
The meanings and practices of barebacking among Brazilian internet users

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Abstract This article originates from an online ethnography on barebacking (intentional unprotected anal sex) in Brazil, between the years 2004 and 2008. More specifically, some elements or conceptual dimensions present in discussions on barebacking will be examined. Based on internet discussion forums and 23 open online interviews, using the Windows Live Messenger program, it was possible to organise the practice of barebacking into two principal modalities: more extensive and involving greater contact and partial or involving reduced risks. The individuals who practise bareback sex may experience situations that include various forms of barebacking during their lives, such as the men who contract HIV and try to develop strategies to reduce the risks in their sexual interactions by, for example, avoiding ejaculating inside their partner or trying to establish sexual relationships with men of the same serological status. Therefore, in general, the different motivations for barebacking constitute a frontier region (of tension) between the pleasure of sensory contact and the risk of infection. Beyond producing a dichotomy between pleasure and risk, the various meanings described by the potential barebackers must be taken into account.

Keywords: HIV/AIDS, barebacking, men who have sex with men, risk, internet

Introduction

The basis of this article is the discussion on the increased risk of HIV infection and other sexually transmittable diseases among men who have sex with men (MSM) in the context of different industrialised regions of the world (Elford 2006) such as Europe (Adam *et al.* 2000), North America (Chen *et al.* 2002) and other regions of the Americas (Organización Panamericana de la Salud 2001), including Brazil (Brasil 2007, Da Silva *et al.* 2005). More specifically, this article deals with barebacking, defined in general terms as intentional unprotected anal sex among males (Carballo-Diégues and Bauermeister 2004, Halkitis *et al.* 2003, Shernoff 2006, Suarez and Miller 2001), a practice that exists in despite of differences and ambiguities in its meanings regarding the type of relationship between the partners involved and their serological status and whether or not the notion of intentionality is shared by both partners.

In order to provide a better definition of this concept, Mansergh *et al.* (2002) described barebacking as an intentional act of anal sex without the use of condoms between men who are not primary partners. In the opinion of these authors, some aspects are central: the intentionality of the behaviour, the unprotected anal sex, the type of sexual relationship and the context in which the sexual behaviour occurs, which should not involve a situation of negotiated protection. Wolitski (2005) defines barebacking as intentional anal sex without the use of a condom except when practised by primary HIV-negative partners who maintain a mutually monogamous relationship or when it is practised within a relationship of negotiated protection. With this, the author seeks to include different forms of intentional, unprotected anal sex, for example, sex between primary sero-discordant partners or between primary sero-concordant HIV-positive partners as long as the relationship represents a risk of infection or reinfection to one of the partners.

These discussions highlight some transformations, appropriations and different uses of the concept of barebacking that extend beyond more or less established definitions. The study conducted by Huebner *et al.* (2006) with MSM, in addition to highlighting the principal definition of barebacking as 'any act of unprotected anal sex' irrespective of the type of partner or the intentionality of the act, also underlines being in a 'relationship' or 'negotiated safety' as constituting the most common reason for participating in barebacking, followed by a heightened 'physical sensation'. As discussed in the article published by Elford *et al.* (2007), it should be emphasised that some HIV-positive men who use the term barebacking to describe the practice of anal sex without a condom also fail to take into consideration whether the act was intentional or not.

Currently, the practice of barebacking also appears to extrapolate the nuances of the version known as bug chasing, which is when an HIV-negative man deliberately seeks out an HIV-positive man in order to become infected with the virus (Gauthier and Forsyth 1999), seeking to overcome a difference and share the same serological status of a community (Riggs 2006). It should be remarked that this form of bug-chasing interaction cannot be generalised, since many barebackers appear to be indifferent to the serological status of their potential partners (Tewksbury 2003) or actively seek sero-concordant partners (Halkitis *et al.* 2003, Mansergh *et al.* 2002). In the study conducted by Grov and Parsons (2006), for example, a small proportion of men genuinely sought sero-discordant partners; however, most appeared ambivalent with respect to the serological status of their possible partners.

Therefore, different aspects appear to be involved in barebacking that would justify or motivate the emergence of this practice. One example is when barebackers refer to the benefits and pleasure obtained from unprotected sex, principally with respect to the heightened physical stimulation and the feeling of being emotionally closer or more connected to the partner (Balán *et al.* 2009, Mansergh *et al.* 2002, Shernoff 2005). Halkitis *et al.* (2003) claim that the idea of barebacking affirms masculinity and stimulates feelings of intimacy and greater contact between partners, including the perception of 'hotter' sex. This reference to masculinity may also be found in an article published by Ridge (2004) dealing with the meanings and dynamics of barebacking among young gays in Melbourne, Australia, in which one of the participants stated that receiving sperm signified reinforcing his own masculinity.

It is interesting to note that the sense of masculinity among men who participate in barebacking may be flexible, open and heterogeneous, and is not confined to the active position traditionally used as a definition of images or signs of masculinity. In this sense, the passive partner, the one who receives the semen of another man, does not become necessarily less masculine or feminised. In barebacking it is possible to find other categories beyond these traditional roles (passive and active), for example, versatile, active versatile, passive versatile

or even completely versatile (Dowsett *et al.* 2008), showing that there is a variability in the positions, performances, intersections or different production images of masculinity.

This article is contained within the context of the debate on the meaning and practice of barebacking. The data originate from an ethnographically based doctoral thesis on barebacking in Brazil (Silva 2008). More specifically, some elements or conceptual dimensions present in discussions on barebacking will be examined. In this article, therefore, emphasis is given to some of the ways, both generic and more specific, of using and understanding the concept of barebacking (and barebackers), using dialogues produced during open online interviews with Brazilian users of the internet as a reference.

Researching on the internet

As pointed out in some studies (Gauthier and Forsyth 1999, Grov 2006, Halkitis *et al.* 2003, Tewksbury 2003), the internet is useful as a source of information on barebacking and to disseminate the practice, although places other than the internet still exist for sexual encounters, for example, bars, public restrooms, and saunas (Léobon and Frigault 2008). In Brazil, the internet also appears to represent a place where information and experiences may be exchanged and meetings can be arranged for the specific purpose of barebacking.

In 2006 seven communities created by Brazilians were found on Orkut (n.d.) in which barebacking was discussed, one of which was in opposition to it. In addition, there were more than 40 communities that positively valued unprotected sex without directly using the term barebacking in their description. It should be mentioned here that Orkut, affiliated with Google since 2004, is an important social networking site that permits its users to maintain contact with friends through photographs and messages, meet new people and establish meetings and relationships, encouraging the dissemination and discussion of various controversial topics.

In order to follow the forums and give visibility to the study, a personal page was created on Orkut containing information on the investigator and the study. After approximately 17 months of participant observation online in the Orkut communities (between April 2006 and September 2007), the investigator then began to participate in discussion forums on barebacking or in those that simply used the more generic term unprotected sex.¹ This methodological strategy was important to enable discussions to be held on some ambiguities involved in defining barebacking among users of the internet.

Whenever an Orkut member creates or participates in a community, all participants are visible on the respective user page. In addition, all the members of each community are registered on the community's page, although they are not always identified by a photograph. Contact is easily established when one user invites another to register on the 'my friends' section of his/her personal page or simply sends messages to each participant in the community inviting them to participate as 'friends'. Within the communities, members may also create discussion forums or participate in those that already exist. When members of a community participate in a discussion forum, they may also remain anonymous (without allowing members to enter their personal page) or be immediately identified. For the investigator, being identified represented an interesting way for another member to make contact, visit his page, read his professional profile and obtain information on the objectives of the study.

Online interviews

Finally, with the creation of a personal page on Orkut, it was then possible to invite volunteers who practise barebacking to participate in an open online interview using the

Windows Live Messenger program, which permits conversation in real time. The investigator's electronic address on Messenger was registered on the respective contact page. Each new contact or invitation for a user to join the investigator's Messenger account was understood as a positive response to participate in the study; however, participants were able to cease participation or withdraw their consent at any time. It is important to mention that in addition to having their anonymity respected, all the participants were aware that the data produced would be used in a doctoral thesis on the practice of barebacking. The study protocol was approved by the Internal Review Board of the Institute of Collective Health, Federal University of Bahia (registered under reference 025-07/CEP-ISC).

The online interview was meant to constitute an interactive action that occurs within a space of negotiation. In this perspective, the participant being interviewed and the interviewer are interlocutors in the discourse; hence engaged in different positions. The interview thus acquires the sense of a conversation (Fontana and Frey 1998, Rubin and Rubin 1995), a dialogue in which different voices meet and confront each other with the potential for the unpredictable, while not losing track of the study objectives. In this sense, the online conversation had to be guided to certain topics that were considered important: (i) the concept of barebacking, (ii) the reasons, sensations and interests concerning barebacking, (iii) the procedure for meeting (how, with whom and when this interest in participating in a sexual experience occurred), (iv) perspectives on the risks involved and (v) the strategies of caution used during sexual interactions. Other general information that was obtained during the conversation included: a) age; city in which the subject was at the time of the interview; occupation; b) sexual preferences and HIV status (serology).

Each online interview was conducted individually in accordance with the styles and unique positions of each user, although there were some common points (connections) between the different interlocutors. Changes also occurred in the rhythm, duration and dynamics within a single conversation. For example, with some of the interlocutors the online conversations occurred in more than one encounter, in accordance with the mood and availability of the individual for conversation. In answer to questions and in order to concentrate on the focus of the study, the investigator was obliged at one point to state that he had no personal interest in taking part in barebacking. However, this did not mean avoiding answering the questions and curiosity aroused, nor did it mean avoiding talking about himself in the course of conversation with interlocutors, always with the goal of facilitating interaction and without losing the focus of research.

Of the 30 contacts registered on the investigator's Messenger account, 23 affirmed that they practised barebacking, including some who expressed their restrictions to the activity, taking into consideration divergences between what they knew about barebacking and what they wished to obtain from the practice. Among the other seven contacts, one of these stressed that he had unprotected sex now and again but he did not know whether this really classified him as a barebacker; another two stated that they did not practise barebacking but had already had or sporadically had unprotected sex and finally, four interlocutors described themselves as being curious about the subject or interested in practising barebacking.

Initially, as inclusion criteria, the interviewee had to be 18 years old or over and to consider himself a practitioner of barebacking. However, in order to compare the uses of the concept and the reasons for the creation of barebacking in the Brazilian context, the seven contacts who were curious about practising barebacking or doubted whether they could be considered barebackers were included in the study, with their speeches being highlighted differently during the analysis. This inclusion was important for discussing the heterogeneity and conflicts concerning the conceptual dynamics, interests and images broadcast on barebackers.

All the interlocutors on the Messenger account were referred to by the codename of Moscarda, a direct reference to the character of Luigi Pirandello in an attempt to focus on some perspectives, transformations and facets of the identity of possible barebackers in Brazil and to respect the anonymity of the interlocutors. In *One, None and a Hundred Thousand*, the main character, Vitangelo Moscarda, found himself in a unique situation when he discovered that he was not who he had always believed himself to be up to that time. Through the Other, his wife, he perceives that his nose is bent to the right. From then onwards, full of doubts and questions about his own identity, he strives to get to know the stranger that he has become. Along a road of rapid transformations, the character is obliged to live with the uncertainty about himself, a drama that becomes even more tense with the discovery 'of the hundred thousand Moscardas', not only for the others but also for himself.

Each interlocutor was identified by a fictitious e-mail address, giving only the respective age of the participant and the region of the country in which he was situated at that very moment, for example, Moscarda20@hotmail.com, SP represented a 20-year old participant from São Paulo. Of the 23 interlocutors who stated that they practised barebacking, all considered themselves as men who prefer to have sex with other men. With respect to age, eight were in the 18 to 23 years age group, another seven were in the 24 to 28 years age group and eight were between 29 and 40 years of age. Most came from the southeast of Brazil, principally the states of São Paulo (eleven), Rio de Janeiro (four) and Minas Gerais (one), with the remaining coming from the following states: Amazonas (one), Amapá (one), Goiás (two), Rio Grande do Sul (one), Paraná (one) and Piauí (one). With respect to occupation, the participants were predominantly university-educated or university students. Only three affirmed that they were HIV-positive.

To reconstruct their stories it was decided to use a more hybrid written form (narrative), using, whenever possible, the language styles adopted by the interlocutors and of the media in which they were generated. Some of the fragments of the online discourse, such as the continuation of an answer, were posted in the same paragraph in order to make reading more fluid.

These text documents were managed using the QSR NVivo program, a specific software program for the treatment and storing of qualitative data. By following the thematic lines of the fragments of text selected it was possible to identify and relate the codes (categories) with each other and to locate the respective segments of text within each analysis category without losing sight of the discursive objects or the socially and culturally legitimised connection rules (Eco 1999). These connection rules also imply taking into consideration the way in which the media context (the internet) affects the production and circulation of texts.

Defining the barebacker

Based on the interlocutors' narratives about their sexual experiences, the concept of barebacking fundamentally referred to unprotected sex, and in most cases was not associated with the type of relationship they had with the other partner (steady or occasional). This practice of unprotected sex (between men) was associated with anal penetration (active or passive), with particular emphasis on direct contact with sperm. In this perspective, in the discourses on barebacking, reference to unprotected anal sex was considered the starting point for analysis, although the distinction between intentional unprotected sex (premeditated) and casual or accidental unprotected sex was not always clear.

With respect to oral sex, this practice alone does not appear to represent an important (distinctive) element when defining barebacking. Even when there is reference to the act of swallowing or drinking sperm, all the interlocutors stressed anal penetration (without a

condom) as a way of intensifying their pleasure. Indeed, one of them (Moscarda20@hotmail.com, RS) emphasised his preference for swallowing sperm ('drink cum') and wondered whether this act could be classified as practising barebacking: 'that's it, I don't know ... as far as I know, yes ... but I'm not sure'. Moscarda affirmed that he loved drinking 'milk', but also liked it when he received it ('milk') in the anus. When asked about what he really liked, he answered: 'when he (the male) sticks it in me ... far into me ... and comes in my mouth ... or comes in my ass'. Nevertheless, he also emphasised that he only used to practise unprotected sex with people he knew ('folk I know ... those closest to me ... friends ... then I do whatever they ask').

However, to define the practice of barebacking (and the barebacker), some of the interlocutors sought to differentiate the context or situation in which unprotected sex occurred. There are three dimensions to consider: the intentionality of the act, the extent of the practice and the reason for the practice (the risks or the pleasure of the contact). It is evident that each of these aspects cannot necessarily be considered individually, since more than one may coexist in the same explanation or point of view.

Dimensions involved in the concept of barebacking

The intentionality of the act

In order to clarify any doubts regarding the distinctions between bareback sex and any act of unprotected sex, one of the interlocutors developed an explanation based on the intentionality of the act: 'bareback is when you already know that there is going to be no condom; it's premeditated; and it's because both (or more partners) like it like that' (Moscarda29@hotmail.com, RJ). This participant began having sex 'without a rubber' about two and a half years ago, 'with some sex through the internet and in saunas'. Nevertheless, it was through the internet that his first premeditated sexual experience without a condom occurred, that is, when he was already aware in advance that unprotected sex would take place:

It wasn't the first time without a rubber but it was the first time I had planned it, premeditated. I think that is what bareback is about; it's about being premeditated. (Moscarda29@hotmail.com, RJ)

Likewise, another interlocutor (Moscarda27@hotmail.com, SP) also affirmed that he himself never carried a condom with him; he was always 'unprepared', since his intention was always to have 'bareback sex'. He explained that the practice of barebacking 'is only when there is intent, not a sex act in which someone accidentally forgets the condom', although he questioned the idea of unprotected accidental or casual sex, since, for him, most people do not make a point of using a condom, so they don't carry condoms around with them ('someone who really wants to protect himself always has a condom in his wallet, pocket, bag, etc.');

My experiences with barebacking are those that happen with the intention of going bare or when it's planned when you make contact with someone or when it happens by chance without anyone even asking about a condom ... there are people who bareback without thinking about it being bare, only the fact that there is no condom. In my case, I am always unprepared and take the whole flirting process right to the point of sex; then I get so excited that I don't even think about the condom. (Moscarda27@hotmail.com, SP)

As this interlocutor explained, 'there are people who bareback without thinking about it being bare just because they are not using a condom'. Nevertheless, this affirmation highlights two questions that may differentiate the concept of barebacking: whether it is restricted to men who understand the meaning and use of the term, consider themselves barebackers or share a certain code; and whether the fact that someone does not use a condom for some circumstantial reason, for example, because they do not have one with them at the time or because they become carried away by an impulse of desire, necessarily makes them a barebacker. Many people in Brazil have never heard of barebacking, principally because the term began to circulate among MSM, often through the internet; therefore a certain socioeconomic level was required to gain access to it and to participate in the encounters (Santos 2004).

Nevertheless, if we consider the effects and uses (practices) of a language and the multiple meanings it may produce (Gergen 1997, Potter 1997), it is also clear that the concept of barebacking does not circulate in a concrete, unchangeable form as it becomes appropriated (and transformed) by its users. This does not mean that the concept of barebacking is not useful, particularly because the term is still capable of producing an effect on those who use it and on those who hear it, principally when it provides indications that someone prefers or practises sex without a condom. What should be noted is that the actors who say that they practise this act have been transformed over this time. They are not a homogenous group, neither do they understand the concept in the same way and this demands a wider reflection on the different users of the term and its contexts of use. Curiously, the expression also began to be used as a synonym for unprotected sex in any situation. For example, during the online interviews one of the participants who practised barebacking mentioned the existence of heterosexual films that also use the term bareback (Moscarda29@hotmail.com, RJ). Another participant (Moscarda32@hotmail.com, SP) made a list of sexual practices performed without a condom and at the end asked: 'Is all this not barebacking?' This shows a concern with disassociating the image of barebacking from gays and homosexuals while simultaneously also seeking to recognise it as a common (normal) practice between heterosexuals.

Throughout this route of conceptual appropriation, it will not, therefore, always be possible to (objectively) distinguish between an intentional act (deliberate) and behaviour considered to constitute a relapse; principally because sexual practices often occur in a tacit (silent, understood) form without either of the parties revealing, discussing or verbalising the intention of the act, when body language (gestures or movements) is understood (shared and negotiated) within the situation experienced. In this perspective, the intention (wish, desire, thought) moves within situations experienced in daily life. More than revealing what is behind the thought, the intention has a practical effect, a public, performative dimension. It is true that different barebackers participate in encounters or gatherings arranged through the internet, already knowing in advance that the sex will be unprotected or without a condom. This may represent a vestige of the more characteristic form of barebacking, even if it has lost its (possibly) political purpose.

On the other hand, many men who use the term barebacking to describe unprotected anal sex fail to take into consideration whether the act was intentional or not. At any rate, what some of the interviews or reports in the study suggest is that there is a growing discourse that recognises or puts into evidence the desire for, the possibility and the pleasure of sex without a condom, often resulting in a confused and disperse definition of the concept of barebacking. An example of this is the interlocutor (Moscarda40@hotmail.com, PR), who thought that he was a barebacker. For him, barebacking was 'wanting and allowing the other partner to come in your ass'. In this sense, he said he practised barebacking 'with a friend, watched barebacking films, wanted to do it with other guys'.

It should be observed that some of the men who contacted the investigator on the Messenger justified their interest in the subject by stating that they were merely curious to try barebacking. Some of these justifications discuss the individual's desire to experiment unprotected anal penetration with a man; to feel a male's seed inside him or simply for the thrill of the adventure, principally with someone they had never met before:

I read that lots of guys want to have unprotected sex because they want to run the risk of getting AIDS. From what I've read (I may be wrong), some guys WANT the virus ... in my case, acquiring the virus is not one of my fantasies; I don't even think about it, except for knowing that I DON'T WANT IT ... I have a desire to feel like a woman in bed and a man's seed arouses my feminine side even more ... Feeling the seed of a male inside me as if I was being 'marked', possessed in every way. (Moscarda38@hotmail.com, PR)

I like crazy stuff ... S & M ... trampling ... ('What are you looking for with these adventures?') Just pure pleasure ... an adventure really. ('Have you ever had unprotected sex?') Just with my ex ... but I'd like to do it with someone I've never met ... a different kind of sensation ... hot ... the fear of catching an STD. (Moscarda30@hotmail.com, RJ)

It should be emphasised that we are not necessarily referring to any particular type of reflection, decision or intention (rational) to definitively give up the use of condoms, principally because there is a habit among some barebackers to swing between moments of condom use and non-use. It cannot be ignored, however, that many decisions are made on the spur of the moment, that is, in the heat of sexual interactions when the individuals concerned appear to have lost their self-control. Therefore, the way in which individuals respond to social rules and structures or conduct their relationships is also mediated by their body's sexual or sensorial experiences (Shilling and Mellor 1996). In this perspective, one of the participants (Moscarda34@hotmail.com, SC) was unsure whether he had practised barebacking or not, since he had already had casual unprotected sex in the heat of the moment in an 'experience of sexual involvement'. Nevertheless, he believed that barebacking was intentional or involved being 'fully aware', unlike what happens (desire) at a particular time. Another participant (Moscarda21@hotmail.com, AM) stated that he practised barebacking sometimes and sometimes went out thinking that this time he would not use a condom. In one of the conversations, he also said that he 'always went out wanting it, but never actually intending to do it'. The fact that the individual 'went out thinking about it' does not necessarily imply a deliberate plan or intent (coherent, clear and definitive) to engage in an act of unprotected sex. This same participant stressed that he 'was scared to death, but when the time comes sexual excitement overcomes fear.' As also mentioned in another narrative, there is this 'intense desire' (situation of extreme excitement) that results from an interactive action of open, unpredictable positions that are consequently susceptible to a change in course when the actors move (and make decisions), principally in the midst of many (ambiguous) emotions and without the guidance of a rational self:

I don't know exactly when I choose not to use a condom ... there's no set rule! I think it's at times when I get carried away with desire ... times of extreme excitement associated with moments when I don't think too much before acting ... I don't know what other answer to give you ... Ah, for example, when I have been with someone for a while and the person seems trustworthy to the extent that I let desire have the last word ... The other day I

fucked a guy in a dark room in a nightclub without a condom ... in a moment of extreme excitement. (Moscarda26@hotmail.com, BH).

The extent of the practice

With respect to the extent or the number of times (and situations) in which the practice of barebacking occurs, another interlocutor (Moscarda32@hotmail.com, RJ) explained that he 'did not participate extensively. [He] enjoyed having sex without a condom', but he could not truly be considered a barebacker despite having participated in barebacking encounters scheduled through the internet. Within this perspective, he did not consider himself to be a complete barebacker ('a guy that only has sex without a condom'), since in some situations he might use one. For him, 'a barebacker fucks for this reason only; there is no such thing as a condom (rubber) in his vocabulary'. This participant just enjoyed good all-male orgies, but he used condoms if he had to have sex, also depending on how his partner positioned himself in the situation.

At this point, attention must be called to a type of pleasure-seeking barebacking (and barebacker) that includes minimising the risks and potential harm (Davis *et al.* 2006, Grov 2006, Parsons *et al.* 2005, Shernoff 2006, Suarez and Miller 2001). This is the case, for example, when some participants of the practice avoid ejaculating inside their partner or avoid receiving their partner's sperm, when they are more receptive or insertive (strategic positioning) or seek to maintain unprotected sexual relations only with partners who have the same serological status (sero-sorting). One participant (Moscarda32@hotmail.com, RJ) said that during his sexual encounters there were times when he preferred his partner 'to come outside him: although I like feeling the cum inside me, sometimes I ask the guy to come outside me'. This interlocutor admitted that there was something missing when the guy withdrew and came outside him. But he was scared. To reduce the risk of contamination, he sometimes randomly chose partners to ejaculate inside him: 'because I'm scared to be acting as a deposit for just anybody's cum ... deep down I'm scared of catching something'. This random selection depended on the moment and on the level of excitement. He emphasised that he wanted and enjoyed 'feeling the milk' inside him (it excited him). If it depended on what he really wanted, 'all of them would come inside him'. Nevertheless, he made some restrictions because he was scared, preferring to see his partner 'coming outside him so as not to run risks', although he was aware that this would not exempt him of all risk.

Even with respect to the length or number of times and situations in which barebacking occurs, it should be noted that many of the interlocutors made no distinction between steady and occasional partners in defining the practice. Curiously, of the twenty-three participants who stated that they practised barebacking, twelve referred to someone known or a partner they trusted (albeit not necessarily in the category of a boyfriend) in some of their experiences of barebacking, with the objective of minimising the risk of infection. For some, the serological status of those involved (HIV-positive or negative) was not a condition for the act of unprotected sex to be included in or excluded from the category of barebacking. For example, one interlocutor (Moscarda35.1@hotmail.com, SP) stated that he liked the freedom 'of the direct contact with the other person and the contact with the semen inside' him, in barebacking; however, he did not 'bareback with just any partner; normally with a steady partner, after ensuring that all the tests had been done'.

With respect to the type of relationship between the partners (steady or occasional), only one of the interlocutors, a sero-positive man, focused on this aspect as being a feature that differentiated the concept of barebacking. For him, 'barebacking is the practice of anal sex

with casual partners without a condom' (Moscarda26@hotmail.com, GO). Nevertheless, despite this definition of barebacking, this interlocutor introduced a new element to the understanding of the concept, which was the discovery of his sero-positivity. As an HIV-positive male, he then began to describe and refer to his actual practice of sex without a condom as barebacking: 'now that I know that I am HIV+ I decided not to use it any more with people who are also HIV+'.

The reason for the practice: for the risks or the excitement of the contact

Another aspect to consider is why individuals want to have sex without a condom. It should be emphasised that, in addition to defining the intentionality of the act as an important dimension of barebacking, there is a central point in the discourse of one of the study participants that contradicts other explanations of the practice, more precisely in relation to the idea of the excitement involved in risk-taking: 'barebacking is unprotected sex in which the pleasure essentially is in running risks' (Moscarda27@hotmail.com, SP). These elements expressed in the same discourse show how difficult it is to separate the concept (barebacking) from what is in practice being sought or experienced, for example, when barebacking emerges as an experience of transgression. In this sense, an interlocutor (Moscarda32@hotmail.com, SP) said that he liked cum, he knew the risks, but 'the thing with a condom was not complete'. Moreover, he felt also subversive, going in the opposite direction of the norm, the paranoia of the 'risk of life' created around the sex, 'as if it were the most subversive thing of the 21st century'.

In the opinion of another interlocutor, the concept of barebacking is only one ramification of not using a condom. This interlocutor (Moscarda18@hotmail.com, SP) attempted to disassociate his (current) practice from the idea that exists of an association between a (conscious) desire for HIV contamination or transmission and barebacking. It is interesting to note that he already considered himself to have been a 'bug chaser', that is, he had wanted to contract the HIV virus because he felt lonely and depressed. However, as time went by, this participant made the decision to live, but without giving up barebacking: 'I got all that stuff out of my head, but for years I have been barebacking. I got hooked'. It was not, indeed, death that this participant wanted but the pleasure of contact with sperm. During the online conversation he affirmed that he did not want to use a condom but he also did not want to get sick. How would he refer to this practice? He, himself, suggested perhaps, 'healthy barebacking':

Suppose I had the test and it was negative ... you did the test and it was negative ... so we decide to have sex without a condom ... for the pleasure of it, not to catch AIDS because we both know that we're clean, right? ... you know the big problem with all this? The translation of bareback [into Portuguese] is *costas nuas* ... but the explanation is literally the conscious transmission of AIDS. It shouldn't be like that ... I don't want to use a condom and I don't want to get sick. So how should I call what I do? Healthy barebacking? (Moscarda18@hotmail.com, SP)

With respect to the idea that the practice of barebacking is associated with the thrill of running risks, one of the participants (Moscarda26@hotmail.com, BH) categorically affirmed that if that was the case he would not practise barebacking. For him, barebacking was simply sex without a condom. Another participant (Moscarda34@hotmail.com, RJ) also expressed doubt about whether he was a barebacker, since he understood that barebacking was a way of defying diseases, with no worries or concerns. He added that with him

unprotected sex happened when he was extremely excited, but afterwards he tended to get upset about it.

(‘Do you bareback?’) That depends ... I don’t really know what the definition of barebacking is. Like, if barebacking means having sex without a condom and just that, then I have done it a few times ... but if barebacking means those scheduled orgies that people go to, knowing that there are HIV-positive people there but having sex anyway, just for the pleasure of running risks, then I am not, because I have never done that. (Moscarda26@hotmail.com, BH).

Final comments

Based on the findings of this study, different modalities of barebackers appear to coexist, showing that multiple aspects and situations are currently involved in unprotected sex. Therefore, based on the definitions and explanations regarding barebacking that were offered by the contacts on the Messenger or in the discussion forums on Orkut, it was possible to set up the practice of barebacking into two principal modalities: more extensive and involving greater contact; and partial or involving reduced risks. These modalities refer to often deliberate, unprotected anal sex, principally when the encounters are organised or arranged in advance. Nevertheless, in other situations, this dimension (intentionality) appears in an ambiguous or unpredictable form as a function of the various contexts in which the sexual interactions occur, for example in moments of extreme excitement or sexual desire. The first group refers to the most extreme and transgressive pleasure-seeking forms in which there are practically no restrictions regarding unprotected sex and which involve an intense (and extensive) exposure to the risk of infection. In this group, the focus would be on a situation that would be excessive in terms of contact with the other person (with great value being placed on the sperm) and of contact with risks. It should be added that up to the time of the online interview, most of the interlocutors claimed to be sero-negative for HIV or to be unaware of their serological status.

With respect to this group, under certain circumstances, the possibility of sero-conversion may appear as a form of fantasy, wish or desire to contract the HIV virus. On the other hand, the protagonists of some of the other stories became infected with the HIV virus while barebacking. These stories represent life trajectories whose common axis involved the change in serological status (sero-conversion) for some of the online interlocutors, not always producing the same effects in relation to their previous practices of barebacking.

Finally, with respect to the second group, there are those who attempt to minimise or develop strategies to reduce the risk, including the references to an affective relationship (or a relationship of trust) between sexual partners. It should be added that the individuals who practise bareback sex may experience situations that include various forms of barebacking during their lives, such as the men who contract HIV and try to develop strategies to reduce the risks in their sexual interactions by, for example, avoiding ejaculating inside their partner or trying to establish sexual relationships with men of the same serological status.

Therefore, in general, the different motivations for barebacking constitute a frontier region (of tension) between the pleasure of sensory contact and the risk of infection. In this perspective, all the participants appear to agree that the pleasure is more liberating and more intense when a condom is not used although, for some, this pleasure is strictly associated with an experience that involves greater excesses and transgressions, up to the point of challenging the virus, the disease and the limits of life itself.

Beyond producing a dichotomy between pleasure and risk, because these two elements are closely related² although they are not expressed predictably, clearly and coherently, it is important to consider the various meanings described by the potential barebackers. This will also require further studies to be developed (online and offline) to follow up the circulation and uses of the terms barebacking and barebacker in different contexts and times, as well as the forms in which new conversations on sex without a condom begin to take place between different individuals, with multiple positions of identification. Other studies should also be developed to follow up and understand the dynamics (and possible transformation) of barebacking in different offline spaces of sexual interaction such as saunas and sex clubs.

On the other hand, it is also important to think about practices of prevention that consider the freedom (and potential) of the actors in the use of their bodies and pleasures, as well as different forms of life, beyond the devices and techniques for the regulation of populations (Foucault 1991). As pointed out by Halperin (2007), it is also necessary to go beyond psychological explanations to gay men's sexual risk-taking that could lead to a revival of medical thinking about homosexual sexuality and investigate new forms of male subjectivity. From this perspective, barebacking, in different contexts and forms of practice, including the different types of partnership, may show the existence of new forms, meanings and directions of life beyond the standards and pre-established rules. This is the case, for example, when the sharing of the HIV can also produce senses of belonging and intimacy between partners (Dean 2009).

Finally, although the discourses sex without a condom and barebacking may appear to echo each other and often appear convergent, it should not be forgotten that barebacking first appeared in gay communities in the USA (Léobon and Frigault 2005) and was closely associated with the practice of resistance to the imperative discourse of safe sex (Crossley 2002, 2004, Rofes 2002). On the other hand, at the present time, it becomes more and more difficult to think of barebacking as an organised movement fighting for the right to choose (to use or not to use a condom) or even in favour of new investments in research to develop a cure for AIDS. Evidently, transgressions continue to exist and to produce satisfaction and pleasure. Nevertheless, they occur in a much more dispersed or diluted, individualised form, with heterogeneous intentions and trajectories.

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Notes

- 1 The Orkut members use the word 'barebacking' in English. There is no Portuguese equivalent.
- 2 This is one of the perspectives in the discussion on risk put forward by Deborah Lupton (1999), principally with respect to what she says on transgression of the frontiers and oppositions (inside-

outside, I-other and so on). In this sense, pleasure is intimately associated with the idea of the transgression (or violation) of frontiers, which includes the separation of bodies. This symbolic frontier that defines behaviour and organises pleasure simultaneously produces fear and fascination, showing itself in an ambivalent way, to be tenuous and unstable.

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