicate questions about male genitalia’s uses socially. Evolutionary purposes required for reproduction, do not preclude recognizing that the use by human bodies in sex acts is multifaceted, and is not exclusively procreative. Therefore, it begs the question “why society attributes specific, privileged meanings to sex acts performed by male anatomy and, why do those meaning persist?” Male identity and masculinity are intricately connected in the minds of men. But this conceptual connection stands in stark contrast to the actual physiological brevity of the ejaculation response. The typical male ejaculation lasts for approximately 17 seconds, but can occur for only a few seconds or last for up to almost a minute. Once ejaculation begins contractions of ejaculate of approximately 10 to 15 gradually decrease in frequency ... occurring at an average of .6 seconds and increase to .1 second per contraction (Guha, 1975).

Ejaculation is imbued with such high social value, yet research shows that it can occur *at most* for only 60 seconds. The fact that ejaculation occurs within such a minute period of time begs the question, why then is such a seemingly brief anatomical operation privileged so highly? Time is a frame through which sexual “success” becomes socially measured, thus duration in some cultures is ascribed a privileged status that both produces and perpetuates definable boundaries of masculinity itself. Understanding how these boundaries are erected is intricately linked to Judith Halberstam’s (2005) description of how “queer” time operates as a mechanism of comprehending life “unscripted by the conventions of family, inheritance and child rearing” (p. 2).

Temporal logics define and constrain how men come to recognize their social standing within a hegemonic hierarchy of masculinity (and thus themselves) based primarily on their ejaculative performance. Halberstam’s critique directly challenges the mainstream discourses that illustrate the rhetorically material ways in which dominant ideology are ideologically disciplined through bodily interpellation. Halberstam’s argument about how bodies operate socially, in conjunction with dominant notions about masculinity, suggests a fluidity that belies how bodies physiological malleability exist in today’s society. This observation is especially important to how the ejaculation imperative operates for ostensibly “male” bodies, both physiologically and socially. Indeed, the physiological malleability of human genitalia serves as a shift in how social meaning can transgress the boundaries of our socially defined expectations.

Similarly, performance expectations and sexual response reflect parallel temporal constraints under which male bodies operate and are situated along lines of socially constructed (and thus “appropriate”) parameters. Brekhuis observed that within U.S. society, those males who take too long to ejaculate are deemed sexually ineffective, while those who ejaculate “prematurely” are similarly deemed sexually inferior (1996). However, this temporal trap extends its reach to men based on age; adolescent men and young men are compelled by the ejaculation imperative to sexually perform consistently and reliably *over time*. The expectation in both the duration of ejaculation and its performative qualities (as in how their sexual partners view it) becomes a standard by which men are subsequently held accountable.

Generally, men experience increasingly diminishing physiological returns (in terms of their ejaculation ability, responsiveness, and volume) as they anatomically age, yet these temporally defined consequences have costs in the inflexibility of the social expectations forced upon men. The dramatic popularity of *Viagra* and similar medications serve as an excellent example of a pharmaceutical remedy to this socially constructed “problem.” However there are no pharmaceutical remedies that will temporarily (or temporarily) extend the duration, volume, or frequency of a male’s ejaculation response; only the erection, which *may or may not result in* an ejaculation. That uncertainty *itself* further exacerbates the social stigma associated with a man’s ability to ejaculate despite the (sometimes pharmaceutically induced) presence of an erection (or in spite of it).

Halberstam’s critique about the “time of reproduction” ruled by a “biological clock” for women, also applies to men in terms of the reliability of their ejaculative ability based on similar principles of repro-normative time. Timing becomes a crucial standard within American society whereby men are both evaluated and evaluate their own sexual abilities. Men who have sex infrequently are assigned a negative social marker, while men who engage in sex frequently are deemed as virile “studs.” Perversely, or perhaps as a result of this rigid time schedule, research has revealed that early puberty among adolescent males has resulted in higher incidences of mental health problems, truancy and bullying primarily due to a lack of coping mechanisms for the social stigma and consequences their physiological development creates (Kaltiala-Heino, 2003). Along the dimension of time lies another scale that penalizes men for not having sex soon enough or being seen as having their first sexual encounter “too late” in life (Brekhus, 1996). This phenomenon was popularized through the movie, *The 40 Year Old Virgin* that satirically alludes to the absurdity of this temporal scale (Apatow, 2005). Time continually serves as a frame of reference to, and as a framework within which, male bodies are expected to operate. Necessarily then, how time operates across differing cultural dimensions will therefore serve to further clarify how the ejaculation imperative works transgressively across phenotypically and genetically different, “male” bodies.

#### INTERPRETATIONS OF EJACULATION

Cultural influences have a strong connection with the interpretation of meanings attributed to ejaculation. A trans-cultural interpretation of ejaculation’s operation by the body produces a wide variety of responses. There is ample evidence that men do not necessarily experience the same physical sensations during ejaculation, across all cultures. For some, such as Yan Sogiru from Japan, “The ejaculation is an act of excretion.” This variation in post ejaculatory, sexual sensation has also been alternatively interpreted as a simple process of evacuation. “The sexual arousal of man is like putting up with the want to urinate. Hence, men’s sexy feelings disappear after ejaculation, just like when we experience the refreshing feeling of urinating” (Bunko, 1992). The psychologist Wilhelm Reich (1989) wrote that for some men, “The sexual act is nothing but an

evacuation, followed by a reaction of disgust” (p. 164). The wide variety of interpretations associated with ejaculation and semen range from fear, anxiety, and repulsion but can also include pleasure excitement and exhilaration.

Non-normative reactions about ejaculation represent external influences, which affect a given individual’s sexual responsiveness. Culturally distinctive sexual practices of gay men are similarly situated to, though distinct from, brown male bodies. Contextualizing how the ejaculation imperative operates in trans-cultural milieus, Holmes describes one sexual practice in which some same-sex male couples regularly engage. “Bareback sex” is a sexual practice in which homosexual men voluntarily engage in unprotected anal intercourse, with the explicit purpose of semen exchange. The operation of ejaculation by the body can manifest value in a variety of forms. This is particularly true in the above example in which semen is highly invested in penetrative sex acts by gay men.

Discussing the social importance for some queer men in “bareback sex” acts as a mechanism of identity making, Holmes noted that queer masculinity is intimately related to the ejaculation imperative. He states, “It is clear that semen exchange is not an accidental byproduct of the practice of bareback sex, but in many ways is the very *raison d’etre* of the activities held by our interviewees. Men need to share semen, and healthcare workers try to “stop” the sharing ... many men commented that semen exchange was necessary for a feeling of “connectednesses.” The semen given to a partner was a “gift,” and refuse it was a kind of affront to their practices” (Holmes, 2005).

Academic literature is replete with research on the notion of semen as a gift, an endowment or commodity (Tober, 2001), specifically within the anthropology (Herdt, 1982) and historical disciplines (Godelier, 2003). However, few academic inquiries regarding the process by which semen is produced have been made, much less the meanings associated with it for the purposes of theoretical discussion (Moore, 2007). The eroticization of possibly contaminated semen gives a clear and powerful demonstration of how the “ejaculation imperative” occurs in Holmes’s example.

Extensive factual information exists about the social importance of ejaculation in social settings and researchers have uncovered substantial evidence, from historical 1970’s era evidence of “circle jerks” in popular culture as a gratifying sexually, safe alternatives (Farrell, 1972); the ubiquity of bathroom graffiti about ejaculation (Farr, 1975); locker-room talk (Sabo, 1994); preferential sexual practices of male sex workers (Luckenbill, 1985) and references to “blue balls” colloquially attempting to hypothesize about the psychologically sexual frustration they “feel” when arousal does not culminate with ejaculation all indicate a resilient persistence and importance ascribed to ejaculation. Mechling describes an especially thorough and potent explanation of the ejaculation imperative’s historical resiliency where the author systematically diagrams the complex and convoluted evolution over time of adolescent Boy Scout sexual behaviors in opposition to the official discourses employed in the Boy Scout handbook. The “official” handbook’s successive editions illustrate an increasing ambiguity about the physiological functioning of ejaculation, that reveal a long “social history of controlling the dangerous adolescent male body” originating as early as 1904.

Mechling (2001) notes, "... boys have no clear marker of sexual maturity, though the ability to have an orgasm and ejaculate comes close. Immature boys can get some pleasure out of the rubbing involved with masturbation, but the real signal of maturity is ejaculation" (p. 192). Most importantly however, Mechling's observes that

The fragility of the construction, maintenance and constant repair of masculinity means that the boy and then the man must constantly "prove" his masculinity. Masculinity is never a state comfortably obtained and occupied; each day sees a new onslaught of assaults and tests. Masculinity is a project never complete. It is the "precarious achievement" of masculinity, as Frosh puts it, that is the central condition of men's lives. (p. 198)

Hegemonically dominant men are therefore expected to produce an erect penis and to maintain an erect penis throughout a sexual act. The erect penis represents a need whose fulfillment must be reconciled. Once erect, the penis is given meaning through the representation of its purpose; its use is compelled by its presence. Bordo accurately discusses how sex acts as a thing to accomplish. Bordo's observation is one that is based on an expectation, within a window of temporal availability and ability. Ejaculation is the sine qua non of "successful" sexual acts for males (2003, p. 12). Indeed the penis is a metaphor of phallic power and the non-erect penis is rendered inadequate and useless, its potential unfulfilled (Bordo, 1999). Sexual ability is identified through the performance of the penis; its potency and ability to procreate is uniformly a requirement of male identity and employed in the perpetuation of that identity (Tiefer, 2004).

#### THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE MASCULINE MALE

The identification of sexual ability through ejaculation constitutes a concerted effort to sustain and perpetuate hegemonic masculinity by preserving ejaculation as a privileged method of identifiable, tangible "maleness." Sexuality is situational and not all sexual acts are available or preferred; the socio-cultural definition of sexual performance affects the understanding of sexual ability (Stoltenber, 1990). How sexual behaviors and attitudes are produced and maintained are proportional to an understanding of what ejaculation constitutes for a given population. The perpetuation of hegemonic masculine ideals by men through their collusion serves to limit the opportunity to reconstruct their sexual abilities and autonomy. Essentializing behaviors occurs when values are attributed to a given sexual act. The narrow confines within which male sexual performance is evaluated prevents alternative masculinities from being constituted thereby perpetuating the basis upon which hegemonic male identity is perpetuated. Tiefer examines the beliefs about sexuality and sexual performance, which are centered on genitalia. These beliefs include the presumption of male ability and willingness for the initiation, aggressive and active participation, satisfaction, and completion of exclusively heterosexual sex acts, culminating in ejaculation consistently over time (Tiefer, 2004, p. 143).

Feminist theorists like Bordo, Tiefer, and others have given much attention to the erect penis, but not necessarily, how it operates in signification; uniformly men in the United States understand an erection provides “agency to their sexual pleasure,” but masculinity and identity become essentialized with potency, virility, and sexual adequacy to its detriment. The “ejaculation imperative” works to support idealized hegemonic masculinity by confirming the legitimacy of sexual adequacy identified through male genitalia. Performing the “mission” of sexual virility and adequacy is furthered by the “ejaculation imperative” by perpetuating male dominance operating within the sexual realm, in which men have a hierarchical position of supremacy. According to Stoltenberg, men who are born with external genitalia “aspire to feel and act unambiguously male” simply by virtue of construction (Stoltenberg, 1990).

This position falsely presupposes (1) the meaning of male anatomical use, through erection and ejaculatory results and (2) the veracity of an “authentically” masculine sexual identity. Dominant males unnecessarily strive to reproduce behaviors that are socially valued because they produce feelings of belonging; the “ejaculation imperative” in U.S. society powerfully fulfills both objectives simultaneously. The performance of the physiological process confirms the person’s ability and anatomical functioning but not actual potency and secondly, the “ejaculation imperative” furthers the goal of conformity; with each successive sexual act, the certainty of that individuals membership in the group identified by that particular anatomical operation, is reconfirmed (Bulter, 1990). That confirmation is always subject to limitations on time and the pervasive need to reconfirm and reauthorize one’s male authenticity, continually eroded by the days, weeks, months, and years that pass from one moment to the next.

#### ALTERNATIVE MASCULINITIES, BODIES, AND SOCIAL MEANING(S)

Dominant males feel a “real” sense of being a “male” both because of the evidence of their ability to perform a sex act *and* the value attributed to the performance of that sex act by others who privilege it over other sexual acts. Much in the same way that the sex act is a “very good example of the correlation between doing a specific act ... and sensing the specificity of the sexual identity to which one aspires,” (Stoltenberg, 1990, p. 36) ejaculation produces similar results. Ejaculation reproduces with tangible and reaffirming results, the veracity of an individual’s identification with their own masculinity.

Alternatively Halberstam notes that masculinity is not reducible to exclusively “male” physiological characteristics or features. While those same ostensibly “male” physiological characteristics and features becomes important for *some*, though not all, FTM transsexuals who seek to access an “authentic,” e.g., socially cognizable “male” self. Defining ourselves through our sexual abilities is a trap that we set ourselves as Reid-Pharr notes that “It is surprising, then, that ... theory has so infrequently addressed the question of how we inhabit our various bodies especially how we fuck, or rather, what we think when we fuck” (Halberstam, 1998).

Most important to this analysis however, is Halbertam’s useful suggestion that “Masculinity ... has important relations to maleness, increasingly interesting relations

to transsexual maleness” it nevertheless remains “what we make of it.” The ejaculative imperative consolidates biological masculinity as the only form of legitimate masculinity, thereby rendering female and trans-masculinities as bad copies. It is equally important that an analysis of the ejaculation imperative look to alternative masculinities in addition to how the process comparatively affects dominant male demographics. As Stoltenberg correctly points out “... sexuality does not have a gender; it creates a gender” and it does this by encouraging those who utilize their sexuality as a method of confirmation *over time*, for their individual sense of belonging and membership. While admittedly some FTM transsexuals “do not define their transsexuality in relation to a strong desire for penises ... and [they] may experience the desire to be trans or queer more strongly than the desire to be male or female,” FTM transsexuals who *do* seek to cross the “two territories of male and female, divided by a flesh border” are implicated in the system of ejaculation, timing, social meaning and relationships that the penis and its performance suggests. Through the participation in sex-based commodification of ejaculatory rewards, FTM transsexuals potentially can *both* fulfill their sense of physiological selfhood while potentially illustrating the transition and mobility of alternative masculinities in a tangible and observable way.

#### NORMATIVE TEMPORALITY

By examining how the ejaculation imperative functions through discourses of time, power and social meaning, we can approach a new way of seeing how hegemonic masculinity continues to function. Producing counter-hegemonic discourses of masculinity, like those advocated by Stoltenberg and Bordo is one possible solution. U.S. society must begin to disentangle the definitions between how masculinity is defined through bodily performance according to schedules of time. More research must be undertaken to examine unanswered questions like, how can the temporal cycle of “adolescence” and “maturity” be examined against male bodies.

Halberstam’s queering of time through the stretching of adolescence suggests that her notion of queer time remains faithful to a linear and heteronormative temporal engagement, or “straight time.” The construction and perpetuation of masculine tropes of sexual ability and physiological, genital function for dominant males in U.S. society are intricately linked to dangerous cultural myths that serve as a mechanism of social control. These behavioral tropes provide a cautionary tale about developmental failure or success, based on a framework of time and performance. Time continues to operate as an unchallenged discrete and autonomous process that reifies dominant social expectations of male sexual performance, despite evidence, which suggests such connections are tenuous at best. Halberstam’s research rejects the assumed naturalness of heteronormative narratives of “correct” and “natural” development within a frame of “queer time,” that indicts linguistic terms of “old,” “young,” “adult,” “youth,” which mark negotiated, fluid and culturally specific meanings. In heteronormative reproductive systems, premised upon procreation, “natural” is assumed and constructed as the social script which creates the expectation of intergenerational relationships between parent, child, and grandparent.

This temporally defined framework, as Halberstam illustrates, is a fictive social creation that obscures the social value of those intergenerational relationships for non-dominant demographics like gay men who do not necessarily possess those relationships or the reciprocal benefits of generativity. The ejaculation imperative theorizes that the social references to time that equate sexual performance and ejaculation within temporally defined frameworks, denies alternative masculinities legitimacy while also constraining dominant males sexual agency free from social expectations. Heteronormative temporal stories tell happily ever after narratives ... monogamous love, marriage, and procreation provides the honor of respectful sexual citizenship and identification within a future worth embracing. On the other side, there is punishment and misery for those who fail to embrace and perform the assumed rightness of, or fail to identify with heteronormative structures for future building. The future shifts from a site of identification to the experience of alienation (Goltz, 2010, p. 833).

Sexual ability and performance are thus one important physiological manifestation that either reifies or rejects the temporal frames of reference upon which society relies. The ejaculation imperative attempts to deterritorialize male bodies as a site upon which social meaning constructs these frames. We must critically examine how the vigilant social policing of time and cultural markers of deviance are inextricably linked within larger discourses about how maleness and masculinity are connected to the body's functioning. If masculine identity construction and maintenance involves the asymmetrical, yet concomitant development to these concepts, then it is especially important for men of all varieties to examine how these connections and conditions of being are perpetuated along the lines of linear time in perpetuity. Failure to examine these issues will doom men to a future of today's status quo.

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