
A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Declaration

I certify that, except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the thesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; and, any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged.

Signature:

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Date:
Acknowledgements

This thesis began with the encouragement of a former colleague in (what was then known as) the School of Social Science and Planning, Patricia Moynihan. She helped me frame my initial research questions and then cajoled me into submitting an application in 2000 for a place in the School’s post-graduate program for the following year. Apart from my supervisors, about whom more later, two senior colleagues were invariably supportive. Chris Chamberlain and Pavla Miller were always willing to find time to discuss research difficulties. They listened and offered calming advice when I needed to test out hypotheses or resolve problems of theory or method. Other colleagues I would thank include Benno Engels, who asked me to speak to one of his classes on some of my very early data analysis, and Kim Humphery, who generously offered me post-graduate teaching and invited me to give lectures on my research, as did Bob Pease when he was a member of the School. Sara Charlesworth, David Mercer and Suellen Murray also found time from their own research to ask me how things were ‘coming along’, as did my post-graduate friends and colleagues Bronwyn Meyrick, Chloe Patton, Manu Peeters, and Ed Yates.

Along the way, I found inspiration, solace, and distraction from the labours of my thesis, in teaching. In particular, I would like to thank the students I have had the pleasure to teach in the gender and sexuality classes that the School offers. To my great relief, I have often found articulate and politically aware young people in these classes who believe that the project of achieving gender and sexual equality is not yet complete. I have also been seriously impressed by the conviction and courage of students who are willing to live their lives openly and honestly as young gays and lesbians, as living exemplars of the gay liberationists’ credo to be ‘out and proud’.

Together with my colleagues, my friends have been an enormous help as I worked on this project. In particular, I would thank Clive Fisher, Ian Gartlan, Neil Robertson, and Chris Wheat and Philip Siggins, who, despite my moans and groans, continued to show interest in what I was doing. So too did Claire Hedger, Kieran O’Loughlin, Tricia Tracey, Julie Warnock and Jane Yule, who also offered thoughtful tips on managing the emotional stress of a doctorate and life generally. Two interstate friends, Humphrey McQueen and Robert Dessaix, helped me recruit interviewees from places other than Melbourne and Victoria, encouraged me in the early stages of the project and then listened as I developed and ordered my thoughts. Susan Serry gave me ceaseless support, without which I would have found the going much tougher than it was. She kept me believing in the worth of what I was doing while I worked on it and as my natal family fell apart after the death of my father.
How does one begin to thank two devoted and hard-working supervisors? I was very lucky when John Murphy and Judy Smart agreed to supervise my research. After Patricia Moynihan left the School, John took me on as one of the many post-graduate students he then had. He was my principal supervisor and has continued in this role, with patience and dedication, even though he left the School to take up a demanding senior position at another university. Judy was officially my second supervisor but adopted me as a friend and colleague, as she is wont to do with her students, and shepherded me through the more difficult editing stages of this project. She is renown for her editing accomplishments, as well as for her knowledge of sex and sexuality. My prose improved significantly under her tutelage. I cannot say that I will remember all that she taught me, such as being consistent when using numbers, but I felt myself truly fortunate that, along with John, she consented to work with me on this thesis. And, above all else, I was lucky because both of them believed in what I was doing, which can be rare and yet is so valuable.

Of all the people I worked with on this project, I owe my greatest debt of thanks to the eighty men who agreed to let me interview them, for, without their stories, this thesis would not exist. All gave freely of their time and let me ‘blow in’ to their lives and then disappear, never to be seen again. In the space of an hour, sometimes more, we established a unique intimacy, the sort of intimacy that perhaps only gay men can establish with one another. They told me their life stories, which I recorded on cassette tapes, transcribed and then fashioned into the nine chapters that appear below. They came from diverse backgrounds, were of all ages and shared two things in common: a strong sense of their own self worth and their right to be heard. It is for these reasons that I dedicate my thesis to them.

Finally, I owe a debt of gratitude to my late father, Barclay Charles Robinson (1926–2002). Not only would I thank him for doing his best to be a good father but also because he was the only member of my immediate or extended family who showed any interest in my life as a gay man. Sadly, he is not alive to see the end of this project, which properly began in the year that he died.
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Summary.

The focus of this thesis is the lived experience of 80 Australian gay men. The oldest man in the sample was born in 1922 and the youngest in 1980. Their understanding of what it is to be gay is historically contingent, for their lives span the greater part of the twentieth century: from when homosexuality was invisible and illegal through the less repressive but no less problematic eras of gay liberation and the HIV-AIDS epidemic. Interviewees’ personal narratives include their experiences of the repression of the Cold War period, the exuberance, and, for some, personal confusion of gay liberation and the disco culture of the 1970s, to the trauma of the HIV-AIDS epidemic. Through the stories of their lives, the men in this sample illustrate the significant shifts in sexual attitudes and culture that Australia has experienced in the latter part of the twentieth century.

Many histories of sexuality and homosexuality have been written. None has used as its primary material the life histories of its subjects. This thesis is innovative in that it shows how three different cohorts of gay men have understood their gayness and have lived their lives as gay men at different points in the last fifty years and under circumstances of varying social tolerance. Aspects of the lives examined include their experience of coming out and development of their sexual identity, their social and affective lives and their involvement in the gay ‘scene’ and community.

This thesis began as an investigation of what ageing means to gay men in Australia and transformed into an examination of the biographies of 80 men and how they made sense of their lives as gay men. Qualitative in approach, it is based on oral history interviews. Interviewees were asked set questions about their social, affective and sexual lives. In one major capital city, young men in high status occupations and older retired men were consciously sought to fill gaps in the age range of the sample, otherwise interviewees were recruited randomly in capital cities and country towns of south-eastern Australia. In the end, the sample comprised an old cohort of 22 men, a middle cohort of 30 men and a young cohort of 28 men. The youngest man is 22 and the oldest 79. The majority of interviewees are of Anglo-Saxon or Anglo-Celtic decent. The exceptions are Aboriginal men, and the children of migrants to Australia from South-east Asia and Southern Europe.
Introduction.

‘I feel so privileged to be able to watch Queer as Folk.\textsuperscript{1} This is the first time in my blooming life that I have been able to enjoy a soapie like somebody else. In that sense life has become much more accepting.’

Vernon, 75.

\* \* \*

Two particularly nasty stereotypes of the gay life course persist in the public mind. The first is that old age is pitiable for gay men because they will invariably be alone and sad, and second, they are seen in youth to represent excessive or deviant sexual practices, as wildly sexual beings. Long-standing public narratives, shared by both heterosexuals and homosexuals, are especially critical of old gay men. In Luchino Visconti’s adaptation of Thomas Mann’s \textit{Death in Venice}, for example, Dirk Bogarde represented the central character, an elderly man called Aschenbach, as a desperate and sorrowful figure obsessed with the youthful good looks and playfulness of a young Polish teenager.\textsuperscript{2} Other stereotypes show old gay men as isolated, irascible and arch (Patrick White), defeated or vilified (Oscar Wilde), or timid, secretive and tentative (C.P. Cavafy, E.M. Forster). Any representations that reflect other stages in the gay life course are ignored or disregarded because they do not fit the narrative’s purpose, which is to portray gay men as ‘Other’. For instance, whenever television or print media report on gay and lesbian parades, such as Feast in Adelaide or Mardi Gras in Sydney, they invariably focus on those near-naked or youthful bodies that suggest sexual excess or deviance in some form.

Powerful and seductive as these images may be, they do not reflect the life stories of men who identify as gay or homosexual, and, as this study shows, few gay men conform to the stereotypes.\textsuperscript{3} Gay men come from all classes, belong to all religions, are found in all forms of human settlements, work places and environments, and, importantly, they age and grow old. Their life cycle, which this thesis also

\textsuperscript{1} A North American television series about the lives of a group of young gay people that screened on SBS Television, 2001–2003 and recommenced in 2005.


\textsuperscript{3} At the conclusion of each interview, the men in the sample completed a short questionnaire including a question about which of the following terms they used to describe themselves: Camp, Gay, Homosexual, Poof, Queer or any other. A very large majority chose gay. Eleven men said that they did not like to be known by any expression that referred to their sexuality; these comprise one man in his seventies, four men in their sixties, two men in their fifties and four who are in their thirties. Despite the importance in the early 1990s of the new identity and social movement known as ‘queer’, only one man in the sample used it, a man in his mid-forties.
charts, is not—contrary to what the literary works of Thomas Mann, Marcel Proust or Oscar Wilde suggest—one of perpetual youth or of restlessly seeking after young companions for sex or love, or of trying to regain a lost youth—any more than these are preoccupations of the rest of the population. And, there are gay men from Aboriginal, Indian, indigenous South American and South-east Asian backgrounds—as any quick examination of the community listings in gay and lesbian newspapers shows.

This thesis began as an investigation of what age and ageing means to gay men in Australia. The original intention was to examine how old gay men are regarded in the gay milieu and how gay men of all ages experience the ageing process. The main source of information was an extended interview with each of the eighty men who volunteered for the project. Questions asked covered aspects of their social, affective and sexual lives, but the interviewees divulged much more about themselves than anticipated. Because they revealed a great deal of what Ken Plummer calls the ‘confusions, ambiguities and contradictions’ of their lived experience, I decided to broaden the focus and instead of confining the study to ageing to look at the men’s life histories for what they understood about their lives as gay men. And thus the title became ‘The changing world of gay men, 1950–2000’. The half-century between 1950 and 2000 was significant for the transformations that occurred in attitudes towards sex and sexuality in the gay world and wider society. Along with radical shifts in views on pre-marital sex, contraception and abortion, there has been a marked decline in hostility toward sexual difference. A greater tolerance has developed in many western societies for sexual relationships that do not conform to the dominant story of heterosexual marriage and monogamy.

To assist in the analysis of the interviewees’ life stories, the sample was divided into age ‘cohorts’. Men aged 60 and over became part of the ‘old’ cohort, while men aged between 40 and 59 constituted the ‘middle’ cohort, and men aged 22-39 made up the ‘young’ cohort. I then proposed three periods of homosexual and gay social history that coincided with the experience of these three age cohorts. The purpose was to outline the context into which the men did (or did not) come out so as to understand what if any variations existed within and between the cohorts and if these affected the members’ lives as gay men. In one sense, I was trying to answer the question that Andrew Boxer and Bertram Cohler posed in 1989: ‘Regarding the historical changes in the gay and lesbian life course

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4 In particular, I am thinking of Thomas Mann’s novella, *Death In Venice*, Marcel Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past*, and Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, all of which contain somewhat cliché, though nonetheless powerful, accounts of the ‘faded queen’ questing after youth.


6 For more information on the composition of the age cohorts, see Chapter One and Appendix Two.
trajectories we may ask, for example: Is coming out in 1987 as a 16-year-old adolescent in Chicago the same process as that for someone who came out in 1970 in San Francisco as a 40-year-old? 7

The men interviewed for this thesis grew to maturity in quite different social climates, and these periods should be seen as rough guides to the social climate that existed at the time the men in each cohort achieved social maturity. As will be shown in Chapters Two, Three and Four, men do not ‘become gay’ or come out uniformly or by a certain age. Coming out is not like puberty or menopause. Men are usually most sexually potent when they are teenagers; some are socially mature at 16 while others are socially immature when they are in their late thirties (for example, the cricket player, Shane Warne) or even when they are in their sixties and early seventies (for example, the ex-footballer, Sam Newman and former prime minister Bob Hawke). 8 In 1969, 18-year-olds risked being conscripted to fight in Vietnam, whereas today 18-year-olds play war games on the Internet. While social maturity is thus manifestly largely a social construct, I have chosen the conventional coming-of-age marker, 21, as the age of social maturity for men born between 1922 and 1980.

The first period is called the ‘camp’ period. It is the period before gay liberation and is when the men in the old cohort reached maturity, that is, from the 1940s until the end of the 1960s. The camp period and the coming-out stories of the old cohort are the subject of Chapter Two. The second period—the ‘gay’ period—takes in the movement for gay liberation and is when the men in the middle cohort reached their social maturity, that is, from the end of the 1960s until the mid-1980s. The gay period and the coming-out stories of the middle cohort are the subject of Chapter Three. The third period is the ‘post-liberation’ period. It is the period from the mid-1980s until the present and is when the men in the young cohort reached maturity. The post-liberation period and the coming-out stories of the young cohort are the subject of Chapter Four. The purpose of these three chapters—concerning the coming-out stories of the old cohort, the middle cohort, and the young cohort—is to discuss the influence of public and ontological narratives in the formation of the gay man’s identity at the time of his coming out. 9 There are men in the sample who believe their working and personal lives have not been a success and who attribute this to their being gay. They believe that their homosexuality explains why they experienced their life as a failure. In some of these cases, and they do not represent a large number in the sample, there is evidence that a clash occurred between an influential or prominent public narrative—for example, a familial or national narrative that was hostile toward homosexuals—and their own private narrative of self, which is

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9 Public and ontological narratives are discussed in more detail in Chapter One.
gay. At the same time, there are stories from men who lived a double life without guilt, came out when their marriage ended and experienced being gay as in no way exceptional. How these and other men reached accommodation with influential or prominent public narratives is the subject of the remaining chapters.

Chapters Five and Six examine the interviewees’ involvement with two important institutions of the gay world, the gay ‘scene’ and the gay community. Until the 1960s, the organised gay world in cities such as Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane was limited to beats and a relatively small number of coffee shops, restaurants and bars in some hotels where homosexuals could meet and socialise. Venues catering for gay men expanded in number and kind, and became more commercialised, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, such that the scene in most capital cities now comprises bars, pubs, discotheques, clubs and sex venues. Its influence on the lives and social practices of gay men of all ages cannot be underestimated, for its venues are the principal locations for gay men to congregate safely in large numbers. Its primary purpose is as a sexual market for young and youthful men. As the discussion in Chapter Five will show, there was general agreement among men from all the age cohorts that the scene has its shortcomings because it is age segregated, highly sexualised, and its physical environment is impoverished.

The gay community, which is the subject of Chapter Six, is understood here to comprise a loose set of organisations with a sense of public service and social awareness. Among these are bodies that focus on helping people to come out or find housing, manage their relationships and understand the gay world, lobby for improved social and legal rights, and, importantly, assist in HIV-AIDS education and provide housing and home care for people living with HIV-AIDS (PLWHA). As the discussion in Chapter Six will show, almost all the men interviewed for this thesis reported positive involvement with the gay community. But a small dissident minority expressed scepticism about its existence and their views are examined along with those of the majority.

Chapters Seven and Eight concern the interviewees’ stories of their intimate lives, which reveal that the two relationships they most value are the couple relationship and friendship. In Chapter Seven, the focus is on the couple relationship. The majority of men in the sample were in couple relationships, which are notable for their length and how similar they are to the companionate marriage. In this chapter, the qualities the interviewees value in a couple relationship, such as intimacy and sexual relations are examined, as are the features of a lesser known version of the couple relationship, the so-called ‘open’ relationship. Chapter Eight investigates the importance to the men in this sample of friendship and family. The interviewees’ stories reveal friendship to be the most valued relationship. Together with the reasons for this, this chapter considers four examples of the ‘gay family’: first, a group of people comprising the children and partner of a gay man who was previously married or in a heterosexual relationship; second, a group consisting of two sets of parents—a gay couple and a lesbian couple—who between them conceive
and give birth to a child; third, a gay couple who create a gay nuclear family consisting of themselves and children; finally, an extension of what is known as the ‘family of choice’, that is, a group of people comprising the friends, relatives, lover and perhaps former lovers of a gay man.

Chapter Nine, the final chapter in the thesis, is entitled ‘Life as an old gay man’. It considers what if any connections exist between a man’s homosexuality and the ease or difficulty with which he may lead his life as an old man. The majority of men in the sample reported being aware that many homosexual men treated old gay men as ‘Other’. Among negative stereotypes that their stories revealed were those that saw old homosexuals as worthless (invisible and ignored), contemptible or predatory. Interestingly, the men from the old cohort were less aware of these than were their younger counterparts.

In the previous paragraph, ‘homosexual’ and ‘gay’ were purposely used together to raise the matter of terminology used to describe non-heterosexual males. My preference is to use both terms interchangeably, as adjectives and nouns. This usage is not universally accepted. Some scholars use homosexual and gay separately in order to distinguish between generations of same-sex attracted men. They will, for example, use ‘homosexual’ to designate only same-sex attracted men in the pre-liberation period and ‘gay’ to designate only men who belonged to the gay liberation period after c.1970. Jeffrey Weeks also observed that, in the early days of gay liberation, radicals argued that the terms connoted different identities, that homosexual meant sexual preference and ‘gay’ meant ‘a subversively political way of life’. Then, according to Edmund White, when gay was first used to designate homosexuals and homosexuality, some straights objected that they could no longer use the word to describe something or someone as festive, and gays objected on the grounds that it was ‘too silly to designate a lifestyle, a minority or political movement’. For some, too, it may have connoted illicitness since the term was used to describe prostitutes in the late nineteenth century. White suggests that its popular appeal might lie in its innocuousness: ‘One of the problems that has beleaguered gays is that their identity has always been linked to sexual activity rather than to affectional [sic] preference. The word gay (whatever its etymology) at least does not sound sexual’. Other scholars use gay to refer to sexual and affective relations between men at any time in the past. John Boswell, for example, used the phrase ‘gay persons’

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to refer to people whose ‘erotic interest is predominantly directed toward their own gender’ and argued that there were gay persons in most Western societies from antiquity until the present.\textsuperscript{13}

The shifting use of terms to designate same sex attracted men over the second half of the twentieth century says a great deal about the change that has occurred in how they are regarded and how they regard themselves. Once closeted or forced to lead double lives because of state persecution and social hostility, gay men of all ages are now relatively free to conduct their affective relations openly and without fear. The nine chapters that follow will chart the course of this social change through the life accounts of eighty gay men born between 1922 and 1980.

\textsuperscript{13} See John Boswell 1989 ‘Revolutions, Universals, and Sexual Categories’ in Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus & George Chauncey (Eds) \textit{Hidden from history: reclaiming the gay and lesbian past}, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, p. 35.
Chapter One. Collecting and understanding life stories.

‘I think it is impossible to separate me from my sexuality. It is one and the same thing, and it influences and changes every aspect of my life. As I get older being gay is less of an issue. It is not like a handbag that I carry with me. It is what I am.’ Jerome, 49.

Introduction.

As already mentioned, this inquiry began as a study of what age and ageing means to gay men and then transformed into an examination of the life stories and, through them, the life paths of eighty gay men. In this chapter, the discussion is divided into two parts. Part One concerns the nature and composition of the sample of men that forms the basis of this investigation, as well as the method I used to interview them. Part Two focuses on the theory known as ‘narrative identity’ which underpins my interpretation of the interviewees’ stories and discussion of how they understand their lives as gay men.

Part One. The sample and the interview method.

This thesis is based on a sample of 80 gay men aged 22 to 79. As mentioned in the Introduction, the sample was divided into three age ‘cohorts’ to assist in the analysis of the men’s life stories. The first was called the ‘old’ cohort and consisted of twenty-two men between the ages of 60 and 79.¹ The ‘middle’ cohort comprised thirty men from 40 to 59 years of age.² The ‘young’ cohort consisted of twenty-eight men between the ages of 22 and 39.³ The interviewees were all drawn from capital cities and country towns in south-eastern Australia. More than half were in relationships of varying duration, twenty-nine for seven years or more and fifteen for twenty years or longer. Sixteen per cent of the men in the sample are formerly married and less than one fifth have children from a previous heterosexual relationship. Also, one man is co-parent, with his partner and a lesbian couple, of an infant girl. The sample is fairly homogeneous in terms of ethnicity. The majority of interviewees are of Anglo-Saxon or -Celtic descent. The exceptions are three Aboriginal men, a man who was born and brought up in South-east Asia, and another man whose parents emigrated from Southern Europe before he was born. A group of men from

¹ Six men are in their seventies and sixteen men are in their sixties.

² Fifteen men are in their fifties and fifteen men are in their forties.

³ Eighteen men are in their thirties and ten men are in their twenties.
The Netherlands and another group from the United Kingdom came to Australia as children with their parents as part of the post-war migration scheme. Almost two thirds of the sample are tertiary educated. Most men in the sample earn their income from middle-class occupations in the public service, or in teaching, accountancy and nursing. Slightly less than one quarter of the sample is retired. A small number of interviewees receive the old age pension, and an equally small number receive Austudy at the younger end of the sample. Some of the interviewees have spent short periods of time on the dole.

The initial call for interviewees was made through a letter published in a gay newspaper in Melbourne. A large number of men in Melbourne and Victoria responded with requests to be interviewed, in fact, many more than were needed. It was not possible to interview everyone who asked for an interview because in some cases the quota was full for men in their age group or geographic region. The ‘snow-ball’ technique was then used to recruit interviewees from capital cities and some country towns in other parts of south-eastern Australia. Men from non-urban locations were purposely recruited in order to test a hypothesis, which has since been discarded, that gay men who live in large cities are more likely to have negative views of old gay men because of the gay scene and its emphasis on young bodies and youthfulness. Some groups of men were intentionally sought out. In one capital city, for instance, young men in high status occupations and retired men were recruited to fill gaps in the age range of the sample. In smaller capital cities, friends or acquaintances were asked to help recruit potential interviewees. The eighty interviews were conducted over a period of approximately eighteen months, from December 2001 until September 2003.

Among works on qualitative research and narrative approach that assisted in formulating the interview questions were Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb’s *The Hidden Injuries of Class* and Lewis Hinchman and Sandra Hinchman’s *Memory, Identity, Community*, especially chapters written by Alasdair MacIntyre, Edward Bruner and David Carr. Kenneth Plummer’s book on life stories and his later one on sexual stories were very helpful, as was a chapter by Margaret Somers and Gloria Gibson in Craig Calhoun’s *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity*. Further help came in the form of advice from

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4 Sixty-four per cent of interviewees hold bachelor’s degrees or higher. One fifth of the interviewees have postgraduate degrees.


colleagues who had done similar research or collected life stories and who discussed the advantages and disadvantages of interviews in general and fixed questions in particular.

Once in the field, the same set of questions was used for each interviewee and all the interviews were tape-recorded. While this procedure makes the interview a more formal interaction, it also provides for an accurate record, which is preferable to taking notes and having to rely on memory to reconstruct pieces of the narrative after the interview. Recording interviews also involves transcription, which, even though it makes the job of collecting data extremely labour intensive, does mean the researcher may return at any time to consult an exact record of the interview. In the end, the task was never onerous. It was a great pleasure to set up a cassette recorder and conduct interviews with strangers and to do so in locations that are as diverse as Millswood in South Adelaide, Old Tallangatta, Erskinvillage and Medlow Bath in New South Wales, Sandy Bay in Hobart, Hackett in the ACT, and East Coburg in Melbourne, to name a few. One final benefit of recording interviews is that they may also be of use to other researchers long after the research they were designed for is finished, provided, of course, that interviewees’ identities are protected.7

Richard Sennett discussed the dialectic of the interview in *The Hidden Injuries of Class* when recounting his experience of collecting life stories. While his interviewees were reserved at the beginning of each interview, he found that they became quite warm towards both him and Jonathan Cobb when, in Sennett’s words, ‘they found our interest was genuine’.8 Describing himself and Cobb as ‘upper-middle-class intellectuals’, he sensed their presence was causing their interviewees to lose the ‘conviction of their dignity’.9 Sennett argues that in the presence of people like himself, who wear their self-confidence and articulateness like ‘badges’ of class superiority, his working-class interviewees felt inadequate, or, as a house painter they interviewed said: ‘Whenever I’m with educated people … or people who aren’t my own kind … I feel like I’m making a fool of myself if I just act natural…’10 My experience of interviewing was both different from and similar to Sennett’s. It was similar in that I also had to overcome my interviewees’ initial reserve. Whereas his interviewees kept their distance until they realised that he and Cobb were genuinely interested in their experiences of class, most of my interviewees paid little heed to my ‘badge of class superiority’—where it could be said to exist—because of the levelling effect of our shared sexuality. With the exception of thirteen working-class men and four non-

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7 In my Ethics Application to the University, I promised to deposit printed copies of the transcripts and the original cassette tapes with the Australian Gay and Lesbian Archives after keeping them for the mandatory five years.

8 Sennett & Cobb *Hidden Injuries*, p. 37.

9 Sennett & Cobb *Hidden Injuries*, p. 37.

10 Sennett & Cobb *Hidden Injuries*, p. 115.
white men (three are Aboriginal, one is Thai) this sample is almost entirely white, middle-class and tertiary educated.

I would like to think that I adjusted for the effects of class when they were apparent. In retrospect, the thirteen working-class men in the sample did seem less relaxed, more ‘on edge’ during the interview than the middle-class men. They appeared more concerned to make sure that their answers were correct or what I wanted. They also seemed less inclined to recount stories and instead to give one-word answers or short answers, when a narrative response was called for. This corresponded with the experience of Sennett and Cobb and the conclusion they drew about the effect of class on agency. With hindsight, however, I now realise that I did not interpret their hesitancy as an effect of class but as evidence of a poor aptitude or IQ. I recall that I tried to deal with their silence or short answers by asking more questions in the hope that these would evoke fuller responses from the men. I certainly intervened more than I did with the middle-class men: I would re-phrase questions if the interviewees looked puzzled and encourage them no matter how they answered the questions. In a sense I behaved as I would with a student who had learning difficulties: I treated their hesitancy as a sign of weak comprehension skills.

The interviews lasted for about an hour and were never longer than 90 minutes. The atmosphere was neither too familiar nor too formal—it was almost conversational—which was desirable given the unforeseen responses personal interviews can evoke and the intimate topics discussed, such as sexual experiences, relationships and feelings of acceptance. Interview transcripts varied from 1500 to 7000 words in length, the average yielding between 3000 and 4000 words. Altogether, the transcripts represent a data base of approximately a quarter of a million words, which is substantial and required careful management. The material was sorted by age cohort, according to individual interview question. Each interviewee was allocated a fictitious first name in order to protect his anonymity. Codes used for the interviewees consisted of this fictitious first name and their real age. Other measures to protect the interviewees’ true identities included disguising their place of residence and occupation. Place of residence is referred to only very broadly by phrases such as ‘major capital city’, ‘working-class suburb’, or ‘country town’. Occupations are designated by general terms such as ‘community sector’, ‘public service’, or ‘transport industry’.

The anthropologist Edward Bruner describes the relationship that exists between researcher and interviewee in terms of narrative development. He understands the relationship as one in which the two participants—the researcher and the interviewee—develop a narrative between them. Bruner claims that the researcher goes into the field ‘with a story already in mind’ and that this is strongly influenced by what he calls the ‘dominant story in the literature’.11 He also claims that the story the researcher collects is ‘co-

authored’, and that, during the course of their interaction, researcher and interviewee come to share the same narrative or narratives. In the case of this research, the dominant story is two-fold and concerns how age and sexuality may affect a gay man’s understanding of himself. His actual age will influence how he relates to the gay milieu and the wider society, and it does so in two ways. First, his chronological age will tell us something about the likely context of his coming out, how receptive society was to the idea of ‘the homosexual’ or ‘the gay man’, and how parents, friends, family and work mates may have received the news of the interviewee’s sexuality, if they were told. Second, the interviewee’s age directly affects how he will experience age segregation, which is particularly pronounced on the gay scene. The young man glories in it; the old man is excluded. Their sexuality affects relations with themselves, their families, friends and the wider society. The effect of age and sexuality is thus both ontological and social.

My experience of developing a shared narrative with the interviewees was as Bruner describes. I went into the field with twin stories in mind: that gay men’s relations with the world are affected by their coming-out experience and by the degree of acceptance they reckon on receiving in the daily course of their lives, and that they experience age and ageing differently than heterosexuals because gay social spaces are youth oriented. The strong response from many men, of all ages, who wanted to tell their story of being gay and growing old, was evidence the story I had in mind was known and already circulating in the gay milieu. It was certainly being told long before I set out to collect versions of it. At the time I went into the field, there was a widespread awareness among gay men that being homosexual means more than being young, beautiful and desirable. Our shared sexuality made the task easier, for, as Bruner wrote,

> if the story is in our heads before we arrive at the field site, and if it is already known by the peoples we study, then we enter the ethnographic dialogue with a shared schema. We can fit in the pieces and negotiate the text more readily; we begin the interaction with the structural framework already in place.\(^\text{13}\)

There are many stories in the academic literature that relate to the topic of this thesis. They include, for example, stories told by scholars such as Dennis Altman, Henning Bech, Kenneth Plummer and Jeffrey Weeks about gay identity;\(^\text{14}\) stories about the growth of the gay community that scholars such

\(^{12}\) Bruner ‘Ethnography as Narrative’, p. 272.

\(^{13}\) Bruner ‘Ethnography as Narrative’, p. 275.

as George Chauncey, Clive Moore, John Gagnon, Gilbert Herdt and Garry Wotherspoon have told. As well, there were stories on the coming-out experience, double life and the closet that Altman, Chauncey, Plummer and Weeks told, as have other scholars, such as Gary Dowsett and Eve Sedgwick. Weeks was one of the first scholars to discuss the story of age segregation and ageing in the gay milieu. It related how old gay men were invisible because the focus of the gay milieu was on youthfulness. Together, these stories comprise the dominant story in the literature, which is first about the emergence and acceptance of the homosexual or gay man in the second half of the twentieth century, and then about how he understands himself and his place in the gay world and the wider world. One final point needs to be made about the dominant story in the literature. It is not static because it responds to the changing reality of gay men: ‘New stories arise when there is a new reality to be explained, when the social arrangements are so different that the old narrative no longer seems adequate’. In this thesis, the evolution of new stories that explain homosexuality in the second half of the twentieth century is understood generationally, and the new stories are interpreted by means of the three age cohorts.

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Part Two. Narrative identity.

The concept of ‘narrative identity’ is central to this research because of what it contributes to an understanding of the self and how it is constituted. The transcripts of the interviews yielded a small but useful amount of quantitative data (for example, age of partners, length of relationships and some financial details) and some qualitative data that suggest patterns of behaviour (for example, sexual relations, plans for retirement and old age). Their richest yield was the stories the interviewees told about their lives, for

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18 Bruner ‘Ethnography as Narrative’, p. 275.
these revealed much about their narrative identity as gay men, that is, how they understood their life path as gay men and what part public narratives played in the formation of their identity.

Proponents of narrative identity include anthropologists, philosophers, sociologists and social historians. All believe in the central idea that our social identity, that is, who we are, is constituted by and in the stories that we tell about ourselves. According to Alasdair MacIntyre, ‘man [sic] is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal’.19 Kenneth Plummer agrees. He says that all humans are ‘social world-makers’ and that everywhere we go ‘we are charged with telling stories and making meaning’.20 And Margaret Somers and Gloria Gibson argue that, when we act, we do so on the basis of ‘the projections, expectations, and memories’ that we derive from a ‘repertoire of available social, public, and cultural narratives’.21 In other words, we understand our actions, and our actions can be understood, as part of a store of narratives that reach back into the past of which we are conscious and stretch forward into the future we expect to unfold. The stock of narratives from which we may choose, however, is not infinite: what is available to people is always ‘historically and culturally specific’, and it is through the process of narrativity that we come ‘to know, understand, and make sense of the social world’. Somers and Gibson continue: ‘[I]t is through narratives and narrativity that we constitute our social identities … [A]ll of us come to be who we are (however ephemeral, multiple, and changing) by locating ourselves (usually unconsciously) in social narratives rarely of our own making’.22

On this point, that is, the effect that the circumstances of our birth have on the life we may lead, Alasdair MacIntyre is most clear and unambiguous: he says that we are born with a past and that ‘to try to cut myself off from that past … is to deform my present relationships’.23 MacIntyre believes, moreover, that ‘we all approach our present circumstances as bearers of a particular social identity’. He continues:

I am someone’s son or daughter, someone else’s cousin or uncle; I am a citizen of this or that city, a member of this or that guild or profession; I belong to this class, that tribe, this nation. Hence what is good for me has to be the good for one who inhabits these roles.24


20 Plummer Sexual Stories, p. 20.


23 MacIntyre ‘Virtues’, p. 259.

24 MacIntyre ‘Virtues’, p. 258.
The circumstances of a person’s birth bring with them what MacIntyre calls ‘traditions’. He is at pains to point out that he does not use the term ‘tradition’ as might a conservative antiquarian, that is, to keep things as they are and not implement any type of change.

What I am, therefore, is in key part what I inherit, a specific past that is present to some degree in my present. I find myself part of a history and that is generally to say, whether I like it or not, whether I recognize it or not, one of the bearers of a tradition.25

MacIntyre describes the nature of the traditions that we inherit thus:

I inherit from the past of my family, my city, my tribe, my nation, a variety of debts, inheritances, rightful expectations and obligations. These constitute the given of my life, my moral starting point. This is in part what gives my life its own moral particularity.26

Where MacIntyre speaks of tradition, Somers and Gibson prefer the phrase ‘public narratives’, by which they mean those narratives that are ‘attached to cultural and institutional formations’ and are larger than the individual. Public narratives include narratives of family, church, workplace, government or nation. In addition, they say that public narratives, like all stories, have ‘drama, plot, explanation and selective appropriation’, which they illustrate with the example of families that might, for instance, ‘selectively appropriate events to construct stories about their descent into poverty’.27

Public narratives on sexuality, and in particular on homosexuality are central to the formation of the homosexual or gay identity. When gay men come out, they do so in a time that is historically specific. The ‘traditions’ of the time and place of their birth and upbringing will affect how they understand themselves and the story they tell of their gayness. The public narratives that are available to them will include those narratives that are available to other people, viz. narratives of family, local regions of birth and schooling, and the public sphere of newspapers, television and social action. They will also include narratives of the local gay scene and gay community (where they existed). Different regions will produce different narratives of gayness and for that matter also different narratives of anti-homosexual prejudice and masculinity.28

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26 MacIntyre ‘Virtues’, p. 258.
27 Somers & Gibson ‘Reclaiming’, p. 62.
28 The ‘civilizing process’, as Norbert Elias explains, proceeds in spurts: its advances are not felt uniformly nor are its effects everywhere the same. If we assume that a decline in anti-homosexual prejudice is a feature of the advance of the civilising process in the West and that it advances unevenly, we can expect there will be pockets of anti-homosexual prejudice even in societies where there is evidence of a greater acceptance of homosexuality. Some of these pockets may be found in non-urban areas as well as in cities of all sizes. Norbert Elias 2000 [1939] The Civilizing Process: sociogenetic and psychogenetic investigations, trans. Edmund Jephcott with some notes and
La Trobe Valley or in rural districts such as the Darling Downs will experience being gay and being male differently from men who are raised in middle-class suburbs such as Battery Point in Hobart or Bellevue Hill in Sydney. In addition, dominant public narratives of homosexuality in contemporary society—which portray the gay man as young, beautiful and sexual—may jar with the private narratives of some gay men.

As well as public narratives, Somers and Gibson also distinguish what they call ontological, or private, narratives. These are the narratives that provide the individual with his or her ‘sense of social being’. They are multiple and may be inconsistent or conflicting for, according to Somers and Gibson, they are the stories that individuals use ‘to make sense of—indeed, in order to act in—their lives’. They elaborate: ontological or private narratives ‘make identity and the self something that one becomes’.29 In the case of any one of the men in this sample, the narratives from which they could choose to explain their identity would include a myriad from their family and its history (for example, stories about ancestors’ struggles and successes, childbirth and deaths, as well as about them as individuals), from their friendship network, past and present, and from social institutions such as schools and any youth organisations, religious or political groups to which they belonged. Because of the importance of coming out to most gay men, however, it is likely that these narratives will have been re-examined and possibly re-written in the light of that experience. In the process of coming out, men must first begin to relate a ‘new’ narrative to themselves of their ‘new’ self. It is at this point in their life that they may find, in the words of Somers and Gibson, that they are ‘powerless to accommodate certain happenings within a range of available cultural, public, and institutional narratives’.30 If men experience disjointed lives after coming out, then it might be because they find themselves excluded from the dominant public narratives of the time, such as those of their family, class or nation. It is important to stress that the men interviewed in this research did not experience identical lives as gay men. The experience of coming out varied according to factors such as when interviewees were born, the attitudes of the time towards homosexuality, their awareness of the stigma that attached to being homosexual, and the ease with which they were able to find and socialise with other gay men. For example, coming out was often more straightforward for men in the young cohort. They were less likely to attract social opprobrium than were their predecessors. In contrast, the men in the middle cohort and the old cohort were more likely to experience the need to pass as heterosexuals and to keep their sexuality a secret than is the case nowadays. As well, in the stories people tell about their coming out—and no gay person is without his or her coming-out story—each of us selects signal events that we believe in retrospect have significance in explaining the process of coming out, that

29 Somers & Gibson ‘Reclaiming’, p. 61.

30 Somers & Gibson ‘Reclaiming’, p. 74.
are meaningful to us as both the actor and the audience in the story that we tell about this important life event.

David Carr argues that narrative is ‘constitutive’, that is, that it brings into being not only actions and experience, but also, and crucially, the self: ‘[N]arrative … is constitutive not only of action but also of the self which acts and experiences’. In regard to the role of narrative in how the self is constituted and how it operates, Carr argues that the self occupies four positions in its own narrative, which it must occupy simultaneously. Each of us is the author, storyteller (or narrator), actor (or agent) and audience of the story that together and at once constitutes the self: ‘I am the subject of a life-story which is constantly being told and retold in the process of being lived. I am also the principal teller of this tale, and belong as well to the audience to which it is told’. Briefly, David Carr makes two other related points. First, we all strive to occupy the position of storyteller in our own lives.

Lest this be thought … far-fetched … consider how important … is the activity of literally telling, to others and to ourselves, what we are doing. When asked, “What are you doing?” we may be expected to come up with a story, complete with beginning, middle, and end, an accounting or recounting which is description and justification all at once.

Secondly—and crucially for the men in the sample—our identities may depend on which stories we choose from the available repertoire.

My identity as a self may depend on which story I choose and whether I can make it hang together in the manner of its narrator, if not its author. The idea of life as a meaningless sequence … may have significance if regarded as the constant possibility of fragmentation, disintegration, and dissolution which haunts and threatens the self.

This possibility of ‘fragmentation, disintegration, and dissolution’ haunted many interviewees when they lived in the closet and before they came out. Most said that life became meaningful and purposeful after coming out. The years spent in the closet represented a period in their lives when they did not occupy the position of storyteller. Eight men who are now in their sixties and seventies married, for instance, because it was safer to do so than risk being suspected a homosexual in the 1950s and 1960s when gay people in

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32 Carr ‘Narrative and the Real World’, p. 16.

33 Carr ‘Narrative and the Real World’, p. 17.
Australia were subject to state persecution and social hostility. In some cases, they waited until their children had grown before they came out or in other cases until the social climate was less hostile.

As humans, we are indeed born into circumstances and conditions not of our making. The world we enter is one where each individual gives shape to his or her social identity by the stories they tell about themselves. Each person has many personal narratives, some are complementary, some are in conflict with others. It is by and in narrative that the self is constituted and that we make our place in a world. The world that we inhabit comprises others who are similarly constituted and subject to the same ontology. We are born into a world of stories, storytellers and the universal practice of telling stories, says Alasdair MacIntyre:

> It is through hearing stories about wicked stepmothers … wolves that suckle twin boys … and eldest sons who waste their inheritance on riotous living and go into exile to live with the swine, that children learn or mislearn both what a child and what a parent is, what the cast may be in the drama into which they have been born and what the ways of the world are.\(^{35}\)

MacIntyre treats stories of childhood equally and with the same regard as he does stories from Roman mythology and the New Testament. Like the other theorists already discussed, he believes that the essence of each person is narratively constituted. ‘Deprive children of stories’, he writes,

> and you leave them unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions as in their words. Hence there is no way to give us any understanding of any society, including our own, except through the stock of stories which constitute its initial dramatic resource.\(^{36}\)

While social identity is constituted in the stories we tell others about ourselves and of which we understand ourselves to be part, there are also private narratives in the manner Carr describes, where people are their own author and storyteller, as well as the actor and audience of the story. MacIntyre also speaks of the many roles we assume in the process of our private narratives, viz., as agent, actor, and author.\(^{37}\) We may not, however, live a story to suit ourselves entirely. MacIntyre describes how living in a world with other people limits the scripts an individual may write, direct and act in.

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\(^{34}\) The eight formerly married men are Gerald (75), Leslie (74), John (65), Oscar (65), Clive (64), Terrence (64), Douglas (63), and Edward (60). For discussion of state persecution of gay people in Australia, see the chapter on the coming-out stories of the old cohort.

\(^{35}\) MacIntyre ‘Virtues’, p. 254.

\(^{36}\) MacIntyre ‘Virtues’, p. 254.

\(^{37}\) MacIntyre ‘Virtues’, p. 251.
[W]e are never more (and sometimes less) than the co-authors of our own narratives. Only in fantasy do we live what story we please … Each of us being a main character in his [sic] own drama plays subordinate parts in the dramas of others, each drama contains the others … Each of our dramas exerts constraints on each other’s, making the whole different from the parts, but still dramatic.\textsuperscript{38} And yet while these constraints do exist and they may direct how a story will continue, there are within those constraints ‘indefinitely many ways that it can continue’\textsuperscript{39}

What Somers and Gibson call public narratives and MacIntyre calls traditions are of a higher level than private narratives, are larger than the individual but none the less bear on the individual, for, like private narratives, they both contribute to the constitution of the self and are where the self is variously and simultaneously located. These are the narratives of family, tribe, class, workplace and nation, and each one of us plays anything from a minor role to a major role in each one and is more or less affected by each of them. Our identity comprises multiple narratives that are not always complementary or consistent and that are both public and private in origin and nature. No one lives alone and all of us are part of a relational world. In \textit{Telling Sexual Stories}, Plummer describes the interconnected nature of our social world constituted in and by narrative: ‘Change is ubiquitous: we are always becoming, never arriving; and the social order heaves as a vast negotiated web of dialogue and conversation’\textsuperscript{40} Plummer’s metaphor of a heaving web suggests constant movement, almost like the breath of life. That narrative process is dynamic is an understanding shared by all who write about it. This, therefore, is the strength and appeal of narrative identity. It allows researchers to map the unpredictability of human lives, individually and communally, to uncover and reveal the interconnected and fluid nature of their interviewees’ lives, to examine the relationships and stories that give them meaning, and to do so while also being aware that each of these features of life is in constant motion.

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Conclusion.

This sample of men was initially recruited and interviewed to explain what age and ageing meant to its members. What they revealed in the interviews were rich and detailed stories of their lives as gay men and, significantly, how they made sense of these, for, as scholars such as David Carr, Alasdair MacIntyre, and others referred to in this chapter, have explained, narrative is constitutive of the self. Through my

\textsuperscript{38} MacIntyre ‘Virtues’, p. 251.

\textsuperscript{39} MacIntyre ‘Virtues’, p. 253.

\textsuperscript{40} Plummer \textit{Sexual Stories}, p. 20.
interaction with the interviewees, two dominant stories emerged—the twin themes running through this thesis—concerning the influence of age and sexuality on the men’s lives. As mentioned, the interviewees’ chronological ages allow for an understanding of their life stories in the context of public narratives that prevailed when they were young men and—in the cases of the men from the middle and old cohorts—at later stages in their life course. Public narratives of interest related to family, self, sexuality, and, of course, homosexuality. Public narratives on homosexuality include stories told by homosexual men about themselves, their relations and practices, as well as the stories that heterosexuals tell and have told about gay men, their relations and practices. The main concern of this thesis is to explain how the interviewees have understood the repertoire of public narratives available to them and how these defined what it was to be homosexual or gay.
Chapter Two. The coming-out stories of the old cohort.

‘I have no difficulty crossing between the homosexual world and the heterosexual world.’

Maurice, 65.

* * *

Introduction.

Between the early 1940s and the end of the 1960s, public narratives of the self, citizenship and sexuality were subject to increased state surveillance as emergency measures were put in place to deal with the exigencies of World War II and then the Cold War. In World War II, one of the purposes of this surveillance was to exclude homosexuals from the armed services because of their supposed threat to morale and morals; in the Cold War, its purpose was to contain a supposed threat to state security. The North American historian, Allan Bérubé, has argued that because of the state’s concern about the homosexual as a type of person and the homo-sociability of the military, World War II saw the assertion of a stronger gay identity and increased gay social activity, even though the dominant narrative depicted homosexuals as social deviants, criminals or mentally ill. It was during this period and in the midst of these contradictory public narratives that the interviewees in the old cohort reached maturity. These and other features of the period when the men from the old cohort ‘came of age’ are discussed in the first part of the chapter.

For men of the old cohort, coming out meant something quite different from what it came to mean for gay men of later generations. It rarely meant that a person made public his sexuality or revealed his identity as a homosexual to all who knew him. It could mean, however, that he had been ‘presented’ to gay ‘society’, for example, or that he had become aware of his sexual interest in men. Notably, it is only in this cohort that there are men who say they never needed to come out because their homosexuality was self evident, or, as one interviewee in his seventies says, because ‘it was simply taken for granted’. What coming out meant to the old cohort is discussed in Part Two of the chapter.

With the exception of two men, all the interviewees in this cohort have come out in the sense that they now freely and openly admit to being homosexual. This was not the case, however, for the majority of the cohort when they were young men, and few could say that they have been out for most of their lives. Their stories reveal a variety of coming-out experiences and this is discussed in Part Three. There are accounts from the two men who never came out and from men who came out when their marriage ended. One group of men also reveals how news of their coming out was received.
Because the majority of men in the old cohort did not come out as teenagers or young adults, the audience for their coming out was more diverse than it was for the men in the other cohorts, and may have included their parents and their children. As with the other cohorts, their coming-out stories include accounts of rejection by parents or friends and also of acceptance. None reported being rejected by their children.

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Part One. The ‘camp’ period: from the 1940s until the end of the 1960s.

The most notable feature of the ‘camp’ period is that it occurred when public narratives regarding self, citizenship and sexuality were subject to intense scrutiny and strict control by organs of the state. During World War II, there is evidence, as Allan Bérubé shows, of the state’s interest in the homosexual as a category of person: the United States military engaged psychologists to assist in screening out ‘undesirables’ from the armed services.¹ Later, according to George Chauncey, there is evidence of a direct link between the state’s anxiety about security during the 1950s and 1960s and its surveillance of citizens, the strict regulation of masculinity and the persecution of deviant sexual minorities.² Throughout the period and notwithstanding Bérubé’s evidence of increased homosexual sociability during World War II, gay men lived ‘closeted’ or ‘double lives’ because the dominant public narrative positioned them as socially deviant, criminal or mentally ill. The ‘fairy’ or the ‘sissy’, that is, the effeminate man, was one of the more pervasive stereotypes of the homosexual in the camp period.

When publicly acknowledged at all, they were caricatured as “fairies” … [as] freaks whose lives were trivialized as silly and unimportant, so that many … gay men learned not to take themselves or each other seriously. Such insidious forms of social control worked quietly below the surface of everyday life through unspoken fears and paralyzing shame, coming into view only in sporadic acts of violence, arrests, school expulsions, firings, or religious condemnations.³

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² George Chauncey, public lecture at University of Melbourne on 21 September 2005. He argues that a similar crackdown against ‘deviant’ sexuality occurred in the USA during the Depression when ‘Lesbians and gay men … threatened to undermine the reproduction of normative gender arrangements already threatened by the upheavals of the thirties’. George Chauncey 1994 *Gay New York: gender, urban culture, and the making of the gay male world, 1890–1940*, New York: Basic Books, p. 354.

³ Bérubé *Coming out under fire*, p. 255. For discussion of the terms ‘fairy’ and ‘sissy’ as they applied in the USA between world wars, see Chauncey *Gay New York*, Intro. and ch. 2 & 3. For discussion of effeminacy, see Peter M. Nardi 1992 ‘Sex, friendship, and gender roles among gay men’ in Peter M. Nardi (Ed.) *Men’s Friendships*, Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage Publications, pp. 173–85 and also discussion in ch. 8 of connection that is assumed to exist between homosexuality and effeminacy. Garry Wotherspoon refers to the effeminate male as one of three stereotypes of homosexual men that circulated in Sydney between the wars and in World War II. See Garry Wotherspoon 1991 *City of the Plain: history of a gay sub-culture*, Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, ch. 1&2 and Garry Wotherspoon.
In the decade before the war, gay sub-cultures in most cities of the West were clandestine, homosexuals discovered gay life only by accident and many suffered from negative effects of social opprobrium: ‘Self-hate, individual pathology, and the social hatred of medicine, law, and religion were commonplace and prevented most gays from gathering and seeking one another’. The camp period takes in the post-war era until the end of the 1960s. In the brief historical sketch that follows, discussion concerns how homosexuals and the gay sub-culture were affected by developments in World War II and the post-war years, with particular attention to Australia.

Following the work of Bérubé, many scholars now accept that World War II acted as a catalyst in the United States for the growth and development of a gay sub-culture and identity. Charles Kaiser, for instance, likens the role of the army to that of a ‘giant centrifuge’ that created what he calls ‘the largest concentration of gay men inside a single institution in American history’. This is not to say that the US military was a homosexual bacchanalia after lights out or that gay servicemen could openly parade their homosexuality. The point the historians make is that gay men who had previously thought themselves isolated and alone in the small towns and provincial cities of America found in the armed forces that there were others like them. Bérubé argues that the US policy of screening out ‘undesirables’ from the armed services benefited gay people: ‘Ironically the screening and discharge policies, together with the drafting of millions of men, weakened the barriers that had kept gay people trapped and hidden at the margins of society’. He also argues that the changes brought about by the war, such as the ‘proliferation of gay bars’ and increased awareness of homosexuality, albeit defined by the psychiatric model, would determine the nature of relations that mainstream American society would have with gay men in the 1950s and 1960s.

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4 George Chauncey shows that an extensive scene existed in New York from the late nineteenth century: ‘Fairies drank with sailors and other workingmen at water-front dives and … “noted faggots” mixed with other patrons at Haarlem’s rent parties and basement cabarets’. This world was forced underground, however, in the late 1920s and 1930s because of the Depression and an anti-gay policy pursued by the State Liquor Authority. See Chauncey Gay New York, ch. 12.


7 Bérubé Coming out under fire, p. 255.

8 Bérubé Coming out under fire, pp. 256–7.
The war did not affect gay sub-culture and identity in Australia exactly as it did in the United States, nor was the state in Australia as intently concerned about the existence of the homosexual as a type of person or about homosexuals in the armed forces. The Australian armed services did not implement stringent screening policies to prevent homosexuals enlisting, and ‘most homosexually inclined men who wished to fight did … get into the forces. They simply kept that aspect of their lives hidden; in the terminology of the time, they acted “square”’. 9 Unlike in the US military, men were rarely discharged from the Australian armed services if they were discovered having sexual or affective relations with other men. 10 However, if they were, its effects were severe, for they ‘bore the full brunt of official censure or the tearing apart of their lives that exposure brought’. 11 The unusual homo-sociability created when large numbers of men were forced to live and work together in military units provided some homosexuals with greater opportunities to develop friendships and sexual relations 12 and also created circumstances for ‘situational homosexuality’. 13 ‘Many other men who might not usually have been involved in homosexual behaviour, lived day-by-day, expecting to die in battle … [and took] their pleasures wherever they found them’. 14

Of all the capital cities on the east coast of Australia, Brisbane was possibly the most affected by the presence of very large numbers of armed servicemen. 15 At the peak of the war, it is estimated that

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13 There have always been men who do not regard themselves as homosexual but who will have sex with men when and if the occasion arises. When a man who is otherwise heterosexual has sex with a man (gay or straight), their sexual encounter may be called ‘situational’ homosexuality. Such cases of sex between men is supposed to occur because of the absence of women to satisfy their sexual needs, and to be found in all male institutions such as prisons and the military. This is a debatable category and explanation. For discussion of the dubiousness of the notion of ‘situational’ homosexuality, see Henning Bech 1997 When Men Meet: homosexuality and modernity, trans. Teresa Mequit & Tim Davies, Cambridge: Polity Press, ch. III, esp. pp. 20–25. Garry Wotherspoon alludes to sexual encounters between men during World War II where only one was homosexual or where both were heterosexual. See Wotherspoon City, ch. 2, esp. pp. 86–93.

14 Moore Sunshine, p. 105. John Murphy makes a similar point about the effect of war on promiscuity in general. See John Murphy 2000 Imagining the fifties: private sentiment and political culture in Menzies’ Australia, Sydney: University of New South Wales Press Ltd, p. 56.

15 Brisbane was the headquarters of US General Douglas MacArthur and became ‘an American village’ [Wotherspoon City, p. 96.] after the USA entered the war in 1942. For a description of the effect MacArthur and his entourage had on Brisbane, see Moore, Sunshine, p. 106.
eighty thousand Americans were stationed in Brisbane, which then had a civilian population of only five hundred thousand. By the middle of 1943 approximately two hundred thousand US servicemen were in Australia. Wotherspoon argues that it is difficult to assess the impact of the Americans on gay sub-culture and identity. Most of the capital cities in Australia had homosexual sub-cultures that pre-dated World War II. In Sydney the effect of the Americans was not to change existing institutions such as drag balls and beats, but to increase the number and patronage of others, such as coffee shops and ‘sly grog’ shops and bars. Some Americans brought with them and passed on to Australian men their personal knowledge of institutions and practices of gay sub-cultures in cities like Chicago and New York, and this ‘played a key role in helping break down the perception among many homosexually inclined men that they were in some way bad or evil or were in an individual predicament’.

One man in the sample has a story to tell of a sexual encounter with a serviceman in Melbourne during World War II. It was Vernon’s first sexual encounter as a schoolboy. He is from the old cohort and no longer lives in Melbourne.

One night when I was seventeen years old a friend and I decided to go down to the gardens across from the Princes Bridge and I was picked up by a soldier and taken home and fucked. And that was perhaps the most significant night that I had ever had. I realised then that a whole world had opened up in a way that I did not anticipate. It was during World War II. The gardens were near [what is now] the Myer Music Bowl. They always have been a beat from time immemorial. If those dark flowers could talk they would tell you an awful lot.

The gardens to which Vernon refers were (and still are) less than ten minutes’ walk from Flinders Street railway station, the principal station of Melbourne’s suburban rail network. The gardens are at the northern end of the King’s Domain, bounded by St Kilda Road, Alexandra Avenue and the Yarra River. In the Domain are Government House and the Shrine of Remembrance as well as statues and other memorials to the dead. The locale is public parkland of considerable ceremonial and civic importance. The gardens where Vernon met the soldier are not well lit, are relatively secluded and public, which would make them a perfect location for a beat. Vernon describes his sexual encounter as a life-changing one.

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16 Moore *Sunshine*, p. 106.
17 Wotherspoon ‘Comrades-at-arms’, p. 218.
19 Wotherspoon *City*, pp. 93–7.
experience, for it showed him a world about which he had not even dreamed. The fact that it was a soldier with whom he had sex is casually stated and unremarkable.

After the brief flowering of homosexual sociability during World War II, repressive social practices returned in peacetime and intensified in the late 1940s and early 1950s as the Cold War began. During the McCarthy period in the United States—and in other Western countries as well—it was no longer safe for homosexuals to be open about their sexuality: it was ‘a time of intense persecution of homosexual desire’. Chauncey describes gay men’s existence as an oppressed minority:

[H]omosexuals were not just ridiculed and scorned. They were systematically denied their civil rights: their right to free assembly, to patronize public accommodations, to free speech, to a free press, to a form of intimacy of their own choosing. And they confronted a degree of policing and harassment that is almost unimaginable to us today.

He is not alone in this estimation of the level and extent of anti-homosexual prejudice in the West. Dennis Altman says that ‘[u]ntil the end of the sixties, to be a homosexual in most Western countries … was to experience a life that was largely furtive, shameful, and guilt-ridden; most homosexuals shared only too strongly the social condemnations against them’. Ken Plummer observes that in the early twentieth century homosexuality was so disparaged that ‘coming out often led to misery, madness or at the very least a life of loneliness’. As well, John Gagnon notes the damaging effects of repression on homosexuals.

Many … were “in the closet” to most of the significant others in their lives; they were properly fearful of the police, their own families, and their coworkers. Such fears often extended to the people with whom they were having sex, since blackmail and violence were both endemic and not reportable to police.

In the United States, more than half the states passed laws between the end of World War II and the mid-1950s that gave police powers ‘to force persons who were convicted of certain sexual offenses, including sodomy—or, in some states, suspected of being “sexual deviants”—to undergo psychiatric


23 Dennis Altman 1982 The Homosexualization of America, the Americanization of the Homosexual, New York: St Martin’s Press. p. 2.

24 Plummer Sexual Stories, p. 84.

examinations’. Punishment consisted of ‘indefinite confinement of homosexuals in mental institutions’. Homosexuals thus imprisoned could be freed only if ‘they were cured of homosexuality’, which, Chauncey writes, ‘prison doctors soon began to complain was impossible’.26 John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman stress that all levels of American government were involved in a campaign to prevent the growth of a gay sub-culture: ‘Especially in the 1950s and 1960s, federal, state, and local governments mobilized their resources against this underground sexual world’.27 This period of intense anti-gay prejudice was all the more extraordinary and ‘traumatic’, says Angus McLaren, because it took place after World War II, when, ‘an American gay world … had begun to coalesce as a result of the uprooting of civilian life’.28 It was extraordinary also because it followed so soon after the work of Alfred Kinsey.

Together with his co-authors, Wardell Pomeroy and Clyde Martin, Kinsey published Sexual Behavior in the Human Male in 1948. They interviewed twelve thousand men of all ages. Their findings included, for example, that 37 per cent of the male population would reach orgasm with another man at least once between adolescence and old age. They estimated that 25 per cent of the male population had more than ‘incidental homosexual experience or reactions for at least three years’ between 16 and 55. Ten per cent were exclusively gay. Four per cent were exclusively gay from adolescence, that is, all their life.29 Kinsey’s contribution to a more tolerant understanding of homosexuals lies in his refusal to accept the psychiatric model that said all homosexuals conformed to a universal type and that their lives were defined by the objects of their desire.30

Historians observe that during the camp period frequent ‘crackdowns’ by police were one of the forms of repression to which gay people were subjected.31 Evidence from McLaren that gay people were persecuted in the 1950s and 1960s includes nine thousand files that the Royal Canadian Mounted Police opened on suspected gay men; thirty-eight thousand convictions in West Germany for homosexual offences between 1953–1965; a ‘five-fold’ increase in convictions for homosexual offences in Britain in the 1950s; and, the discharge of more than four thousand homosexuals from the US military between 1947–1950.32 In France, Didier Eribon writes, the national legislature amended laws to define

26 Chauncey Why Marriage? p. 11.


29 See Kaiser Gay Metropolis, pp. 54–5. See also, McLaren Twentieth Century, pp. 145–6.

30 Gagnon An Interpretation of Desire, p. 112.

31 D’Emilio & Freedman Intimate Matters, pp. 293–4, and also McLaren Twentieth Century, p. 161.

homosexuality ‘as a social illness alongside alcoholism and prostitution’.\textsuperscript{33} Persecution of gay men thus occurred in other Western nations at the same time and with the same intensity as in the United States. D’Emilio and Freedman describe how gay people were treated in United States cities during the period:

\begin{quote}
Arrests were substantial in many cities … [and] fluctuated enormously as unexpected sweeps of gay bars could lead to scores of victims in a single night … Newspaper headlines would strike fear into the hearts of gay men and lesbians by announcing that the police were combing the city for nests of deviants. Editors often printed the names, addresses, and places of employment of those arrested in bar raids.\textsuperscript{34}
\end{quote}

These crackdowns suggest a moral panic until one realises that they were state sanctioned and did not cease when the newspapers lost interest. Indeed, if the newspapers did publish the names and addresses of gay men who were arrested in bar raids, they were acting as agents of the state in its persecution of homosexuals. The frequency of police raids and intensity of state surveillance varied according to place and time.

Conditions were not much better for gay men in Australia where they were subject to similar repression following the war. Graham Willett shows that a six-fold increase occurred between 1938 and 1958 in the number of people convicted of unnatural offences in Australia, and that more than three thousand people were convicted between the end of World War II and 1960.\textsuperscript{35} Gay men were arrested as a result of deliberate policies by police forces to suppress homosexual activity, specifically public sex at beats.\textsuperscript{36} Other features of the repression included censorship of films, books and plays, and an increased interest by the Australian Security and Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) in the homosexual public servant as a security threat, especially if employed in intelligence ‘sensitive’ departments such as Defence or External Affairs. Willett notes that the crackdown was designed not to change public opinion—for there was scant coverage of homosexuality in the press—but to terrorise homosexuals, ‘and in this it was very successful. Homosexual life during the 1950s was marked by a degree of secrecy and fear and self-

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\textsuperscript{34} D’Emilio & Freedman \textit{Intimate Matters}, p. 294.

\textsuperscript{35} These figures are for convictions in superior courts in Australia. Willett notes that they are likely to underestimate the extent of the effect of police repression because they exclude people who were charged but not convicted and people who were convicted in lower courts, e.g., magistrate’s courts. See Graham Willett 1997 ‘The darkest decade: homophobia in 1950s Australia’ in John Murphy and Judith Smart (Eds) \textit{The Forgotten Fifties: aspects of Australian society and culture in the 1950s}, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press and \textit{Australian Historical Studies}, n. 109, pp. 127–8.

\textsuperscript{36} Willett ‘The darkest decade’, p. 128. The head of the New South Wales police force said that homosexuality was the greatest danger Australia faced in the 1950s, see Robert Aldrich 2003 \textit{Colonialism and Homosexuality}, London: Routledge, p. 238.
censorship that speaks volumes for the effectiveness of the repressive mobilisation’. This ‘wall of silence’ did not prevent social relations between gay men. It did mean, however, that relations had to be conducted in secret and that the homosexual milieu was by necessity clandestine.

Throughout the camp period an organised, if hidden, sub-culture existed in Australia’s capital cities. Sydney then had, and still has, the most extensive gay sub-culture in Australia. In the 1950s its institutions comprised coffee shops, restaurants and hotels in central Sydney that welcomed a homosexual clientele. Towards the end of the decade, ‘gay-friendly’ businesses began to re-locate to Darlinghurst and Kings Cross. ‘[T]he downstairs bar of the Chevron Hotel … was called “The Quarter Deck” and was popular with young sailors and … the men whose interest was young sailors’. And then in the 1960s the sub-culture embraced drag with the opening of clubs like the Jewel Box, Les Girls, the Purple Onion and the Annexe, and continued to expand, this time into Oxford Street, as bars opened there. These included Enzo’s and Chez Ivy. ‘The place of Oxford Street as a focus for gay entertainment was further reinforced early in 1969 when Ivy’s Birdcage, a major venue for drag shows, opened at Taylor Square.’ When it burned down it was replaced by a night club called Capriccio’s, which had a 3am license. An interviewee recalls its pre-eminence among Sydney bars:

The opening of Capriccio’s was a great thrill because until then the gays didn’t have a proper place to go to. It had a restaurant downstairs, with a piano, soft music, and a female impersonator who used her own voice. Upstairs, it had a show that was better than Les Girls. It was gay orientated, not touristy.

Perhaps not coincidentally, state-sanctioned repression of homosexuals corresponded with the ‘high-water mark’ of the nuclear family in Australia. In its ideal form—which conservative governments of the day supported and promoted—the family comprised male breadwinner, female housewife and mother, and dependent children. As well as being the proper institution for raising children, it was the only socially approved site for the satisfaction and enjoyment of sexual relations between women and men. John Murphy argues that the 1950s is not a period of sexual denial for

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38 Wotherspoon City, pp. 152–5.

39 Wotherspoon City, p. 155.

40 Wotherspoon City, pp. 156–7.

41 Wotherspoon City, p. 158.


43 For discussion of the ways in which taxation policies of the Menzies government benefited and supported the middle class family in the 1950s, see Murphy Imagining the fifties pp. 84–9.
heterosexuals, and that contemporary commentators, such as marriage guidance counsellors and writers for popular magazines, consistently argued that ‘sexual expression and what they call “adjustment” were crucial to a stable and happy marriage’. It was not sex that was taboo in the 1950s but sexual relations outside marriage.

Given the extent of repression of homosexuals that occurred in Australia in the 1950s, it is noteworthy that only three men from the old cohort tell of it: two men had direct experience of police raids and a third man says it kept him in the closet. There are a number of possible explanations for the small number of instances. First, as I originally set out to investigate interviewees’ experience of ageing, I did not ask them about their experience of homophobia or repression. What accounts there are of homophobia or repression arose in the normal course of the interviews; when they occurred, I noted them, but did not follow up. Second, the cohort is largely middle class and, because middle-class men are more aware of the social cost of arrest and prosecution, they are less likely to risk being arrested at beats. Third, a large number of men in the old cohort were in long-term gay relationships or in marriages and, from the accounts they gave, were faithful to their partners or wives. If they mixed with other homosexuals, they did so in a way that did not attract the attention of the police; thus they had little or no experience of repression to report.

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Part Two. Coming out in the ‘camp’ period.

In the twentieth century, different generations of gay men have understood the expression ‘to come out’ differently and at times alternated it with the expression ‘to bring out’. Depending on the historical context, to come out has meant to be presented to homosexual society, to become aware that one is sexually attracted to men rather than women, to declare that one wants to have or has had sex with a man, that one has social relations with other homosexuals, or that one is gay.

In the 1920s, gay men were said to have come out after they had been presented to the gay world at a drag ball, in much the same way that young women came out into ‘society’ as debutantes. Garry Wotherspoon and George Chauncey describe the prominence of drag balls in the social calendar of homosexual sub-cultures in Sydney and New York respectively. See Wotherspoon City, pp. 76–7 and Chauncey Gay New York, pp. 291–9 & passim.

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44 Murphy Imagining the fifties p. 56.

45 Garry Wotherspoon and George Chauncey describe the prominence of drag balls in the social calendar of homosexual sub-cultures in Sydney and New York respectively. See Wotherspoon City, pp. 76–7 and Chauncey Gay New York, pp. 291–9 & passim.
that one has been initiated into social and/or sexual practices by a more experienced person. In World War II coming out lost the connotation of being introduced to society, possibly because the war disrupted the settled social patterns of homosexual social relations that had developed in established gay quarters in large cities of the United States. Bérubé shows that by 1941 gay people were ‘using coming out to mean they had found gay friends and the gay life’.47

When Barry Dank interviewed gay American men in the late 1960s, his interviewees used the expression ‘to come out’ in a number of different ways. They used it to refer to the occasion when they first identified as homosexual and then how (that is, in what circumstances) they met other homosexuals. He maintained that it was possible to be homosexual and not develop social relations with other homosexuals: ‘self-identification may or may not occur in a social context in which other gay people are present’. As well, Dank found that his interviewees used ‘to come out’ interchangeably with ‘to bring out’ where the meaning referred to an individual’s first enjoyable sexual encounter with a man: ‘The statement, “He brought me out,” usually meant, “He taught me to enjoy real homosexual acts”’.50

In his early influential work, *Sexual Stigma*, the British sociologist, Kenneth Plummer, explained that while coming out had many different meanings, including the public declaration of the gay liberationists, he understood it to mean a process whereby ‘individuals … are “reborn” into the organized aspects of the homosexual community … during which they come to identify … as “homosexuals”’. Crucially, he notes that coming out is ‘neither an inevitable step nor a necessary stage in becoming homosexual’, because a person may regard himself as homosexual without having to develop social relations in the gay world, but Plummer insists that a person must come out—that is, be ‘reborn’ into the gay world—if he wishes to take on ‘homosexuality as a “way of life”’. For Dank, coming out may or may not occur in company of others and is related to the individual’s self-regard, whereas Plummer sees it as a social process where the individual adopts a new ‘way of life’.

By the time of the gay liberation era in the 1970s, the meaning of coming out had grown, and, as is shown in the next chapter, while it could still mean a gay man’s first sexual encounter or his entry into

47 Bérubé *Coming out under fire*, p. 6.
48 Dank’s interviewees, whom he styled ‘self-admitted homosexuals’, completed a one-page questionnaire. The men were recruited from ‘a large metropolitan area in the United States’ in the late 1960s. The age range of respondents is 15–69. See Barry M. Dank 1971 ‘Coming out in the gay world’ *Psychiatry*, 34, pp. 180–3.
49 Dank ‘Coming out in the gay world’, p. 181.
50 Dank ‘Coming out in the gay world’, footnote 7, p. 181.
the gay world, it was more likely to refer to the occasion(s) when he announced to his friends and family that he was gay. Of the historical shift in meaning from the 1920s to the 1970s, Chauncey observes ‘[t]he critical audience to which one came out had shifted from the gay world to the straight world’.

Before gay liberation when gay identity and the gay milieu became more public, the expression to come out referred to a man’s admission to himself and perhaps later to homosexual friends that he was sexually attracted to men rather than women, and that he wanted to have and/or was having sex with men. If he was an overt homosexual, his homosexuality was known not only to his friends but also to other homosexuals who socialised in the bars and clubs of the sub-culture. By today’s standards, these men would be described as leading a ‘closeted’ life or ‘double life’.

Both Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and George Chauncey understand and use the terms ‘closet’ and ‘double life’ differently. Sedgwick argues that gay people are never fully out of the ‘closet’, and that, because of what Ken Plummer calls ‘heterosexism’, there will always be people in a gay man’s life who will not know his sexuality and may assume he is heterosexual; he must then decide whether he wishes to remain in the closet, or not. As well, there will be those to whom a gay man consciously chooses not to reveal his sexuality because he believes such information may weaken his standing with them. ‘Passing’ as heterosexual is preferable to coming out. Chauncey is less persuaded by the usefulness of the term ‘closet’ or by Sedgwick’s use of it to describe the homosexual life before the 1960s. He dislikes the pejorative connotation of closet and believes that ‘double life’ is a better metaphor for the manner in which homosexuals managed their identity in the camp period. Closet connotes an invisibility and isolation that is not borne out in the lived experience of homosexuals before gay liberation. Chauncey suggests a number of possible explanations for the origin of the word closet, all of which tend to support the notion that overt homosexuals used it to describe covert homosexuals who wanted to keep their

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53 The word ‘closet’ is gay jargon for the state of being where a person keeps his sexuality secret because he fears that he will be the subject of social opprobrium or hostility and/or physical abuse or violence if people learn that he is not heterosexual. Sedgwick makes the point that closet is nowadays used in other senses to connote a secret that a person keeps from others. See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick 1990 *Epistemology of the Closet*, Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 67, 72.

54 Ken Plummer defines heterosexism as ‘[A] diverse set of social practices—from the linguistic to the physical, in the public sphere and the private sphere, covert and overt—in an array of social arenas (e.g. work, home, school, media, church, courts, streets, etc.) in which the homo/hetero binary distinction is at work whereby heterosexuality is privileged’. Emphasis in the original. See Ken Plummer 1992 ‘Speaking its name. Inventing a lesbian and gay studies’ in Ken Plummer (Ed.) *Modern Homosexualities: fragments of lesbian and gay experience*, London: Routledge, p. 19.


sexuality hidden.57 ‘Leading a double life’, says Chauncey, ‘in which they often passed as straight (and sometimes married) allowed them to have jobs and status a queer would have been denied while still participating in what they called “homosexual society” or “the life”’.58 Many homosexuals were able to make a relatively easy transition between their lives as heterosexuals and the sub-culture, or the ‘homosexual world’. While Chauncey acknowledges that passing came at too great a personal cost for some gay men, for those for whom the personal cost was slight, the advantages were considerable.

One interviewee from the old cohort explains how over the years he managed to move between two worlds, to pass as a heterosexual when required and resume his homosexual persona when circumstances permitted. Maurice is 65 and lives in a country town located within an hour’s drive of a major capital city.

I do not mix with a lot of straight people and those I do mix with are totally unaware of my homosexuality. With the homosexual world I do not have to think as much when I am expressing myself whereas with the heterosexual world I have to be a little bit more on guard. The art of getting along with people is being to them what they want you to be. I can mix on all levels, with straights and gays. Of course gays come in 67 different colours. With the exception of the scene, I blend in fairly well.

Apart from having to take more care with the presentation of his self in the company of heterosexuals, Maurice shows no evidence of being oppressed by the double life. It has become his accustomed way in the straight world. With the exception of the scene, he has no difficulty ‘blending in’ with all other homosexual cultures. On the scene, his age would make blending in more difficult.

* * *


The coming-out stories of the old cohort stand apart from those of younger generations because, as its members reached their sexual and social maturity before the advent of gay liberation, they were not under the same pressure, created by the dominant narrative of the gay movement, to come out. In other words, they did not face the same compulsion to declare their sexuality publicly. What pressure they did experience, however, concerned the decision they all had to make, which was whether to live their life as an overt or as a covert homosexual, that is, how they would manage what Erving Goffman called a

‘spoiled identity’. If they decided to live as a covert homosexual, they had to hide the truth of their sexual desire not only from other gay men but also from their siblings, parents and friends, and their wife in the case of those men who got married. On the other hand, if they decided to live as overt homosexuals, and were ‘out’ to other gay men, they could expect to find emotional support and camaraderie in the gay sub-culture. Such support and camaraderie were available only to those who were able to move between the two milieus without undue psychic distress—that is, to pass while they were at work, for example, and then to be out when they went to a gay bar or were with gay friends. One example is Ronald, who is now in his late sixties. He turned eighteen in the mid-1950s and explains the subtle meanings that then attached to being out.

I met men in the ballet who were homosexual and who were out in the limited sense that we understood the term in the 1950s. In other words, they were out to each other and perhaps to other people in the dance world. But they were not necessarily fully out in the sense that we would mean it today.

In the old cohort, half of those who ‘came out’, as they understood its meaning, did so when they were in their twenties and thirties; the rest came out when they were in their forties or older. With only one exception, all the men who came out in their forties, fifties and sixties had once been married. And, with the exception of two men, all the men in this cohort are now ‘fully out’. They represent a variety of coming-out experiences. First, there is a small group of men who never had to formally come out because their homosexuality was never in doubt. Second, another small group comprises those who came out when their marriage ended. Third, five men, whose stories are a fair representation of the old cohort’s coming-out experiences, reveal how news of their homosexuality was received, that is, how people close to them—their audience—responded to their coming out.

Those who said they never had to come out are in their late sixties and seventies. All said they knew from an early age that they were ‘different’. Charles (67) was off-hand when asked to tell the story of his coming out. ‘I didn’t have to’, he replies. ‘I have always been gay. I am one of the lucky ones.’ Geoffrey, also in his late sixties, echoed these sentiments: ‘I think I have known all my life even before I knew what sex was. I don’t suppose that I ever came out. I was always that way’. Chester (71) is one of a number of children of migrants in the sample. He was born to upper middle-class parents who moved to


60 The average age of the men in this cohort is 67 and on average they came out at 37. Interviewed in 2002, a 67-year-old would have been born in 1935 and would have come out in 1972, the year the Whitlam Labor government was elected to office and one year after gay liberation and CAMP Inc. were established in Australia. This man would have been in his final year of secondary school in 1950 or 1951 and would have been 21 in 1956.
Melbourne when he was fourteen. He is single and lives on his own. He never had to come out because his parents did not think ‘such things mattered’. His parents were ‘thought to be unconventional in the small, rigid town that is Melbourne’. He said he does not choose friends who are ‘bigoted or conventional people who were reactionary in their views’.

By contrast, Reginald (79) was brought up in a working-class family. He explains that being gay was something he could never hide, and, for that reason, he never had to come out: ‘I feel that I was always pretty obvious to most people because of my voice. I realised that I could never hide the fact that I was a homosexual because I have a pale pink voice’. But Reginald did tell his father he was gay. The occasion was one of his weekly lunches with his parents. He was 55 at the time. It was the Sunday after Mardi Gras and they were watching television. When the television station broadcast footage of the Mardi Gras parade from the night before, Reginald’s hand was forced: ‘My father said, “We don’t want to watch this stuff”. And I said to him, “But I do!” And he said, “But you’re not one of those”. And I said, “Yes I am”. And that shut him up completely’. Reginald did not stop visiting his parents on Sundays and the topic was never raised again.

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Men who came out when their marriage ended, and therefore relatively late in life, comprise a small but significant group. Their lived experience is significant because it is an example of coming out as a long, slow process of positioning oneself against heterosexual expectations, of learning a new identity at a time when gay narratives were being created and refashioned. They are represented here by the stories of one man in his sixties and another in his seventies. Both came out in the late 1980s when—the AIDS epidemic notwithstanding—the social context was more open, and gay men were not regarded as mad, criminal or deviant. The gay identity was also less closeted and more accepted and there was less reason to lead a double life.

John (65) explains that he did not come out in the 1950s when he was a teenager because ‘there was no conception of homosexuality in the minds of people then’. He saw no evidence of people like him and was confused for many years ‘without knowing why’. For three years in his mid-twenties, however, he had a covert relationship with an older man. When the relationship ended, he got ‘involved with women’ and within six months was engaged. His decision to marry ‘relieved the situation’—of having to live a covert life—‘because it was [his] avenue to being normal’. He believes he was not alone in seeking ‘normality’, as ‘so many people would tell the same story’. Then, after more than 30 years of marriage and when he was in his early 50s, he experienced a crisis while on holidays. He came to the realisation that all his involvements were ‘a form of running away’, and that his sexuality was the reality he was trying to avoid. He contacted a counsellor and thus began the end of his marriage and the end of a
coming-out process, which, he says ‘had spun out over 30 years’. John believes that he would not have
married if he had known what homosexuality was when he was a teenager: ‘I would have recognised what
I was and lived with it’. To finally come out, albeit late in life, has made him very happy: ‘I shall never
forget the sense of relief when I came to terms with my sexuality and the joy I felt that I had found myself
at last’.

Leslie is in his mid-seventies and was married for more than 30 years. He worked in education
before he retired. As a young man, he found himself attracted to his own sex. ‘I liked to mess around
with men’, he says. He was 20 in 1948 when Alfred Kinsey’s report was published, but says that he could
not see a place for men like himself because ‘gay did not have a name then’. And so, like John (above),
he got married and hoped that his interest in men would ‘go away’. But it became apparent that it was an
intrinsic part of who he was: ‘I gradually realised this is me’. But he did not leave his wife until relatively
late in life.

I stayed married for 30 years. I didn’t want to leave while the kids were growing up. In the end, we
separated because the relationship had broken down. Brian and I met in 1983 and we moved in together in
1987. Brian is married too. I suppose that it must have been a gradual coming out over a number of years.
I had gay friends who said when I was younger: “You have to leave and start a life of your own”. Of course
they didn’t have kids. They didn’t understand. It did happen eventually. I have no regrets. In fact my kids
have been heard to say that “Dad has never been happier”.

Leslie’s decision not to leave his wife might confound people today, gay men included, just as it puzzled
his gay friends and acquaintances when he was young. He stayed married because he wanted to take care
of his children. In the West—in France, for example, the United States, New Zealand and Canada— men
like John and Leslie married women or remained closeted during the 1950s and 1960s and until quite
recently because it was simpler to conform to the ‘heterosexual assumption’.61 When they ‘came of age’,
there was no public narrative of homosexuality with which to identify themselves. In many cases, they
stayed married in order to look after their children or because of the affective bond with their wife and
family.

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In contrast to the young cohort, for whom parents constituted the crucial audiences for their coming out,
audiences were more varied for the coming-out stories of the old cohort. Because these men did not come
out uniformly, as teenagers or young adults, and their life stories are more complex—some were married,
most led a double life for some part of their lives—their coming-out audiences are more diverse. In the

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61 See discussion of heterosexual assumption in Chapter Four.
stories of the five men who represent the old cohort’s coming-out experiences here, the first understands his audience to be himself, then two men describe how different audiences—a work colleague and parents—respond to their coming out. Finally, two men tell how their children received the news of their gayness. As is the case in the younger cohorts, whose stories are discussed in later chapters, there are accounts of rejection and also of acceptance.

Maurice came out in the early 1950s, when, as he says: ‘homosexuality was extremely undercover, especially where I grew up’. The clandestine nature of the sub-culture that existed meant it was not easy to identify, in his words, ‘people who were of that nature’ and he felt ‘fairly isolated’. Maurice does not mention parents or siblings in his coming-out story. An exuberant, self-confident man, he believes his coming out was not exceptional: ‘I do not think my coming out was any more difficult than what the average person went through’. His coming out did not involve other gay men, his friends or family. Also, it did not involve coming out in the gay sub-culture. According to Maurice, he came out to himself and he alone was the audience for his story.

The idea of a person making a public declaration of his or her homosexuality is central to the ideology and practice of gay liberation, discussed in the next chapter. It is less common, however, in the camp period. In this section, two men recount their experiences of making such declarations. The first is Oscar, who was previously married and, like the other men who were married and came out late in life, did not come out until he was in his late forties—in the 1980s. He came out in the ‘post-liberation’ period when the social climate was less repressive than in the camp period, although, because of HIV-AIDS, no less problematic. The other man, Ronald, came out as a young man in the mid-1950s. Apart from making public declarations of their homosexuality, the common experience these men share is varying degrees of rejection by their audiences.

Oscar is not out at work, but says that people have ‘worked it out for themselves’. No one comes out where he works, he says, ‘because that is the end of your career. It is a very conservative industry. Most of them are typical poofter bashers’. Despite this knowledge of his work place and its mores, and his knowledge of the risks involved in coming out, Oscar did come out to his secretary:

We had a long lunch and I had had a few drinks. She had been my secretary for 11 years and I had known her a long time and knew lots about her personal life. She had had a difficult life. But when I told her officially, it was quite difficult.

Oscar has had no dealings with his secretary since that day. In effect his decision to come out to her, based on what he believed to be the strength of their long-standing work and personal relationship, brought their friendship to an end. Other friends also dropped him, ‘like a hot potato’: ‘I did lose quite a number of friends, some of fifteen years’ standing. They stopped sending me Christmas cards. Three of
my best friends have not spoken to me for fourteen years’. Painful as it was to him at the time and to recall, Oscar’s experiences of rejection illustrate Goffman’s observation about the ‘moral career’ of a person who becomes aware late in life of a stigmatised identity: ‘[W]hen an individual acquires a new stigmatized self late in life … pre-stigma acquaintances, being attached to a conception of what he once was, may be unable to treat him either with formal tact or with familiar acceptance’. 62

Ronald is in his late sixties. He is from an upper middle-class family and told his parents when he was in his twenties. His news was received with minimal understanding or interest. His parents did not reject him but nor did they welcome him as a homosexual son. He knew from an early age that he was gay but there was ‘absolutely no possibility’ he could speak to anyone or do anything about it. And yet, despite his repressed upbringing, he did manage to come out to his parents. The experience was, however, ‘quite dramatic and traumatic’. The occasion was his first love: ‘I fell in love with someone and that was sufficient to bring me out’. 63 Ronald was still living at home and was forced to tell his parents because they noticed a change in him: ‘It involved a confrontation with them and the upshot was that I left home’. His parents suggested he see a psychiatrist, which he says was ‘a fairly conventional response then’. Conventional though his parents’ response may have been, Ronald was distressed by it. As a teenager he had been a devout Christian and regarded his love affair as a passionate and serious commitment, not a ‘condition that needed treatment’.

Two men explain their children’s response to news of their gayness. Their audiences reacted quite differently. Clive, who is in his mid-sixties, was surprised by his children’s acceptance of him, while Gerald (75), struggled with his children’s response. Clive was married for more than ten years. He and his former wife have five children. Both have come out as homosexuals. Clive admits to a ‘cautiousness’ in his dealings with his children. He does not talk to them about his sexuality but feels ‘accepted and loved by them’. Gerald experienced a variety of responses from his children: from being cross-examined by his daughter to being ‘cold-shouldered’ by his son. He is in his seventies and lives with his partner, Larry. When his children, all of whom are adults, learned by accident of his homosexuality, he expected not to hear from them again. His daughters were, he says, ‘a bit doubtful at first but came to accept it’. Between Gerald and his son there had been ‘a lot of tension’, he says, ‘and we had not spoken for years’. At one point, his son wrote and told Gerald that he should leave Larry and go back to his mother, which in Gerald’s words was ‘simply ridiculous’. Relations improved when Gerald’s younger daughter had a child and his son arranged a celebratory dinner and invited Gerald. Since then, they keep in touch more regularly. Gerald’s children live inter-state, and so, while relations are


63 Note that Ronald uses the verb to ‘bring out’.
harmonious, he rarely sees them. He and Larry live self-contained lives that are not so different from the lives of most other people in their seventies.

* *

For some of the men represented here the idea of coming out was redundant. They were never called on to do so because they were ‘always that way’, and they lived relatively good lives as overt homosexuals in the camp period and thereafter. The men whose lived experience shows greatest variety are the covert homosexuals who married, raised a family, lived a double life and waited for propitious times before they came out. These men also reveal the greatest variety of coming-out audiences. In some cases, they comprised parents, siblings, wife and children. And at least one man—Ronald—anticipated the gay liberation practice and made a public declaration of his sexuality when he was a young man.

* * *

Conclusion.

The camp period is notable for the level of state interest in the homosexual as a category of person alongside the gay sociability that World War II fostered in the armed forces of countries like Australia and the United States. The state’s interest in homosexuals arose from their supposed threat to the morale and morals of the armed forces and to the security of the state during the Cold War. Yet, an unintended effect of the military’s enlistment of men was the development of gay identity and homosexual sociability. Soon after the end of the war, increased surveillance by civilian authorities resulted in repression of the gay sociability that flowered during the war. Censorship of literature and the arts, increased interest in homosexuals as possible security risks, as well as police raids on gay bars and clubs, were features of the repression.

While historians such as Chauncey argue that these actions show the state oppressed gay people in the USA and elsewhere, there is little evidence from the private narratives of the men in this Australian sample that they suffered at the hands of police or believed that they were being oppressed. There is no evidence from their coming-out stories of undue suffering. While there are accounts of rejection by family or friends, none reported being bashed, pilloried or gaoled.

The expression ‘to come out’ carried varying meanings in this period. It might mean that a man had admitted to himself or to gay friends that he was sexually attracted to men or that he wanted to have and/or was having sex with men. If he was open about his homosexuality, his friends would know it and so would other homosexuals who socialised in the gay sub-culture. Today, such men would be described as leading a closeted life or double life. The idea of a person making a public declaration of his or her
homosexuality, which became a central tenet of gay liberation, was relatively uncommon in the camp period.

Audiences for the old cohort’s coming-out stories were therefore more private than they were for the younger cohorts. In their coming-out stories, the men of this cohort reveal a wide range of life trajectories: some men never came out, some had no need to come out and others came out when their marriage ended. Also, their audiences were more varied and could include children as well as parents, family and friends. Coming out was a far less definitive process for this cohort, first, because it rarely took the form of a public declaration, and, on the odd occasions when it did, was rarely mentioned again, and second, because it most often took place between friends who lived double lives and jointly kept secret each other’s homosexuality.
Chapter Three. The coming-out stories of the middle cohort.

‘It was a great relief. I felt like yelling out of the car.’ Neil, 46.

* * *

Introduction.

The men in the middle cohort reached their early adulthood at the end of the late 1960s and early 1970s, a period that was significant in the post-war era for its level of social and political unrest. It was critical for them because it took in the movement for gay liberation, the growth of a gay ‘scene’ and ‘community’ and the decriminalisation of homosexuality in some Australian states.1 It also preceded the outbreak of HIV-AIDS in the West.

A gay social movement began in Australia when the Campaign Against Moral Persecution (CAMP Inc.) formed in Sydney and other cities in 1970–71. Then a gay liberation group was launched in Sydney in 1972, quickly spreading to other capital cities. Both CAMP Inc. and gay liberation set up consciousness-raising groups in schools, universities, youth groups and churches and called on gay people to come out of the closet. This remarkable period is the subject of discussion in Part One. The idea of ‘the gay man’ was formed in discussions homosexuals had in consciousness-raising groups as well as in their social relations and sexual relations with other men. Not only did gay men of this period reject the old public narrative of the homosexual as an effeminate, insane, deviant or criminal male, they also rejected the practice of ‘passing’ or leading a ‘double life’.

Gay theorists have understood coming out to be a personal act people take to resolve their sexual identity by integrating it with the rest of the self, as well as a radical political act to challenge anti-homosexual prejudice. As is shown in Part Two, the members of this generation did not regard their sexual identity as contingent. To them, it represented an important element of the authentic self, which demanded to be liberated. When they told the stories of their new selves, however, they often found that their audiences responded with less than equal enthusiasm. The stories, which are discussed in Part Three, include those from men who never came out, who came out to selected family members, who waited until they were in a relationship to come out, whose coming out was accompanied by trauma and, finally, whose parents rejected them.

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Part One. The ‘gay’ period: the early 1970s until the mid-1980s.

The homosexual of the gay liberation period was unashamedly the ‘gay’ man. These men abhorred the term ‘queer’. As Jeffrey Weeks explains, queer was the word that their oppressors used to bait and abuse them and it symbolised their ‘accepted oppression’. Gay, on the other hand was, ‘a word chosen by homosexuals themselves—it represented the new mood among gay men and women’.2 The anthropologist, Edward Bruner, believes that new stories, such as the more tolerant story of homosexuality that began to be heard in the West in the 1970s, arise ‘when there is a new reality to be explained, when the social arrangements are so different that the old narrative no longer seems adequate’.3

In the works of North American and some Australian and British scholars, this period is known as the ‘Stonewall’ era.4 In the northern summer of 1969 at the Stonewall Inn, New York, a group of gay men and drag queens refused to be harassed any longer by police and a riot ensued that lasted three days.5 It is this event from which people date the beginning of the end of the post-war repression of homosexuals and the rise of gay liberation. The name has mythic importance in the history of gay and lesbian activism as a foundational narrative. Ken Plummer explains its symbolic importance for gay people in the West:

The fact that … [Stonewall] was not the first radical action by lesbians and gays … the fact that shifts in the women’s movement played at least as central a part in gay liberation … all these “facts” are beside the point. Stonewall became a galvanising symbol: a crucial memory in the reconstruction of lesbian and gay stories from the late 1960s onwards.6

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6 Plummer *Telling Sexual Stories*, p. 90.
The novelist, Edmund White, was at the Stonewall Inn when the police raided. In a 1980 article he reflected on its importance as an act of resistance by a minority who until then had never regarded themselves as having rights to defend. At the time of the riot gay men saw themselves as ‘separate individuals at odds with society because we were “sick” (the medical model), “sinful” (the religious model), “deviant” (the sociological model) or “criminal” (the legal model).’ Gay men had in common an absence of pride in themselves:

Before 1969 only a small (though courageous and articulate) number of gays had much pride in their homosexuality or a conviction that their predilections were legitimate. The rest of us defined our homosexuality in negative terms, and those terms isolated us from one another … Few felt anything but regret about their homosexuality as such.

White reflected on the relatively swift change in self-regard that the Stonewall riot brought about in gay men in the United States. Even though gay liberation was still a new phenomenon in 1980, it had ‘already transformed attitudes among homosexuals and modified the ways in which they speak’. He prophesied that gay liberation would cause gay men to become less remarkable, for, in the end, gay men are just like other men: they are, in his words, ‘as reassuringly philistine as the bulk of straights’.

Gay men of this period were at pains to reject the ‘gender-inversion images of the past’. They rejected the prevailing public view of the homosexual as effeminate and instead developed their own image of the gay man as masculine in manner and appearance. As Angus McLaren writes, ‘[t]he stereotypes of “fairy” and “queen,” which had once been embraced were beginning to be discarded’. New versions of the gay man included what Herdt calls the ‘lusty male etiquette’ that was acted out in ‘bathhouse sexual intercourse’. Michael Pollak refers to the ‘super virile’ gay man and the ‘macho man’, the character that was to become known as ‘the clone’, who appeared with ‘crewcut, moustache or

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7 White ‘The political vocabulary’, p. 777.
10 White ‘The political vocabulary’, p. 785.
13 Herdt ‘“Coming out” as a rite of passage’, p. 34.
beard, and muscular body’. By the end of the gay period, ‘the clone’ had become the dominant and most popular representation of the gay man. R.W. Connell, describes him thus: ‘[E]quipped with jeans and T-shirts, moustaches and cropped hair, [he] became the international [leader] in style in the gay community in the later 1970s’.

In Australia, the evolution of a gay movement followed a similar but not identical path to those in other Western countries in the early 1970s. It did not develop in the context of acts of civil disobedience by gay people or in response to police harassment as in the USA. News of the Stonewall riots and their aftermath did of course reach Australia and was discussed by gay activists. But, as Graham Willett shows, gay activists in Sydney advised against following the example of gays in the United States and said that street marches were not yet appropriate to the times. Indeed, Garry Wotherspoon observes that, prior to the events of 1970–71, there had been no demonstration or evidence of gay activism in Australia. Until then, the impetus for homosexual law reform came from agitation by some churches, a homophile group in Canberra and sub-committees of the Humanist Societies of New South Wales and Victoria. He quotes the examples of the Methodist and the Presbyterian Churches. In 1966, the Methodist Church agreed to ‘look into the problem of homosexuality’, while in May 1967 the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in New South Wales agreed to the proposition that homosexuality between consenting adults in private ought to be decriminalised.

It was not until the formation of the Campaign Against Moral Persecution Inc., or CAMP Inc., in 1970–71 that there existed in Australia a political organisation of and for homosexual men and women, although, the title of the first ‘openly homosexual political organisation’ must go to the lesbian group, Daughters of Bilitis, which was set up in Melbourne in January 1970. The aims of CAMP Inc. were to agitate for law reform (to decriminalise homosexuality in the first instance), to act as a support group for


17 Garry Wotherspoon 1991 City of the Plain: history of a gay sub-culture, Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, p. 162.

18 See Wotherspoon City, pp. 163, 166.

19 Wotherspoon City, p. 166.

20 Wotherspoon City, p. 168.

male and female homosexuals, and also to ‘restructure’ their place in contemporary society. To achieve its aims, CAMP Inc. wanted female and male homosexuals to come out. And this was revolutionary, ‘given that homosexuality had so long been hidden away, not only due to social attitudes, medical perceptions, and church definitions, but also because male homosexual activity was still illegal’.23

John Ware and Christabell Poll established CAMP Inc. in Sydney in July 1970. It held its first public meeting in February 1971 and was formally constituted in April 1972.24 During the course of 1971 branches of CAMP opened in Brisbane, Melbourne, Perth and Adelaide. University groups followed in Sydney, Canberra, Newcastle, Adelaide and Queensland.25 By the end of 1971, CAMP had its own monthly journal, Camp Ink, its national membership was approximately 150026 and from within its ranks a breakaway group was preparing to set up in opposition.27 The breakaway group formed around Dennis Altman, who in January 1972 announced the formation of a gay liberation group at Sydney University.28 Shortly thereafter, gay liberation groups were set up at Melbourne University and Monash University.29 Gay liberation was different from CAMP Inc. In its early days its philosophy was radical, even subversive. In Homosexual: oppression and liberation—published in the USA in 1971 and in Australia in 1972—Altman explained that gay liberation shared aims similar to other counter-cultural groups and that together they comprised what he calls ‘the movement’.30 Gay liberation, he argued, would have a part to play in the removal of cultural and social structures of oppression: it would challenge ‘the basic cultural norms of our advanced industrial, capitalistic, bureaucratic society … bringing about changes in individual consciousness and new identities and life styles’.31 The changes that gay liberationists hoped this movement would introduce were revolutionary. They believed that full liberation would make it possible

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22 Wotherspoon City, p. 169.

23 Wotherspoon City, p. 169.

24 Wotherspoon City, p. 168; Willett Out Loud, p. 46.


26 Willett Out Loud, p. 43.

27 Willett Out Loud, p. 60.

28 Willett Out Loud, p. 61.

29 Willett Out Loud, p. 62.

30 Dennis Altman 1972 Homosexual: oppression and liberation, Sydney: Angus & Robertson, p. 177.

31 Altman Homosexual, p. 223.
to create ‘a new human for whom … distinctions [between hetero- and homo-sexual] no longer are necessary for the establishment of identity’.32

The period is notable also for what Herdt calls the ‘mass coming out’ of gay men, which, he argues, was made possible by the social networks of men that developed around gay institutions such as bars and clubs, sex clubs, saunas (bathhouses) and discotheques, as well as social action groups such as the many gay societies that formed in Australia, especially in and on the margins of universities and secondary schools in the 1970s. Ken Plummer describes the mass coming out of the period in the UK and explains why it was unprecedented.

[T]he 1970s witnessed the growth of gay publishing, gay industries … gay churches … Sexual diversity had become the explicit, overt organising point of hundreds of thousands of lives … Whatever evidence there was for “gay sub-cultures” in the Middle Ages or for institutionalised homosexuality among certain tribes, it is certain that world history has never seen the organisation of stigmatised sexual diversity on such a massive scale before.33

This large-scale coming out took place in a time marked by social unrest in Western society. In Australia, social movements developed to challenge dominant values (the ‘counter-cultural’ revolution), sexual power and practices (the women’s movement and the ‘sexual’ revolution) and the country’s military involvement in the Vietnam war.34 In North America, the activists of gay liberation were influenced by similar social movements in which many of them were also involved.35 Thus the various social movements of the time would feed into, bolster and influence one another. Dennis Altman describes how the act of coming out affected gay people’s sense of themselves: ‘[T]he visibility of the new homosexual woman or man was an affirmation that we no longer considered our sexuality a matter of which to be ashamed’.36 He continues: ‘To come out publicly is, according to the liberationist argument, the one potentially radical act for every homosexual’.37 Australian journalist and bon vivant, Peter Blazey, who died of HIV-AIDS in 1997, saw coming out as an act of ‘personal resistance’ as well as a ‘public affirmation’: ‘It is one of the only ways we can beat the many forces which still want to keep us isolated,

32 Altman Homosexual, p. 226.
33 Plummer Sexual Stories, pp. 90–1.
35 McLaren Twentieth Century, p. 190.
36 Dennis Altman 1982 The Homosexualization of America, the Americanization of the Homosexual, New York: St Martin’s Press, p. 3.
37 Altman Homosexualization, p. 22.
fearful and silent’. The belief these men and others held in the power of coming out to transform the individual and society showed the brash confidence of the ‘sixties and ‘seventies generation. They were convinced that they could make a new world if people only dared to liberate themselves from a repressive social order.

Yet, for all the stress on political activism and consciousness raising, many gay men came to understand the nature of their sexual identity in this period through the sexual and social relations they had with men they met on beats, in sex clubs and in bars and discotheques. Of the men in the old and middle cohorts, only three say that they were involved with gay liberation or homosexual law reform in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Not one of them says that he was part of a consciousness-raising group. Two men were members of CAMP in Adelaide. And yet, if the appeal of consciousness-raising groups at the time was limited and few gay people participated in them, it is still clear that they were important building blocks of gay political organisations. They were the revolutionary cells of the gay movement for it was in the consciousness-raising groups that the activists, leaders and future leaders of gay organisations met and formed important friendships, and from which they also recruited supporters and members. Importantly, their work made possible a more open social gay identity and thus increased the social opportunities that were available to more apolitical gay men, such as the majority in this sample.

What happened to the radical agenda of the early gay liberation movement? Over the course of the 1970s, the radicalism dissipated as more and more gay people came out and, instead of joining consciousness-raising groups, queued for entry to discotheques, dance clubs and saunas. Peter Shapiro argues that in the United States activism waned because ‘the discotheque made … [it] largely irrelevant’:

It was never going to change discrimination enshrined in law, but disco culture was the most effective tool in the struggle for gay liberation. Disco didn’t have to hit anyone over the head with slogans or bore you into submission with earnest missives; its “message” was its pleasure principle. Disco was born of a desire that was outlawed and branded an affront to God and humanity, so its evocation of pleasure was by necessity its politics, and by extension its politics was pleasure.

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39 Graham Willett acknowledges this reality and also that activists were aware at the time that this was the reality of many gay people. See Willett Out Loud, pp. 144–7.

40 The three men are Lindsay (62), Donald (52), and Michael (52).

41 See Willett Out Loud, pp. 143–147 for discussion of activists’ awareness of the need to work with the bar scene because of the large numbers of gay people who participated.

42 Shapiro Turn the beat, p. 54.
More significantly, the counter-cultural movement slowed and lost its purpose as society became less repressed. Then, in mid-decade, Western economies faltered in the face of the Middle East oil crisis and the destructive ‘stagflation’ that followed, after which social movements seemed to have less appeal.

In drawing this sketch of the birth of gay activism in Australia, the intention is to underline the importance of the activists’ injunction, which gay people took up in the thousands, to come out, and also to provide some idea of the context in which the call was made. The period is notable for the transformations that took place. The social and political changes would not have occurred without the activism of gay political organisations, particularly those in Sydney, but, while gay activists lobbied for change, parallel transformations were occurring in homosexual identity and the homosexual milieu. Just as the homosexual identity transmuted into ‘this new social category, the gay man’, so too did the clandestine homosexual sub-culture transform into the more open gay community. In the mid-1990s, Robert Dessaix recalled the gay culture that in 1978 had developed in Darlinghurst and Paddington, where people were experimenting with a new set of rituals and rites, new value-systems, new readings of history and new political agendas, and they were talking to each other about them in their own newspapers and books and in their own cafés and pubs. Homosexuality was being positively celebrated, as well as practised and theorised about.

In Sydney, an increasingly important part of this culture was the ‘scene’. During the 1970s, it grew at a rapid pace from a relatively small group of drag clubs and bars into a sophisticated web of bars, saunas and clubs that provided for varying styles of homosexuality. Oxford Street and adjoining suburbs were the focus of the scene once the CBD and King’s Cross lost their appeal. But Sydney is an exceptional case in the history of gay and lesbian culture in Australia. Similar developments did not occur in the same way or at the same pace in other capital cities. In Brisbane, for example, the gay market was small and relatively undeveloped, its members never large enough to support more than a handful of bars. Whether because of the tropical climate or because masculinity is less domesticated in northern Australia, beats were (and remain) an important site of homosexual activity in Brisbane and Queensland in general:


45 Wotherspoon City, pp. 189–94.

46 Clive Moore 2001 Sunshine and Rainbows: the development of gay and lesbian culture in Queensland, St Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press, p. 146.
There is no sign of decline in these public displays of male homosexuality [at beats]. The focus may be shifting away from park toilets to shopping centre amenities, but commercial gay venues will only ever attract one section of the gay population.47

By the mid-1980s, at the end of this period, homosexuality was no longer spoken of as a single homogeneous identity, but as a diversity of identities. Garry Wotherspoon describes some of the possibilities that had become available to gay men.

For some, being “gay” represented no more than being more open about their sexual preferences, being open in their patronising of gay venues, or being able to conform to the new stereotype of homosexuality, that of the “macho man”. For others it represented questioning the very grounds on which society defined them, a rejection of the views that they were “ill”, and accepting that homosexual desire is as legitimate … as heterosexual desire.48

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Part Two. Coming out in the ‘gay period’.

The concept of coming out has been the starting point for analysis of gay lives and identity for the last 30 years, and since the 1970s there have been two dominant ways of explaining coming out. On the one hand, there are scholars who describe it as a deeply personal transition or life-changing event while, on the other hand, there are some who, though acknowledging this personal aspect, draw attention to its importance as both a public and a political statement. During the gay period, coming out became the clarion call for an entire generation of young gay people in Australia, Britain, the United States and similar countries. A number of those who were young gay liberation activists—for example, Dennis Altman, Ken Plummer and Jeffrey Weeks—have since written scholarly works on coming out and its meanings. Thus both the historiography and contemporary documentation are richer than for the earlier period.

Typically, those who see coming out as deeply personal regard it as a process. For some men coming out is a life-long process,49 and there are many homosexuals who never come out. It has been described as ‘showing oneself’50 or as a ‘unique life event’,51 as the ‘end of a search for identity’,52 a ‘rite

47 Moore Sunshine, p. 150.
of passage\textsuperscript{53} or a form of ‘rebirth’;\textsuperscript{54} all of which emphasise the personal in the process. For Gilbert Herdt, it represents a profound change. He describes it as a transformation in ‘gendered worlds’, which, he says, involves ‘much more of the whole person—body, soul, and mind—than [was] previously implied’\textsuperscript{55}. Henning Bech understands it as an event of considerable psychic significance, the implication of which for the gay man is that he must become an outsider. He means by this that all the familiar associations and sense of belonging that the gay man has developed with friends and family must come to an end if he is to become a homosexual. The power in Bech’s argument lies in his understanding, examined by few others,\textsuperscript{56} of the destabilisation people experience when they realise their experience of ‘togetherness’ can come to an end:

The homosexual … must leave the safe and self-evident socialness he has otherwise become embodied in. He must go out to “realize himself”. He is no longer with them; what he does is somewhere else, in another world … of which the former know nothing and is [sic] unwilling to know anything.\textsuperscript{57}

And this experience, says Bech, causes the homosexual to become a loner: ‘To this extent he becomes a stranger; by leaving their world he becomes an outsider; he steps out of their fellowship and becomes alone’.\textsuperscript{58} Bech qualifies what he has to say on ‘the end of togetherness’ and the loneliness that homosexuals know. He acknowledges, for instance, that heterosexuals also leave home and also have to separate from their parents and families at some stage in their adult life. But notwithstanding this fact, Bech insists that what young heterosexuals experience when they ‘break away’ is not as acute or nearly as painful as what gay people go through when they come out. Bech writes about heterosexuals: ‘[F]or the most part their break-away is less radical: they go from one social world to a similar one, or the various worlds merge into each other with no great dividing lines’.\textsuperscript{59} Heterosexuals move in transit between families:

\textsuperscript{52} Barry M. Dank 1971 ‘Coming out in the gay world’ \textit{Psychiatry}, 34, p. 190.

\textsuperscript{53} Herdt “Coming out” as a rite of passage’, pp. 31–2.


\textsuperscript{55} Herdt \textit{Gay Culture}, p. 32.


\textsuperscript{58} Bech \textit{When Men Meet}, p. 97.

\textsuperscript{59} Bech \textit{When Men Meet}, p. 99.
[T]hey scarcely get the first one [self-evident community] out of their head before they enter the next one. They have to go home to the family. The homosexual, on the other hand, is typically travelling and out in town: he sits there at the café table, alone, gazing out of the window.60

In contrast to writers such as Herdt and Bech, who view coming out as intensely personal, are those writers who consider it important because of its political dimensions. These writers refer to coming out as a ‘potentially radical act’,61 a transition from a ‘secret’ to a ‘public’ existence,62 and a ‘challenge [to] sexual chauvinism, homophobia, and bias’.63 When Plummer wrote in the early 1980s, he again stressed its importance on a personal level but also discussed its political potential as a means ‘to break down … the hostility and mythology which surround the whole subject’.64 It is also a matter of personal ethics, for the effect of keeping secret one’s homosexuality is that it causes the individual to ‘live a marginally dishonest, slightly dissonant existence’.65 Here is the nub of the gay liberation argument.

Gay liberationists argued that the decision to come out would lead to greater positive well being for the individual, would help also to break down barriers between homosexuals and straight people and, finally, would allow the homosexual to avoid having ‘to live his life as a lie’. Gay people used this as their rallying cry in Western countries then and later. Jeffrey Weeks was a young academic in the London School of Economics in the early 1970s when he came out. In one of his first books, he defined coming out as a combination of the personal and the public: “‘Coming out’ is usually seen as a personal process, the acceptance, and public demonstration, of the validity of one’s own homosexuality”.66

In the early 1970s Dennis Altman wrote in Homosexual: oppression and liberation that coming out could be seen as the desire by homosexuals to ‘integrate their sexuality into a total life style’ and to escape the secrecy, the closeted life, or what he calls ‘the traditional divided life of the gayworld’.67 Its political nature varied according to the degree of social hostility that homosexuals faced: ‘We are freeing

60 Bech When Men Meet, p. 99.

61 Altman Homosexualization, p. 22.


65 Plummer ‘Going gay’, p. 102.

66 Weeks Coming out, p. vii.

67 Altman Homosexual, p. 118.
ourselves through the way we live, and as long as homosexuals are oppressed, walking arm-in-arm with
one’s lover down Fifth Avenue [in New York] is as much a political act as campaigning for legal
reform’.\(^{68}\) Almost 25 years after the publication of Altman’s *Homosexual*, Ken Plummer described the
political power that flows through stories of gay people’s coming out and said that it is something like the
personal power that gay liberationists and feminists made work for them and their generation in the 1970s.
‘The power to tell a story, or indeed to not tell a story, under the condition of one’s own choosing, is part
of the political process’\(^{69}\).

For many of the men from the middle cohort, their early adulthood was spent in a time of
considerable social upheaval and political turmoil, when dominant public narratives concerning family,
self and society were in flux. The men in the middle cohort turned 18 between the early 1970s and mid-
1980s and yet, despite the calls of the gay liberation activists to come out, to make the personal political, a
number of men in this cohort waited until circumstances suited them before they did so. The majority of
interviewees from the middle cohort came out either when they were teenagers or when they were in their
twenties and thirties. Some men in this cohort did not come out until their forties, however.\(^{70}\)

Kevin, for example, did not come out until he was 32. Born at the end of the 1940s, he is a baby-
boomer. He grew up in the country, did not go to university as a teenager but as a mature age student, and
said that much of the ‘fuss and bother’ of the 1960s and the sexual ‘revolution’ passed him by. Living in a
country town meant he was ‘not truly aware of being gay’. ‘It was not something that I ever thought
possible. I had a huge peer group around me. My relationships with women were always a little tenuous
and not very long lasting. At the time I didn’t put two and two together.’ It was when he moved to a
capital city that Kevin began to explore the possibility that he might be gay.

Graham is also in his fifties. In contrast to Kevin, he knew from an early age that he was gay and
has had a partner for more than twenty years. Both Graham and his partner were university students and
lived together as a couple in student houses. Graham and his partner came out to their friends at the time.
His parents, however, were a different matter. As he tells the story, ‘the great struggle’ was ‘to come out
to one’s parents who had strong expectations of their sons marrying’. The struggle was so difficult that he
waited until he was in his late thirties to broach the subject: ‘Eventually in my parents’ later years I sat
them down and explained everything to them. My explanation was greeted with blank incomprehension’.

\(^{68}\) Altman *Homosexual*, p. 119.


\(^{70}\) The average man in this cohort is 49 and came out when he was 27. Interviewed in 2002, this 49-year-old man
would have been born in 1953 and came out in 1980. He would have been in his final year of secondary school in
1970 or 1971 and would have turned 21 in 1974.
Some time later his father told him that he thought it was ‘all right to be who I am’. His mother, however, never accepted his gayness or his relationship with his partner. Says Graham philosophically, ‘There was a little coming to terms with it but I did not feel embraced by them or that they had embraced who I was and who we were’.

Of the other men who did not come out until they were in their thirties or forties, only one was married. The remainder wrestled, like Graham, with unreceptive, judgmental or hostile parents. These men kept their sexuality secret when they were young men and sexually active. All chose to live in towns or cities other than where their parents lived. One possible explanation for their decision finally to come out is that they grew tired, as one man said, of being asked if he ‘had found a “nice girl” yet’, and of having to keep the secret. Bob is 48 and told his mother two years ago. ‘I got tired’, he said, ‘of carrying this thing so I decided that the best thing to do was to tell her. If she exploded, I would just have to pick up the pieces and go on from there’. In the end, Bob’s mother did not explode; instead, she told him that she had always had her suspicions that he might be gay. His final comment concerned his father who died when Bob was a teenager. Bob’s picture of his father is of a dominant, argumentative and aggressive man. If his father were still alive, said Bob, ‘I might not even have been out at this stage’.

* * *


The coming-out stories of the men in the middle cohort reveal a greater diversity of experiences than for the men in the other cohorts. This contrasts with the uniformity in the coming-out experiences in the old and young cohorts: of a double life on the one hand, and of relatively trouble-free coming out on the other. In general, the coming-out stories of the middle cohort concern the reaction of the men’s families. What is exceptional about this generation of gay men is that they were the first generation to feel the need *en masse* to confess to their families, to say, particularly to their parents, ‘I am not who (or what) you think I am’. The generation of gay men that preceded them went to great lengths to keep their sexuality secret. In regard to the diametrically opposed approaches of the two generations, Henning Bech observes that ‘just as it was a matter of course … [for homosexuals of an earlier generation] that homosexuals should not advertise their homosexuality and be provocative, so too it was obvious for the gays of the 1970s that they should’.71

While the ‘baby-boomer’ generation of gay men felt honour bound to proclaim their homosexuality from roof-tops and soap-boxes, on street marches and at campus sit-ins, their coming-out

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71 Bech *When Men Meet*, pp. 95–6.
stories show it was not easy for them. They may have believed in the precepts of gay liberation, that coming out was a necessary political statement, but for many making it was easier said than done, and coming out was not always a liberating experience. On the contrary, for some men, personal crises and family trauma accompanied it.

The coming-out stories, arranged in roughly equal numbers, concern first, men who never came out; second, men who came out to some but not all members of their family; third, men who waited until they had a partner before they came out; fourth, men who experienced some degree of trauma when they came out; and, fifth, men who were rejected by their family because of their homosexuality.

Three men in the middle cohort said they have not come out. All were educated in boarding schools. The reasons they give for not coming out vary. Two of the men are content they have not come out because, in the words of one, he ‘never saw the need’. The other man, Richard, in his late fifties, provides a variety of views on the topic of coming out. Some he derives from his own experience, while others are an amalgam of public narratives that are in circulation in the gay milieu. He believes coming out to be a fairly slow process: ‘I certainly could not come out when I was a younger man’, he says, and for two reasons. His parents who are now dead held strong prejudices against homosexuals: ‘My parents were certainly anti-gay. They did not want to know or talk about it’. He managed his relationship with them by not coming out, which was only partly effective, for, while on the one hand it avoided a confrontation, on the other hand it meant that his mother never stopped asking him when he was going to get married. The second reason he could not come out concerns work. In his twenties and thirties, he worked in a private school for boys and ‘did not feel comfortable in coming out’. He said that the school was ‘rife with homophobia’ and that a member of staff would have been asked to leave if he had admitted his homosexuality. To come out in such circumstances would have meant the end of a career.

Richard’s understanding is that he is ‘not fully out’, that is, he is overt when it is appropriate and covert when it is not. In his words, he is ‘out when it is okay to be out’ or that he is open about his homosexuality when he feels it is safe to do so; otherwise he is silent about it. This is not how coming out is generally understood and, in effect, Richard is leading a double life. For Richard, the idea of being out is conditional on the company he finds himself in. Whereas the gay liberationists of his generation understood being out to be a permanent state and identity, Richard experiences being out as temporary and subject to the reception he anticipates from his audience. Recently, he witnessed police raid his local gay pub. They had dogs with them and three or four men were removed and searched for drugs. This caused him to reflect on the precariousness of the legal privileges that gay men now enjoy in Australia and to arouse fears of how easily they might be taken away: ‘When that sort of thing happens, I feel that they could so easily change the law. Under the present circumstances, I would not be surprised if one day they repealed the homosexual law’.
A handful of men in this middle cohort came out only to selected members of their families. Among them is Lionel, who is in his late fifties and is thus in the vanguard of the gay liberation cohort. While coming out was ‘never an issue’ for him, he admits on the other hand that he ‘went through … [his] straight bit’ at university when he dated a woman for six months, and was, in his own words, ‘emotionally screwed up’ by the experience. Lionel grew up in a lower middle-class family. He was eighteen in 1962. After he broke up with his girl friend, he moved in to a share house with friends from school. He was forced to come out to his mother when she read one of his letters. He says that his relationship with his mother improved as a result because it ‘gave her a way into my life, so she could understand me better’. Lionel’s mother pre-deceased his father. He never told his father because ‘the relationship was not as good as it was with my mother and it would not have improved anything if I told him that I was gay’. He did come out to his brother after his mother died and his brother said that he had always known. His brother advised against telling his father. Yet an intriguing aspect of Lionel’s family life is that he introduced to his family every man he was ever interested in. They were all invited to dinner with his family or to stay over-night when he was living in the family house and even to go on holidays with his family. Memories of these family experiences lie behind Lionel’s belief that coming out was ‘never an issue’ for him:

The men that I had affairs with met my parents, had dinner with them and my parents never asked a question. And because of that, I have never had to sit down with people and say that I am gay. I have never had this coming out thing and have never felt the need to hide anything.

Lionel’s understanding of what it means to be out was, like Richard’s, at odds with the generally accepted meaning of coming out and he was living a double life with his parents and family when he was at home. We might infer any number of meanings to the statement that he made in retrospect, that his parents ‘never asked a question’. This might mean that they never enquired into the nature of his relationship with the men he brought home because they thought it improper or impolite to enquire into a person’s personal life. Alternatively, they may have known but did not want to admit it to themselves. What Lionel’s complex and ambiguous story most likely means is that even though he kept his sexuality a secret while he lived with his family and until he had to come out to his mother, he felt sufficiently at ease about his relations with his parents and with his boy friend(s) to sit down together with them en famille. It is probable also that because his parents did not pry into the nature of his relationships, did not make insinuations about them or ascribe any meaning to them other than what they assumed from the surface (that they were friendships), Lionel developed an untroubled sexual identity and ‘never had to sit down with people and say that … [he] was gay … never had this coming-out thing’. He was able to lead what we would call a double life that did not cause him any psychic distress and that allowed him to introduce
his boy friends into the heart of his family where both he and they were accepted and ‘there was never a question asked’.

Two men waited until they were established in a long-term relationship before they came out. Both men are in their forties. One lives in the country and the other in the city. Both have professional jobs. Alan is in his late forties. When he was debating whether and how to come out twenty years ago, a friend advised him to assume that everyone knew. He followed this advice: ‘My sisters and brothers who were straight never had to have the “I’ve got something to tell you” conversation with the folks, so I decided to treat it the same way’. When Alan had a steady boy friend, who later became his partner, he told friends and family that he had met a wonderful person and that his name was Howard. In retrospect, Alan sees what he did as a political act in that he avoided having to apologise for himself: ‘I treated it as a positive experience. I did not want to see myself as a victim or as deserving victim status. It’s a bit like Jews who refuse to see themselves as beaten and downtrodden. Neither should gays’. Ivan, the other man, is in his early forties. He met his partner when he was in his mid-twenties and they have been together for 18 years. Ivan did not come out when he was at university in the early 1980s, ‘for no particular reason except I now know that I needed something secure’. Ivan began to tell his family and friends when he realised his relationship with Paul was more than a casual relationship. He needed to be comfortable about himself, ‘about who I was’, and to know that he and Paul meant ‘the world to each other’ and that Paul ‘was going to be around for the long haul’.

Three men reported that some degree of trauma accompanied their coming out. This ranged in severity from moderate discomfort with a family member to intense psychic distress. All are in their fifties and turned 18 between the late-1960s and the mid-1970s. The first man is in his late fifties. On hearing that he was gay, his mother’s response was to make an appointment with her doctor in the hope, he now believes, that the doctor would write him a prescription to cure his homosexuality. To please his mother, he saw the doctor who advised him not to worry about it. Although the interviewee makes light of the situation now, he describes his mother as being ‘traumatised’ by his news, and conditions at home as ‘tense and difficult’ for about a month while he and his mother ‘skirted around each other and did not talk’. They settled their differences when his mother realised that he was not going to turn into ‘a monster with two heads’. The interviewee has lived with the same man now for 27 years.

The second man was brought up in a devout Christian family. He and his family regularly attended Sunday service. He knew that ‘it was wrong to be gay in the Christian sense’ and abandoned his
Christianity ‘the moment [he] accepted his homosexuality’. This man experienced a distressing and
prolonged coming out. He first realised he might be gay when he was upset that the crush he developed
for a school friend was not requited. Like the first man, he sought help from his family doctor who
referred him to a psychologist: ‘At this point, I became quite emotionally unwell. I stopped speaking and
was unable to communicate at all. I started to stutter and to carry pieces of broken glass around in my
pockets’. He experienced a period of intense psychic distress, brought on by the conflict between his
feelings and Christian upbringing. He saw a counsellor for twelve months. He had a girl friend and tried
without success to initiate a sexual relationship with her. Finally, toward the end of the year, he ‘began to
move to accepting [his] homosexuality’. He went to university and threw himself into gay liberation and
student politics. The worst was over: ‘I started to make new friends and slowly started to come out to
them’. Later, as his confidence grew, he became more open and told the world: ‘I announced it, as one
did in those days, to everyone very publicly, so that in the end everyone around me knew I was gay’. The
interviewee and his partner celebrated their 25th anniversary together in 2002.

The third man fell in love and was committed to the psychiatric unit of a hospital. He too is in a
long-term relationship. Brought up by parents who were ‘sexually open’ and in a house ‘that was very
open as far as nudity was concerned’, he knew about sex from an early age. As an adolescent, he had
sexual relations with boys and girls his age: ‘I was bisexual because I did not realise there was anything
different about them’. Despite his parents’ openness and their philosophy that you ‘love everybody
equally’, he learned that it was best ‘not to boast’ about sexual relations with boys. When he fell in love
with a cousin who visited them from inter-state, his parents had him committed to the psychiatric unit of
the local hospital. While there, he was sexually abused by one of the medical staff. These events ruined
his final year of school. Two years later he met his partner and they have lived together for more than 30
years. At the time, these events taught him that ‘if you wanted to get on, you had to live a double life and
that coming out is not always a safe thing to do’. He believes that it would have been safer for him if he
had come out when he and his partner were together and when they were sufficiently confident of their
love and relationship not to care what anyone thought.

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Two men recorded that they experienced some degree of rejection from their family when they came out.
Neither, however, experienced the level of psychic distress that the interviewees in the preceding section
speak of. These men risked all, told all and suffered some degree of rejection as a consequence. Both are
in their fifties. Roy (aged 58) did not come out until his father was dead and, when he did, he experienced
varying levels of acceptance from his siblings. Patrick (aged 53) came out and his father promptly
disowned him. Both Roy and Patrick spent approximately 20 years living a double life before they came
out to their parents. Both men recount events from some time in the past. Their accounts are brief, to the

Chapter Three. The coming-out stories of the middle cohort. 57
point and relatively unembroidered. There was no sound of distress in their voices when they recounted their experiences.

Roy marked the first stage of his coming out when as a young man he asked a friend to have sex with him. Although his invitation was rebuffed and his friend told the rest of their friends, Roy says that this ‘was a kind of coming out’. Being gay was never an issue for him at work because he was always out at work. But he did not come out to his family until he was 44, by which time his father was dead. Roy is the youngest in his family. When he told his mother, her reaction was: ‘My own flesh and blood! How awful!’ Once Roy reassured her that he was not a transvestite and that she would not see him walking down the street in a frock and hat, she revealed that it was not a surprise. ‘Your father and I always thought you were anyway’, she said. His siblings’ responses varied from full acceptance to complete rejection. His sister told him his gayness would not make any difference to their relationship and that she loved him all the same. One brother said that he was gay because ‘it was fashionable’. His other brother and his wife refused to have anything to do with Roy, and they did not speak for seven years.

Patrick began coming out in the 1960s. His fellow students at college were both interested in his decision and supportive.

When I was in my first year at college, I decided to tell my group of close friends that I like boys and the response was very good. They were very supportive. In those days, it was a bit like, “You poor thing” and “That’s sad for you”. I guess I identified with that because in the movies the only homosexuals were the miserable ones and, as this was at the height of existentialism and being miserable was fashionable, you could be gay and miserable and be very happy about it. I suppose I played up on being the “victim”.

It was not until the 1980s, however, that he came out to his parents. Throughout his early adulthood Patrick led a relatively untroubled gay life: he had a network of gay friends and moved easily in and out of the gay sub-culture in the city. He told his mother when he was in a long-term relationship: ‘I had a four-year relationship with a guy that my parents knew and liked and they never guessed’. Then Patrick’s mother told his father. His father declared that he never wanted to speak to his son again, that he disowned him and would cut him out of his will.

*   *

Conclusion.

This cohort reveals a greater range of difficulties associated with the act of coming out than do the other two cohorts. This may be for two reasons. They are the first generation to regard coming out as an indispensable condition of their homosexuality, and to attempt to come out publicly and en masse. As discussed in the preceding chapter, the men of the old cohort did not understand coming out in the same
way as did this gay liberation generation. Mostly they did not consider it required a public declaration and they often limited their coming-out audience to people close to them, often other homosexuals, who would keep it a secret. And as we shall see, for the young cohort, coming out was less fraught, largely because the middle cohort prepared the way for them.

The men in this cohort came of age during a time of marked social change in the West when personal and public narratives were being reconfigured. The so-called sexual revolution involved the re-writing of male and female heterosexual roles as sexual relations were liberated from marriage. The anti-war movement seriously challenged the notion of citizenship and authority. As these men came of age, a gay identity was being created in a confusion of liberation ideology and disco fever. And, as scholars have noted, the act of coming out, which gay liberationists enjoined their generation to undertake, was not only a political act, but also an intensely personal process often involving profound transformation of the self.

Many men who belonged to the generation of gay liberation believed therefore that it was their duty to make public what had hitherto been kept secret and was only spoken of in whispers, if at all. For this reason, their audiences were not always as ready and willing to receive the new story, as the storytellers were to tell it. In their zeal to advertise their new self, they often misjudged the power of entrenched sexual hierarchies, which their public declarations challenged—as is revealed in the stories of the men who experienced trauma or were rejected when they came out. Of the thirty men in this cohort, only two are really gay liberationists. Both men are 52 and joined gay liberation in their respective cities when in their early twenties. So, despite belonging to the gay liberation generation, the overwhelming majority of men in the middle cohort did not identify themselves as liberationists.

An important reason for the greater variety of coming-out experiences in the middle cohort is that this is a generation in transition. The old cohort, if they did come out, came out into the world of a secretive homosexual sub-culture, while the young cohort came out into a much more public and open ‘gay community’ after 1985. The picture of the men of the middle cohort is of individuals whose experiences of coming out were less consistent and less uniform than were those of the men in the other cohorts. The ‘baby-boomer’ generation experienced more uncertainty because they were part of a culture in transition. But while they experienced the vagaries and insecurities of transition, they were also the generation that established many of the cultural institutions that now support the gay community and are taken for granted—newspapers, magazines and academic journals, bars and clubs, bookshops and cafés, sex clubs, saunas and discotheques.
Chapter Four. The coming-out stories of the young cohort.

‘Dad was a bit cool when I came out but it didn’t change anything.’ Travis, 38.

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Introduction.

In November 1982, the first case of AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome) was diagnosed in Australia.¹ The first reported death was in July 1983.² It took medical researchers until 1984 to determine that the disease was caused by a retrovirus that attacked the body’s immune system, the Human Immuno-deficiency virus (HIV). Rates of HIV infection peaked in Australia in the mid-1980s, rising from fewer than 500 diagnoses in 1984 to approximately 1,800 in 1985 and 1,600 in 1986, and then again in 1987, after which there was a gradual decline, until in 2000 the annual number of new HIV diagnoses was around 660.³ The overwhelming majority of deaths from AIDS in Australia has been among gay men.⁴

The men in the young cohort reached maturity in the period that stretches from the mid-1980s to the present. This period corresponds with the outbreak, spread and then containment of the HIV-AIDS epidemic in Australia. How it affected gay men and gay communities and how they responded is the subject of discussion in Part One. Despite the devastation, some positive consequences flowed from the epidemic, such as the growth of a stronger, more diverse homosexual community, a greater willingness by gay men to engage in monogamous relationships, the development in the 1990s of a rights agenda, the birth of ‘queer’ and an increased openness and acceptance of gay men.


² Randy Shilts 1987 And the band played on: politics, people, and the AIDS epidemic, New York: St Martin’s Press, p. 342. According to Shilts, on 8 July 1983 a forty-three-year-old man died in Prince Henry’s Hospital, Melbourne. The hospital was demolished in the 1990s and has been replaced by a block of luxury flats.


Coming out now seems less important than it was in the 1970s and 1980s, though those who do tend to come out earlier. Angus McLaren even refers to reports that, in the late-1990s, there were young gay men who did not understand what the term, ‘the closet’, meant or what it meant to be ‘in the closet’.\(^5\) Some, however, see coming out as ‘heteronormative’. It is possible too that during the 1980s gay men may have delayed coming out because of HIV-AIDS. These themes are discussed in Part Two.

Despite a greater level of acceptance of homosexuality in the West and the fact that, for some gay men, coming out is now less of an ordeal, the majority of men from the young cohort in this thesis still regarded coming out as a major life-course event to be negotiated. Their accounts of coming out are the subject of Part Three, ‘Coming-out stories’. The biggest obstacle they faced was having to tell their family, in particular their parents. Almost none said relations with friends were affected by their coming out. A small group of men reported that their parents received the news well and in a positive spirit. On the whole, though, fear of rejection still caused young men anxiety as they approached the task of coming out. The importance of their father’s acceptance was a strong theme in the coming-out narratives, as was the fact that, when their parents were frightened or apprehensive, the cause was often a fear that their sons might contract HIV-AIDS.

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Part One. The ‘post-liberation’ period: the mid-1980s until the present.

The outstanding feature of the ‘post-liberation’ period is the AIDS epidemic. It is the context in which the men of the young cohort grew up and into which many came out. Their experience of what it means to be gay was shaped by the context of the epidemic and its effect on other gay men. All the men in the middle and old cohorts were adults in the 1980s and it was among their ranks—particularly the middle cohort, or ‘baby-boomers’—that AIDS took its greatest toll. While the focus of this chapter is on the coming-out stories of the young cohort, a selection of stories from the old and middle cohorts about the epidemic helps explain the historical context.

Infection rates and mortality figures are useful in outlining the extent of the HIV-AIDS epidemic, but they can too often disguise its personal dimension. How did individual gay men respond to it and how were they affected by it? John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman wrote that, before the discovery of the retrovirus, ‘death and dying became endemic’ in the gay communities in North America, ‘as young men found friends and lovers taken ill, with no prospect of recovery’.\(^6\) The experience for gay men in

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Chapter Four. The coming-out stories of the young cohort.
Australia was similar. A man from the middle cohort, for example, describes how his friendship network was affected:

I am 56. I was sexually active in getting off with a lot of different guys in the early 1980s. I was fortunate not to contract HIV. It was pure luck. Most of the guys I knew in my twenties and early thirties died of AIDS. Very few of them are left.

The disease struck down communities and friendship networks of gay men, and men bore witness to friends’ and lovers’ suffering and deaths. In Melbourne, for example, historian John Foster nursed and cared for his Cuban lover, Juan Céspedes, until his death on Good Friday 1987. In *Take Me to Paris, Johnny*, Foster tells the story of their relationship. In this passage from the book, he describes his last night with Juan:

We were at the end now. He dirtied the bed, and when the nurses lifted him into the chair while they changed the linen, his eye fell again on the palm cross on the bed-head, and he instructed me to put it with him in his coffin … Finally when he was quieter than he had been all day and appeared to be drifting off to sleep, I switched out the light. “Come to bed, Johnny”, he whispered. So I took off my shoes and slipped into the bed beneath the blanket that was draped on a wire frame to spare his body the weight. I cradled him in the curve of my body and listened to his breathing.7

His friend and colleague, John Rickard, wrote in an Afterword to the 2003 edition of the book that John Foster died within a year of its first publication.8 At about the time *Take Me to Paris, Johnny* was launched, a man from the young cohort was diagnosed HIV positive. As he tells his story, he was 22 and it was a routine test: ‘I did not suspect that I was positive. That ripped me apart. At that point, I thought it meant death and would be the end of everything. I spent the next five years trying to pull myself together mentally’.

It did not take long before the medical condition of having AIDS was transformed into a moral commentary on the ‘gay life-style’. This suited the political agenda of social conservatives and Christian fundamentalists in Western countries. ‘Promiscuity was targeted by the press’, writes Angus McLaren, and ‘[i]n the public mind AIDS was not simply transmitted, it was “caused” by sex’. As a result, ‘[h]omophobia was let loose’.9 In such an environment, it was difficult for gay men not to think that they

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8 Foster *Take Me to Paris, Johnny*, p. 194.

were being punished because their sexual and affective relations deviated from the conventional model of monogamous heterosexuality.

Two men in the sample understood AIDS as a moral punishment. The first man is Jerome, who is from the middle cohort. He refers to his experience of ‘survivor guilt’, which is a common response among men whose friends and acquaintances died and also among those who simply survived the epidemic relatively unscathed, without experiencing death in large numbers or at all. The metaphor of AIDS as punishment helped Jerome comprehend its arbitrary nature.

I am a survivor and I don’t know why I survived and the others didn’t. It has been explained to me a hundred times why it occurs, but I do wonder why it had to happen to gay men and why we were punished. Because I think it is a punishment. Because it changed everything.

Maurice is from the old cohort and his understanding of AIDS is strongly judgmental. He sees a direct link between gay men’s promiscuity and transmission of the virus, while at the same time admitting to his own earlier promiscuity. His explanation for not being HIV positive is that age ‘quietened’ his promiscuity, which he attributes to the fact that God ‘smiled’ on him. By contrast, a man from the middle cohort says that he and his partner gradually became less anxious about AIDS as they acquired more knowledge of HIV and its transmission. Like other interviewees, Neil saw his friends die, but he rejected an Old Testament interpretation for the epidemic.

In the mid-1980s, then, not only did gay men have to suffer the pain of living in an epidemic caused by a mysterious virus that was killing friends and lovers, they also had to endure homophobic taunts that they had brought it on themselves, and bear the burden of a more deeply stigmatised identity. Men under 30 in the young cohort were aged between seven and eleven in 1985. Nonetheless, the effect of the homophobia released by AIDS was, according to some of them, still in evidence in 2002 when they were interviewed for this thesis. Five interviewees, or less than one fifth of the men from the young cohort, reported anti-homosexual prejudice that associates AIDS with being gay. Their views are represented here by two men in their twenties. They live in different capital cities and share a similar understanding of how AIDS has affected the gay identity. Mark (aged 25) is aware of ‘blatant insults’, such as ‘all gays are AIDS carriers’, while Myles (aged 24) fears that heterosexuals believe ‘all gay people have AIDS and carry the HIV virus’.

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10 The men were asked ‘What effect has HIV-AIDS had on your sense of self?’ See Appendix 1. Interview schedule, question 8. The men who referred to connection between HIV-AIDS and gay identity are Tony (33), Ian (28), Mark (25), Myles (24) and Adam (24).
Accounts of men in the middle and old cohorts, who were adults during the epidemic, confirm the young men’s experience. One man in his mid-seventies believed HIV-AIDS erased the acceptance gay men had won from average Australians: ‘Most people would have thought it was a poofter’s disease and that poofers brought it to this country’. Lindsay, who is in his sixties, recalls that during the 1980s he felt ‘being gay associated [him] with this dreadful disease’, that ‘people looked at [him] differently because of AIDS’ and that, because of the intense media coverage, he ‘tended to feel tainted by this plague’. A man in his forties said that ‘when AIDS blew up, homosexuals were stigmatised’. He felt the stigma acutely because he was trying to come out to his family and, in the town where he lived, some people adopted a ‘red neck view’ of gay men: ‘They believed that gay equals berserk behaviour, such as rampant sex with hundreds of guys, that all of a sudden gay equals fatal illness’.

Because of the manner of its transmission—through the exchange of blood and semen—AIDS forced gay men to think about how and why they had sex and in so doing created what Jeffrey Weeks calls ‘a moral crisis’ in the gay subculture: ‘AIDS focused attention on just those practices and beliefs which have been central to a coherent gay identity since the 1960s’.11 Dennis Altman’s response to this moral crisis was to argue that while AIDS would affect sexual practices, it would not alter what he called the ‘fundamental reality of homosexuality’.12 And in many ways he was proved right: some gay men hesitated longer before coming out; others chose celibacy, monogamy or ‘safe sex’ as their protection against the virus.13 Even if they chose to be celibate for the duration of the epidemic, as some did, their identity was still homosexual, for, as Altman argues, ‘any sense of gay identity [is] quite meaningless if we try to deny it is an identity clearly based upon sexual preference, even if this preference is not always acted upon’.14 Fear of AIDS affected sexual practices among all sexually active people, gay and straight alike, and contributed among other things to their giving greater emphasis to ‘non-penetrative forms of sex’ in their repertoire of safe-sex options.15


13 For discussion of change in sexual practices among gay men as a response to HIV-AIDS, see Dowsett Practicing Desire, pp. 77–87.


In Australia, gay community leaders debated whether sex venues such as saunas should be closed down, but unlike in the United States—where, for example, in October 1984 city officials closed down bathhouses in San Francisco—they were able to convince governments that sound policy required that sex venues be kept open, for two reasons. First, they argued that gay men would continue to have sex whether the sex venues were open or closed and that closing them might force gay sex underground once again. Second, sex venues could play a role in educating gay men about safe sex and so perhaps help to change sexual beliefs and practices. As a result, saunas continued to operate throughout the period and are still in business. Initially, however, people kept away from all types of gay venues, partly because the mood in the early days was sombre as gay men and their friends digested the news of the epidemic and its implications, and because few felt like celebrating. One interviewee who is now in his seventies recalled that AIDS caused a marked decline in the ‘beat trade’:

Beats went off for about nine months. There was hardly anybody on the beats. I think HIV has caused a lot of guys to be very frightened. We have all lost friends through AIDS—people we have known who have died. Not so many now, but in the early days when the scourge was at its worse. It was a shame. There were some lovely people.

While numbers attending sex venues fell at first, they returned as safe-sex programs were introduced and understood.

Slightly more than one third of the men from the young cohort came out in the 1980s. Approximately half of these, or one sixth of the cohort, came out during the worst of the epidemic, that is, in the early- to mid-1980s. Two men tell how AIDS affected their coming out. Joseph (35) came out in the early-1980s, when he was a teenager, and says that at the time ‘there was a lot of hysteria and not much good information’. Moreover, because he was ‘not comfortable talking about [his] sexuality then’, he was not able to gain access to ‘good information’. His solution was to join an AIDS council as a volunteer worker ‘as a way of chasing away the bogey-man’: ‘I wanted to find out about the virus. I wanted to know what was going on and to find a pro-active way of dealing with it so that it did not overwhelm me’. Harry (28) was 15 when he came out in the late 1980s:

When I came out, I was bombarded with information about safe sex and took on everything I was told. I do not think about it until someone dies or I have a scare with it and think, “Oh, shit, it really is there”.

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16 Sendziuk *Learning to trust*, p. 88.


18 Garry Wotherspoon 1991 *City of the Plain: history of a gay sub-culture*, Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 226.
By the middle of the 1990s HIV-AIDS was under control in Australia. Even though many men were still dying and would continue to die as Juan Céspedes and John Foster died, rates of new infection had declined from the peaks of 1985 and 1986.\(^\text{19}\) The personal legacy of the epidemic in a country like Australia includes not only the premature deaths of many thousands of gay men and the loss of entire friendship networks but also, as Jeffrey Weeks pointed out in the British context, continuing doubt for people who live with the disease and for gay men in general:

The person living with HIV or AIDS must live with … the uncertainty of diagnosis, of prognosis, of reactions of friends, families, loved ones, of anonymous and fearful or hate-filled others. Everyone must live the uncertainty too: the uncertainty bred of risk, of possible infection, of not knowing, of loss.\(^\text{20}\)

Scholars are agreed that one of the more notable positive effects of AIDS was to invigorate gay communities in First World countries. In the first instance, communities of gay men drew on their own resources in the form of their labour, time and community leadership and then, in the case of some countries—for example, Australia, Holland and Denmark—they were able to work co-operatively with governments in the formulation of health policy.\(^\text{21}\) Networks of gay men, whose engagement with gay culture before the advent of AIDS had focussed on the scene, showed themselves capable of sustained and genuine altruism and, as a result, gay communities that emerged at the beginning of the 1990s in Australia and other Western countries were stronger and showed signs of beginning to transform into more diverse and inclusive social structures.\(^\text{22}\)

Not only did AIDS cause gay men to reassess their sexual relations, it also caused them to reassess their affective relations. As a result of this reassessment, which began in the mid-1980s, gay men have shown a willingness to engage in a broader range of relationships. Monogamy became more attractive as McLaren observed: ‘The havoc caused by AIDS having given rise to a nostalgia for family

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19 More recently, however, rates of HIV infection have been increasing, rising from 656 cases in 2000 to approximately 800 in 2004. For the majority of these cases, transmission was through sexual contact between men. See National Centre in HIV Epidemiology and Clinical Research Annual Surveillance Report 2005, pp. 5-9.


21 For discussion of gay communities’ response to HIV-AIDS and their relationship with state and federal governments’ health and research strategies in Australia, see Dowsett Practicing Desire, ch. 3.

life, an important segment of the gay community increasingly embraced domesticity’. In the middle cohort and old cohort of this sample are men who admit that monogamy was their principal survival strategy during the epidemic. Barry (aged 62) said bluntly that fear of AIDS probably kept him and his partner together: ‘If that dreadful thing had not been around, I might have looked further afield and might have got involved with other people, but I think it helped keep our relationship on track’. Meanwhile, Richard, who is four years Barry’s junior, said that he would most likely have contracted HIV if he had not been in a ‘fairly monogamous relationship’:

When I think back to the 1970s, when it all started to happen, I was well and truly in the relationship with my partner, and I think that it’s just pure luck that I am not HIV. Before that, I was quite promiscuous. I think that I am very lucky that I don’t have it.

On the edges of gay communities afflicted by the epidemic, there developed in the early 1990s a social movement known as ‘queer’, which began with the establishment in New York of a radical gay group called Queer Nation in late 1990. Its purpose was to challenge existing gay community organisations and leaderships because in the eyes of the young queers these were ‘overly liberal, complacent, and politically timid’, to do away with the binary distinction between heterosexual and homosexual, to destabilise ‘any and every identity claim, asserting the irreducibility of difference itself’. Queer came into existence at the same time as less powerful sexual minorities were asking for recognition. But its claim to represent all sexual minorities directly threatened well-established gay community institutions and what Jeffrey Weeks calls, ‘the patterns of lesbian and gay life as they developed during the 1970s and 1980s’. In the end, it did not subvert existing gay and lesbian institutions or the binary distinction between heterosexual and homosexual, possibly because they were too entrenched and the queer movement was too amorphous.

Gay men became more visible as a result of HIV-AIDS because the disease infected and killed more of them than any other category of person in the West. As well, they refused to give in to it or the homophobia that it gave rise to, they lobbied governments and they simply became more noticeable. How successfully gay activists have been able to fight or contain homophobia is debatable. Dennis Altman, for

23 McLaren Twentieth Century, p. 199.
24 Robert Reynolds 2002 From Camp to Queer: re-making the Australian homosexual, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, p. 158.
27 Reynolds Camp to Queer, p. 162.
example, believes homophobia transmutes as soon as homosexuals become more visible.28 On the other hand, Plummer argues we can measure the growing acceptance of gay men by the expanding volume of stories being told by gay men about their lives: ‘[W]hereas once a silence pervaded film, press and TV, now lesbian and gay issues get regular airings. Most soaps have at least introduced one gay or lesbian character’. More recently, the stories have ‘snowballed’ to include ‘black men, black lesbians, Hispanic lesbians, Hispanic men, Asian men, Jewish women, elderly gays, ageing lesbians, deaf gays and lesbians. And … the coming out of children to their parents, of parents to their children’.29 And Gilbert Herdt, writing in the 1990s, observed the relative ease with which young gay men were able to incorporate gayness into their lives:

Where early cohorts lived closeted and in fear … and where the … [gay liberation] cohort is now besieged frontally with the death and grief of AIDS, today’s youth—witness to these preceding life-styles—are in response developing an alternative cultural reality and future life course. Many … now assume the possibility of achieving unprecedented gay life goals and open social relationships at home, school, and work.30

But, as many of the stories of the young men in this sample show, while coming out may now be less fraught than in was in 1959, 1974 or 1982, it is still an important life event for young gay men to negotiate when they are sure that the time and audience are right.

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Part Two. Coming out in the post-liberation period.

Several public narratives of coming out co-exist in this period. There is a strong argument that coming out is now less important than it was in the 1970s and 1980s. Ken Plummer, for example, believes that, while it has been of signal importance to millions of individuals, its importance may be diminishing.31 Some theorists call on young gay people to resist coming out because it is ‘heteronormative’, arguing that by doing so gay people acknowledge the existence of a sexual hierarchy where heterosexual desire is assumed to be ‘natural’ and right and all other sexualities are regarded as in some way deficient.32 Then

28 Dennis Altman 1982 The Homosexualization of America, the Americanization of the Homosexual, New York: St Martin’s Press, p. 22.

29 Plummer Sexual Stories, p. 96.


31 Plummer Sexual Stories, p. 52.

32 In a heteronormative society gay men and lesbians are forced to declare their difference—to come out—in order to assert their identity and existence as ‘non-heterosexuals’. See, for example, Lisa Duggan 1998 ‘Queering the state’.
there are scholars who argue that gay men may have delayed coming out because of the effect that AIDS had on the homosexual identity. And, finally, there is research to show that people are coming out earlier.

One of the earliest writers on the subject of coming out, Barry Dank, estimated that more than 80 per cent of the men he interviewed in the late 1960s had come out by the time they were 24. A decade after Dank, and recognising the effect that social context has had on the lives of homosexuals, Ken Plummer wrote that the time of coming out is unpredictable. ‘Many will find it occurring during their first heterosexual marriage’, Plummer continued: ‘some may find it taking place in mid adolescence, and others can move through it in their retirement’. He noted that among North American men in the 1970s it tended to occur between the late teenage years and the early thirties. Gilbert Herdt concurs that coming out represents ‘a lifelong social and developmental change’ for gay people, their friends and family, and even their neighbours, but overall the age at which they come out is dropping.

North American research suggests that between the 1970s and the late 1990s the age at which young gays and lesbians came out fell by 10 years. The reason Herdt observes, is ‘[t]he growing visibility of the lesbian and gay movement … has made it increasingly possible for people to … “come out” at younger ages’. As John Gagnon writes, the gay and lesbian community offers ‘new attractions to wider audiences’, with the important consequence that young people ‘now know about gay and lesbian possibilities at an earlier age and … are better informed about the content of these life-styles’. In a study he conducted with Andrew Boxer of young people in Chicago between 1987 and 1988, Herdt found that

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36 Herdt Same sex, p. 158.

37 Herdt Same sex, p. 127.

38 Gagnon Interpretation of Desire, p. 123.
16 was the average age at which young males and females came out. 39 They found evidence of ‘same gender attraction’ in people as young as 10. This makes coming out, ‘for the first time in history a matter of adolescent development’. 40 Angus McLaren suggests it can be related to the ‘speeding up and standardization of life-course events’ in Western countries, by which he means that people participate in social practices at an earlier age with each new generation: ‘There emerged in the twentieth century a “right time” (usually earlier with each generation) to reach sexual maturity, to lose one’s virginity, to marry, to have children’, 41 and, for gay people, to come out.

Most of the men in the young cohort came out either as teenagers (12 interviewees) or in their twenties (10 interviewees). 42 The exceptions are three men who tell of coming out as children, one man who came out in his thirties, and one who says that he has not and will not come out because he ‘cannot relate to the gay community’. Two men do not say when they came out, a man in his early twenties and one in his late thirties, and it is impossible to infer when they came out from what they say in their transcripts. No one said that he had not come out because of its heteronormativity. One man said that he regarded coming out as a ‘baby-boomer’ concept but nonetheless recounted an extensive story of his own coming out. The experiences of the men in the young cohort strongly support the pattern observed in the United States, that people are coming out earlier than preceding generations of gay men.

Those who date their coming out from when they were children are of some interest. One man explained that he and a classmate were ‘outed’ by the rest of the children in Grade Six and, ‘they gay bashed the pair of us at the traffic lights after school’. Adam is now in his twenties. He is an intelligent, sensitive and articulate man, who is enrolled in a university course as a mature age student. This homophobic attack forced him to come out when he was 11 years-old. He explains: ‘They labelled our relationship for me and after the bashing I felt that I had no choice but to say that this is what I am. I did not want to hide or let other people tell us what we could or could not be’. His account may be influenced by the narratives of discrimination and homophobia he encountered when he was at secondary school and as a young adult at university. It is possible also that he has reconstructed a signal life event while his

39 Herdt and Boxer interviewed 202 young males and females between the ages of 14 and 20. The average age of the sample was 18. The young people were members of Horizons Community Services in Chicago, a ‘drop-in’ centre for young gays and lesbians. See Herdt Same sex, p. 127. For details of the Chicago research, see Gilbert Herdt & Andrew Boxer 1993 Children of Horizons: how gay and lesbian teens are leading a new way out of the closet, Boston: Beacon Press.

40 Herdt Same sex, p. 127.

41 McLaren Twentieth Century, p. 220.

42 The average age of the men in the young cohort is 33. Interviewed in 2002, they were born in 1969. On average, they came out at 21. Their coming-out year was 1990 and they were in the final year of secondary school in 1986 or 1987.
self-identity as a gay person formed and as he told the story of his coming out to other gay people and empathetic straights. This is not to say that he has invented the story; rather, it acknowledges the important part that ontological narrative plays in the formation of our identity. Adam strongly believes that what he experienced as an 11 year-old was a ‘gay bashing’ and that this event precipitated his coming out at a relatively early age. He did not say how he experienced being gay at 11.

Harry, like Adam is a man in his twenties. He says that he ‘always knew’ that he was gay and that he was having sex with boys his own age when he was four or five years old. Harry says that, after these experiences, ‘the feelings and the sex’ went away until he was 13 or 14. Then he experienced something similar to Adam’s ‘gay bashing’. His classmates suspected that he was homosexual and started calling him ‘poofter’ and thus began what he describes as ‘a hard few years and one or two traumas as well’. The term, ‘poofter’ is a fairly general term of abuse among males of all ages in Australia. Teenagers will often use it without understanding its meaning. For young gay men, however, its meaning is painfully clear and is not as easily shaken off. When a dominant group labels an outsider, especially a male whose perceived deviancy is sexual, the person may carry the hurt ever after.

For Harry, the occasion when he was labelled ‘poofter’ marked the beginning of not one month or one term of abuse, but the beginning of, in his words, ‘a hard few years’. The homophobia that he experienced caused him eventually to rebel against his tormentors. He came out, he says, because, ‘I got tired of all the crap’. At this point in his gay career Harry told some friends that he was gay, began to meet other gay people and, in his words, ‘to feel a bit more comfortable about who I was and who I was with’. This stage in Harry’s coming out is significant for the sociability and sense of belonging that seems to have accompanied it. Several scholars have written about the importance in the coming-out process of the neophyte’s social interaction with, and acceptance by, other homosexuals who are out.43 If his coming out began when he was four or five—which is unlikely given what we know about childhood sexuality and how we understand coming out—and then went into abeyance until he was a teenager, realisation was forced on him by the homophobic labelling he received in secondary school.

The third man who says that he came out when he was a child is Jason. Jason is in his thirties and says that, like Harry, he ‘always knew’ he was gay. His sexual awakening occurred when he was in Grade Five or Six in primary school. He says that he and his best friend used to ‘play around’. Their sexual relationship came to an end when Jason’s friend moved to another town. Jason’s sexual career then followed a similar pattern to Harry’s, that is, there was a period of inactivity until he reached puberty. Jason is emphatic, however, that he did not know what gay was or what it meant until he was 14. As he

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tells the story, there was an occasion when the teenager who was then his best friend ‘found himself a male lover who was much older’, and this friend and his older lover introduced Jason to gay clubs and bars. This was his first ‘identifying experience’. He was 16.

Harry and Jason believe that the sexual experiences they remember having when they were children were the beginning of the coming-out process. They may be better understood, however, as early sexual awakenings that they have interpreted in their personal narratives as their first gay sexual experience. It may therefore be more accurate to describe these experiences as markers that they have retrospectively selected as starting points in the story that they tell of their coming out rather than as evidence that they actually did come out when they were children.

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The greatest difficulty the majority of men from the young cohort faced when coming out was having to tell their parents. In the main, their friends expressed surprise that they had waited so long to tell them. A handful of men said coming out was an event of no great significance, but they were distinctly in the minority.

Fear of rejection caused young gay men the greatest anxiety as they approached the task of coming out to their parents. In the stories they told of how they arranged to reveal their homosexuality to their parents—on Mother’s Day in the case of one 24-year-old—the emotions they recalled were at best tentativeness, at worst, cold fear. Commentators are agreed that the chief obstacle to overcome in the process of coming out is what Ken Plummer calls the ‘heterosexual assumption’,44 which has also been called the ‘presumption of heterosexuality’ and ‘heterosexual ethnocentricity’.45 The assumption that people are born heterosexual and grow up heterosexual is, I would argue, the dominant public narrative in the West and many other human societies. It is expected, says Plummer, ‘that every adolescent will find a partner of the opposite sex, settle down, get married, ultimately procreate and raise children’.46


In the past, generations of gay men found they were under pressure to conform to the heterosexual assumption. They lived closeted lives and passed as heterosexual. Many got married. In middle age or later, they then faced a set of problems, which Plummer enumerates as ones of: ‘marital disharmony, of spouses who reproach themselves for the relationship, of divorce, of the custody of wanted and unwanted children and of gay parents’. In the following extract from his life story, Garry Wotherspoon spells out the damaging effects for gay men of the heterosexual assumption.

I was in my late twenties when, once again, I fell in love, and this time it was requited. The relationship lasted for about three years and ended … in what I saw then as failure. Both he and I were utterly “untrained” for the situation we found ourselves in. We … had no collective past experience—relating to homosexual relationships—to fall back on … We tried to apply the only guidelines we had learned, those taught by the heterosexual culture, where the roles and categories at least had a relevance to reality. But nothing in all my past reading, or my previous emotional involvements, or my sexual encounters, was adequate preparation for that situation, for that relationship, for what it went through.

Wotherspoon was born in the early 1940s and so was in his late twenties at the beginning of the 1970s. He would consequently belong in the middle cohort and the gay period. Today the gay identity is less stigmatised, and there is more visible evidence of gay men’s capacity to form affective relationships that provide role models for others and to develop stable life paths.

The importance to the young men of their father’s acceptance was a strong theme in their coming-out stories. Moreover, because of the father’s position in the nuclear family and the associated struggle between fathers and sons, other members of the family often mediated the news of the son’s homosexuality. In the stories, it was common to hear that a mother or sibling had offered to be a go-between and to tell the father on the son’s behalf, or advised the son not to tell his father about his gayness, or to delay telling him. Fathers’ responses varied from acceptance through denial and rejection. What the stories often revealed, therefore, were long-standing and pre-existing structures of power within families that were not sufficiently flexible to incorporate a gay son.

A small number of coming-out stories told of parents who were frightened by news of their son’s gayness, often because they feared he would contract HIV-AIDS. When one man who is in his thirties told his mother about his boy friend, her first question was, ‘Has he got AIDS?’ For the men in their twenties, the reaction was similar if more dramatic. The mother of a 24-year-old man told her son, ‘You

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will get HIV and die’, while a man in his early twenties was told that he could do whatever he wanted to do, but he had to wear a condom and he must never catch AIDS. The latter is Jack and his reflective response to his mother’s concerns deserves longer consideration. He lives in a capital city and grew up in a large provincial town. He almost completed a university degree and now works in politics. He is 22 and single.

Fears about HIV dominated my mother’s thinking about my sexuality. Her attitude is, “I don’t care what you are; I love you; just don’t get AIDS. You have to wear a condom”. The thought never enters people’s minds that sex between men does not necessarily involve anal sex or condoms and therefore I might not be at the risk that they think I am. I have a rule about safe sex and I have kept to it fairly strictly but it is a scary proposition as well. I have never been tested [for HIV] and that concerns my friends who say I am an idiot. I have been making commitments for over a year to do it but it is a big psychological thing. I don’t think that I have put myself or anyone else at risk of anything being transmitted.

It is clear that his mother’s concern for his well being is important to him and that he interprets it as a sign of love. He is well informed about transmission of HIV and safe sex, and he is unlikely to be putting himself or his sexual partners at risk. But Jack is frightened. Like people who fear the prospect of having a colonoscopy, mammogram or pap smear, Jack is afraid of the possibility the medical procedure may reveal a fatal disease. His mother’s fear is mirrored in his own response.

Among the remaining examples of parental responses are two that concern credulity. Robert is in his late thirties. He came out when he was 27. When he told his family, his mother refused to believe him and would not listen to what he had to say until the girl friend he had at the time spoke to her and convinced her that he was indeed gay. The other interviewee, Ian, is ten years younger than Robert. His parents accepted his word when he told them that he was homosexual but asked him why he thought they needed to know and then wanted his assurance that he was not a trans-sexual.

In the small group of men whose parents accepted the news of their son’s gayness unconditionally and in a positive spirit are a man in his mid-thirties and one in his early twenties. The parents of the man in his thirties are divorced. When he told his mother about his homosexuality, he also told her that his sister was not ‘handling the news well’. His mother replied that his sister would learn to accept his homosexuality or she would have to leave home. The other man, Troy (aged 24), arranged to meet his father in a city restaurant for a father-and-son conversation. As Troy tells the story, his father, whom he describes as a ‘powerful, domineering man’, stood up when Troy told him that he was gay. Troy continued: ‘I thought that he was going to hit me or walk out but he held out his hand and said that he thought I was more of a man to tell him than to keep it a secret’. Troy was overwhelmed by his father’s response and even more so when he learned that his father broke down in private and cried. Now, his parents want to know whom he is going out with and are more interested in ‘what is happening in my life’.
The significant minority of men who had to leave their family home or home town in order to come out comprises five men in their thirties and three in their twenties. Those who left country towns seem more worried about peers than parents. They are represented here by Robert, Vincent and Daniel who are in their thirties, and Ian who is twenty-eight. In almost all cases, the men left town also to go to university or TAFE or in search of work. Often they had grown up in regions of rural Australia where anti-homosexual prejudice is not a thing of the past. Gilbert Herdt argues the existence of homophobia in the United States continues to make coming out a struggle for some people, and there is no reason to believe that Australia is different in this respect:

American society and western cultures in general have changed in the direction of a more positive regard for gays. This does not mean, however, that the hatred and homophobia of the past are gone or that secrecy and fear of passing have faded away. People still fear, and rightly so, the effects of coming out on their lives and safety, their well-being and jobs, their social standing and community prestige.

Moving away from their family and home town provided them with an occasion to develop, as Ian says, ‘a circle of friends who were more likely to be accepting’, which is code for ‘friends who are less homophobic’. When Vincent left his home town, he began drinking because of what he describes as the ‘heart-ache of having to live a double life’. Once he came out he stopped drinking. Most of his family have accepted his homosexuality. The ‘red-neck cousins’ who do not accept it and who, he now suspects, were the reason he wanted to leave home when he was a teenager no longer bother him.

Daniel also left his home town because he knew it would be safer to be a gay man elsewhere. He returned to the country town where he grew up when he had a partner and chose, as he says, ‘in the full flight of love’, to come out to his family. Their response was mixed. Some of his relatives had suspected and were not surprised; others were happy for him. One group of relatives, however, told him that his ‘life-style’ disgusted them and, says Daniel, ‘I still have difficulty with a couple of family members who have not come to terms with that part of my life’. He describes the region where his family lives as ‘a safe place to grow up’ and as ‘politically and socially conservative because of the influence of fundamentalist Christian beliefs’. Daniel remembers anti-homosexual marches in the neighbouring town when he was in school.

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50 A report prepared in 2003 for the Attorney General’s department of New South Wales on homophobic violence found that gay men and lesbians in New South Wales ‘continue to experience high levels of homophobic abuse, harassment or violence’. New South Wales Government 2003 ‘You shouldn’t have to hide to be safe’: a report on homophobic hostilities and violence against gay men and lesbians in New South Wales, Sydney: Attorney General’s department, p. 8.

Unsettling as is Daniel’s account, it is an isolated experience of the men in the young cohort. The general pattern is that coming out is a life-course event that they may expect to negotiate without fearing ostracism or social opprobrium. Nevertheless, it is worth underlining that a significant minority of the young men did wait until they had moved away from family and their home town to come out. There are a number of possible explanations for this.

On the one hand, it could be argued that there is nothing special about their decision because the time they left home—for further education or work—is a standard stage in the life course of young adults in Western society, a time when they begin to assert their independence. It is understandable that young gay men would take this opportunity to come out. On the other hand, it could be argued that these men purposely waited until they moved away because they knew any public declaration of homosexuality would attract less negative attention or censure if they came out somewhere other than where they grew up and their family lived. Coming out would be safer if they waited until they had settled in a new town or city and, as one interviewee said, had had time to make friends with people more likely to accept them.

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Conclusion.

The general pattern to emerge from the young men’s experience of coming out is that, while it is a life-course event that causes some anxiety, they were generally able to accomplish it without the risk of being ostracised or having to sever relations with family and friends. This was not always the case in the past. In this regard, their experience corresponds with that of young gay men elsewhere.52 ‘The hardest thing’, said an interviewee in his late thirties, ‘was telling my parents’. These men have benefited from the gradual reduction in anti-homosexual prejudice over the last 20 years. Instead of the social opprobrium of the past, the greatest anxiety these men faced was that their parents might reject them because of their sexuality. And, yet, the fact that a notable minority of men chose to leave home before they came out shows that homophobia persists in parts of Australia.

It is difficult to be definitive about the effect of HIV-AIDS on the coming out of this generation. While slightly more than one third of the cohort (twelve men) came of age during the 1980s—when the epidemic was at its worst in Australia—half of these waited between three and twelve years to come out. And while this may suggest that the stigma of AIDS caused them to delay the decision, none says so in his interview. HIV-AIDS nonetheless dominated the context of their coming out. Some interviewees

reported knowledge of heterosexuals conflating AIDS and homosexuality, others spoke of their parents’ fears they would contract the virus.

The men related a variety of responses from parents, ranging from full and unconditional acceptance to incredulity. One notable finding is the importance of the father’s acceptance and the strategy a number of men adopted to tell one member of the family—often the person they felt closest to—and then tell the others by stages or let the information seep out via their confidant. Finally, there is a handful of men for whom coming out was an event of no great significance, a relatively matter-of-fact experience. One man, for instance, let his family know via a telephone call. Meanwhile, another man made a casual announcement at his 21st birthday when, at the end of the night, he said, ‘Thank you all for coming and, by the way, I am gay’.
Chapter Five. The gay ‘scene’.

‘I would not be rejected at any gay venue because the gay male psyche is conditioned to accept anything young and pretty’. Troy, 24.

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Introduction.

A middle-class interviewee from the young cohort joked that the gay life course was a progression through four stages: ‘Lycra, leather, rice and rent’. As the material from which bicycle shorts, swimming trunks, gym clothes and vests are made, ‘lycra’ represents the athleticism of youth. The remaining three terms signify stages of decline, from middle age to old age and destitution. ‘Leather’ is for a style of dress that mimics service uniforms or signifies an interest in sado-masochistic sex; ‘rice’ signifies a penchant for young Asian men as sex or relationship partners; and ‘rent’ refers to the final stage of a gay man’s life when, according to the cynicism of the joke, he is reduced to buying sex, and perhaps affection, from male prostitutes. Such attitudes are understandable in the context of the dominant narrative of the gay scene, which is that a gay man’s most valued qualities are his youthfulness and beauty.

The gay ‘scene’ is a site of physical and youthful display, where young men are to be found in greatest number and are valorised for their youth and beauty. The principal argument of this chapter is that age mostly determines how gay men engage with the scene. As they age, gay men have less in common with its values and activities. They feel less at ease on the scene. It satisfies fewer of their needs.

The scene and the gay community are two parts of what in previous chapters has been called the gay (or homosexual) milieu, the gay world, or the homosexual (or gay) sub-culture. The scene consists of businesses that provide spaces where gay men socialise and may consume alcohol, drugs or sex. These are social and recreational spaces such as bars, pubs, discotheques, clubs and sex venues. The gay community, on the other hand, largely consists of not-for-profit organisations whose focus includes providing assistance for gay people coming out, lobbying for improved political and social rights, and the provision of housing and care for people living with HIV-AIDS, all of which are discussed in the next chapter.

In major cities, the centre of social life for many gay men is the scene. It is a world oriented towards young men, with a premium placed on beautiful bodies and the latest fashions. All sites of gay
sociability are sites of consumption, where ‘sexual fantasies and pleasures [are sold] as commodities’. While the commodification of sex is not limited to the gay scene, and is a feature of Western capitalist societies generally, anyone wishing to participate on the scene must have a high disposable income, for night clubs, sex clubs, gymnasiums and dance parties all charge substantial entry fees, and, in the case of dance parties, are very costly to attend. Writing in the early 1980s, Kenneth Plummer commented that, in regard to the scene,

the homosexual “poor” are ignored—it is all very well to counsel homosexuals to become involved in the gay scene, when the cost of membership, entrance, travel, drinks and cosmetics are so high as to preclude those who live at or below the breadline.

Scholars who have examined gay social practices in Western countries describe the scene as a competitive place, familiarity with which will not necessarily guarantee gay men social success or emotional support. In support of this observation, a man interviewed for this thesis, who is in his mid-thirties, said he could not go out when he broke up with his boy friend because ‘the gay scene as a whole felt threatening. I was not being hugely harassed but I was aware there might be one or two people in a club who made the whole thing feel really toxic’.

To outsiders and to many gay men who have recently come out, the scene is the most visible form of gay culture. As Vincent, a man in his thirties, explained, young gay men commonly confuse the scene and the gay community:

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2 In January 2006, the price of a ticket to the Red Raw dance party in Melbourne was $72.50, which allowed one person entry to the venue. Additional costs would include the cost of alcohol, food and water bought at the party, drugs, costume/outfit, food, transport to and from the site, as well as entry to and alcohol bought at ‘recovery’ parties the following day, and possibly more drugs. Crucially, a single dose of drugs such as Ecstasy, Ice, Special K and Speed, which are popular on the dance party scene, often cost more than the price of the party ticket. For discussion of the drug culture at gay dance parties, see Lynette A. Lewis & Michael W. Ross 1995 A Select Body: the gay dance party subculture and the HIV/AIDS pandemic, London: Cassell.


Chapter Five. The gay ‘scene’. 79
The gay community is obsessed with youth and beauty and the perfect body. In some ways I feel let down by coming out into the gay scene. We need to let young gay people know that the gay scene is one part of the gay community and the gay culture of night clubs, sex, gyms and dance parties is not all there is in life. I have had this weird experience of being sucked into it but also on some level knowing that it is crap. I put too much energy into body image sometimes.

Vincent reveals a strong ambivalence towards the scene. He is drawn to it because it is a site of youthful display but he also knows that its values are insubstantial. His ambivalence helps explain the continuing importance of the scene: the physicality and beauty of men on the scene attracts others to it. In the end, however, most gay men tire of its superficiality and the contrived illusion of perpetual youth.

A word is needed about terms used in this chapter. ‘Bar’ and ‘pub’ are social spaces where alcohol is consumed and people socialise. Originally, bar was a North American word for a social institution peculiar to that culture; now it is used to designate any social venue where alcohol is served. While the pub (public house or hotel) has a long history as a working-class venue, its representation has been ambiguous. It has had a variety of purposes, political ones included: in gay pubs, entertainment may include drag shows. The fact that most gay socialising has taken place and continues to take place in bars and pubs affects the way gay men relate to and regard each other. A ‘club’ is a more private venue where an entry fee may be charged and space provided for dancing. Pubs may also be called clubs if they have extended licensing hours and a dance floor. In the gay world, clubs have often been necessary for members’ safety, especially if they are meeting for sex. Sex venues include saunas and what are called sex (or fuck) clubs. Their primary purpose is to enable patrons to have sex in public, as well as in booths and private rooms, without fear of assault or arrest. Sexual relations that occur in sex venues are known as ‘public sex’ and have a longer history at beats.

As suggested in the previous chapters, the scene that exists today in Australia’s largest city (Sydney) evolved by stages from the 1920s and 1930s. Between the wars it comprised a small group of hotels, cafés and coffee shops where homosexuals were tolerated or welcomed. These venues expanded during World War II with the influx of servicemen from Australian, American and allied armies. Repression followed with the Cold War and the scene became more clandestine. As the repression eased in the 1960s, drag clubs opened and gradually expanded the variety of venues available for homosexuals.

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6 In Victoria, the change to opening hours occurred in the mid-1990s under an economic rationalist state government led by Jeffrey Kennett.
The emergence of Camp Inc. and gay liberation coincided with a rapid growth in the 1970s of bars, saunas and clubs, which in Sydney has continued since then, slowed, though only in its early days, by the advent of the HIV-AIDS epidemic.

The men interviewed for this thesis were equally divided in their view of the scene. Equal numbers expressed negative views and positive views, and almost one quarter of the sample held both negative and positive views—in other words, were ambivalent about it. Notably, more than a third of the men said they did not go on the scene, the majority from the middle and old cohorts. This fact underlines the main argument of the chapter, which is that age determines most gay men’s engagement with the scene: as men grow older, the scene appeals less to them and has less to offer them. Its social practices are for young or youthful men. This is consistent with other published research.

With the exception of men from the middle cohort, relationship status had little bearing on interviewees’ views of the scene. Single men were almost equally divided in their view of the scene, as were men in relationships. At first sight, this appears counter-intuitive but, unlike in the heterosexual world, where social life is more domestically oriented after the formation of couple relationships, in the gay world, social involvement in the scene does not necessarily cease when gay men pursue permanent couple relationships. Interestingly, in the middle cohort, twice as many men in relationships held positive views as held negative views of the scene. One reason for this may be that these men were of the gay liberation generation, who came out as the scene was being formed and helped create it. As a result they seem to have a higher regard for it than the men from the old cohort who preceded them and the men from the young cohort who followed them.

Almost two thirds of men interviewed for this thesis participate in the scene. The largest group consists of men from the young cohort where more than 80 per cent reported participation, followed by almost three quarters of the men from the middle cohort, and slightly more than a quarter of the men from

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7 Forty-two interviewees, or fifty-one per cent of the sample, reported positive views of the scene, while forty-one interviewees, also equal to fifty-one per cent of the sample, held negative views. Nineteen interviewees held both positive and negative views. The cohort where there was the greatest overlap between those holding both positive and negative views was the young cohort.

8 Twenty-nine men, or more than one third of all interviewees, said they did not go on the scene; sixteen men, or more than fifty per cent of those who spurned the scene, were from the old cohort, while eight were from the middle cohort and five were from the young cohort.

Scene participation drops gradually between the ages of 20 and the late 50s and then declines rapidly when men are in their 60s and 70s. Edmund White noted a similar trend in the 1980s: ‘In the United States, and especially among gay men, this period of adolescence is being extended for the first time in history into the forties, fifties, even sixties. It has become a way of life’. What White observed in gay men was a more visible example of a universal condition, which, according to Phillipe Ariès, began to develop in Western society after World War I, when marriage no longer brought to an end what he called the ‘privileged age’ of adolescence: ‘the married adolescent … [became] one of the most prominent types of our time, dictating its values, its appetites and its customs … We now want to come to it early and linger in it as long as possible’.

Gay men may appear to experience a more prolonged adolescence than is available to the rest of society because the social sites available to them—where they are free to conduct social relations without fear—are mostly limited to those of the scene, that is, venues where they typically drink, dance, or have sex. To observers, therefore, it may seem that drinking, dancing and having sex are the sum of gay social practices. Their life trajectory may appear to be an extended adolescence. And yet, as this research shows, while a small group of gay men continued to participate on the scene in their 60s and 70s, and many did who were in their 40s and 50s, a significant minority of the men interviewed for this thesis did not participate on the scene at all. Moreover, a significant proportion of those who did participate on the scene held ambivalent views about it and disapproved of many of its social practices.

* * *

Part One. Positive views of the scene.

Not surprisingly, interviewees’ positive views were contingent on their having had, and being able to recall, rewarding experiences at gay venues. More than 80 per cent of interviewees with positive views of the scene were from the middle cohort and the young cohort. Both of these groups included men who

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10 Twenty-three interviewees (or eighty-two per cent) from the young cohort said they participated on the scene, while twenty-two men (or seventy-three per cent) from the middle cohort said so, as did six men (or twenty-seven per cent) from the old cohort.


13 Among the men interviewed for this thesis, thirteen were formerly married and fourteen are parents. The families and relationship status of interviewees are discussed in a later chapter.

14 Of the forty-two interviewees with positive views of the scene, nineteen were from the middle cohort and seventeen were from the young cohort.
were satisfied with the venues, as well as men whose satisfaction and participation were conditional on finding spaces where they could ‘be themselves’. While also expressing some positive views, the men from the old cohort generally offered only faint praise for the venues.

Part One begins with a short discussion of the views of the men from the old cohort and the middle cohort. Then there follows a section on men who use sex venues, the majority of whom are from the middle cohort and the old cohort. It is notable that, with the exception of two men, none of the interviewees from the young cohort referred to sex venues in their accounts of their participation on the scene. The final section concerns the positive views of men from the young cohort.

In the old cohort, a small group of six men had positive views of bars and pubs, and they are represented here by two men in their sixties. Drawing on his memory of an earlier scene, Charles (aged 67) said that ‘the pub scene was better than the disco scene’. Lindsay (aged 62) is still a fairly active participant on the scene. Not long ago, he joined a leather club operating from a pub but went infrequently because, as he said, he ‘did not find the people particularly interesting’.

In the middle group, interviewees with positive views of the scene were either satisfied with the venues and what they provided or were more selective about their participation. ‘An easy place to meet friends’ was a common sentiment about the scene. One of the men described it as ‘time out’ from the straight world, while another said he liked ‘being amongst other gay men’, whether in a sauna or a club. A man in his mid-fifties recommended gay bars when travelling because he can ‘be himself’ and he knows that he will be welcomed:

I always feel safe in gay venues, not that I necessarily feel unsafe elsewhere, but at some kind of level you can relax because everyone knows exactly the situation. I have never been hassled in gay bars or any other kind of gay establishment. So while travelling it was nice to check out gay venues for that feeling.

Five men from the middle cohort specifically stated that their enjoyment of bars and clubs was conditional on being with their own age group. They disliked young men’s venues: in the words of one, the scene was ‘great fun’, as long as he ‘kept clear of kiddies’ bars’. The sixth man in the group is upper middle class and in his late fifties. While his account is generally positive, it suggests that the presence of other gay men is incidental to his enjoyment of a ‘night out at the pub’: ‘I enjoy going to gay pubs because you can go in and out. I love going in to watch a drag show. It is good light-hearted fun and you are not going to come across the same people again’.

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In this section, two groups of men, principally from the middle cohort and old cohort, relate their experience of sex venues. The first group consists of those who limit their participation on the scene to
sex venues, while the second group consists of men who include them in their range of acceptable of venues.

Public sex is not a recent phenomenon. It has existed for as long as male and female prostitutes have practised their trade. James Boswell, for example, wrote about the sex he had in public with female prostitutes he picked up in St James’s Park in London in the 1760s\textsuperscript{15}. In the early twentieth century, public sex—both homosexual and heterosexual—was common in working-class neighbourhoods of large Western cities because, as George Chauncey explains, it was impossible for young unmarried people to have sex in the ‘tenements, boardinghouses, and lodging houses’ in which they lived. Their recourse was to ‘construct some measure of privacy for themselves in spaces middle-class ideology regarded as “public”’. When gay men cruised public spaces for casual pick-ups, therefore, they often found that they were sharing them with ‘young heterosexual men and women, who sought privacy in them for the same reasons … Both groups [of gay and straight young people], for instance, found … [New York] city’s parks particularly helpful’.\textsuperscript{16}

Following the ‘sexual revolution’ of the 1960s, and as the gay liberation movement developed, the Sydney scene transformed into a sophisticated sexual market that included bars, clubs and sex venues, which provided for varying expressions of sexual desire. Michel Foucault described the sex venues he discovered in San Francisco and New York as ‘laboratories of sexual experimentation’.\textsuperscript{17} At this time of ‘increased sexual freedom and stress on individual gratification’, argues Dennis Altman, sexuality was ‘incorporated into the marketplace’:

\begin{quote}
[Going to the baths to have sex represents an integration of sexuality into consumerism in a way that encounters in parks or streets do not … As gay bathhouses have both proliferated and become more luxurious, they are being recognised as central institutions of male gay life …\textsuperscript{18}
\end{quote}

In contrast to these views, Sheila Jeffreys criticises the sexual practices that developed in gay sex venues: ‘Sex clubs, bathhouses, bookstores and bars with backrooms promoted the sex of “cruising” as the liberated sex of the new era, and the burgeoning gay porn industry, whose stock-in-trade was “public sex”,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{18} Dennis Altman, 1982 \textit{The Homosexualization of America, the Americanization of the Homosexual}, New York: St Martin’s Press, p. 82.
\end{itemize}
served as propaganda to this end’. This attack on public sex arises from her belief that too few AIDS activists or queer theorists admitted a link between gay men’s sexual practices—in particular, ‘multi-partner sex in commercial clubs’—and the spread of HIV-AIDS. She was incredulous that in the mid-1990s gay activists in the United States continued to promote and defend public sex, in particular the practice known as ‘bare-backing’, or unprotected anal sex, and argues that its implications for others outweigh the rights of gay men to have sex in public:

The model of sexuality which underlies the queer promotion of “public sex” is one which is profoundly problematic for women, children, and vulnerable and marginalized men and boys internationally. If the interests of constituencies other than privileged white American gay men are to be taken seriously, then this kind of sexuality needs to be transformed, rather than protected.¹⁹

A small group of five men from the old cohort and middle cohort have stories to tell of their experiences at sex venues. The social practices they reveal suggest high levels of conviviality, even intimacy, in public spaces. These men do not go to bars or pubs; their involvement in the scene is limited to sex venues. They are Leslie and Clive from the old cohort, Noel and Bob from the middle cohort and Alex from the young cohort, and their ages span five decades. The youngest, Alex (aged 37), was critical of the scene and his account is discussed in Part Two, below. The remaining four men are middle class with diverse relationship experiences. Three are single, one is in a relationship of more than 20 years, and two were formerly married; three are university educated, two are retired, all are or have been in full-time employment.

There is, in addition, a group of six men who included saunas with bars and clubs in the variety of venues they attended on the scene.²⁰ Mark (aged 25) is the youngest, and his experience of saunas is discussed in a later chapter on the intimate life of gay men. The remaining five men are from the old cohort and the middle cohort, and, in common with the first group of men, are middle class and university educated. All but one are in relationships and all work in education or the public service. The views of both groups of men are represented here by the accounts of Leslie and Bob from the ‘sauna-only’ group, and Alan and Lindsay from the ‘wider variety’ group.


²⁰ Lindsay (62), Thomas (52), Henry (50), Alan (47) Neil (46) and Mark (25).
Once a month Leslie (aged 74) and his partner go to a special night at their sauna for men over 55. It is a form of ‘mass sexual encounter’ similar to the ‘jack-off’ parties that began in the United States as a preventive measure against HIV-AIDS. Leslie described one of the encounters he attended:

You pay a fee. You get your gear off and go into a room where there can be up to 60 guys. Everybody is talking, wanking, hugging and so on. There are rules: “No fucking” and “No lips below the hips”. It is sensible and it is friendly. We have met some very nice people there.

A frequent accusation made against sex venues is that they are sites of impersonal sex but Leslie describes a mass sexual encounter that is sociable, and an intimacy of sorts in a public setting. The three remaining interviewees also referred to the sociability they experienced in saunas, as did Dennis Altman, in the early 1980s, when he remarked on their effect on social relations between gay men. He described the atmosphere as egalitarian, where there existed ‘a desire to know and trust other men in a type of brotherhood far removed from the male bonding of rank, hierarchy and competition that characterizes much of the outside world’.22

Slightly confused private narratives are revealed in one interviewee’s account of his experience in saunas. Bob is in his late forties. He goes on the scene when he is looking for sex, but is impatient with it because, as he said, he ‘cannot be bothered with the pick-up line that begins with “Let’s have a drink”. Also, I am not a great drinker and I hate getting pissed’. Then, when he does go to a sauna, it does not always involve sex:

When I was going there it was mainly to get in touch with my Greek friends. There were about five of them who used to go there every Friday night. I used to go to practice the language on them. It was quite funny. We would go into a cubicle and smoke dope and come out ripped off our tits and then be struggling through Greek and then struggling through English, which was often more enjoyable than hunting around and cruising for sex.

He is dissatisfied with the artificiality of the scene. He cannot talk to strangers and prefers to be with friends. Avoiding conventional meeting places, Bob uses a sex venue to socialise with friends, and have drugs. His difficulty in talking to strangers is not uncommon and is raised, below, in Part Two, when the discussion turns to men who are frustrated they cannot find a community on the scene.

Alan, also in his forties, shares Bob’s views about the predictability of social interaction at bars. He likes saunas for their conviviality and the direct interaction they allow: ‘There is music and you can

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22 Altman Homosexualization, pp. 79–80.
talk if you want to. It is warm and you can act on impulse instead of playing games. I do not feel as vulnerable grabbing someone as I would at a dance party’. Other published research shows a similar relation between gay men’s dislike of the artificial social interaction in bars and clubs and their attendance at saunas.  

In the early 1970s, Lindsay discovered saunas on a trip to the United States; since then, they have been, in his words, ‘part of my life in a way’. Almost 20 years older than Bob and Alan, Lindsay said that he visited saunas on his own, or, like Leslie, with his partner: ‘On a trip interstate we will both go to one as a kind of holiday outing’. When in his hometown, he restricts his use of saunas because ‘it can get totally out of hand. I try not to become part of the furniture. I suppose I go to one every month or so’. 

The picture these men reveal is of moderate involvement and participation in public sex at saunas. Their accounts are notable more for the conviviality they enjoyed there than for any evidence of ‘wild’ sexual excess. These men are, as well, fairly representative of mature, middle-class gay men. What mention they make of sex in saunas suggests that, while it may be anonymous, it is not their sole motivation for being there. Younger gay men may tell different stories, but, as mentioned in the introduction to this section, only two men from the young cohort referred to sex venues when they discussed their participation in the scene. This relatively small number may be a measure of either the success of the scene as a source of sexual partners for young men or a decline in interest in public sex. * 

Slightly more than 60 per cent of men from the young cohort reported positive views of the scene.  

Their accounts are notable for the diversity of the young men’s experiences and also the range of bars and clubs available to them, which is discussed separately below. At one end of the spectrum are two men in their early twenties who are unqualifiedly positive about the gay scene. At the other end is a group of seven men whose participation is conditional, whose views, while positive, are more qualified. Their participation on the scene depends on being in the company of friends. For these men, venues are enjoyable only from within a circle or ‘bubble’ of friends or in a social space on the scene where they can ‘be themselves’. 

Troy and Lachlan have entirely positive views of the scene. Both are in their early twenties. Troy believes he would be welcome wherever he goes, because ‘the gay male psyche is programmed to accept

24 The seventeen men from the young cohort with positive views of the scene were Travis (38), Neville (37), Andy (37), Jeremy (36), Joseph (35), Julius (34), Tony (33), Mick (33), Adrian (30), Ian (28), Harry (28), David (28), Mark (25), Troy (24), Myles (24), Lachlan (24), and Jack (22).
anything that is young and pretty’. Lachlan works in the finance sector and has a high disposable income. He recounts very positive experiences of the scene:

I think of the gay community as the scene. I get involved in it weekly and sometimes more than once a week and it is lots of fun meeting people, sharing fantastic times with my friends and having new experiences. If it is a work night, I rarely venture out of the house. I have a routine, which is work, gym, home, dinner and bed. Friday night is different. I would have dinner with friends; we would have lots of wine; then we would go somewhere where we can stay out until 9 am and have some drugs. But that would be the exception. Normally we would have lots of drinks, everyone would get drunk and we would head home at 3 am.

From his account, the scene is the stage for social interaction, chiefly with his friends. It is also the stage for drinking a lot of alcohol and occasional drug taking. In no sense does Lachlan feel isolated or lonely on the scene. Rather it performs a community function for him because it is the place where he and his friends can express their fraternity and socialise.

At the other end of the spectrum of positive experiences and views of the scene is a group of men whose enjoyment is contingent on being with friends or finding a venue where they could ‘be themselves’. The group comprises men from different class and ethnic backgrounds, and is represented here by the accounts of one working-class man, two non-Caucasian men and one middle-class man.25

The working-class man is in his early thirties and lives in the country. When he visits a nearby capital city, he goes to a small pub in an inner-city suburb where the drag is good and whose owners refer to their pub as ‘their “lounge room downstairs”’:

They welcome their friends and regard the rest of us as their friends as well. I used to go out a lot more but I have found that if you do not have “the look”, you are not welcome. And yet at this pub you can be old or young, fat or skinny and they accept you because you are who you are.

The non-Caucasian men are in their mid-thirties and late twenties. The older one lives in an inner suburb of a major capital city and the younger in the country. The older man and his friends avoid venues for young gay men because of their experience of racism, and, instead, they go to an ‘alternative’ club where ‘there is no discrimination on the basis of your nationality or the clothes you wear or how you look, and the bar staff are friendly’. When the younger non-Caucasian man ‘goes to town’, he prefers a small, quiet pub on weeknights because ‘it is just people socialising. It is not a meat market and the staff are friendly there as well’.

25 Neville (37), Joseph (35), Julius (34), Mick (33), Tony (33), David (28) and Jack (22).
The middle-class man is in his early thirties and likes to go on the scene to dance and have fun with his friends. He was aware, however, that it is a lonely place for single people: ‘I go with friends whenever I go out and that makes it easier. If I were going out by myself, I would feel uncomfortable in a lot of places’. This comment is revealing because, despite the appearance of conviviality, the scene would appear to be a lonely place for single men. All of the men interviewed for this thesis said that they went on the scene with friends or as a couple. While it may give the impression of comprising large numbers of active, energised men, and give the illusion of individualism, it is more likely to consist of a lot of small friendship groups and couples.

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Part Two. Negative views of the scene.

The interviewees’ principal complaints about the scene concern its impoverished social and physical environments. The majority of men interviewed for this thesis said that it was difficult to develop genuine social relations on the scene, often because of the poor physical environment of gay venues. More than 70 per cent of men from the young cohort reported negative views of the scene. Because of their age, one might reasonably assume that these men, as the principal ‘target market’ of owners and managers of gay venues, would be more positive. But many of them were disenchanted, and almost half of those with negative views cited poor physical environment and social relations at venues. The remaining criticisms concerned the regulation body image of the scene and its sexual nature.

That the men from the young cohort were so critical of the scene is attributable to the fact that, as mentioned in the Introduction, more than 80 per cent of them participate on the scene. It is their playground, and the number and strength of their criticisms reflect the level of their involvement in it. For this reason, Part Two begins with the young cohort’s views on the physical and social environments of the scene, followed by their accounts of regulation body image and sexualised relations. It concludes with a summary discussion of the views of the men in the middle and old cohorts.

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Criticisms of the noise, crowds and smoke at bars and clubs are to be expected from men in middle or old age, but are unusual from the young. And yet, a significant minority of men from the young cohort complained about the physical environment of the scene. Their views are represented here by the

26 The twenty men from the young cohort reporting negative views of the scene were Drew (39), Robert (38), Neville (37), Andy (37), Jeremy (36), Travis (38), Alex (37), Jason (35), Julius (34), Tony (33), Mick (33), Luke (32), Vincent (30), Brian (30), David (28), Ian (28), Mark (25), Myles (24), Angus (23), Jack (22).

27 Robert (38), Jeremy (36), Tony (33), Luke (32), Brian (30) and Angus (23).
account of a man in his late thirties, which encapsulates the range of the others’ criticisms. Robert is caught between a desire to socialise on the scene and his dislike of its environment.

I hate gay bars because of the loud music, cigarette smoke, people getting pissed, looking unhappy or getting out of it on drugs. It is not my scene. I do not fit into it. That is what made it really hard when I was coming out. It is the most visible place for gay men to meet. It is not just a characteristic of the gay community. A lot of straight people get off on the club scene; others feel alienated by it. What do you do? Join a knitting club? Female friends who are my age and are not married have found it a huge problem to find a man.

The fact that his female contemporaries also criticise straight ‘singles’ bars’ says much about the anonymous nature of social intercourse in big cities and the corresponding anonymity of institutions set up to deal with it. For gay men the situation is more acute because, as mentioned, the social sites available to them are almost entirely limited to the scene. In earlier times, gay men and women who were not married by their thirties would have been ‘on the shelf’ and referred to as ‘dedicated bachelors’ or ‘old maids’. Writing about family life in the post-war United States, Elaine Tyler May argues that unmarried people were seen as deviant: ‘Single women and men faced constant suspicion that there was something abnormal or dangerous about them’.28

A relatively small group of four men from the young cohort complained about the poverty of social relations on the scene.29 Of special interest are the stories of two men, Jason (aged 35) and Mark (aged 25), who were frustrated because they expected to find a community on the scene. Jason is a working-class man in his mid-thirties. After a number of different jobs, he is now studying at university. He dislikes gay venues because the people are insincere:

Gay venues are full of pretension. They are full of people who are trying to be someone they are not, and when they do that they isolate themselves from everyone else. I don’t think that there is an openness among gay men. Occasionally you find it. It is not a tightly knit community like what you would find in the heterosexual community. The bars and the clubs can be cold places. Even though the bar is full of people, you can feel isolated.


29 Jason (35), Mick (33), Luke (32) and Mark (25).
For men like Jason, the scene is all they know of the gay world. It is the focal point of their engagement with gay culture and represents for them a community of sorts. Middle-class men may have greater agency in this regard. They are more likely to be in a position to dip in and out of the scene and treat their engagement with it as a ‘special occasion’ or ‘time out’ from their working life or social life or from their involvement in the more serious activities of the gay community. This point is underlined by Michael Pollak: ‘Although the collective nature of homosexual life tends to blunt social distinctions, class origins and membership affect the ease with which an individual succeeds in integrating with the milieu’.31

Mark is a young middle-class man. He was educated at a private school and is a university graduate. Ten years younger than Jason, he also expected to find a community on the scene. And, in a sense, this is understandable because, for young men who like dancing, drinking and looking for sex, the scene is their community. Large numbers of gay men socialise there on weekends, just as do young heterosexuals in straight or ‘mixed’ clubs and bars.32 Mark was disappointed, however, that his generation was not more involved in making the scene their own.

The gay scene was more progressive when I came out but now it is more backward looking. It focuses more on ‘baby boomer’ music when the ‘baby boomers’ were in their twenties, like Abba, for example, which is irrelevant to me and is not directed to people like me. People who come out now are expected to listen to old music and do it the way people used to do it. And because the rights have been won, they are not as keen to take control and create a community that they are involved in and will participate in.

Behind his disappointment is a desire for generation change, for not only was the music on the scene out of date and irrelevant to Mark, but so also was the style of homosexuality it represented.

Another reason men like Jason and Mark may expect to find a community on the scene is that gay pubs and bars have a long history as meeting places. In the decades before gay liberation, they were the only community institution for gay men and, as Dennis Altman noted, they were often the first place where they met like-minded people, and were ‘able to express themselves in ways denied in other areas of their lives’. As well, gay bars and clubs provided ‘a sense of identity and even community that only a


32 Earlier in the chapter, market segmentation was discussed in relation to the development of the gay scene since the 1970s. The most obvious segmentation in the night club scene as a whole is between gay and straight bars and clubs. There are ‘mixed’ bars and clubs which, in Melbourne, tend to be located in the CBD and inner city suburbs, and attract a young, inner urban crowd. They are generally safe places for middle-class gay men to socialise with their straight friends.
relatively small number of homosexuals find in alternative institutions’. However, as gay community organisations proliferated, and the scene expanded, the gay bar gradually lost the central community function it once held for gay men. And yet, even though a stronger and more visible gay community exists today, with opportunities for involvement at many levels, and homosexuality is more integrated into mainstream society, some men still look on the gay scene as their community or look to the scene to provide them with a community—and these are generally young men and working-class men.

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The remaining criticisms of men from the young cohort concern the regulation body image of the scene and its sexualised nature. Relatively small numbers of men raise these matters. Five referred to body image and two complained about the scene’s sexualised nature. These are not large numbers but the views are significant because of the conviction with which they were expressed and because the men expected a better social environment.

In the young cohort men who are physically, socially, or financially powerful still feel inadequate on the scene because they do not measure up to its regulation image. They are represented here by two interviewees in their twenties and two in their late thirties. Their experiences and expectations of the scene, though varied, reflect a shared understanding of the scene’s requirements and where as individuals they fall short of them. The two men in their twenties are university educated and live in different capital cities. Although the scenes they frequent are sophisticated and specialised, their stories reveal dissatisfaction with the social environment. At 24, Myles is at an age when he can dance all night and still enjoy the next day. His youth does not protect him, however, from being inhibited in a club that attracts the body beautiful: ‘It is a fabulous club but it is intimidating socially. You walk in and a wave of insecurity sweeps over you. You think, “What am I doing here when there are men like that running around?”’ Angus (aged 23) is also aware of the dominant narrative of youth and beauty but doubts people his age are responsible for perpetuating it: ‘It’s sad that men in their thirties call themselves “gay boys”. There is constant representation in gay media of young men. And the images are not only of young normal men but also young perfect men’.

The two men in their late thirties come from opposite ends of the socio-economic spectrum. One earns a medium to high income and has a high-status occupation, while the other has spent most of the last decade in casual jobs in various towns and cities. The latter is Andy. He works in the hospitality sector

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33 Altman *Homosexualization*, p. 21. Gilbert Herdt also argues that the gay bar was the ‘pivotal social context’ for gay men in the camp period. See Herdt, Gilbert 1992 “Coming out” as a rite of passage: a Chicago study’ in Gilbert Herdt (Ed.) *Gay Culture in America: essays from the field*, Boston: Beacon Press, p. 32.

34 Neville (37), Andy (37), Myles (24) and Angus (23).
and has a strong, solid build. But he has to choose where he goes because, although relatively young, he
does not have ‘the look’ and has been refused entry at gay clubs: ‘I have a beard. They take one look at
me and, going on past experience, I guess they are edgy about people with shaved heads and beards’.
Neville is also in his late thirties. Both he and his partner have experience of the scene in Sydney, which
Neville described in the following manner:

If you talk about a fairly narrow group of people attached to the gay community, it is a *Peter Pan*
culture. It is also non-reflexive. It is not just age; it is also race. The way Anglo gay men constrain and diminish
Asian men and black men is racist. It is also partly to do with consumption. Sexuality is what you consume
so anything that deviates from a narrow model of gym-bunny is less desirable.

His observation that gay men as a group are racist—‘Anglo gay men constrain and diminish Asian and
black men’—is borne out by Australian autobiography and research. Tony Ayres is a Chinese Australian,
film-maker and writer. His family migrated to Australia from Hong Kong in 1964. At gay clubs in
Australia, he has experienced ‘a wearing, subtle, almost imperceptible feeling of exclusion … It is the
demoralising feeling that I am, in the eyes of the majority of the gay male population, as undesirable as a
woman’.35 He elaborates the layers and subtlety of the racism at work in the character of the so-called
‘rice-queen’:

Caucasian men primarily attracted to Asians are called “rice queens.” Because of the lowly status of the
Asian within the gay community, the term “rice queen” is a term of disparagement. The implication is that
“rice queens” are not desirable enough to cut the mustard in the mainstream scene so they have to resort to
having sex with Asians. Within the race-power dynamics of the gay scene, these Caucasian men become
second class by default.36

Almost 30 years ago, Raymond Berger observed that the gay scene in the United States was
‘overwhelmingly dominated by white males’. He was uncertain if the reason was ‘the inhospitality [sic]
… [or] racism … of the established gay community, or … a lack of interest on the part of women and
minorities’.37 More recently, Australian research found that men from South-east Asian backgrounds
reported being treated as other at gay venues in Melbourne.38 There is no reason to expect that the
treatment of non-Caucasian men is any different in other Australian capital cities.

35 Ayres ‘China Doll’, pp. 89–90.
36 Ayres ‘China Doll’, p. 95.
37 In 1978 Berger interviewed 112 older homosexual men. See Berger Gay and gray, pp. 26–7 & 156.
38 The researchers interviewed eight men (aged 19–27) who were of Chinese ancestry and had arrived in Australian
as migrants from various South-east Asian countries. See Ridge, Hee & Minichiello “Asian” men on the scene’, pp.
46–7.
All these men are conscious of the worship of young men’s bodies on the scene and the regulation image. Their discomfort with the valorisation of young men is not a form of self-hatred. Rather, it is recognition of the arbitrariness of the scene’s hierarchy, which rewards white men with beautiful young bodies—of the ‘gym bunny’ variety to which Neville referred—and disregards and diminishes others.

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A persistent stereotype of gay men, often used to discredit their way of life, is that they are only interested in sex. While it is mischievous to see all gay men as obsessed with sex, it is equally a mistake to discount their interest in it because, as Kenneth Plummer explains, ‘the cornerstone of homosexual experience … has to be—by definition—an emotio-erotic relationship with one’s own sex’. This ‘emotio-erotic’ relationship is nowhere more in evidence than on the scene, where sexual exchange dominates gay men’s social relations. Michael Pollak used the metaphor of the market to describe its primacy: ‘Of all the different types of masculine sexual behaviour, homosexuality is undoubtedly the one whose functioning is most strongly suggestive of a market, in which in the last analysis one orgasm is bartered for another’.

The scene, then, comprises not only bars and pubs but also sex venues, where patrons may have sex in public without fear of assault or arrest. Many of the men interviewed for this thesis were aware of the sexualised nature of the scene—some referred to it as a ‘meat market’, others referred to practices such as ‘cruising’ and ‘picking up’—and yet only two men, both from the young cohort, identified it as a reason for the impoverished social relations on the scene. The men are Vincent (aged 30) and Angus (aged 23). Both men live in a major capital city, are university educated and are employed in professional occupations.

Vincent has been in a relationship but is single now. He believes that social interaction is severely limited at gay venues because they operate as sexual markets. He would like to go out to gay venues with women he knows but does not do so because of previous experiences:

Female friends and lesbians say that at dance parties people treat them like shit and they believe it is because the men see them as not “fuck-able”. It is the same invisibility old gay men complain about. That is why our obsession with sex rather than relationship or intimacy is sad. We miss out on a lot of things because of it.

39 Bell & Weinberg *Homosexualities*, p. 73.

40 Plummer ‘Going gay’, p. 106.

41 Pollak ‘Male homosexuality’, p. 44.
Later in the interview, Vincent said gay men treated one another as sex objects because they confuse sexual freedom—the freedom to express their sexuality—with promiscuity. For Vincent, promiscuity prevents gay men from learning how to be intimate with each other.

In his early twenties, Angus believes that men his age and younger are belittled by what is expected of them on the scene. Young gay men are seduced or forced into a role allotted to them, which is to be ‘young and pretty’—code for sexually desirable.

I get annoyed when I see young guys fitting the role of what is expected of them and not questioning it. They are at the same club every week, off their faces [on drugs] on the podium and they go home with a different guy every week. That annoys me. It seems to me they are filling a role without even thinking about it or what it is doing to them. But then they might be having fun too.

Angus uses the argument of an earlier generation of feminists. If he could, it seems he would exhort his contemporaries not to see themselves or allow themselves to be seen as sex objects by older, more powerful men. Angus is angry his peers seem blind to the fact that the role they are given is demeaning. Just as feminists of his mother’s generation demanded that women be proud and aware of who they were, Angus wants gay men his age to show more pride in themselves and resist the role of pretty, young sex object. Both he and Vincent are critical of the scene because it is sexualised and hence inimical to the genuine social intercourse they seek.

The views of these two men do not necessarily reflect widespread criticism in the young cohort, or the sample of interviewees in general, about the sexualisation of the scene. That being said, they are remarkable because they are the personal judgement of young men, who are the target market of the businessmen who run the scene. They dislike the social environment they found there because it is impoverished and prevents social intercourse or the development of genuine social relations.

* By comparison with the young cohort, the men from the old cohort and the middle cohort had fewer criticisms of the scene, most likely because it is less important to them. Their criticisms are limited to the two principal ones to which all interviewees referred, viz.: the impoverished social environment and physical environment of the scene.

One man from the old cohort and two men from the middle cohort represent the views of the interviewees who objected to the social environment of the scene.42 Oscar is 65 and was married for more

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42 Vernon (75), Chester (71), Oscar (65), Kenneth (65), Barry (62), Graham (52), Trevor (49), Nigel (49), Simon (46), James (45).
than 20 years. He works part-time for his former employer. He lives with his partner and they have been
 together for 18 years. People would call Oscar a man’s man. He is fit and athletic and commands respect
 when he enters a room. But he dislikes some gay bars:

I feel more comfortable in bars that have a wider cross-section of age, where there are more men over 35
 than under 35. As people get older they seem to be more at ease talking to people like me who are older.
 There are a number of bars where I feel ill at ease. I find bars full of young gay men very synthetic, and I
 never feel that comfortable in them. And they’re probably the only places where I have sometimes felt old.

Oscar is not being precious when he says that he feels excluded in a gay bar. He is used to commanding
 the respect of other men, including the young: ‘I am used to mixing with a lot of young people, at work.
 It’s just that I don’t feel comfortable in “Twinky” bars or bars where young and beautiful men between
 20 and 30 parade their bodies’. If nothing else, a gay bar is an entirely masculine environment. It is
 supremely male. Apart from the ethos and spirit that pervades all-male sporting clubs, no other space is
 more exclusively masculine than a gay bar, and yet in this quintessentially masculine space a man like
 Oscar feels shunned.44

The two men from the middle cohort are in their forties and both object to the unvarying nature of
 the scene’s social practices. Trevor is 49 and has no patience with the artificiality of the scene. In
 particular, he dislikes its predictability:

It’s the same faces all the time. It’s the same inane conversation. The crap they go on about: “How big’s
 your dick?” “Do you want to go to bed?” I like having sex but I am past the silly games they play. Gay
 guys are so stupid that they have made it part of their life. It’s just not real. They live in this fantasy world
 where there is a 20-inch dick just around the corner, and it’s not going to happen.

James dislikes the scene because he has found the people superficial. James grew up in the
 country, is 45 and lives in a capital city. He lived overseas in his twenties where the gay scene was less
 pressured than in Australia. He is critical of the conformity of the gay men on the scene:

When I am in the mood, I go out with a friend to these places but I find them boring. All the people have
 got their shirts off dancing. In the 1980s if you were gay, you were outside and that was the exciting thing
 about it, but now it is extremely conforming in terms of looks, behaviour and expectations. It is the
 Americanisation of the gay thing.

43 A Twinky is a pretty and possibly slightly effeminate young gay man.

44 For discussion of masculine ‘collectivities’ such as sporting clubs and the armed forces, see Henning Bech 1997
 44–55.
For James gay was once a symbol of rebelliousness, a sign of a person’s outsider status and non-conformist values. His subsequent disenchantment now seems to spring from what he regards as the ordinariness and unquestioning conventionalism of much of gay men’s behaviour, and of what it now means to be gay.

Eight interviewees criticised the scene for its crowded, noisy and smoky environment, and are represented here by one man from the old cohort and two men from the middle cohort. The man from the old cohort, who was born just after World War I, said that he never felt at ease in a pub because of his parents. Reginald is 79 and lives with his partner. His upbringing in a working-class suburb shaped his views of what is appropriate behaviour for a man of his class.

I have never, ever cared much for the commercial gay venues. I do not feel happy in them at all. I do not feel happy in an ordinary pub. I think it goes back to my childhood. My parents were not pub goers. Both of them used to say, “If you want to drink, you can bring your friends home”. I suppose that is why I feel very out of place in a hotel or a pub.

Reginald’s prejudice against pubs is understandable. His parents saw the pub as an unacceptable social venue for respectable working people like themselves, which, until quite recently, was also the case for many middle-class men.

The two men from the middle cohort are both in relationships and both work in the education sector. Apart from these similarities, their life histories are quite different. The first man, Michael, is in his early fifties and is one of two men from this sample of interviewees who was involved in the gay liberation movement in the 1970s. He is also a PLWHA carer and has been in a relationship with the same man for 28 years. The second man, Scott, is in his mid-forties, has a teenage daughter and was once married. He is in a relationship of 8 years’ duration and prefers not to define himself by his sexuality.

Michael rarely goes on the scene but, as the following extract shows, while he is drawn to it because of its busyness, its physical conditions make it impossible for him to relate meaningfully to others there:

I go to the pubs occasionally but I don’t feel at ease in them any more. I find the music really boring and it is now too loud for me. But I like to be there because I feel it is where it’s happening, and it is fun, sexy. When I have been to venues, I have only stayed an hour and then I have thought, “It’s too noisy. I have had enough. I’ve seen it all”. And because I am not picking up anyone, because I am going to watch and

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45 Reginald (79), Geoffrey (69), John (65), Michael (52), Kevin (52), Glen (49), Alan (47), Scott (45).

maybe dance and have a drink, after a while it palls. I like to talk to people but I don’t like shouting clichés into some one’s ear for two hours.

For much the same reason, Scott simply does not go on the scene: ‘I do not think that I would feel uneasy in any venue, other than being uneasy because of the dreadful music and the smoke and too many pissed people. I am not into it, not interested’.

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Conclusion.

Gay men participate in the scene when they want to socialise with friends or when they are looking for a sexual partner or a man with whom to have a relationship. Some men ‘dip into’ the scene immediately on coming out or as part of their initiation and then never return. Others spend their late teenage years or early twenties on the scene and leave once they find a partner or when they realise that it is not the place to find one. There are others again who come out of the closet, go on to the scene, and spend most of their twenties and thirties drinking, having sex and taking drugs. For them it approaches something like a community, but it will not and cannot provide them with the lasting *communitas* they may be looking for, because, in the end, it is a market place.

The scene is not designed as a space or set of spaces for gay men to entertain their siblings or parents, their heterosexual or lesbian friends. Its primary participants are men with fit youthful bodies, and its primary purpose is as a sexual marketplace. To participate on the scene a man needs dedication, discipline, energy and a high disposable income. He also needs to be young or youthful, for its social practices are geared to the young and age determines the level of a gay man’s engagement with it. It was not surprising, therefore, that more than one third of the men interviewed for this thesis reported that they never went on the scene, and that at least half of these were from the old cohort.

In fact, interviewees of all ages were divided over the worth and value of the scene, and those who most frequently engage with the scene, the men from the young cohort, expressed the strongest views. On the whole, the men with positive views of the scene were either entirely satisfied with its environment, and they were relatively few in number, or restricted their participation to occasions when they were with friends or were able to socialise in a space where they could ‘be themselves’. This applied to all venues, including sex venues. Negative views about the scene related to interviewees’ experience of discomfort at gay bars, clubs or pubs: many felt marginalised when they were on the scene or, at best, ill at ease. A significant minority of the sample (one fifth of interviewees) complained about the noise and crowds at commercial venues, which restricted genuine social intercourse. As well, a small but articulate group of men from the young cohort criticised the scene for its sexualised nature and the emphasis on body image.
The commonly expressed complaints about the impoverished social and physical conditions seem to be causally connected—that is, social relations on the scene are weak and poorly developed because its physical environment, designed to facilitate sexual exchange, restricts real social interaction between gay men. This is significant because, unlike heterosexuals, gay men cannot assume that they may congregate and socialise where they please. In the main, if they wish to socialise with other gay men, they must do so on the scene, and, for the reasons outlined in this chapter, the fact that most gay socialising takes place in bars, clubs or pubs affects how they relate to and regard each other.
Chapter Six. Gay community life.

‘Some people I know will only go to a gay plumber or a gay dentist.’ Jeremy, 33.

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Introduction.

Whether out of a sense of politeness, linguistic shorthand, or ‘political correctness’, many of the men interviewed for this thesis used the word ‘community’ to describe all the social institutions of the gay milieu, from those with very clear commercial origins and functions, such as bars and sex venues, to those staffed by volunteers or with a strong sense of public service and awareness, such as HIV-AIDS telephone help-lines and other counselling or support services. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the gay community is understood in this thesis as a loose collection of organisations with a sense of public service and social awareness.¹

The term, ‘community’, was also used by scholars writing before gay liberation to describe the gay world then, when it mainly comprised bars and clubs, and these provided a community function for gay men.² And, as discussed in the previous chapter, there are still men today, mainly from the young cohort, who regard the scene as their community. In the early 1980s, Dennis Altman wrote in the North American context that a gay community was much more than the businesses that comprise the scene. He listed the social and cultural institutions as ‘political and social clubs, publications and bookstores, church groups, community centers, radio collectives, theater groups … that represent … shared values and a willingness to assert one’s homosexuality as an important part of one’s whole life’.³ This description takes in most of the institutions and organisations that are features of the contemporary gay community in Australia.

Often staffed by volunteers, gay community organisations focus on providing assistance to people coming out and in developing relationships, fighting homophobia, lobbying for improved political and social rights, and the provision of housing and home care for people living with HIV-AIDS (PLWHA). There are telephone counselling services in most capital cities in Australia and many with facilities for

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¹ Interviewees were asked to describe their experience of or involvement in the gay community. See Appendix 1: Interview Schedule, question 24.


³ Dennis Altman 1982 The Homosexualization of America, the Americanization of the Homosexual, New York: St Martin’s Press, p. 8.
reaching people who live in the country. The National Gay and Lesbian Archives in Melbourne is also an institution with a strong and clear community purpose and representation.

One other example of an important community organisation, mentioned by a handful of interviewees, was the gay and lesbian community press and radio stations. These media have a vital function in the creation and maintenance of community identity, even if they are mostly run for profit. David Carr argues that a community forms where there is a narrative account ‘of a we which persists through its experiences and actions’.⁴ Such an account may be spread via the gay and lesbian media as well as through the personal and public narratives that gay men tell about themselves in written works such as their plays, poems, novels and this thesis. As Carr puts it, the idea of community ‘exists when it gets articulated or formulated—perhaps by only one or a few of the group’s members—by reference to the we and is accepted or subscribed to by others’.⁵ Kenneth Plummer too believes that in order for a community to flourish, there must be stories of the community, told by its members, that ‘weave together their history, their identity’.⁶ Again, the gay and lesbian media have been instrumental in achieving this, as has the increased social acceptance of gay men and lesbians, which has assisted in the wider dissemination of these stories.

The interviewees’ accounts of their experience of or involvement in the gay community revealed two prominent attitudes. First, as the discussion in Part One shows, a large majority of men gave positive accounts of their experience of the gay community. A significant minority, comprising more than a fifth of interviewees, is, however, critical of the community. These interviewees either do not agree with or cannot conform to dominant gay narratives; some question the existence of a gay community. Their views are examined in Part Two.

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Part One. Positive experiences of community.

The overwhelming majority of men interviewed for this thesis told encouraging stories of their experience and involvement in the gay community and community activities. In their accounts, four principal sites of community emerge. First, a group numbering 22 men said that involvement in the gay community

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⁵ Carr ‘Narrative and the real world’, p. 22.

consisted of the work they did with HIV-AIDS support groups and with telephone and other counselling services.\(^7\) Second, an equally large group of 22 men said that they expressed their gay community involvement through the local social group.\(^8\) Third, a slightly smaller group of 19 interviewees said they were involved in the gay community when they participated in gay festivals, street parades and the scene.\(^9\) Finally, a relatively small group of 8 men said their experience of gay community was through social activism and political lobbying.\(^10\)

* More than a quarter of interviewees said that their community involvement was represented in the voluntary work that they did with HIV-AIDS support groups or with telephone and other counselling services. More of this group came from the middle cohort, that is, the ‘baby-boomers’, than from either the old cohort or the young cohort, but there was not a marked preponderance. Men from all cohorts saw work with HIV-AIDS support groups as an important community involvement or experience. That this is so underlines the point made in the chapter on the coming-out stories of the young cohort: that gay men’s response to HIV-AIDS was remarkable because they responded as a community, and this impulse has not significantly slowed.

For men in the old cohort, the level of their involvement with HIV-AIDS support groups, telephone and other counselling services ranged from membership of umbrella organisations, such as the AIDS Council of New South Wales (ACON) or the Victorian AIDS Council (VAC), to personal work in running the service. One example was Geoffrey, aged 69, who, with his partner, became involved in supporting PLWHA through their local gay social group, the members of which felt honour-bound to help out in whatever way they could: ‘We were very involved with the local gay group because that’s when we started doing work when AIDS hit. We collected funds and did a lot of work to help those people [i.e., PLWHA]’. Men like Ronald (aged 68) and Douglas (aged 63), on the other hand, contribute financial support for HIV-AIDS organisations. Says Ronald: ‘I have been a member and on the board of the AIDS council. I occasionally go to an annual meeting. But I must admit my involvement has not been

\(^7\) The numbers of interviewees involved in HIV-AIDS support groups and other counselling services were fairly evenly spread across the age cohorts, with seven men from the old cohort, nine men from the middle cohort, and six from the young cohort.

\(^8\) The numbers of interviewees who expressed community involvement through their local social group were also fairly evenly spread across the age cohorts, with six men from the old cohort, seven men from the middle cohort, and nine from the young cohort.

\(^9\) There was a preponderance of men from the young cohort in this category; one was drawn from the old cohort, five were from the middle cohort, and twelve from the young cohort.

\(^10\) Two men were from the old cohort, four came from the middle cohort, and one from the young cohort.
enormous’. Douglas is less self-deprecating. He says of his contribution: ‘I have been subscribing to ALSO and to the Peter Knight centre since their inception’.11

Two older men who have been personally involved at ‘grass roots’ level are Leslie, aged 74, and Lindsay, aged 62. Both have spent ten or more years with counselling services. Together with a group of men in their locality, Leslie and his partner operate a telephone service for gay people. It provides men of all ages with information about coming out, social groups and the scene.

We operate a gay telephone counselling service from homes rather than an office. People ring and they hear a five-minute message. If they want to talk to anyone in confidence or clarify anything they heard on the message, which is packed with information, there are numbers they can ring. We have been doing that for fifteen years.

Nine men in the middle cohort said that they manifested their community involvement through work in HIV-AIDS support or with telephone or other counselling. They are represented by the accounts of two men in their fifties: Samuel, aged 56, and Graham, aged 52. Samuel found the work he has done with people living with HIV-AIDS to be life-changing.

Being an HIV-AIDS carer is an important part of my life. I had no intention of getting involved with it and it was an impulsive decision when I started. I became very involved and was on committees and got involved with the PLWHA centre. I used to cook lunches for them. I guess it has made me come to terms with dying. I never cease to be impressed with the people with HIV-AIDS and the way they handle the prospect of death. I have found people who I have been with when they died very courageous. It has been something that they have given me without knowing.

Samuel works part time in paid employment and devotes a great deal of the rest of his time to volunteer work with PLWHA. As a member of his local support group and as a carer, he has experienced all aspects of this volunteer-based organisation, from being the cook to palliative care for the dying.

Graham worked as a carer for PLWHA for two years in the 1980s. His partner, Charlie, is still looking after the man he was assigned to in the early 1980s, and has been with him for 12 years. Graham speaks of the work that he did as a volunteer with the VAC:

In the traumatic early days the client load was almost unmanageable. I was supported by marvellous, almost visionary people. It was dynamic but fraught with tragedy. The people who led things died. It was

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11 ALSO is the acronym for the Alternative Life-style Organisation that was established in the early 1980s in Melbourne. It is most well known for the warehouse parties that it hosted and that were a prominent feature of the gay scene in the late 1980s and 1990s. Funds raised from the parties were supposed to help support the fight against HIV-AIDS. It is now known as the ALSO Foundation and is one of many gay lobby groups. The Peter Knight Centre is a community centre in Melbourne that supports PLWHA.
a hard time and the stigma was huge. It is a tragedy that AIDS is still an unpopular cause. It has gone back into the shadows again, even though the community has educated people and kept them informed.

Graham’s account recalls early days when gay people struggled to deal with an enormous crisis, when leaders died, and the work that he and others did made meaning of community.

The experiences of the men in the young cohort are as intense, as personal and as varied as those of the men in the two other cohorts. Six men in the young cohort demonstrate their community involvement through work they do in HIV-AIDS support or with telephone or other counselling, and they are represented here by three men in their thirties. One has a highly paid job in the finance sector and the other two have low-paid casual work. Jeremy is 36, single and ambitious. He describes how he and his friends support the gay community:

I have done work for the AIDS trust and sold little red ribbons. At the same time I have done work for other community groups. Looking back on my life now I am more likely to work for the AIDS trust than for anything else. It comes back to what my friends are doing and we tend to do it all together. Last year for the parade, two of us took the bucket around and collected donations for people with AIDS.

He speaks of this contribution without elaboration. He and his friends see community support in terms of charity and the sort of charity work that is acceptable in the circles in which they and people like them mix. In a sense, for gay men like Jeremy, it is just something that one does. Jason (35) describes his work in HIV-AIDS support in the following terms: ‘My involvement included getting involved with friends who were dying; for example, wiping their arses, changing their beds, feeding them, because their families didn’t want to be involved, didn’t want to touch them’. By contrast with Jeremy’s more removed experience, Jason’s is visceral and, because he is a person living with AIDS, it has its roots in the core of his social and sexual being. Finally, a man in the young cohort uses the word charity to describe what he observed and what he could see himself doing as well: ‘I have seen groups doing a really good job in charity work, and they seem to have a fun time doing it’, said Andy, who is 37. ‘It wouldn’t bother me doing something like that.’

The significance of these stories lies in the range of meaning the men derive from their voluntary work and their level of involvement in it. Age and class do not always explain meaning or involvement. There are middle-class men like Ronald, Douglas and Jeremy, for instance, whose contribution to HIV-AIDS is slightly removed from the physical presence of PLWHA and consists mainly of donating money or collecting it. Far greater is the number of other men who devote considerable time and energy to caring for PLWHA, and these are drawn from all classes. As mentioned in an earlier chapter on the coming-out stories of the young cohort, one of the more remarkable effects of the HIV-AIDS epidemic was the
willingness and ability of gay men in Western countries to respond to it communally. It was, according to R.W. Connell, ‘[t]he most impressive men’s health initiative in any field in recent decades’.12

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In country towns and regions, local social groups play an important role for gay men, who would otherwise be socially and culturally isolated. A group of men, equivalent in number to the previous group, said that they showed their involvement in the gay community through the local social group. Typically these are men from smaller capital cities or the country. All age groups were fairly evenly represented among those who defined gay community in this way. In The Hidden Injuries of Class, Richard Sennett asks how people protect themselves when they feel vulnerable in relation to those who are ‘respectable’: ‘There is the old way to do this, which is to withdraw into an enclave’.13 In the main, this is what people who belong to minorities have done and continue to do in order to preserve their identities and protect themselves. Gay community can be seen in this light, particularly in small cities and country towns.

In the old cohort, six men, all in their sixties, had positive experiences of the gay community. Among those are Leonard and Barry. Their recollections speak of the local group’s importance as a focus of social activity more than anything else. Leonard recalls that he and his friends ran a club ‘that held picnics and balls, which does not exist now’. Barry and his partner, Eric, belonged to a similar gay group in another city that held balls, which were and in some places still are a feature of organised gay life. He explains why they are less involved now than they used to be:

When I was younger and until the last few years I was always on our local committee. We used to have balls and lots of entertainment. We don’t go to them now. That is another thing about the ageing process: you can’t be bothered and you can’t stand the noise. The entertainment still goes on but it’s a different style. Like everyone else, we don’t like changes and we know what it used to be like. It’s not as good as it used to be. People are different. It doesn’t seem to be as popular now. They don’t seem to get the same number of people that we used to get when we did it. I don’t know what the reason is. There are so many other things to do now, I guess.

Barry understands the changes he has witnessed in recent years as part of a natural hand-over of responsibility from one generation to another but he also hints at a reluctance to be pushed aside and marginalised, which is expressed in his wistful remembrance of how much better things used to be when they were younger. Given his age, the balls that he and his friends organised are likely to be the same


balls that George Chauncey and Garry Wotherspoon argued were an important part of the sub-culture before gay liberation discussed in the earlier chapter on coming out in the old cohort.

The men in the middle cohort emphasised the role that the local group plays as an alternative to or substitute for the scene. Thomas, who is 52, sees the role his local social group plays as a venue where gay men can meet without feeling the need to perform. He refers also to his own experience of feeling isolated on the scene: ‘Our group is important because it helps to establish the normal face of being gay and to provide opportunities for normal contact between ordinary gay men. I have been to Sleaze and Mardi Gras parties and sometimes I have found them isolating, disappointing events’. Thomas lives in the country with his partner of 20 years.

Kevin (aged 52) also has reservations about the scene: ‘The social life is the bars and the pubs but it is not satisfying. It lacks substance’. He used to work in the finance sector and is now looking for a new career. He is single and lives in an inner-city suburb. In place of bars and clubs, he has found an alternative in a local group that holds monthly drinks for gay men who work in the central business district.

When I started going to social events for working gay men five years ago, there were forty people in a hall. The idea is that people go there for a drink after work. Now they get crowds of three hundred once a month. You often see faces that you don’t see in the clubs or pubs. It is a great social outlet. It is not as intimidating as the clubs. There is a greater sense of equality because they are all business people, which makes it easier to mix together.

Kevin’s account of the advantages of this social group suggests that gay men with conventional working lives might feel out of place on the scene, perhaps even at a disadvantage, and that, when an opportunity is provided for them to meet others like themselves and dressed presumably in suits and ties, there is, in Kevin’s words, ‘a greater sense of equality’. This is, of course, a limited notion of equality, one that exists when people are among their own kind, in class terms.

Almost one third of the young cohort said that their involvement with the gay community consists in the activities of their local social group.14 Their stories are represented here by the accounts of three men, two of whom are in their thirties and one who is in his twenties. The first man is Drew (aged 39), who is a committee member of his local social group. Outgoing by nature, he has invited straight friends and acquaintances to the group’s social functions, to ‘make more people aware of it and show them that we are like a sporting group or any other type of group’. He is serious about his responsibilities and the purpose of the group:

14 Drew (39), Robert (38), Travis (38), Jason (35), Tony (33), Mick (33), Brian (30), Harry (28), and Adam (24).
We try to raise funds. I do not think people realise the extra work the committee does in counselling and AIDS support. Some think that we are just a social group so we can have rave parties. That is not what it is about.

Also a committee member of his local gay group, Mick (aged 33) is working to develop stronger bonds between lesbians and gay men. He admitted, however, that there were difficulties, similar to those between generations: ‘Like the older guys and the younger guys, they ostracise one another. They like their tea parties alone but, as a community, we have to stick together because united we stand, divided we fall’.

Adam is the third man from the young cohort who regarded his local social group as his gay community. He is 24, grew up in the city and recently moved to the country. The gay and lesbian community that he found in the country was not perfect.

I had a dream when I was growing up of a gay community that was utopia. It was a group of people that would hold on to me and really care, not so much in the cotton wool sense but in the sense that if all else failed a community would be there for me. But like all other communities that has not been the case. If we want to have a community, we have to accept it warts and all and accept that we are a diverse set of people. What we have in common is this one thing that no one can put a finger on. If we stick together all our lives will be better. I learned here that it was possible, which I never found in the city. There is a sense that we are all gay and lesbian people and that is what matters. It is almost like a nationhood experience.

In this short but important extract, a young man explains how he reconciled utopian expectations with the reality of the gay community that he discovered in the country. He also demonstrates a more complex understanding of community as embracing difference and sometimes conflict. The group of people he found was less supportive than he had dreamed they would be, and more diverse. He has also learned that there is strength in unity, an experience he was not afforded when he lived in the city. As well, Adam confirms Benedict Anderson’s perception of community and nation as largely imagined.15

The common experience these stories suggest is that in small cities and country towns the local group is the hub of gay men’s social activities, and this has not changed significantly over time. Even though they may criticise the style of present-day balls, the men from the old cohort cited here are not marginalised by contemporary gay social practices in their milieu, for the balls they organised were the precursors of those today. As well, there is a sense that the men from all three cohorts, as represented by these accounts, have greater agency in shaping their social relations, which is in contrast to men in large

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cities, who, according to the discussion in the chapter on the gay scene, have to rely mostly on the scene for social contact with other gay men and who seem powerless to influence its social practices.

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A third group of men with positive stories to tell of the gay community said that they experienced it when they went on the scene or to street parades or festivals. As discussed in the previous chapter, it was mainly men from the young cohort who cited scene activity as their expression of gay community. Very few men from the middle and old cohorts said the scene constituted their experience of or involvement in the gay community. Other festive occasions and locales where interviewees experienced the gay community included dinner parties with friends, sporting groups and warehouse (or dance) parties.16

There are gay and lesbian festivals and parades in most capital cities in Australia as well as in provincial cities such as Newcastle in New South Wales and towns such as Daylesford in Victoria. The leading gay and lesbian festival is the Sydney Mardi Gras.17 Festivals and parades have a crucial role to play in the construction and maintenance of gay men’s ‘social memory’, which Kenneth Plummer describes as:

the common stories talked about and heard within particular groups that often come to have a life of their own … [and] help in the construction of this “memory” … The gay and women’s movements, for instance, came to develop their own folklore of stories which get transmitted in part from generation to generation, complete with ritualistic days and marches … which help to provide a sense of shared history.18

Nine men from the three age cohorts nominated participation in festivals and parades as representing their experience of the gay community. Two men, one from each of the young and middle cohorts expressed strong, positive sentiments that were common to those who said they experienced a sense of community when they went to gay festivals or street parades. Michael (aged 52) was ambivalent about the scene but enjoyed the Midsumma festival because of what it allows him to express:

I really like Midsumma and I like to go to some of the events. I usually go to the street party and when I am there I feel accepted and have a wonderful time. I love the carnival because I feel free to be myself when I

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16 The rapid growth and success of the dance (warehouse) party phenomenon in the 1980s can be explained as both a defiant and an affirming statement by gay men en masse in face of the HIV-AIDS epidemic. See Lynette A. Lewis & Michael W. Ross 1995 A Select Body: the gay dance party subculture and the HIV/AIDS pandemic, London: Cassell, ch. 7.


18 Plummer Sexual Stories, p. 41.
am with really big groups of homosexuals. As a rule, my partner and I don’t hold hands in public but we do at the carnival because it’s a totally safe environment.

Joseph is a 35-year-old man who works in the health sector. Like Michael, he enjoyed Midsumma’s carnival day for what it allowed him to do and be, in his case to have a picnic in public with his children: ‘I have been every year and I enjoy it. It is a great event that I can take my kids to as well. It is a positive event for everybody’.

Held in a public park during daytime, Midsumma carnival provides a space for all sorts of gay people and their families to have a picnic lunch and to take part in carnival activities. There are tents for community organisations and political parties wishing to court the gay vote, there are dog competitions, carnival rides, food stalls, and the atmosphere is relaxed and inclusive. Later in his interview, Joseph said that the carnival is unusual because it does not involve cruising and sex, which normally occur when a large group of gay men congregate.

While it is undoubtedly true, as Plummer observes, that annual festivals and marches continue to build the gay community’s social memory, the accounts of these two interviewees suggest that they are also valuable because they provide a social space where the men may ‘be themselves’. For Michael, the festival allows him to ‘be himself’ with his partner free of the threat of homophobia, whereas Joseph enjoys the freedom of being among large numbers of gay men in an environment that is not sexualised.

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Articulate and well-organised lobby groups exist—mainly in the capital cities—with a mixture of political aims, including gay migration (which assists couples to establish their bona fides where one is an Australian citizen and the other is seeking residency status), gay law reform and gay marriage. A small group of eight men said that their involvement in the gay community was through social activism and political lobbying, and their views are represented here by the accounts of five men. There are two interviewees from each of the old and middle cohorts and one interviewee from the young cohort.

19 Melbourne’s gay and lesbian festival, Midsumma, runs from mid-January to early February each year. It includes social, cultural and sporting events such as book readings, plays, a swimming competition, a street party and film festival, as well as a family carnival and dance party. In 2006 the festival also included live music performances, art exhibitions, cabaret performances and a greater range of sporting events, picnics and dances.


21 Reginald (79), Gerald (75), Charles (67), Noel (58), Michael (52), Donald (52), Des (50) and Jason (35).
One of the most politically active men is also one of the oldest men in this sample. Gerald (75) lives with Larry, his partner of nine years. Gerald has been a political activist most of his life. When he was married, as he was for more than thirty years, matters of social justice were his chief concern. Since coming out in the early 1990s, he has been involved in HIV-AIDS support and wider issues of legal rights for gay men and women. In the following extract Gerald explains how central to his life and that of his partner is their political commitment to rights of homosexuals and general issues of social justice:

My partner and I became carers for people living with AIDS. I was also doing meals on wheels. We are involved with the federal anti-terrorism bills and also in the age of consent issue in New South Wales. We produce and send out a newsletter for lesbian and gay solidarity. Also we discovered that, for instance, the AIDS memorial garden is in a terrible state. There was a letter in a gay newspaper and we are working on that too.

Gerald also explained how he and his partner use the Internet to lobby parliamentarians on matters of human rights and gay and lesbian rights. ‘We do a lot of work on the Internet and it’s actually becoming an important part of our lives. We send letters to ministers of parliament and things like that, and email has become very important to enable us to do that’. Gerald and Larry are incensed by injustice and motivated by a determination not to be silenced because they are old men: ‘The general community regards old homosexuals as old queens who should go away and die quietly. We ageing homosexuals are not going to do that. We are still here and making our voices heard and intend to continue doing so’.

Charles, who is 67 and has a partner of 35 years, spoke of an involvement with the gay community that stretched back more than 40 years and began when police raids were common events in clubs and bars.

I worked in one of the very first gay bars, which was a wine bar where we sold everything else but wine. We used to get raided regularly. I have always worked for the gay movement. We always supported gay people and gave advice and financial advice to people who were in trouble. I have been in jail three times for gay rights.

Part of the cohort of men who came out before the gay liberation movement, Charles was a gay businessman. He spent much of his working life as the manager of a number of clubs that were part of the clandestine sub-culture. There is no doubt that he regarded the bars and clubs as an integral part of the gay community. If he was sent to jail for operating illegal premises—a gay bar in the years before decriminalisation of homosexuality—this is less important than that he believes he was sent there in support of ‘gay rights’ and that the bar was his stand against the state’s persecution of homosexuals.

In the middle cohort Donald (52) says that his experience of the gay community began when he was a young man in the late 1960s. Because of the politics of the times, he says, more was at stake: ‘gay
liberation was my first gay community experience and that was hugely important, as well as the gay lib[eration] ideologies. I am so glad I was part of that’. Des (50) often finds he cannot ‘help himself’ when he hears a ‘demo’ is being planned:

Politically I have been active at all levels. I will take to the streets and blow whistles. I have been violent in demonstrations. I am a passionate person and even though it may not be lawful I believe that you have the right to demonstrate. If that means violence, like in the Vietnam War moratorium, and if it means throwing flour bombs at police, I would do it again. Not that I have anything against the police. It is a statement.

Only one man in the young cohort said that he had been involved in political action. Jason is proud of the newspaper photograph he has of himself and friends throwing handbags in the air on the steps of Parliament House:

Being involved included protesting for rights. I made placards and marched on parliament. My involvement has been about survival of gay people, of the gay culture. I was a carer. I did that because they were my friends, not through any organisation.

Although Jason’s activism has its roots in the illnesses that HIV-AIDS brought to his friends and with which he continues to live himself, it is no less idealistic because of its personal nature.

Not coincidentally, most of those who expressed their sense of community through political activism are from the camp generation or the ‘baby-boomer’ generation, and they were actively involved in the movement for gay liberation in their twenties and thirties when it was part of wider social and political movements. The political beliefs they developed in their youth are now the articles of faith by which they lead their lives, and this is partly what gives their lives meaning.

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Part Two. Critical views of community.

A significant minority of eighteen interviewees, or slightly more than one fifth of men interviewed for this thesis, was critical of the gay community.22 A number of themes emerged from their stories. They disliked what they had seen of the gay community and had difficulty identifying with gay men in general. Some of them were disappointed by social practices they had observed, such as factionalism and cliquey behaviour. Others had experienced dismissive or irresponsible behaviour from gay men and saw this as peculiar to the gay community because they regarded it as a characteristic or attribute of gay men in

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22 This group of eighteen interviewees comprises five men from the old cohort, seven men from the middle cohort, and six men from the young cohort.
general. Their views are represented here by the accounts of eight interviewees, three from the young cohort and two from each of the middle and the old cohorts.²³

Discussion begins with the accounts of three men from the young cohort. Their life experiences are varied. The first man, Jack (aged 22), is single and lives in an inner suburb of a capital city. The second man, David, is 28. He is Aboriginal, also single and lives in the country. Both men have full-time employment and both work for the public service. Jack is a university graduate and David left school after he completed Year 12. Neville (aged 37) is the third man. He is a university graduate also, and works in the education sector. He and his partner have been together for 12 years. Like David, he is Aboriginal.

Jack is suspicious of gay community organisations because they are unrepresentative of gay men and are not accountable for their actions:

When my friends and I talk about “the gay community”, we are referring to a bunch of narrow-minded and self-selected gay activists or community organisations that operate in a world that feeds into itself and is publicised in the gay press. It is a very small, intensely wasteful and bitchy community. I do not find it fulfilling at all; in fact I get quite annoyed.

For Jack, the self-proclaimed altruism of support communities holds no appeal because it is too claustrophobic and comfortable. In addition to being suspicious of these organisations, Jack is sceptical that any unity or sense of common purpose exists among gay men. Later in his interview, he described two beliefs, which he said were common to gay men. Some believed, first, that they were no different from straight people and that gay people should simply assimilate into what Erving Goffman called the world of ‘normals’.²⁴ Jack was critical of them because they are apolitical. Second, there were other gay men who believed themselves to be victims of discrimination.

The gay community is inward looking. Some people believe that there is no discrimination against gay people, that there is no need to understand difference among gay and lesbian people and that we should assimilate into a straight world. And then there are the other people who think that the world is against them and that they deserve special favours. I don’t think that affirmative action or anti-discrimination laws are about special favours. There are a lot of tensions and some people can’t come to grips with them because they live in an inward-looking world.

Gay men who, according to Jack, believed they were entitled to ‘special favours’ are similar to the category of person Erving Goffman described as using their disadvantage ‘as a basis for organising life’. With their own kind they may ‘develop to its fullest … [their] sad tale accounting for … [their] possession

²³ Jack (22), David (28), Neville (37), Matthew (42), Richard (58), Brendan (64), Oscar (65) and Kelvin (66).

of the stigma’. For such people, a stigmatised identity is central to their sense of self and to their relations with others. They have a vested interest in retaining it.

Like the other men in this section, David has struggled to identify with gay men in his milieu. He lives three hours by car from the nearest big city and is critical of the gay community for the overt performance of gayness that he has seen perpetrated in the country:

Here in the country my experience of gay community has been absolutely horrible. I find gay country folk annoying. It is as though they feel they have to prove something to mainstream society. They are looking for acceptance from the wider community here and they push the boundaries right to the limit. Instead of being a normal human being, they have to tart it up or fag it up and they do it to annoy rather than to gain acceptance. There is not the same behaviour in the city. People do not aim to annoy other people or to say, “We are here”. They do it because it is how they like to dress or like to act. But here or in country towns, and I have lived in quite a few of them, they feel they have to do it in protest.

In David’s eyes, the overt behaviour is designed to draw attention to the perpetrators. Presumably it is also to show they are not afraid of the response or reaction of the mainstream community. Perhaps, in addition, they are motivated by the desire to shock. However, for David the performance is forced and unnecessary.

Neville’s criticisms of the gay community concern the homogeneity of gay commercial culture and the insular lives that some affluent gay men lead in major capital cities.

We occasionally go out to a gay night club or gay bar or do the dance parties or Mardi Gras. I don’t like that life-style. There are people in Darlinghurst who live in apartment blocks that are full of gay men. They are completely absorbed in the night club scene, go to dance parties, work in the area. I find that too constraining. Also it is so Anglo, which I don’t find a culturally friendly environment. I participate in it but I feel like a consumer at the time. You go in there and shop around for whatever you want and then go home.

His most damning criticism is of the ghetto that many gay men have created for themselves in Sydney. This insular life is more pronounced in Sydney but there is evidence of its growth in other capital cities. In Melbourne, there are renovated factories in the inner city whose tenants are predominantly gay men, and similar enclaves exist in Newcastle, Hobart and Adelaide. The gay ghettos are populated by men who earn medium to high salaries, and whose life-style is, as Neville implies, wholly defined by their sexual identity. He finds it ‘too constraining’.

25 Goffman Stigma, p. 32.
In the middle cohort are two men with stories of irresponsible behaviour that they see as characteristic of gay men. Richard is 58 and lives in a large capital city with his partner. Matthew is 42 and single. Both men are middle class in education, income and occupation. Richard’s lament concerns unspecified business dealings that he has had with gay men.

I find that a lot of gay men are unreliable. If you can’t depend on them, what’s the point of putting your energy into that? A lot of them are unreliable emotionally and in business. They change their minds. I am generalising but they don’t have sustained opinions on things, so you never know where you stand with them. I can’t be bothered putting my faith in that.

There was no note of bitterness in Richard’s voice during the interview. In fact, his manner was sanguine, even resigned. There was a strong sense, however, that he would not consult a directory of gay businesses or service providers if he needed furniture moved, or his house renovated or painted.

Matthew’s reservations arise from deeply personal experiences and concern the reckless and irresponsible behaviour of gay men in their twenties and thirties, of men who despite their age are immature, but who in other contexts would be regarded as adult.

I don’t know whether it is because everyone is having a hard time, but there is a fair bit of dysfunctionality in the community. Many people are not coping well with their finances, their lives, or their sense of balance. They are mostly in their late 20s to mid-30s. I see a lot of people who are just dangling on the edge.

For example, I had a bad experience with a man I went out with for a year. He was a sexy guy and I used to stay with him every weekend. But he lied to me about his HIV status. I was okay, but it was the worst experience I have had. He lied because he thought I would leave if he told me. I wouldn’t have left but, because he didn’t tell me and we had been having sex for a year, I had to leave.

At other times, I have lent money to guys who have not repaid it. My experience of gay men is that as they get older, they are more balanced and that is one thing that I like about older gay friends.

As Matthew admits, it is difficult to know why some men lead chaotic or disorganised lives. But he suggests that the gay milieu does not provide the support young gay men need to keep their lives together. And sadly, because of the need to be seen as ‘cool’ if their social space is the scene and their social circle comprises other people who are on the scene, the young men who are ‘dangling on the edge’ might not know how to call for help or whom to call.

It is also difficult to know, from Matthew’s account—indeed, from the accounts of any of the men in this sample—how widespread reckless and irresponsible behaviour is among gay men and whether they are any more likely than other men their age to be involved in high risk social practices. From Matthew’s
observations, it would seem that it is not uncommon to see gay men whose life projects do not follow steady trajectories. Furthermore, alcohol and drug taking seem to be common ingredients of their lives. R.W. Connell uses the phrase, ‘rebellious masculinity’, to describe this sort of behaviour when it occurs among young heterosexual men. Rebellious masculinity is not discredited masculinity; in fact, it is close to its obverse, exemplary masculinity, the masculinity of athletes and sportsmen. It is a version of masculinity that is constructed from being out of control: ‘[D]oing reasonably dangerous things with drugs, trading on … physique and youthful energy’.²⁶ For young gay men these high risk practices are less a demonstration of rebellious masculinity than they are a desire for acceptance by the in-group on the scene.

The story that Matthew tells of his relationship with a man who was HIV positive points to the importance of trust and shame in human relations and how easily the latter can undermine the former. Matthew believes that the man concealed his HIV status from him because he was ashamed of it and feared that if he revealed it he risked losing Matthew’s affection or their relationship. In *A Select Body*, Lynette Lewis and Michael Ross raise the dilemma HIV-positive men face. On the one hand, they are morally (and legally) obliged to disclose their HIV status to potential sex partners, while, on the other hand, many know that if they do, the other man may terminate the encounter or relationship.²⁷

Matthew’s experience cuts to the heart of how we see ourselves as human beings and how we conduct relations with others whom we wish to treat as people of equal standing and regard. But if this experience is relatively common, it can explain the suspicion with which some gay men regard others in the community.

In the old cohort there are stories from two men in their sixties who had hoped to find a communal spirit among gay men with whom they worked or mixed socially, and a third man, also in his sixties, who opposes the notion of a gay community because of its suggestion of separate development. In the first instance there is Brendan (64), who is a public servant. His partner is 18 years his junior and they have been together for 20 years. Some time ago Brendan and his partner were actively involved in a gay lobby group. Brendan’s experience of gay political activists soured his view of the gay community. He found factionalism and a mood of exclusiveness in the actions of people who were younger than he:

It is a very narrow element within the gay community that abuses power. It is a bitchy, vicious thing. And more people are talking about it. They can be so political and so dismissive of other people. They have this horrible dismissive view of older people or people that are not politically correct.

²⁶ Connell *The Men and the Boys*, p. 97.

His account of small mindedness and in-group versus out-group behaviour, which Norbert Elias discussed in *The Established and the Outsiders*, can be a feature of ‘grass-roots’ political or ‘community’ organisations of all colours and persuasions. The members of an in-group will often maintain their identity as ‘superior’ people by attributing to themselves ‘super human characteristics’ and by pinning a ‘badge of human inferiority’ on the members of the outsider group.28 This may be the social process that lay behind the dismissive behaviour Brendan witnessed. And, although Brendan sees it as a characteristic of gay culture, and similar experiences of gay community organisations have been referred to in published research, it is not exclusive to it.29

Oscar (65) also has a low opinion of the spirit of community that he has found among gay men, as a whole, and believes it to be superficial. Oscar was married for 20 years. He has lived with his partner, Henry, for 18 years. On the basis of his experience both as a heterosexual man and as a homosexual man, he believes that he has a good yardstick for comparing the social *mores* of gay and straight people. In his experience gay men are less trustworthy than heterosexual people:

> The one thing my experience in the gay community has taught me is that there are more superficial people in the gay world than there are in the “straight” world. There are more bitchy people, more gossips. I have found that a lot of people in the gay world think it’s wonderful when relationships break up and that is probably because they have never had a decent relationship in their life. I have had a lot of wonderful experiences in the gay world, but I think that because of the difficulty of acceptance in the “normal” world, there is a lot more superficiality in the gay world than there is in the “straight” world.

Oscar feels that he has been let down by his gay friends and acquaintances. In a previous chapter, Oscar was described as a ‘man’s man’. He said it was only in gay venues that he felt old and out of place. On the matter of a senior gay man’s adjustment to the social and moral demands of the gay milieu, Michael Pollak has argued that few gay men succeed in freeing themselves from ‘the socializing influence imprinted on them in childhood, an influence totally oriented towards a life of heterosexuality’.30 Oscar was married for 20 years. As a result of the long time spent as a heterosexual, perhaps he believes that only a long-term relationship is a ‘decent relationship’.

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29 In *Gay and gray*, Raymond Berger cites the cases of two older gay men who were disenchanted by infighting in gay community organisations. He also argues that older gay men tend to be marginalised by the younger members. See Raymond M. Berger 1982 *Gay and gray: the older homosexual man*, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, pp. 38 & 229.

Kelvin (66) used to work in the education sector and is now retired. He is more strident in his opposition to the idea of a gay community than either Brendan or Oscar, and cannot identify with today’s gay men. He opposes the notion of separate development, which he sees in the fostering of a gay community:

I don’t think it should be seen as a sort of separate community. I object to the way in which gay and lesbian activists tend to talk about a homosexual community and then cut themselves off into a ghetto. And when they do come out in public they turn themselves into circus animals, like they do at that Pride march.

One explanation for the difficulties these men experienced and their critical views of the gay community may lie in its failure to meet their social needs. Another explanation may lie in their inability to find a suitable niche. And yet, as the discussion in Part One showed, there are many gay community organisations and their activities are varied. Another, perhaps more convincing explanation may be that, as Erving Goffman has suggested, people who share a stigmatised identity may socialise together and may be seen by outsiders as all the same, but the cohesiveness between them is an illusion because they do not necessarily have a ‘capacity for collective action’ or a ‘pattern of mutual interaction’. It can take time for members of a minority to achieve a degree of tolerance and acceptance of their own kind, and of themselves:

When the individual first learns who it is that he must now accept as his own, he is likely … to feel some ambivalence; for these others will not only be patently stigmatized, and thus not like the normal person he knows himself to be, but may also have other attributes with which he finds it difficult to associate himself. What may end up as freemasonry may begin with a shudder.

*     *

Conclusion.

When asked to explain their experience of or involvement with the gay community, almost two thirds of the men interviewed for this thesis nominated their work with HIV-AIDS support groups, counselling services, their involvement with a local social group, or their work in social activism or political lobbying. Then a group of almost one quarter of interviewees said their community involvement occurred when they participated in gay festivals, street parades or the scene.

31 Goffman *Stigma*, p. 35.

32 Goffman *Stigma*, pp. 50–1.
Involvement thus consisted either of the work they did for community organisations as counsellors, PLWHA carers, activists or lobbyists, or when they socialised or participated with other gay men in social groups or public displays of solidarity or celebration. In other words, they understood community as either the practical work they did to improve the lives of others like them or as a participatory experience with other gay men. In both cases the gay community that they knew was visible to them and had a concrete reality.

On the whole, interviewees who worked as counsellors, PLWHA carers, activists or lobbyists were drawn from all classes and all age groups. Other findings included that gay men in small cities and country towns appeared to have greater agency in shaping their social life because of the role of the local social group and their access to it. And festivals and parades contributed to the perpetuation of gay men’s shared history and provided non-sexualised social spaces that were free of homophobia.

The accounts of the remaining interviewees, comprising just over one fifth of the sample, represented a significant, dissident minority. These men either do not agree with or cannot conform to the dominant gay narratives. A number of them have rejected the version of gayness available and have no wish to understand it. There is a case to say that all communities include similar dissident minorities. Richard Sennett cites an argument of Lewis Coser that conflict is essential to the maintenance of community, since it forces people to pay attention to one another: ‘[T]he scene of conflict becomes a community in the sense that people learn how to listen and respond to one another even as they more keenly feel their differences’. If Coser is correct, it is possible that with time the voices and views of dissidents such as these men may effect a change in the number and range of stories that comprise the gay community.

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Chapter Seven. The intimate life of gay men (i): couple relationships.

‘He has provided huge stability and gives me huge freedoms.’ Lionel, 59.

* * *

Introduction.

Banned from openly expressing their affective relations for most decades of the twentieth century, gay men invented other ways of relating, created couple relationships of varying duration and configurations to suit the circumstances forced on them or to circumvent prohibitions against them. These have been variously characterised as experimental, difficult to sustain, or similar to heterosexual marriage.¹

Most of the men interviewed for this thesis regard a relationship as an important source of meaning in their lives.² Not coincidentally, perhaps, the majority of men in the sample are also in couple relationships, which, as the discussion in Part Two shows, are notable for their longevity and for the similarity they bear to the companionate marriage. More than one third of interviewees are in relationships of seven years’ duration or longer. Importantly, nine men have been in relationships longer than twenty-five years.³

One piece of Australian research suggests that gay relationships are less common than the experience of my interviewees would suggest, especially among working-class men. Hard to attain but greatly desired, their prevalence is, according to these researchers, ‘hegemonic rather than the normal thing’ in working-class milieux.⁴ This view is corroborated by other Australian research on gay relationships. A recent report suggests that male homosexual relationships, especially among working-


² Forty-seven interviewees, or almost sixty per cent of the sample, chose relationship as one of the three most meaningful aspects of their life. See Appendix 1: Interview Schedule, question 10.

³ The nine men in relationships of twenty-five years’ duration or longer comprise four men in their sixties and five men in their fifties.

class men, seem more fragile and fraught than lesbians’ couple relationships, and that tensions arise between the demands of the scene and their affective needs.  

There is a perception, as well, that gay men’s relationships are short-lived, that they founder too easily. As Gary Dowsett writes: ‘[C]ommon parlance reviles the homosexual relationship by depicting it as inherently unstable or by judging its worth against a heterosexual norm’. One explanation for the short duration of gay relationships, discussed later in this chapter, is that they developed this way in times of social hostility as a defence against homophobia.

In this chapter, and throughout the thesis, two terms are used for the partners in a couple relationship: ‘boy friend’ and ‘partner’. They are used intentionally to distinguish between relationships in terms of duration. Often the term ‘boy friend’ will be used in the initial period of a gay relationship, while ‘partner’ is reserved for the members of a couple relationship when it is more established. For example, gay men are likely to refer to the man they have been going out with for six days or six weeks as their boy friend. After six months or a year, however, the title is likely to change to partner. Another term, ‘lover’, was more common in the 1970s and 1980s but is rarely used nowadays.

The argument of this chapter is that there are two principal stories of gay relationships. The dominant story concerns the practice of the majority of interviewees, which is to conduct permanent arrangements that mirror heterosexual marriage, or to engage in serial monogamy. A powerful secondary story concerns the practice of a small group of men who maintain more fluid or ‘open’ relationships. Why and how relationships are meaningful to interviewees is discussed in Part One of this chapter. In Part Two, the discussion concerns interviewees’ experience of permanent relationships. Finally, in Part Three the discussion turns to the ‘open’ relationship.

* * *

Part One. The relationship as source of meaning.

The principal reason a relationship is meaningful to the men in this sample of interviewees is because it is both the central focus of their life and a project they jointly develop with their partner. More than two thirds of the men in the old cohort and slightly less in the middle cohort said a relationship brought

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meaning to their lives, while less than half the men from the young cohort made the same claim. In the section that follows, the idea of a couple relationship as the central focus and as a joint project is examined; its significance as the site where men may experience love, companionship, intimacy and sexual satisfaction is also analysed.

Two men in their seventies and one in his early sixties represent the views of the men from the old cohort. Two are in long-term relationships, one of twenty years’ duration and the other thirty years. The oldest man is Leslie (aged 74). Married for more than thirty years and in a gay relationship for longer than twenty, he believes that a solitary life lacks meaning: ‘Without our relationship, I would not be sharing my home with anyone and, as far as home is concerned, it only has meaning when I share it with someone’. Harold, who is 71, also enjoys a shared life, even though he and his boy friend live apart: ‘Not a day goes by but he rings. We have a wonderful relationship. He and his daughter are very important to me’. Lindsay (aged 62) expressed similar intense feelings:

The most important thing in my life is my relationship with my partner of the last 30 years. We moved in together in 1972. That is fundamental. We live in the same house. It is impossible to imagine what life might have been like without it. It is so important.

As a group, the interviewees from the middle cohort expressed themselves with more certainty than those from the young cohort concerning the meaning of couple relationships. Four men in their fifties and one in his mid-forties represent their views here. None of these men was previously married but four are in couple relationships of twenty years’ duration or longer, all of them men in their fifties. The remaining man, James, is 45 and has been in a relationship for six years.

Graham and Lionel are each in relationships of more than twenty-five years’ duration. For Graham (aged 52) his relationship is his life’s focal point: ‘Everything in my life really hinges around my primary relationship with my partner and that is the context for everything else’. Lionel is 59 and lives with a partner he describes as ‘a real kind and gentle fellow’, who has been ‘an incredible stabilising influence’. While sex is less important now, their sexual relations were ‘terrific for the first fifteen years!’ He also enumerates the many other ways in which his partner makes sense of his life:

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7 Of forty-seven interviewees who chose relationship as one of the three most meaningful aspects of their life, fifteen men were from the old cohort (or sixty-eight per cent of the cohort), nineteen men were from the middle cohort (or sixty-three per cent of the cohort), and thirteen men were from the young cohort (or forty-six per cent of the cohort).

8 Lindsay, 62 (30 years) and Leslie, 74 (20 years).

9 Richard, 58 (30 years); Lionel, 59 (28 years); Graham, 52 (26 years); Patrick, 53 (20 years).
If I want to do something around the house or in the garden I just do it. I talk to him and he accepts and lets me go. I never argue about whether we’ll have this colour on the walls or this carpet. We share interests in football and opera and film. We read the same sort of books. Politically we are together.

Lionel’s partner is clearly influential in all aspects of his life. Importantly, his account also reveals the development from romantic to companionate love, a transition that enduring marriages are said to go through too.

The other men from the middle cohort touched on what Michel Foucault called the ‘lovers’ fusion’.  

James says, ‘We seem to mesh’. Patrick is more explicit and more than hints that his life with his partner is as if ‘two become one’:

Having a relationship in itself but also having a relationship with this person has given me self-confidence and made me feel that I am a real person. He is in a sense my identity. He has shaped who I am. The person I am now is half him in a way. I find now that I can hardly separate myself.

Patrick is neither resentful of his partner’s power to shape him nor jealous of the qualities that his partner has. He simply rejoices in their shared identity. There is a quality of Yin and Yang in the way he describes their union. How his partner might feel about it is another question. The last of the interviewees from the middle cohort to speak is Richard. He is in his late fifties and has been in a relationship for thirty years. He uses the metaphor of building to describe it: ‘Together you are creating your own atmosphere as a unit’.

Among the interviewees from the young cohort who regard a couple relationship as an important source of meaning are two men in their thirties and two in their twenties. Three of them are in relationships of between two and twelve years’ duration. All four men are employed and none has been married.

Neville (aged 37) from the upper end of the young cohort says that his partner of twelve years ‘anchors’ him and ‘is what life is about’. For Daniel, who is 35, a relationship is hard work but rewarding:

To be in a relationship with someone is such a damned hard thing to do. Because nothing else really requires you to look so closely at who you are in the world. Nothing else requires you to walk around quite as nakedly in the world. [Laughs] And I don’t just mean physically either.

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11 Neville, 37 (twelve years); Mark, 25 (five years); Daniel, 35 (two years).
Myles (aged 24) is more wistful: ‘I do not like living alone and not sharing my adventures and life experiences and challenges with someone. It means a great deal to me to live and share life with another person’. Finally, there is Mark (aged 25), who says that he wants a relationship that is like a marriage: ‘I want to be with someone in a similar capacity that a heterosexual relationship can have, that is, a committed relationship for a long period of time’.

While none of the men from the three age cohorts actually used the phrase ‘central focus’ to describe how a relationship gives meaning to his life, their accounts point to a sense that a relationship is meaningful because of what the other man brings to their life. Among the men who saw their relationship as the central focus of being are some who said life would be nothing without their partner. Others said that he gave life meaning, that he was the most important person or thing to them. To use Patrick White’s phrase, the other man was the interviewee’s ‘solid mandala’.

And similarly, while none of the interviewees used the phrase ‘joint project’, the language they use to describe their relationships suggests that many of them understand it in this way. Their words convey the sense that they understand their lives to have a similar goal, or that their shared life has a mutually agreed common purpose, which has a slightly different meaning. The latter meaning is often expressed by older men who perhaps have had more opportunity to iron out any wrinkles in their relationship.

* Relationships are meaningful also because they are the means by which men experience love, companionship, intimacy and sexual satisfaction. These are aspects of an emotional life that everyone may hope for from a couple relationship.

Only one interviewee explicitly says that a relationship is meaningful to him because it is where he experiences and can express love, and this is a man in the young cohort. Jason is 35: ‘I love the feeling of love; I like being in love even with all the rubbish that comes with it. I am a bit of a love junkie, I suppose’. What reasons might there be for the other men not to speak of love as making their relationship meaningful? It is possible that they take for granted the love they have for their partner. It might be that many men are bashful about speaking of these things. Perhaps they are more comfortable speaking of companionship and intimacy, or perhaps these are what love means to them?

Older men value companionship. It is only men in the middle and old cohorts who speak of companionship as giving meaning to their relationship. The young men do not. From the old cohort there
is a man in his mid-seventies, who was formerly married and who rates companionship as the most important ingredient in his relationship.\textsuperscript{12}

The things we share are so important, such as the jokes and the other things we do together, like when my partner gets the meals so that I can stay and work in the garden. We have a holiday house and we share that, as well as the travel we do together. Life would not have much meaning without companionship.

Like companionship, intimacy appears to be a quality that older men value, for it is only men in the middle cohort, that is men in their forties and fifties, who expressly say that it makes a relationship meaningful. Their views are represented here by Neil who is in his mid-forties and Ivan who is 40. Neil says that he and his partner know each other so well they are almost like brothers: ‘After almost 16 years the relationship with my lover becomes one of faith, trust and dependence’. He values the support they give one another and also the intimacy, which he says exists on a daily basis:

The fact that we can still learn from each other is important and also that we still laugh together. And the fact that we can argue points to the growth and understanding that can occur. He and I are very different. What is important is the support and nurturing that comes from the intimacy that is there.

Presumably when he says that his relationship is mature because he and his partner can argue, Neil means that an argument no longer threatens its existence—that is, they can argue and not worry that one of them will take offence and desert the other. Similarly, Ivan describes intimacy as closeness and sharing. His partner is his lover, best friend and mate.

What is most remarkable about these attitudes is the ease with which the men admit their respect for and attachment to their partner. There is no evidence of discord or domination of one by another; in fact, there is a strong sense of equality between partners. While they are shy of using the word, ‘love’, it is clear that it is the basis of many of their couple relationships. These accounts are conspicuous for how like a companionate marriage are the couple relationships they describe.

Sex makes a relationship meaningful said a group of ten interviewees.\textsuperscript{13} Half of these men are currently in a relationship, the other half are single. Their views are represented here by the accounts of two men from the middle cohort and one man from the young cohort. All have been in a couple relationship at some point.

\textsuperscript{12} Leslie (74).

\textsuperscript{13} This group consists of three men from the old cohort, five men from the middle cohort and two men from the young cohort: Clive (64), Brendan (64), Edward (60), Lionel (59), Roy (58), Ross (54), Henry (50), Stuart (49), Vincent (30), and Jack (22).
Stuart (aged 49) has been single for many years. He said that he would prefer to be speaking as a person in a relationship but he is not. And this weighs heavily with him. Stuart is also HIV positive and believes that his HIV status makes it difficult for him to have a relationship: ‘I would love to be in a relationship but having HIV has limited my scope for relationships. It has been hard to find a partner who has coped with that in the past’. Stuart says that sex has become an issue for him because he has had so few relationships in the last 20 years: ‘It is not always getting too much of it that is the issue or getting enough of it. It is just that it is an issue. It would take up some part of my average week’. Why ‘getting sex’ is an issue is not clear. What he may mean is that sex would be less of an issue for him if he were in a relationship. It would be less of a struggle because it would be part of his couple relationship. But, as it is, he must go out looking for sexual encounters and these forays are time-consuming. As he says elsewhere in the interview:

If I want to have sex I have to throw myself into the sexual market place. To stand a chance there one is required to have a reasonably attractive body in some shape or form. And that has become a serious issue for me because HIV has disfigured me in some ways, which has affected my body image more dramatically than anything else.

Stuart’s experience confirms the observations that were made in an earlier chapter on the gay scene. Most social spaces available to gay men operate as a sexual market where a premium is placed on youth and beauty. One effect of the valorisation of youth and beauty is that those who are neither young nor beautiful are dismissed or marginalised.

Vincent is in his early thirties. He has had a number of short-term relationships, the longest of which lasted nine months. In the following excerpt, he makes clear that he is aware of a distinction between affective relations and sexual relations but also how easy it is as a young man to confuse the two, or at least how easy it is to confuse love and sex.

When I was younger, I mistook sex for love and did so without knowing it. Many of my sexual experiences were not emotionally satisfying but were great physically. Part of me feels that gay sex is bad but a good part of me loves it and enjoys sex. Sometimes I have sex knowing that it is not love but find it good and satisfying because of the connection. My sexual appetite can be voracious. On other occasions I could not care less.

Vincent’s frankness includes his admission that there are times when he knows he wants to be loved or wants love but seeks out episodic sexual relations and finds the sexual connection ‘good and satisfying’. And thus does he manage both to separate and conflate the affective and the sexual.

Ross (aged 54) was married for thirteen years, and has one child and grandchildren. He and his partner have been together for seven years. He is forthright in his belief that sexual relations and relationship are inter-related. A satisfying sex life is important to him, by which he means sexual relations
with, as he says, ‘my lover and partner’, who are one and the same. Moreover, in his mid-fifties he
declares that: ‘It is still as important now as it ever has been’. If his sex life is on hold, when for example he or his partner is inter-state, he says, ‘I feel like something important is lacking in my life’.

These stories are significant because the interviewees appear to understand sex in one of two ways. It is either as an expression of lust, as a social practice they do ‘for fun’, that can make them ‘feel good’ about themselves, or it is practised in a spiritual sense, where it is an expression of the love for their partner, which can also be fun and enjoyable, of course. The former is simply an expression of physical desire, while the other is more an expression of companionate love.

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Part Two. Permanent relationships.

Donald West’s Homosexuality was a bible for Australian gay men in the 1960s. An interviewee from the old cohort remembers reading the book as a young man and says that it was Donald West who introduced him to the word ‘homosexual’, which replaced the schoolboy ‘poof’ and preceded his becoming ‘camp’. How reliable Homosexuality was as a guide to curious, inquisitive or uncertain young men is debatable. It is not clear if Donald West’s intention was to help or to warn off young men who read his book. For example, he has the following to say about the chances a gay man might have to develop a relationship:

The deviant who has “come out” into homosexual society, and fully accepts his inverted feelings, has then to go through the experiences of falling in love and having affairs of greater or lesser intensity or exclusiveness. Many strive to duplicate the heterosexual model of monogamous marriage, but both nature and social circumstances work against this solution.

Fifty years after its first publication, Homosexuality reads as though its author intended to discourage gay men rather than to offer them the consolation of good science. One page later, he says slightly more optimistically and perhaps with some accuracy that ‘some of the most stable male homosexual unions are those in which the partners pursue their sexual interests independently’.

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14 First published in the United Kingdom in 1955, it was banned in Australia until 1961. When it did become available in Australia its annual sales were between 1500 and 2000 throughout the 1960s. See Garry Wotherspoon 1991 City of the Plain: history of a gay sub-culture, Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, p. 126.


16 West Homosexuality, p. 57.
Contemporary commentators approach the topic in a different spirit. Jeffrey Weeks, for one, rejects any idea that gay men are in some way unable or unwilling to have relationships. Their capacity and propensity to develop relationships are, he says, no different from those of heterosexuals.\(^{17}\) Kenneth Plummer examines the many choices available to gay men who want to live a ‘gay life’. Like Michel Foucault, Plummer recognises that a variety of relationships and friendships are possible.\(^{18}\) He mentions three. A gay person may wish to model his relationship on the heterosexual marriage, he may choose ‘to experiment with more diffuse couple relationships’, or he may decide to live a single life. Most gay men will decide at some point to develop a relationship, says Plummer, because they were brought up in a society that ‘highlights the value and naturalness of “coupling”—through family of origin, through education, through religion, through media—it is a difficult task for any individual to estrange himself from such concerns’.\(^{19}\)

While gay men may wish to develop a couple relationship, it can be difficult to find a partner. Plummer suggests three reasons for this. First, the gay milieu provides for people ‘who have little in common but their gayness’; second, the attitudes and behaviours of men on the scene ‘establish expectations of “casualness” in sexual relations’; and, finally, gay men have to struggle with negative views of them held by wider society.\(^{20}\) In regard to the effects that social hostility has on gay men and the difficulties many have in developing relationships, Plummer comments:

Social hostility to homosexual men … may mean the relationship has to be hidden from family and work mates; it may mean difficulties in obtaining a joint mortgage, writing a mutual will or even visiting a sick partner in hospital; it may mean a general lack of support from others when the relationship is under severe stress. As hostility decreases, so these kinds of problems diminish—nevertheless they have played a paramount role in the past.\(^{21}\)

Since Plummer wrote this in the early 1980s, changes have occurred in the way gay men are treated and seen by wider society. The difficulties Plummer describes affect gay men less generally or intensely than they once did. But hostility has not uniformly decreased in all classes and locations. While some men in suburbs like Darlinghurst in Sydney or Fitzroy in Melbourne will have no sense of social hostility towards

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\(^{19}\) Plummer ‘Going Gay’, pp. 103, 105.


\(^{21}\) Plummer ‘Going Gay’, p. 106.
gay people, there are other men in country towns, provincial cities, and less affluent suburbs of big cities who do not share the same experience of relative tolerance.

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Until very recently in the West, gay people have been prohibited from marrying. Permission even to conduct relationships of varying levels of intimacy is also quite recent—in legal terms. These relationships are the primary focus of this chapter. Although discussion of gay marriage in this thesis is limited to this and the following paragraph, it is important to note that the prohibition against such marriages is slowly weakening. Prohibition no longer exists in a number of Scandinavian countries. Britain and Canada most recently passed legislation to allow gay marriage, and, as John Boswell has shown, it once existed in societies of Ancient and Medieval Europe.

The interviewees were not specifically asked a question on gay marriage because the bulk of interviews were conducted in 2002 and 2003; and it was not until mid-2004 that the matter began to attract regular coverage in the gay media—in Sydney at least. The men in the sample were asked, however, to tell the story of their relationship: none mentioned gay marriage. They were also asked how their life would be different if they were not gay, in answer to which only one man, an interviewee in his mid-twenties, said he would be able to marry and have children. There was very little evidence, then, that the interviewees were strongly interested in or aware of gay marriage, and no one indicated any intention of actively pursuing the matter at a political level. There is, however, an interest in and propensity for relationships that are remarkably like the companionate marriage.

Forty-nine of the interviewees, or more than 60 per cent of the sample of 80 men, are in couple relationships, the highest proportion being in the old cohort (68 per cent), followed by the middle cohort (60 per cent) and then the young cohort (57 per cent). Of the interviewees in relationships, a small handful of only 5 men are in relationships of less than 1 year’s duration, while 29 men, or over a third of


24 See, for example, Sydney Star Observer, 1, 8 & 15 July 2004.

25 See Appendix 1: Interview Schedule, questions 11 & 7. The interviewee is Mark (25).
the sample, are in long-term relationships—defined here as 7 years or longer. It is notable that in the old and the middle cohorts, there are 19 men who are in relationships of 20 years or longer and nine men whose relationships are 25 years or longer. That over one third of interviewees are in relationships of more than 7 years suggests significant longevity in couple relationships.

The largest concentration of men in long-term relationships is in the old cohort, where 54 per cent are in relationships of 7 years or more. In the middle cohort, 46 per cent of the men are in such relationships. The young cohort has the smallest number of men in long-term relationships. While 16 of the young men are in relationships, which is almost 60 per cent of the cohort, only 3 of them are in relationships of 7 years or more.

The comparatively low proportion of men from the young cohort in long-term relationships is to be expected because many have not yet had time to have begun such a couple relationship, especially those in their early twenties. Also, it is in the young cohort that we find the men with fewest responsibilities and as well those most heavily involved in the gay scene, which, as Michael Pollak noted, may create a special set of tensions: ‘How can sexual impulses stimulated by the existence of a highly accessible and almost inexhaustible market be reconciled with the sentimental ideal of a stable relationship?’ They are young men, and in Western countries young men are allowed to prolong their adolescence, which, depending on class and family, may be marked by an absence of serious ties or commitments and the pursuit of hedonism.

* The stories of three men, one from each of the age cohorts, form the basis of discussion of the permanent relationships of men in this sample. The first man is in his mid-sixties and has the longest relationship of all the men interviewed for this thesis. Next is a man who is in his early fifties and has been in a

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26 The five men in relationships of less than one year’s duration are Jeremy (36), Luke (32), Adam (24), Lachlan (24), and Troy (24).

27 The following is a breakdown of men in relationships of seven years or longer: three men in their seventies, nine men in their sixties, nine men in their fifties, five men in their forties, and three men in their thirties.

28 Interestingly, the biggest group in long-term relationships crosses the old and the middle cohorts and comprises interviewees in their sixties and fifties. Nine men from each of these age groups, or a total of eighteen interviewees, are in relationships of 7 years or longer—that is, more than 60 per cent of the men in this sample who are in long-term relationships are in their sixties and fifties.

relationship for eleven years. Then there is a thirty-three-year-old man who is in a relationship of five years’ duration.

A prominent feature of these relationships, and the others they represent, is how similar they are to the companionate marriage—described by D’Emilio and Freedman as marriage redefined in ‘more egalitarian terms’: ‘A successful relationship rested on the emotional compatibility of the husband and wife, rather than the fulfillment of gender-prescribed duties and roles’. The stories of interviewees’ relationships are notable for the equality between the partners and also for the absence of ‘gender-prescribed duties and roles’. The last point may seem unnecessary but a perception exists in mainstream society and some gay circles that gay relationships operate in the way of the traditional marriage, that there is a division of labour along gender lines, just as sexual relations are imagined to be conducted according to the model of active (masculine) and passive (feminine) partners. In their work with working-class gay men in Australia, Connell, Davis and Dowsett found ‘much joking about husbands-and-wives’, while the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu wrote: ‘In the couples they form, they [gay men] often reproduce, as do lesbians, a division of male and female roles’. But there are also scholars who maintain that gay relationships are not remarkable for gender role distinctions, and this was a strong theme in the stories of the men interviewed for this thesis. The stories were also remarkable for what they revealed about the men’s actual practice of egalitarianism.

Barry is 62 and lives with his partner of almost 40 years. Barry is not given to hyperbole but nevertheless describes his relationship with his partner as a very loving one kept alive by their each having separate interests.

I love the trash and treasure markets and my partner is mad into musicals and I think that’s how it has worked so well. He comes from the arty side of life whereas I enjoy a different type of life, and we are compatible. We have our arguments, but we have never split up over the 40 years. We have always been compatible sexually. We don’t do anything now. When we were in the prime of life we used to enjoy sex very much. But it is only in the last few years, since we both had our separate stints in hospital, he with his heart and me with my back, that there is not much sexual drive at all.

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Even though Barry is proud his relationship has endured, it seems he feels obliged to refer to earlier days when sexual attraction was stronger and sex was a more important part of their relationship. It may be that he misses the intimacy or enjoyment that was part of their sexual relations and is not yet reconciled to the loss of them.

Thomas represents the men from the middle cohort in long-term relationships. Both he and his partner are serial monogamists in that each had prior significant relationships before they met. Thomas works in education and has been with his partner for eleven years. He admits that he can resent his partner’s presence but at the same time welcomes his return after an absence:

Quite often we don’t do things together and I am glad of that because he gets under my feet a lot of the time. But I like that sense that he is coming back and will tell me about what is going on and will always ask if I want a cup of tea.

In the end, it is clear that, for Thomas, his partner’s company is an important, meaningful adjunct because of the other’s physical presence:

There is something warming and stable and reassuring in knowing that he is there. I like being able to reach over and put my hand in his when we are driving and the bodily contact and warmth in the bed. I like that sense of someone else being there. That is important to me.

The story of his relationship is of interest for the honesty with which he describes the two sides of intimacy in a relationship, of how a partner’s presence can be both claustrophobic and a source of deep longing and appreciation.

Mick is 33 and his partner is 38. Here he represents the men from the young cohort in relationships. Both Mick and his partner are employed in the travel sector and met while at work. They have been together for five years.

In our relationship spending time together is important and so is having someone there to care for you when you are sick. I find that in a relationship sex is not everything. You could go years without it. It is having someone there waking up with you. It is being able to come home and cry on someone’s shoulder. It is being able to spend time with a person who is there for you.

Mick’s account is the closest to the lovers’ fusion mentioned in Part One. His relationship is very much a joint project and his partner would seem to be the central focus of his life. It is also noteworthy that he feels compelled, like Barry (above), to refer to their sexual relations. But, whereas Barry referred to sex in order to lament its passing, Mick’s purpose is to discount it, to explain that its temporary absence is of no importance. This may be because he does not have a strong sex drive. It is always easier to do without something when its supply is guaranteed than when it is not. Mick’s situation is in direct contrast to what
Barry faces, which is to accept the sad truth that his sex life is ended. That both men refer to their sex lives underlines the point made in Part One: that an important meaning men attach to relationships is as the site for satisfaction of their sexual needs.

The significance of these stories lies in their revelation of both the seriousness and the relative ease with which gay men conduct their relationships. They reveal gay relationships that are relatively permanent and approximate the companionate marriage: ‘It is impossible to miss the similarity to heterosexual marriage, and … romantic ideology about “being the only one” for your partner’.33 The longevity of the relationships of the men interviewed for this thesis and their relatively high incidence contrast with the common perception of gay relationships as flimsy or inconsequential. Some scholars have remarked on the similarities between gay and straight relationships in the late twentieth century. D’Emilio and Freedman, for example, regard a homosexual relationship as one of many options from which young Americans may choose, and Anthony Giddens’s ‘pure relationship’ applies equally to homosexual couples.34

Part Three. The ‘open’ relationship.

In the homosexual milieu there exists a style of relationship that is now less common among heterosexual people—the so-called ‘open’ relationship.35 An open relationship is one where two partners agree to live together or separately and to share their lives in most senses, that is, emotionally, physically, sexually and financially, except that they are not monogamous.

Arrangements of this type are most often but not always made by mutual consent. In order for the relationship to function ‘openly’, the two partners will often agree on a set of rules or conditions that govern or guide the sexual relations that they may engage in outside the relationship. Like many single, promiscuous men and women, gay men in an open relationship agree to make a division, or maintain an existing division, between their affective life, and their sexual life. A popular stereotype of gay men is

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35 It was during the sexual revolution in the 1960s and 1970s that many heterosexual members of the ‘baby boomer’ generation experimented with similar radical, alternative sexual arrangements. Couples that engaged in ‘open’ sexual relations were known as swinging couples or ‘swingers’; married couples were said to have ‘open marriages’. Herpes and then HIV-AIDS curtailed such experimentation for most of the 1980s and 1990s. See David Allyn 2001 Make love not war: the sexual revolution, an unfettered history, New York: Routledge, chs. 4 & 17 and passim.
that they are only interested in sex, not in relationships and that if they have relationships they are not long-lasting. It could be argued that the practice of some gay men to divide their affective life from their sexual life supports this stereotype.

Historians explain the division that some gay men make between an affective life and a sexual life as an adaptation to the social context that prevailed before sexual liberation in the 1960s and 1970s, when the clandestine way of life called for ‘[a]n affective and social life to be carried on without the constraints imposed by stable and lasting relationships’.  

Like Michael Pollak and Ken Plummer, John Boswell sees a direct link between the style of relations that gay people conduct and the degree of social hostility that they have to endure:

> It is obviously very much to a gay person’s advantage in hostile environments not to be part of a permanent relationship … [T]he most effective defense against oppression will lie in fleeting and clandestine relationships which do not attract attention or provoke suspicion’.  

Their assumption is that social practices that develop in a repressive period continue long after the restrictions and stigma that it creates are removed.

Four interviewees who have open relationships were willing to discuss them. None is from the old cohort, but there are two men from the middle, Donald (aged 52) and Alan (aged 47), and two men from the young cohort, Harry (aged 28) and Mark (aged 25). Three of the men, Alan, Harry and Mark, refer in their stories to rules that they and their partner use to guide sexual behaviour outside the relationship.

Alan explains the open relationship that he has with his partner, Sergio, in the context of the effect HIV-AIDS had on how they deal with casual sex. To deal with the risk, they adopted what Alan calls ‘rules of engagement’ whenever they have sex with other men.

> As a couple, we negotiated what HIV-AIDS might mean for us. We discussed rules of engagement if we wanted to go to saunas. We took safe sex very seriously and kept ourselves informed but at the same time were not paranoid about it. We realised that there is a level of risk in all of this but that we would be open in our relationship. We talk to each other and perhaps get off on the experiences with each other as part of the trade off.

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36 Pollak ‘Male homosexuality’, p. 43.

The arrival of HIV-AIDS caused Alan and his partner to systematise their sexual relations with other men. Dennis Altman has argued that men in relationships such as Alan and his partner are more likely to practise safe sex because of their wish to protect their primary affective relationship:

[I]t is my belief that there is a far higher acceptance of multiple partners among gay men than most other groups … Ironically, this makes it easier to develop safe sex practices, for couples can admit to themselves that there may be risk of infection from outside liaisons without imperilling the relationship.38

Harry’s relationship with his partner, Frank, has lasted more than three years. Frank is almost 40 but Harry (aged 28) is not concerned by the age difference. In the following extract he describes what he calls the ‘little rules’ that govern the nature of sexual encounters outside the relationship.

We met three years ago. It is an open relationship with little rules. For example, we are not allowed to pick up anyone. They have to pick us up, so we have the choice to say “Yes” or “No”. If we are together in the same town, we pick up threesomes, we do not pick up alone. That is about it. It is the longest relationship I have had.

The rules seem designed to control the likelihood of one partner feeling jealous of the other partner’s sexual adventures. The purpose of the rule that requires each partner to wait for the stranger to make an advance (‘They have to pick us up’) is to remove them from direct responsibility for any casual sexual encounters. And thus responsibility for it would rest with the stranger.

Mark conducts a long-distance relationship with his partner. It would be easy to assume that it is the geographic distance separating them that allows for the ‘openness’ of their relationship, but Mark explains this arrangement pre-dates his partner’s departure. Elsewhere in the interview, he says that open relationships exist because of the absence of ‘support structures for relationships in the gay community’. Mark describes what he understands an open relationship to be and the rules by which he and his partner conduct their version of it.

It is okay to have sex with a guy more than once but we cannot be in a relationship with them. We are happy to talk about who we see and what we do, though we are not so interested in the intimate details. It is useful and an important way of doing it, given that we have been separated for over two years. But we did it before. We used to go to saunas together and go off and have our fun and then come back and talk about it. That was useful because it helped me understand that you can have different kinds of sex. You can have more sexual sex and you can have more loving sex. In that way there is not that much to compare between the two in terms of the feelings that you get out of it. In that way I think that both of us are quite secure.

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Implicit in the rules in all open relationships, no matter how they are phrased, is that the emotional intimacy of the primary relationship is sacred and must be protected at all costs. Either partner may have sex with a person more than once, but again, only so long as this does not represent commitment to a new relationship. Like Alan and Sergio, Mark and his partner ‘talk about who we see and what we do’.

Of the four men, only Donald does not refer to rules for the conduct of his open relationship. The decision to open their relationship was not mutual. Donald is 52 and works in public relations. In this extract, he explains that he and his partner are experimenting with an open relationship that involves more ‘than just sex’, by which he means that his partner has begun to become emotionally involved with the other man. Donald says that he would like to believe that it is possible to negotiate such a relationship but it is clear in what follows that it is not easy for him.

The loving relationship that I have with my partner is going through a challenging time because we are exploring open relationships, which are much more than just sex outside the relationship. And that is quite a dominant theme in my life. I believe that monogamy is a social construct but I can’t help getting a bit jealous from time to time. The other man doesn’t know what he wants, which is tricky for my partner. And then there is me and I know that if I am just patient things will work out.

This open relationship, which is working in the partner’s favour, has come to dominate Donald’s life because it is ‘more than just sex outside the relationship’. Donald tries to justify and become accepting of the arrangement when he says that ‘monogamy is a social construct’, but it would appear that his position in the triangle is marked by powerlessness.

Emotionally, the open relationship is very risky, for, in most cases, one partner will be more eager than the other to arrange for ‘third-party’ sex. The need for rules suggests the men are aware, however, that such arrangements can cause emotional distress to one or other partner and they therefore make an effort to minimise it. The rules also seem like an attempt by the men to protect what is valuable in their relationship—for example, the intimate companionship they enjoy there and the other sources of meaning discussed in Part One—while, at the same time, enabling them to take part in the sexual opportunities the scene provides.

* * *

Conclusion.

In line with the findings of other published research, the stories of the men interviewed for this thesis show that a couple relationship is valued by gay men of all ages and classes. Where the findings here differ is in relation to the length of the couple relationships, which, as mentioned, are notable for their longevity. One possible explanation for the divergence may lie in the fact that the majority of men in this chapter...
sample are middle class, and their lives are, on the whole, less subject to the same pressures that Connell, Davis and Dowsett identify among men in working-class milieux or that were outlined in a separate piece of research by Dowsett and in the report by Chamberlain and Robinson.\textsuperscript{39}

In contrast to popular preconceptions, the interviewees’ stories suggest that, at least for a majority of the sample, their intimate life is characterised by a strong desire to pursue a couple relationship similar to the companionate marriage. Features of companionate love present in gay relationships include, for example, love, intimacy, companionship and sexual satisfaction, qualities the men said made a relationship meaningful for them. Their belief, too, that the relationship was the central focus of their life, corresponds to the focus of the companionate marriage, that is, the ‘emotional compatibility’ of the two parties. Nevertheless, there is also evidence from the stories of a small group of men in this sample of an interest in open relationships, that allow for sexual adventurism as well as the security of companionate love. Overall, the sexual and affective reality of the majority of the interviewees is one of relative fidelity, in its external form at least. This can be largely attributed to the impact of HIV-AIDS on the sexual behaviour and attitudes of gay men, and the greater acceptance of gay relationships in the wider society.

Chapter Eight. The intimate life of gay men (ii): family and friends.

‘You sometimes see the most amazing companionships or friendships or mateships that men of various ages have built.’ Ivan, 40.

* * *

Introduction.

Next to the couple relationship, which was examined in the previous chapter, the other important features of gay men’s intimate life are friendship and the relatively new ‘gay family’. Friendship between men is now a closely monitored relationship. This has not always been the case, however, for, as Philippe Ariès argues, adult friendships were once more frequent and less commented upon, retreating in the nineteenth century as the family gradually became the primary source of intimate relations. The simultaneous decline of male friendship and expansion of the family as wellspring of intimacy underlines a more recent argument, which Lynn Jamieson makes, that the couple is now the most significant intimate relationship.1 This argument is slightly at odds with my research findings which, as Part Two shows, reveal friendship as the paramount relationship of the men interviewed for this thesis. Friends are important to more of them than a couple relationship, and friends and relationship are considerably more important than natal family.2

Ariès also believed that the growing acceptance of homosexuality in the second half of the twentieth century—when friendship began to carry ‘sexual overtones’—may have assisted the decline of ‘personal friendship’.3 Similarly, Henning Bech argues that words like ‘friends’ and ‘friendship’ changed meaning among men during the twentieth century and ‘turned into purely homosexual terms, just as the reality they designated disappeared from everything but homosexuals’ relations’.4 While it was more usual twenty or thirty years ago, it is still possible today to hear a gay man’s partner referred to as his

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2 Fifty-two interviewees, or 65 per cent of the sample, chose friendship as one of the three most meaningful aspects of their life. As mentioned in the chapter on intimate life (i): couple relationships, 47 interviewees, or almost 60 per cent of the sample, chose relationship as one of the three most meaningful aspects of their life. See Appendix 1: Interview Schedule, question 10.


‘friend’. The consequence of this ‘sexualisation’ of male friendship has been to draw attention to any close friendship between two males because of its homosexual potential. For straight men, personal friendships are rare today also because there is very little space, according to Bech, for such a relationship in their intimate lives:

Where might such a friend be in a “heterosexual” man’s life? Not at home, since that is reserved for the wife and kids. Nor at work, because there he is mostly together with more than one man, and in any case work itself is the primary concern in that context. Where then? In the gaps between home and work he is usually either with his family (at the movies, for example, or on a Sunday outing); or he is alone (in the car, in the supermarket); or if he is with other men, it is always in the plural or always subordinated to some other purpose (soccer, politics). If there is room at all for a friend in a man’s life, it must apparently be found in the interim between the family he was born into and the one he will later enter, in other words, in the relatively unguarded niches of boyhood and youth; and even there the possibility is vanishing, since nine-year-olds are now expected to have girlfriends. Friendship between men is a social impossibility in modern societies, at least for most males.5

While it could be argued that Bech is too categorical—some straight men do manage to have close male friends—the tendency not to is still greater among men than among women. And, for gay men, there is no such constraint. They may, and do, as the research for this chapter shows, enjoy intimate, non-sexual friendships with men.

Whereas once the function of the family was to transmit ‘property and position from generation to generation’, it has come now to be much more an ‘emotional unit’.6 The nuclear family has evolved as an intensely private institution whose central focus is the affective relations of its members. While the family is predominantly a heterosexual institution, there are gay versions of it, and these are examined in this chapter as examples of what I have called the ‘gay family’.

The question of homosexual parents and the families they create is not new. Barry Dank first raised it in the early 1970s when he discussed the variety of parents in a North American gay sub-culture. Then John Boswell suggested that its practice had been hidden but widespread in European societies since Antiquity. He said that, with the exception of priests and other members of the clergy, most of the gay men he wrote about in Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality were married and had children.

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The reason for the ‘persistence of the belief in the non-reproductivity of gay people’, he continued, lies in a tendency to notice ‘what is unusual about individuals rather than what is expected’. Few people, for example, would be likely to recall that Oscar Wilde and Edward II were fathers, even though they ‘devoted the bulk (if not the entirety) of their erotic interest to persons of their own gender. But the fact remains that they married and had children’.7

From his study of the gay milieu in a North American city, Dank identified four types of homosexual parents. The first were gay people who were formerly married: ‘There are many persons who played the role of husband and father—generally before they decided they were homosexual’. Second, there were homosexual couples who raised adopted children or children from a former marriage; in the main these couples have been lesbian. Third were couples where one parent was homosexual and they remained married. Finally, there were ‘front’ marriages where both man and woman were gay and decided to marry and to ‘pass’ as a married couple: they adopted children or had children of their own. ‘[S]uch marriages’, said Dank, ‘are for purposes of social convenience’.8

More recently, the definition of gay family has expanded to include persons who are neither kith nor kin. Jeffrey Weeks refers to this new social form as the ‘family of choice’. Elsewhere it has also been known as the ‘alternative family’, and sometimes the ‘elective family’.9 Sociologist Michael Pollak detected a gay version of the alternative family in the early 1980s:

Little groups of friends, often former lovers who in the past have all had sexual relations with each other, form a sort of “extended homosexual family” … “Brother” or “little brother” is often the special name for those former lovers with whom the ups and downs of life together, as well as a common vocation, have been shared.10

When Weeks speaks of family of choice, however, he has in mind ‘extended networks of support’ that gay people create: ‘a sense of self-worth and cultural confidence is realized in and through the friendship networks that we describe as family of choice’. He defines family of choice as a friendship network that may also comprise relatives, as well as the lovers and former lovers to whom Pollak referred. In the eyes of Weeks’s respondents, the family of choice is not a substitute and is ‘as real as the family of origin’.11

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8 Barry M. Dank 1971 ‘Coming out in the gay world’ Psychiatry, 34, p. 182, footnote 8.
10 Michael Pollak 1986 ‘Male homosexuality—or happiness in the ghetto’ in Ariès & Béjin Western Sexuality, p. 52.
11 Weeks Sexual History, pp. 218–19.
Very few men interviewed for this thesis understand or use family in Weeks’s sense, however. The family types that do exist in their experience are as follows. In the first place, as mentioned earlier, they all speak of their experience with their natal family. Second, a substantial minority of men who were formerly married have families that comprise their gay partner and the children of a former marriage, or, in some cases, of two marriages, that is, where both men were formerly married and each one has children from his marriage.\textsuperscript{12} Third, one interviewee and his partner formed a family unit with a lesbian couple and the biological child of the interviewee and one of the women. Fourth, another interviewee and his male partner created a family closely resembling the nuclear family, and referred to below as the ‘gay nuclear family’. Finally, two interviewees consciously constructed a family consisting of friends, former lovers and perhaps siblings, in other words, something that approaches Weeks’s family of choice. Four of these family types are discussed in Part One. In Part Two, the discussion centres on friendship and its role in the affective life of gay men.

* * *

Part one. The gay family.

In the discussion that follows, gay family is understood to refer to, first, a group of people comprising the children and partner of a gay man who was previously married or in a heterosexual relationship; second, a group consisting of two sets of parents—a gay couple and a lesbian couple—who between them conceive and give birth to a child; third, a gay couple who create a gay nuclear family consisting of themselves and children; finally, an extension of what Jeffrey Weeks describes as the family of choice, that is, a group of people comprising the friends, relatives, lover and perhaps former lovers of a gay man.

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Formerly married men. Men who were formerly married comprise less than one fifth of the sample.\textsuperscript{13} In all, slightly more than 60 per cent of the formerly married men are in the old cohort. Of those, four were married for more than thirty years and all have children. Two of them, Leslie (aged 74) and John (aged 65), are in gay relationships of twenty years or longer. In the middle cohort, there are five men who were formerly married. The man in this cohort who was married for the longest period of time (twenty years) is a fifty-year-old with two sons and two daughters. All such men in the middle cohort have children from their former marriages. One, Ross (aged 54), has two grandchildren as well. Among the young men, none

\textsuperscript{12} Such arrangements are known as ‘overlapping’ or ‘serial’ families. See Beck and Beck-Gernsheim \textit{The Normal Chaos of Love}, p. 170.

\textsuperscript{13} Formerly married men are: Gerald (79), Leslie (74), John (65), Oscar (65), Clive (64), Terrence (64), Douglas (63), Edward (60), Roy (58), Ross (54), Henry (50), Trevor (49), and Scott (45).
has been married. There are in the young cohort, however, two men who belong to different forms of the gay family and their circumstances are discussed in a later section of this part of the chapter.14

The stories the men tell about relations with their children and wife vary. At one extreme are stories of retaining close contact with their children or with their children and their wife, while at the other extreme there are men who do not mention them at all. Two interviewees stand out as making considerable efforts to maintain relations with their children and their former wives as well as with their natal family. They are Ross (54) and Terrence (64). Ross lives with his partner, Glenn, and his former wife lives in a neighbouring suburb. He keeps in touch with his ex-wife for a number of reasons. First, says Ross, their ‘similar ideas about parenting’ help them to maintain contact, and then their two grand-daughters ‘keep us together’, he says. In addition, he keeps alive connections with his natal family: ‘I have a good family life and I enjoy the memories and the feelings that I have from my family’. He specifically keeps in touch with his mother and his sister. Ross says that his relationships, and especially his relationship with Glenn, give him the sense that they are a ‘family unit’, which is made easier by the fact that, as he says, ‘my daughter and grand-daughters like Glenn as much as I do’.

Terrence is older than Ross by a decade. He never told his parents about his homosexuality or his relationship with Jock, his partner. He was married for twenty years and has two adult children. He is now in the twenty-second year of his relationship with Jock. Terrence said that his relations with his daughter are very good but are somewhat distant with his son, who, he said, ‘rings every now and again but not as much as I would like him to’. Before his mother died, she always included Terrence and Jock in family gatherings, even though she did not know, or, if she did, she did not let on that she knew, about their relationship. Terrence said that his mother and Jock ‘got on a treat’: ‘Jock was great to her. Even when she was in a nursing home and with dementia, he would spend time with her’. He said that his sisters accept him and his relationship with Jock, even though the one who lives in the country is, as he said, ‘a bit precious and born-again’.

None of the formerly married men shares a house with his children, wife, siblings, or parents. As well, not one of the men has created a household comprising himself, his partner, and his children from a former marriage, though most of the men relate stories about their children or their partner’s children staying with them. None has created a formally constituted alternative family of this type *under one roof*. Their kinship relations are more loosely based.

*14 Tony (33) and Joseph (35).*
Co-parenting. A less well-known form of family is the one created when two homosexual couples agree to be co-parents.\footnote{See Weeks \textit{Sexual History}, pp. 224–6.} Two couples, one of gay men and the other of lesbians, will between them conceive and give birth to a child. There are other configurations. For example, a gay man may donate sperm to a lesbian or heterosexual couple who want to conceive, or to a single straight woman. The man may choose to have no relations with the child or may wish to be fully involved in its life and upbringing.\footnote{In \textit{Australian Story} (ABC television, 29 May 2006), a gay man in Sydney, Paul van Reyk, described his role in co-parenting arrangements with, or as anonymous sperm donor for, lesbian couples and single women.}

Parenting experiments such as these are not uncommon nowadays. What is remarkable, however, is that people are ‘yearning to have children’ by such unconventional means, ‘often to the exclusion of all other interests’, when the birth rate is falling, and also that they want to create non-traditional family arrangements at a time when the divorce rate is rising.\footnote{Beck & Beck-Gernsheim \textit{Normal Chaos}, p. 173.}

Only one interviewee in the sample has a story to relate of being a co-parent. Because of the significance of this social experiment, this section is devoted to the experience of that interviewee, who, with his partner and two lesbians, is a parent of a small child. Tony (aged 33) works in a professional occupation and lives with William, his partner, who is 38. They have been together for nine years. Tony says that he cannot imagine his life without a set of relationships that are important to him, among which are those with his partner, daughter and co-parents, mother and siblings, and friends.

Asked to tell the story of his daughter’s life, he began by saying that he had always known he would be a parent: ‘I did not know how it would happen but I always knew that I would. It was something that was very important to me’. He helped his parents bring up his younger siblings and ‘enjoyed spending time with kids’. Tony admits that he was more determined than his partner to begin the project of having a child: ‘My partner put it out of his mind. It was not until I started talking about it that it came on to the agenda. I drove it in our relationship’. Through mutual friends, Tony and William met a lesbian couple who also wanted to have a baby.

The two couples did not undertake the project of having a child lightly. First, they agreed to spend twelve months getting to know each other, during which time they spent six months together in family therapy. ‘It was an incredible journey we went through’, said Tony. ‘There were lots of tears. It was an amazing way to get to know people.’ Second, they drew up a formal agreement of their ‘understandings of issues about child rearing’. And, as Tony says, everything was covered: ‘From what
football club she would follow to what school she would go to, what religion she would belong to and what name she would have’.

In retrospect, Tony believes that the decision to record formally their understandings about their child’s upbringing was vital not simply as ‘a process of documentation’, as Tony calls it, but because it allowed them to discuss areas of potential conflict. Such parenting experiments are known to be complex, if not problematic. If there had been any disputes, says Tony, ‘it would have been a red light’ for him and his partner. In the end, the process achieved two things for the parents: first, it was a means of understanding each other, and, second, the document made clear that all the parents were to have ‘a say in bringing up the child. All of us agreed that the four of us have those rights’.

After a ‘cooling-off’ period, the two couples met and agreed to conceive. Their daughter was born in 2003. In the following extract, Tony describes how he and William share their daughter with her mothers, and how he resents having to ‘give her up’ for what feels to him like a very long time each week.

We see her one day every weekend and on Wednesday nights we have family dinner. No one is allowed to miss family dinner. As my daughter gets older we will have her more and more. When she is three she will start to do sleepovers with us without the girls. By the end of primary school it will be 50-50. It has been difficult for me because I want to be a full-time parent and the only reason I compromised is because it is in her best interests. It breaks my heart to have to drop her off every Sunday night. Last Sunday we were saying goodbye and she said that she did not like saying goodbye to daddy. It will get better.

At present Tony and William are only part-time parents. He clearly wants a more equal share of time with his daughter but seems reconciled to the program that the four parents agreed to while she is an infant. At present, the child seems to be a pawn in their arrangements. How the girl will wish to divide her time and live her life when she grows older is another question. Exciting as the experiment is, all four parents will have to come to terms with allowing the child to be herself. As Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb observed in *The Hidden Injuries of Class*, treating children as possessions or puppets is a dangerous social practice: ‘[Living] a vicarious life through one’s children … carries with it enormous dangers. For children are not merely extensions of oneself, embodiments of one’s dreams, but independent beings themselves’.

Social experiments such as this are evidence, says Jeffrey Weeks, of a generational shift in the gay milieu. In the past, gay parents were mainly women or men, like those discussed in the previous section,

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18 See Weeks *Sexual History*, pp. 225–6.


20 Weeks *Sexual History*, p. 225.
who had children from a former heterosexual relationship. Nowadays, however, gay and lesbian couples are more willing to use each other’s reproductive capabilities to have children in arrangements such as Tony described. As well, a ‘reproductive technology’ has developed that is, according to Elizabeth Beck-Gernsheim, ‘clearing the way for new forms of parenthood’. In the following, she outlines some of the ethical choices it creates:

[S]hould the possibilities of artificial insemination be open only to married women, on the grounds that marriage still offers the best protection for the child’s welfare? Or should they be open to anyone who so wishes—including unmarried and homosexual couples or women without a partner—on the grounds that the child’s need will be for care and affection, not an official rubber stamp? Or is the idea to uphold in principle the right of the most diverse lifestyles to exist, but to require, in the name of the child’s welfare (defined how?), at least a stable partnership for the application of medical technology to planned parenthood?

In Australia, despite the parenting experiments of gay and lesbian couples and single women, reproductive technology is still largely restricted to straight couples, and the public debate about other forms of parenthood has not yet progressed beyond platitudes and stereotypes.

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The discussion here of the remaining two categories of the gay family—the gay ‘nuclear family’ and the family of choice—relies on the testimony of only one interviewee from this sample: a man from the young cohort who is in his mid-thirties. While what he has to say in relation to family of choice is interesting, and corroborates Jeffrey Weeks’s claim that such social experiments are taking place in the West, it is important to note that its practice is not widespread among Australian gay men, as represented by those in this sample.

Moreover, as the discussion in Part Two shows, the overwhelming majority of men interviewed for this thesis regard friendship as the paramount relationship, which, on the whole, they keep separate from their other intimate relationships. There is very little evidence of the interviewees ‘blending’ the elements of their intimate lives in the way that Michael Pollak described in his outline of the ‘homosexual extended family’ or that Jeffrey Weeks suggested in his definition of family of choice. And the only

21 Beck-Gernsheim Reinventing the Family, p. 97.


23 Regulations governing access to medically assisted artificial insemination vary from state to state. They are less restrictive in NSW than they are in Victoria, and lesbians and single mothers, for example, may have access to this form of fertility treatment in NSW when prohibited from doing so in Victoria. See report in the Age, 26 April 2006.
interviewee who refers to his friendship network as ‘family’ is Joseph, who is the subject of the following discussion on gay nuclear family and family of choice.

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**Gay nuclear family.** Joseph and his partner are foster parents of two children. Joseph is 35, works in the health sector and lives in a capital city. He and his partner have been together for eleven years. Joseph says his family is important to him ‘both in the biological sense and the constructed sense’. He means natal family when he uses the word, ‘biological’, to describe one part of his family, and, when he speaks of family in the ‘constructed sense’, he is referring to the nuclear family that he and his partner have created, and also to his family of choice, as we shall see below. In the following extract he explains why his constructed family can be defined as a nuclear family.

> I have quite consciously constructed a family in the last few years with my partner and our two kids. I am not a traditionalist in thinking that the nuclear family is the only way to go but I think that a household with more than one adult that cares for kids is a family.

Joseph’s definition differs from accepted understandings of nuclear family in the same way that do heterosexual families with adopted or fostered children and as de facto couplings do—that is, he does not require that the children and adults be kin, viz., related by blood or marriage. Joseph and his partner, Scott, are foster parents. Neither church nor state has sanctioned their relationship. Nonetheless, Joseph believes that he has ‘constructed a family … with my partner and our two kids’. What he seems to be saying is that he has collected together the component parts of a family and assembled them in such a way that they serve their intended purpose, which Joseph believes is to provide love and care for the children. This has been one of the principal functions of the modern family since it came into being in the late Middle Ages, or, as Georg Simmel, explains: ‘The major social purpose of a secure marriage was obviously the better care for the offspring which it could guarantee, and which already led to marriage-like unions in the animal world’.24 Finally, Joseph boasts, as would any parent, that he loves that he can provide the boys with ‘something that feels like a family’. And there is evidence that gay couples and lesbian couples have been and are raising children with the same purpose in mind.25

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25 See report in the *Age*, 16 August 2003, in which a journalist claims gay couples are using surrogate mothers in the USA to provide them with children.
**Family of choice.** As already mentioned, this term is used to describe a form of friendship network that includes not only friends, but also relatives, lovers and former lovers. While it is true that both straight and gay people may be experimenting with this relatively new social form, it has a different meaning for gay people as Weeks explains:

> [T]here are clear overlaps between homosexual choices and the choices of many self-identified heterosexuals. But for non-heterosexuals the idea of a *chosen* family is a powerful signifier of a fresh start, of affirming a new sense of belonging, that becomes an essential part of asserting the validity of homosexual ways of life.\(^{26}\)

Some gay people may create a family of choice to substitute for their natal family, although this is not Joseph’s situation, and it is not the situation of Weeks’s respondents.\(^{27}\) Joseph explains that his family of choice exists side by side with his natal family. In effect, it is an extension of his natal family. He sees more of his family of choice because his parents and siblings live interstate. ‘They are scattered all over the place’, says Joseph.

When explaining why his natal family is important to him, it is clear that Joseph sees it as a source of his identity (and origins): ‘They are a big part of my sense of self in terms of where I have come from and what it means to be me now’. It is at this point in the interview that Joseph expounds on how his family of choice exists along side his natal family.

But I see my family as broader than the people who I am related to by blood. I include in it some of the heterosexual friends that I have had for decades. One in particular was a best friend at school and still is a best friend. He and his wife live around the corner from us now and I see them absolutely as family. My ex-partner and some of my close friends are family to me in the same way.

* * *

Part two. Friendships.

Friends are without doubt the central feature of the affective life of the gay men interviewed for this dissertation: almost two-thirds of the men in the sample declared that friends are an important feature of their lives. As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, the fact that friendship is important to more men in this sample than a couple relationship contrasts with Lynn Jamieson’s claim that the couple is the significant intimate relationship today.\(^{28}\) There are two likely reasons that the situation for gay men


\(^{27}\) *Weeks Sexual History*, p. 219.

\(^{28}\) Jamieson ‘The couple’, p. 265.
differs from what may exist more generally—that is, why friendship, rather than the couple relationship, remains their principal intimate relationship.

First, even though, as previously shown, one third of the men in this sample are in long-term relationships, the majority of them are not. They are either single or they are in relationships of fewer than seven years’ duration. The intimate couple life of these interviewees may thus consist of a series of short-term relationships interspersed with periods when they are single. If it does or if a gay man spends the bulk of his adult life single, friends may assume a more important role in his intimate life, as they also tend to do for single women. Friends are likely therefore to represent a source of constancy between relationships or indefinitely. In other words, friends may provide a web of intimacy that other gay men, who are in permanent couple relationships, find within their relationship.

This picture is reinforced by the second reason the intimate life of gay men may differ from the general one Lynn Jamieson outlined, which is that the majority of interviewees in this sample do not regard their natal family as an important source of meaning. This may be a legacy of coming out: the type of relations gay men maintain with their natal family largely depends on the level of acceptance or rejection they experienced when they announced their homosexuality. Friends will take the place in their intimate lives that their families vacate if that response is negative. Roger (aged 44), for example, said that he would probably replace family with friends:

I do not find my biological family, except for my mother, in any way important. I rarely see my sisters and their children. There would be half a dozen people who I would regard as my family, but I have never lived with them and could not bear to. [Laughs]

Friends may therefore assume a pre-eminent role in the intimate lives of the men in this sample, and among gay men more generally, because relatively few of them are in long-term relationships or have meaningful links with their natal family. In the remaining sections, discussion focuses in more detail on why the interviewees regard friendship as paramount.

Each age cohort has a slightly different set of reasons for valuing friendship. Men from all three cohorts agree, however, that the most vital attribute of friendship is social interaction. Its next most desirable quality—in the eyes of interviewees from the old and the young cohorts, but not the middle

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29 See discussion in chapter on the intimate life of gay men (i): couple relationships.

30 Thirty-one men, or slightly less than 40 per cent of the interviewees, were not in a relationship. Meanwhile, 20 men, or one quarter of interviewees, were in relationships of fewer than seven years’ duration.

31 Forty-six interviewees, or close to 58 per cent of the sample, omitted any mention of family as a source of meaning. See Appendix 1: Interview Schedule, question 10.
one—is the mutual exchange of care and support. Friends may be more important to interviewees in the old and young cohorts because they also provide a support network in times of crisis, such as arise from accidents or accommodation difficulties. These impact more heavily on people who are vulnerable, more of whom are likely to be found among the old and the young than the middle-aged.

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For the men in the old cohort, social interaction is the single most important attribute of friendship, followed by the mutual exchange of care and support. In the following section, five men, all in their sixties, speak about the importance of social interaction with their friends; then one man in his seventies describes the place of giving and receiving in his friendships.

Terrence is proud that he and his partner, Jock, regularly host parties for their friends and acquaintances: ‘Out in the back room we have had twenty-eight people for sit-down dinners on a couple of occasions. One was for my sixtieth birthday. I also did it for Jock’s birthday’. It is a tradition with their friends to have lunch with Terrence and Jock at Christmas: ‘We also have twenty-six for Christmas. We have the waifs and strays in the gay world’. Lindsay similarly places a great value on his circle of friends and on maintaining contact. ‘I place a lot of emphasis on keeping in touch with people. I telephone people to say “Hello” every week.’ From his description, Lindsay appears to be the hub of his circle:

I maintain quite a lot of correspondence on the Internet with friends and people that I have known in places that I have lived before. The twenty or thirty that I keep in contact with are very important. I would do something every day towards nurturing them or keeping in touch.

Maurice (aged 65) also values his friends and says that ‘without friends life would be dreary’. His circle is smaller than Lindsay’s, for he believes that ‘you do not have time for more than two or three close friends’.

Slightly at variance with the other men, Brendan understands friendship in the context of his Christian beliefs: ‘we come to understand our spirituality through our friendships and through our love for other people’. Nevertheless, Brendan echoes the views of other men in the old cohort when he says that friends make his life worthwhile. He also believes—in a somewhat doctrinaire fashion, perhaps—that a

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32 Fourteen men, or 64 per cent of the old cohort, said friendship was meaningful. Ten men gave social interaction as the reason and four men said it was because of the exchange of care and support. The men who cited social interaction were Geoffrey (69), Charles (67), Kenneth (65), Oscar (65), Maurice (65), John (65), Terrence (64), Brendan (64), Lindsay (62) and Barry (62). Those who cited mutual care and support were Gerald (75), Harold (71), Charles (67) and Terrence (64). Two men fell into neither category and they were Chester (71) and Kelvin (66).

33 Charles (67), Maurice (65), Terrence (64), Brendan (64), Lindsay (62) and Harold (71).
person can only experience what is good in life in the company of friends: ‘I love the things that are associated with friendship, like a meal with friends. You cannot experience music and wine on your own; you only experience them with friends’.

Charles’s consciousness of the value of friendship has particular poignancy. In the six months before our interview, two of his close long-term friends had died: ‘Doug who I met when I was twenty-two. That is forty-six years ago. And Clarke who I knew for forty-seven years died in New York last week. So it has not been a good six months’.

Four men in the old cohort maintained that friends were important because of an understood moral economy of giving and receiving. This is the unspoken value that all men in the old cohort, and in the other cohorts, place on, and hope to find in, their friendships. Harold, who says that friends are crucial because they are ‘relationships where you share and give and receive’, represents the views of these four men here. He describes an incident that occurred before our interview—the sort of incident that is a commonplace in the lives of people in their seventies—when because, as he says, ‘none of my family lives near me now’, he had to call on a friend for help when he was in hospital: ‘I was in for two weeks because my heart played up a bit. One friend in particular came and got everything from home for me and did everything for me’. While it is relatively normal for a heterosexual family to collect the belongings of a seventy-year-old relative and take him to hospital—as it is for single women, who do this for one another all the time—in the life of a single man such as Harold its significance is quite different. Harold is proud of his relationship with his friend, which is platonic, because it is one of those relationships that, he says, ‘gives meaning to my life’.

Social interaction is also regarded as friendship’s prime attribute by the interviewees from the middle cohort. However, unlike the views of the men from the old cohort, only one man from this cohort regards the exchange of care and support as important, and a large group of men understand social interaction as significant because it provides continuity or substance to their lives. Their sentiments are represented here by the stories of two men in their fifties and three in their forties.

Enduring friendships are meaningful for Bill (aged 52) because they provide a degree of consistency in his life: ‘They have always been there in an unquestioning way and the sense that they have been has always been there’. For Nigel (aged 49), too, ‘friends are probably the most important thing in

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34 Twenty men, or two-thirds of the middle cohort, said that friendship was meaningful. They were Lionel (59), Noel (58), Samuel (57), Thomas (52), Michael (52), Graham (52), Bill (52), Henry (50), Des (50), Trevor (49), Nigel (49), Jerome (49), Bob (48), Alan (47), Simon (46), Scott (45), James (45), Roger (44), Matthew (42) and Ken (40). One man cited mutual care and support as an important attribute of friendship and he was Bob (48).

35 Bill (52), Michael (52), Nigel (49), Jerome (49) and James (45).
life’. And old friends are especially important: ‘I can talk to them and say things that they understand’. James’s account is slightly different from Bill and Nigel’s in that, as a young adult, he made a project of forming friendships. He is 45 and grew up in a large country town. He lived in London in his twenties and now lives with his partner in a southern capital city. During the course of the interview, he reflected on how few friends he made when he was a teenager and that, when he left the boarding school he attended, he made friends a ‘career for a time in my life’.

One of the directions I wanted to take when I left school was to find friends. Most of my friends at school were people who were on the outside. When I left school I was not thinking about work or career. I was desperately looking for friends. That was the really important part. I am pretty sure that these friends were gay or bisexual. I think in retrospect that the motivation to look for alternative people was part of my search for gay sex. It was the gay sexuality. It was the gay identity. That would have been a part of what I was doing.

James is not indiscriminate in the friends he makes and yet also admits to a confusion of sex and friendship. He is proud that he still has friends in London whom he sees whenever he travels to the United Kingdom. ‘I tend to hold on to people who I want to keep as friends.’

In the remaining accounts from the middle cohort two interviewees explain how social interaction augments their lives. Michael (aged 52) was a gay liberation activist in his youth. He says that he cannot imagine how life would be without friends. Perhaps rather grandly, he says that they are ‘existence’: ‘They reflect you. It is a matter of sharing. I share my life with my friends and they share their life with me’. Jerome (aged 49) says that he recently met a man who is 35 and has no gay friends:

He lives with a lover, but I am astounded that none of his friends are gay. I don’t understand how he lives because I could not do it. I need people to talk to. I need to be able to have a girlie laugh with someone or need to have a shriek! I need to have other people around me that are the same.

Jerome likes the company of people who share similar values, sense of humour and sexual identity. Part of the reason he needs to be able to socialise with friends with whom he can share ‘a girlie laugh’ or ‘a shriek’ may lie in the fact that he is a manager in a large company where all the other senior managers are straight. His social life is less exclusively gay now than it was: ‘When I was younger it had to be totally gay. I wasn’t interested otherwise’. He is certain that he will never reach a stage when he does not need gay friends: ‘I would always need to have gay friends, and I think when I get older or retire that this need may be even more important’.

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As with the other cohorts, the interviewees from the young cohort regard social interaction with friends as the essence of friendship. For them, it provides an opportunity to share views and values and common interests. Friends are also valuable to them because of the support they give each other, a quality that the men in the old cohort referred to as well.\(^{36}\) Their views are represented here by the stories of two men in their thirties and two in their twenties.\(^{37}\)

Friendship is paramount for the two men in their thirties because, in the words of one of them, it provides them with ‘new ideas or new outlooks’. It is the relationship they most value because it allows them to test out their beliefs and build their sense of self. Robert is 38 and lives in an inner suburb of a capital city. He and his partner have been in a relationship for three years and have lived together for two. For Robert, the value of friends partly lies in their capacity to challenge him and act as a catalyst for change. He says: ‘I find that my friends and the new people I meet stimulate me’. Friends of long standing are particularly valuable because ‘they share your history with you. In many ways my friends provide a shared narrative to life. For other people that would be the gay community but for me because I came out late it is my friends’. Elsewhere in the interview he indicates that his mother was not accepting of his homosexuality.

The other man in his thirties is Daniel. He says that his friends are ‘like mirrors’ in the sense that their views reflect his influence on them, and vice versa. He does not mean that he has a narcissistic relationship with them: ‘I think that I most clearly get a sense of my place in the world from the relationships I have with my friends’. Thus the connection with them is reciprocal. Moreover, Daniel describes the influence his friends have on him in terms similar to those that Robert uses—that is, they act as catalysts for change and personal development:

I have friends who genuinely challenge me to explore bits of me that I would not otherwise explore, or challenge me to do things that I would not otherwise do. If I think back, it has been the friends who have performed that function whom I most value.

Like the men in the old cohort, the young men also value friends because of a moral economy of recognised giving and receiving. Mark, who is 25, and Ian, who is 28, represent their views here. Mark is a university graduate and has been with his partner for four years. He says that friends have been indispensable to him since he left secondary school—for the exchange of care and support, and the company they provide. ‘I love reading and I love thinking but I love being with my friends more. I enjoy the interaction and the support and just “hanging out.”’

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\(^{36}\) Eighteen men, or 64 per cent of the young cohort, said that friendship was meaningful. They were Roger (38), Andy (37), Alex (37), Jeremy (36), Joseph (35), Jason (35), Daniel (35), Julius (34), Tony (33), Luke (32), Brian (30), Adrian (30), Ian (28), Harry (28), Mark (25), Lachlan (24), Angus (23) and Jack (22). Three men cited mutual care and support as an important attribute of friendship and they were Daniel (35), Luke (32) and Ian (28).

\(^{37}\) Robert (38), Daniel (35), Ian (28) and Mark (25).

Chapter Eight. The intimate life of gay men (ii): family and friends. 151
Ian gives a more detailed account of the value of mutual exchange in friendship. He believes friends and family are similar in importance: together they provide a ‘support network that is always there’:

They are people to go to when you need help and someone to bounce off. I have a close family. I have a close-knit group of friends, although a lot of them have moved interstate recently. I have lost about six friends in the last six months. Trying to re-build a circle of friends can be difficult and it is something that I am trying to do because it is important to do it.

What does Ian’s extract tell us? In the first place, both his family and friends are ‘close-knit’ groups. Second, he regards each as an indispensable source of support and succour. Third, proximity is vital for the maintenance of his friendship group, because frequent interstate travel is impractical and costly and because it is incompatible with the close and immediate social interaction that he and his friends, and perhaps also other single people in their twenties, require in order to maintain their friendships.

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Conclusion.

When it was not safe for gay men to be open about their sexuality, they often married or had de facto heterosexual relationships, kept their sexuality a secret and became parents. This is the origin of the most common form of ‘gay family’ and is well represented in the life histories of men in this sample.

When times were more propitious, some of these men separated from their wife or female partner. One of the options that may subsequently have been available to them then was to establish a gay family with their same-sex partner and their children. Notably, none of the men in this sample created such a gay family under one roof. It was more common for the interviewees to create a looser intimate network, which they still termed ‘family’, where the members met regularly or occasionally—for example, for a weekly dinner—but did not live together as a household.

The interviewees’ experience with three other forms of gay family, viz., co-parenting, gay nuclear family and family of choice, was largely restricted to two young men, both of whom were in their thirties. Children were involved in both cases. While these social experiments help to re-frame and extend notions of the family, the men’s motives appeared more related to their own needs, particularly in the case of the interviewee and his partner who arranged with a lesbian couple to be co-parents of their own child. One interpretation of their endeavours is that, notwithstanding the care with which they prepared for parenthood and looked after the child, the interviewee and his partner seem to have created a family to provide for their own satisfaction. If this is so, it may suggest that a couple relationship will not fully
satisfy the affective needs of all gay men, that some may want more and may hope to find it in this type of gay family.

Friendship, on the other hand, was central and crucial to the affective lives of the vast majority of men in this sample. Its chief attributes were social interaction and mutual exchange of care and support. For the men in the old and young cohorts, these were the bases of their support networks.

How the interviewees understood social interaction varied by age cohort. In the old cohort it was the means by which the men maintained their social networks. By contrast, the men from the middle cohort understood it as a source of continuity and substance in their life projects. The young men, meanwhile, regarded social interaction as friendship’s most significant attribute because—as with most young people, gay and straight—it is with friends that they exchange views and share values and common interests. In doing so, it seems that they are engaged in a process of developing and reinforcing their sense of self. In other words, the young gay men seem to be testing out their identity, as young homosexuals, through social interaction with friends, gay and possibly straight. Few, if any, men in the other cohorts made similar claims.

One explanation for this difference may lie in the life stages of the interviewees. Apart from those who have come out later in life, it is among the young cohort that we find the greatest concentration of men most recently out. As discussed in Chapters Two, Three and Four, coming out is not an overnight transition. It can take some men as long as twenty years, or more, to complete. Among other things, coming out often involves a sorting through of old friends and the making of new ones, a re-working of identity. This reconstitution of identity may take many forms. For most it will involve the selection of friends who share similar values and views. Of importance to men who have come out or who are coming out are friends who, in the words of an interviewee from the young cohort, provide a ‘shared narrative’. The reason therefore that we may find fewer men or none in the middle and old cohorts who see this as an important quality of friendship is that many more of them will have completed their coming out and are likely to be more certain of their sexual identity and who they are in the world.
Chapter Nine. Life as an old gay man.

“There used to be the notion that old gay men were sad and lonely but I think that has evaporated and now they are seen as no more or less sad than anyone else is.” Chester, 71.

* * *

Introduction.

At the heart of this chapter are two aspects of human identity that are rarely joined together: homosexuality and ageing. Earlier discussion of the gay scene showed that a powerful public narrative exists that portrays homosexuality in terms of youthfulness and young bodies. It is rarely associated with growing old or being old. The purpose of this chapter is to establish what if any link exists between the interviewees’ gayness and the ease or difficulty with which they live their lives as old men. Its central argument is that age segregation occurs among gay men because the gay scene valorises youthful bodies and worships the cult of the body even more than Western society generally.

Depending on their occupation and career, and their relationship status, it is possible for gay men to experience all that heterosexuals experience as they age. The only intimate relationships that are absent from the middle age and old age of most gay men are those with their own children or grandchildren, but, as mentioned earlier, even these relationships may be part of some gay men’s intimate lives. In addition, some scholars have suggested that, because of their coming-out experiences or the discrimination they may have faced during their life, gay men often manage later life relatively well, if not better than some of their heterosexual counterparts.¹ Not all members of the old cohort examined here have come out but the majority has.

Other scholars have argued that ideas like ‘youth’ and ‘age’ are cultural products: that the meaning we ascribe to these depends on the value that the society we belong to accords them.² A person’s attitude to age and ageing is also likely to vary according to his or her age and sex and generation. In this


sample of interviewees, for instance, the facts of being old and having experienced the process of ageing are the lived experiences of men in the old cohort. For members of the middle cohort and the young cohort, however, ageing and old age are largely imagined conditions, for, as Norbert Elias wrote,

normal age groups … often have difficulty in empathizing with older people in their experience of ageing—understandably. For most younger people have no basis in their experience for imagining how it feels when muscle tissue gradually hardens and perhaps becomes fatty, when connective tissue multiplies and cell renewal slows down.3

The men in the middle cohort may have greater empathy for the experiences of the old cohort by virtue of their own lived experience and their place in the life course. But, because old age is so far removed from their experience of life, and empathy for the old is not encouraged in Western society today, the men from the young cohort are likely to regard it only in abstract terms, if it enters their purview at all.

A large majority of men in this sample said that old gay men are viewed and treated as Other.4 At least three quarters of men in each cohort reported that old gay men were either invisible and ignored or treated with contempt in the gay milieu; the accounts of these interviewees are considered in Part Three and Part Four. Another group of men, comprising one fifth of the sample, said that old gay men are viewed as predatory beings, a prevalent, negative stereotype that has a long history; these accounts are discussed in Part Five.

Alongside the public narrative of the old gay man as predatory is another one that portrays old gay men as lonely; this persists in the gay milieu as well as among heterosexuals.5 It is clear that while a very small number of men were aware of this narrative or knew gay men who live lonely lives, it is not supported by the lived experience of the men in this sample and for this reason is not discussed in this thesis.6

Modifying these negative images of old gay men, but only very slightly, is the fact that one third of the men in the old cohort say they feel that they are respected and admired by other gay men, while a smaller number of men in the young cohort and the middle cohort say that old gay men are treated with

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4 The interviewees were asked, ‘What in your opinion is the attitude of other gay men to old gay men?’ See Appendix 1. Interview schedule, question 16.


6 Three men referred to this narrative. Two were from the young cohort (Drew, 39 and Lachlan, 24) and one was from the middle cohort (Kevin, 52). No men from the old cohort referred to it.
respect or admired; these positive views of the interviewees are the subject of Part Two. In Part One, a selection of men from the three age cohorts explains what age they regard as old and how they experience or understand it.

*   *

Part One. What old age means.

More than half the men in this sample understand ageing as a process of physical decline. When asked what picture they had of themselves as old gay men, forty-three interviewees associated old age with infirmity and frailty.\(^7\) The second most mentioned indicator of ageing was the deterioration of external appearances (for example, skin or hair), to which seventeen men referred, or just over one fifth of the sample.\(^8\) A substantial majority of those interviewed for this thesis therefore understands ageing to be associated with the slowing down or deterioration of the body.\(^9\)

All interviewees were asked if they regarded themselves as old.\(^{10}\) The findings are revealing. In the old cohort, two men said they regarded themselves as old and four gave equivocal answers. Both men who regarded themselves as old are in their sixties. Interestingly, none of the men in their seventies did.\(^{11}\) Failure to identify themselves as old may arise from a dissonance between the internal view they have of themselves and the external view others have of them, which, Simone de Beauvoir explains, is the ‘complex truth’ of old age:

[T]he words “a sixty-year-old” interpret the same fact for everybody. They correspond to biological phenomenon that may be determined by examination. Yet our private, inward experience does not tell us the number of our years; no fresh perception comes into being to show us the decline of age.\(^{12}\)

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\(^7\) The interviewees were asked whether they regarded themselves as old and then what picture they had of themselves as old gay men. See Appendix 1. Interview schedule, question 17. The forty-three men who regarded physical decline as an indicator of old age comprised fourteen men (or sixty-four per cent) from the old cohort, eighteen men (or sixty per cent) from the middle cohort and eleven men (or thirty-nine per cent) from the young cohort.

\(^8\) The seventeen men who regarded deterioration of external appearances to be an indicator of old age comprised two men (or nine per cent) from the old cohort, six men (or twenty per cent) from the middle cohort and nine men (or thirty-two per cent) from the young cohort.

\(^9\) A total number of sixty men (or three quarters of the sample) understood old age as physical decline or deterioration of external appearances.

\(^{10}\) See Appendix 1. Interview schedule, question 17.

\(^{11}\) The two men from the old cohort who regarded themselves as old are Maurice (65) and Barry (62), and the four who gave equivocal answers are Vernon (75), Gerald (75), Kenneth (65) and Douglas (63).

\(^{12}\) Beauvoir \textit{Old Age}, p. 316.
At least two men from the old cohort reported experience of Beauvoir’s ‘complex truth’. A man in his mid-seventies found the interview question difficult to answer because ‘when you look out at the outside world, you do not really see yourself as old or getting old’. It was other people, said Gerald, whose ‘perceptions of you dictate that you are getting old’:

For example, I have white hair and have had for some years. There is a tendency for younger people on public transport to give you their seats. We [Gerald and his partner] are both still physically active. We are not bedridden; we are not crippled; we are not suffering ill health, which means that we are able to be active in lots of ways and as a consequence do not see ourselves as old.

Ten years younger than this man, John is another interviewee from the old cohort who shares a similar understanding of the distance between the way others view him and how he sees himself:

Inside I am still the same person I was when I was an eight-year-old kid. I can still see myself as that same kid, but the wrapping has changed. I would say that an eighty-year-old would be an old person, but I am old in the view of some people.

In the next stage of the discussion in Part One, the focus is, first, on the lived experience of the men from the old cohort, that is, people who would generally be considered old, even if very few of them see themselves as such. Their stories concern the association they make between ageing and physical decline. When the discussion turns to deterioration of external appearances, the focus shifts to stories from the middle cohort and young cohort.

When the fourteen men from the old cohort who associated physical decline with ageing spoke about it, they did so in the context of either an illness, and the incapacity it caused them, or a more general reduction in their physical capabilities. In this section, two men discuss old age in the context of illness and then three men speak about how it may lead to reduced capability.13

The two men made aware through illness of what old age may mean are Reginald (aged 79) and Edward (aged 60). Reginald worked all his life in mundane occupations and is now retired. He lives with his partner of nine years in a working-class suburb of a major capital city. Edward writes for a living, has a boy friend of six years and lives in an upper middle-class suburb in a capital city. Reginald says that, for as long as he can look after himself, he will not regard himself as old. But his first experience of what old

13 The two who speak about illness are Reginald (79) and Edward (60), and the three who speak about reduced capabilities are Vernon (75), Chester (71) and Ronald (68).
age may mean occurred when he recently fell ill: ‘I couldn’t get out of bed without help and I suddenly realised what was going to happen to me’. His fear of dependency is well founded, according to Elias:

The way in which people come to terms, as they grow older, with their greater dependence on others, a decrease of their power potential, differs from one person to the next … But it is perhaps useful to remember that some of the things old people do, in particular some of the strange things, have to do with their fear of losing power and independence and especially of losing control over themselves.14

Edward was also made aware of how illness may change a person’s understanding of their future life course and what he calls their ‘place in the queue’. He recently experienced a serious health scare:

My hearing deficits, sight failure, the cancer, all of these happened because I am not as young as I used to be. When I was almost 60, I had to think that I might be going to die, and that means you think about where your place is in the queue. As other people die around you, you get a sense of being closer to the head of the queue. However, I do not have that immediate sense of feeling old and decrepit.

The interviewees who associate old age with a general reduction in physical capabilities do not appear to experience it until they begin to approach seventy. Vernon (aged 75) is the oldest man to relate an account of the general physical decline he has experienced as he ages. He does not regard himself as old but confesses he can no longer do what he could when he was younger. One way he measures the effect of age is by the reduction in his sexual performance: ‘I have not been able for 12 years to be the active partner in any relationship, so certainly I have felt my age’. Chester did not begin to think about age until his seventieth birthday. And now, at seventy-one, while still not regarding himself as old, he has begun to notice ‘a certain diminution of physical things and little aches and pains and illnesses’. Ronald’s life path is similar to Chester’s. Still in his sixties, he does not regard himself as old. He feels and sees himself as healthy, and yet, like others at his age, knows that his body can let him down: ‘Various things are wrong with me, but because I am still relatively healthy I do not tend to think of myself as old’.

Considerably more men from the middle and young cohorts connected old age with the deterioration of external appearances. In fact, only two men from the old cohort referred to external appearance at all, while nine men from the young cohort and six men from the middle cohort did so. Because appearances seem thus to matter more to the younger men in this sample, their views form the basis of the discussion in this section. They are represented here by the accounts of one man from the middle cohort who is in his early fifties, and two men from the young cohort who are in their thirties.15


15 Donald (52), Tony (33) and Paul (33).
Declining appearances were particularly important for Donald, who represents the views of other men like him from the middle cohort. He is concerned about losing his looks as he ages, and is determined not to let his body deteriorate, as have the bodies of gay men he has seen in the sauna, ‘whose elasticity has really gone’. ‘Their bodies are everywhere. Frankly I don’t find it pretty and I hope I don’t do that. My body is still in good trim and I have a real commitment to keeping it trim into my seventies.’ Donald knows that he is ageing when he looks in the mirror, but intends to grow old ‘gracefully’: ‘I am determined not to do nips and tucks. I want to be fairly gracious. I do put a bit of blonde in my head but there will be a point where I will be gracious and grey’.

The two men representing those in the young cohort who associate deterioration in appearance and old age are Tony and Paul. Both are aged 33 and are in relationships. Tony is university educated and Paul left school after he completed Year Seven. Tony is a high-income earner, whereas Paul works in a low status, low paid occupation. Tony, the more articulate, says it is difficult to age as a gay man because ‘the gay world focuses on young, beautiful people and the lifestyle that goes with that. As you get older as a gay man, you have to find a new space to be in’. Either in spite or because of this awareness, he intends to have plastic surgery to keep himself youthful: ‘I plan to have my first bit of work next year when I am 35 and I plan to have it every five years after that’. Paul is less vain than Tony. He accepts that a ‘loss of physical appeal’ accompanies ageing, but believes that a man can compensate for this as he acquires emotional maturity.

The men who discussed physical decline in the context of illness seemed to understand their recent experience of illness as a foretaste of the loss of mobility and independence that they anticipate will accompany old age. The other interviewees from the old cohort simply described a general slowing down as they aged or an increase in ‘aches and pains’. There was nothing revelatory about their stories, except a perception that the advance of old age may take many people by surprise.

It is understandable that there should be more men in the young cohort than in the other cohorts who associate declining appearances with old age. These men are in the full flush of youth and are valorised in both the gay milieu and wider society for their youthfulness. If Ariès is correct, and adolescence is the most privileged state, then Michael Mittenauer is also correct to argue that, by a remarkable inversion, the young have now become society’s role models:

Youth as a period of particularly intense consumer activity is certainly relatively new. It also has to do with the sharp increase in leisure time in recent years. In the use of this leisure time, young people have taken on the role of models for society. They are, so to speak, the leisure specialists to whom everyone turns.16

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16 Mitternauer *A History of Youth*, p. 41.
Part Two. Positive views of old gay men.

It is a sad but true fact that only fifteen men, or slightly less than one fifth of the men in this sample, reported experience or knowledge of old gay men being treated with respect or admired in the gay milieu. Interviewees from all three age cohorts have stories to tell of the positive regard in which old gay men are held.

Only three men from the young cohort can report evidence of old gay men being treated well by other gay men. Their views are represented here by the account of one man, Myles, who is in his early twenties and single. He finished university two years ago and works full-time. Myles states that few of his contemporaries respect old gay men or accept that they ‘went through a difficult time to get to where we are today’. He, however, has ‘enormous respect for them’, for making life easier for him and other young men.

The middle cohort is represented by Patrick and Graham, who are in their fifties. Both men are semi-retired and are in long-term relationships, which in Graham’s case has lasted more than 25 years. Patrick explains that his understanding of how old gay men are treated does not include ‘any experience of the broader community’ and is limited to ‘what [Prime Minister] John Howard would call the intellectual elite or the “chattering classes”’. Among the latter, he has found that young gay men ‘generally respect old gay men’. He describes this general feeling of respect thus: ‘Older men are judged by what they did, how they behaved and their achievements. Whether or not they are gay is not a deciding factor’. Graham has a more intimate understanding of the respect that may exist for old gay men. Although he does not yet describe himself as an old gay man, he has been the mentor for some years of a man who is 20 years his junior: ‘I would not call it a father-son relationship but it is a relationship in which he seeks my support, affection and encouragement in all aspects of his life’. Their friendship continues while each maintains separate, stable, affective relationships.

In the old cohort, a total of seven men, or slightly less than one third of the whole cohort, reported experience or knowledge of being treated well as old gay men. Their views are represented here by the accounts of four men, all of whom are in their sixties. Two are retired and two work part time. Three

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17 Fifteen men (or nineteen per cent of the sample) reported knowledge of old gay men being treated with respect or admired. They comprised three men from the young cohort, five men from the middle cohort and seven men from the old cohort.

18 Adam (24), Myles (24), Graham (52), Patrick (53), Terrence (64), John (65), Oscar (65) and Kelvin (66).

19 Terrence and Oscar have part-time jobs.
are in long-term relationships and all live in capital cities. In Kelvin’s experience, he has found young gay men ‘friendly and affectionate but not in a sexual way’. Kelvin is single and his young homosexual friends often ‘drop in to talk and so on. Perhaps they think I have some accumulated wisdom’. Terrence and John live in different cities and relate similar stories. Both know how severely the scene limits relations between the generations. And yet both know from personal experience how rewarding friendships are with younger men. John says that he and his partner have found ‘tremendous acceptance from young people’. His explanation for good relations is simple: ‘There are young people who gravitate towards older people and it is a terrific relationship based on mutual respect’. Terrence and his partner socialise with a group of young gay men whom they met through Terrence’s daughter. ‘They always come here for Christmas’, he says. ‘They are in their thirties. We often have breakfast together on a Sunday morning with a heap of young gays.’ Oscar’s story is different from the others’. He believes that he commands the respect of younger gay men because at 65 he is still able to take part in the social practices of the scene and be less affected than are many younger men by the physical demands: ‘I can still go out and party all night and wake up better than most’. Oscar usually goes out with his partner and a friend: ‘I have more energy than the two of them put together and they are younger than me. I think that ageing is a state of mind. Though, there are some days when this body says it is not a state of mind’.

That so few men from the young cohort and relatively few men from the middle cohort have knowledge or evidence of old gay men being treated with respect or admiration shows that age segregation still prevails in the gay milieu. More than twenty years ago, Raymond Berger identified one of its negative effects as preventing ‘older and younger gay men from checking out their possibly erroneous assumptions about each other’. The story from the representative of the young cohort was at best equivocal, while the stories from the middle cohort were only slightly more encouraging. Surprisingly, the four men who spoke for the old cohort did have truly positive accounts to relate of strong, beneficial relations with young men.

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Part Three. The old gay man as invisible.

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20 Kelvin is the single man.

21 Berger, Gay and gray; p. 42. Berger conducted his research in 1978. He asked 112 respondents to answer a questionnaire, then selected 10 men to interview more thoroughly. All respondents were 40 or older and drawn from a North American ‘locale’ which he described as ‘a four-county area, encompassing urban, suburban, and semi-rural environments’. His youngest respondent was 41 and the oldest was 77. See pp. 26, 156–7.
Slightly less than half of the men interviewed for this thesis reported knowledge of old gay men being treated as though they do not exist. In this part of the chapter, the discussion begins with a summary of accounts from men representing the views of the young cohort, followed by similar accounts from the middle cohort. In these accounts, the interviewees describe treatment of old gay men that they have witnessed; some reveal how they may have treated old gay men themselves, and others explain why old gay men are not welcome to socialise with them. Finally, a small group of men from the old cohort explains why they are excluded from gay social spaces.

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Eleven men, or almost 40 per cent of the young cohort, have stories to tell of old gay men being treated as though they are invisible. Their stories are represented here by three men in their twenties and two men in their thirties. Mark is 25 and says that in night clubs, which he calls the ‘mainstay of the gay community’, the focus is on ‘cruising, picking up [sexual partners] and meeting people’. He rationalises that because a man’s ability to find new sexual partners is directly related to his ‘youth and beauty’, older gay men are ignored or overlooked. Ian (aged 28) concurs. Young gay men only speak to other young men, he says, and will have nothing to do with old gay men.

Troy (aged 24) is experienced in the scene. He speaks frankly about gay social practices, old gay men and age. He was educated at a private school. Troy reiterates Mark’s claim that old gay men are excluded because they are neither young nor beautiful. But he is more direct and even a little hostile in his view of them. Old gay men are excluded because they do not have what he calls ‘the visual’. He declares that he and his friends ‘make derogatory comments about old gay men’.

They are not particularly accepted in the younger gay world. A lot of younger gay boys have a different lifestyle, and, as some of the older gay men are not as fast-paced and because nothing is new to them and they are not as easily excited, there is not as much in common and therefore the association between the two groups is disjointed.

Youthfulness and physical stamina separate young and old gay men. Older men cannot keep pace with young men and have different interests. Troy does not say at what age a man ceases to be young. Presumably, therefore, men in their forties can participate on the scene, as long as they have the body and can keep up with the younger men. Young gay men often hold such men in high regard because, in

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22 Thirty-six men (or forty-five per cent of the sample) reported witnessing old gay men treated as invisible or experienced being so treated. They comprised eleven men from the young cohort, twelve men from the middle cohort and thirteen men from the old cohort.

23 Robert (38), Neville (37), Alex (37), Jason (35), Daniel (35), Mick (33), Tony (33), Adrian (30), Ian (28), Mark (25) and Troy (24).
addition to having the required ‘visual’ and ‘pace’, they are also likely to be more established (in a career or life) and therefore may be able to offer the young man security, if he is seeking a relationship. They may also subsidise their mutual interests, such as social engagements, introductions, drugs and alcohol, if it is a looser arrangement the young men seek.

Two men in their thirties actually use the metaphor of invisibility to explain the nature of relations between old and young gay men. Daniel is 35 and, in the following extract, draws on Soviet history to conjure a powerful image of the effect that being overlooked has on older people in the gay milieu:

During the Communist era of the Soviet Union people were air-brushed out of photographs. If you had a family photo taken by a gay man, the old would be air-brushed out. It is a bit like dying: you are not dead but you might as well be. They are notable by their absence.

Robert (aged 38) works with older gay men and describes them as ‘good people’ but knows that they regard themselves as invisible in the gay community: ‘the scene is a hostile environment for older men because most young men look straight through them or do not see them’.

The men from the middle cohort reiterated what some of the men from the young cohort said: that the gay focus on youth and beauty causes young gay men to overlook or ignore old gay men. A similar number of men from the middle cohort said that they had knowledge of old gay men being treated as though they did not exist.24 Their views are represented here by the accounts of five men in their fifties.

Noel, who is 58, believes that ‘the image of being gay is a young man in his late teens or early twenties or an older man who is able to look young’. Ross says the gay culture is one that ‘appreciates youth, muscular development and athleticism’, and that the focus is therefore on young men because these qualities are more in evidence in the young. Des likewise identifies the cult of the body as the reason for the exclusion he has experienced as a fifty-year-old man: ‘On the scene a lot of people are into muscle, youth and good looks and when they see someone like me they see someone who is dumpy and grey and needs a face lift’.

Coupled with the misplaced belief that a person must be young and beautiful in order to be gay is the illusion that young men have that they will never grow old. Richard and Henry are in long-term relationships. Richard has been with his partner for 30 years and Henry has been with his for 10 years. Richard says that gay men ‘glorify youth and go to endless trouble to make themselves look young and

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24 There were twelve men from the middle cohort: Lionel (59), Richard (58), Noel (58), Ross (54), Michael (52), Henry (50), Des (50), Trevor (49), Jerome (49), Alan (47), Simon (46), James (45).
beautiful’. He is critical of the superficial values in the gay milieu: ‘I find it repulsive. That is what I do not like about the so-called homosexual community. They do not think about ageing. They only think about staying young’. Henry agrees: ‘they do not give a lot of thought to what they may require in order to live satisfied lives as older men’. Henry suspects this unconcern arises from a false belief that young gay men harbour, which is that ‘they will not grow old, either because they ignore the bleeding obvious that everyone dies or because they think that they will not survive to old age’.

Men from the old cohort have direct experience of being treated as though they were invisible, and almost 60 per cent of them spoke about it. The reason they gave for the marginal position that old gay men occupy in the milieu was the same as the men in the other cohorts identified, that is, an emphasis on youth and beauty. The accounts of five men in their sixties represent their views here. These men gained their knowledge of the gay scene in bars, clubs and saunas in Sydney, Melbourne, Canberra and Hobart.

Terrence is 64 and feels out of place in a gay venue. He liked dancing in his youth but stays away from gay dance clubs nowadays. Clive (aged 65) also knows that he is no longer ‘hot property’ in certain saunas: ‘I am far too old and flabby and do not make the grade. It is a form of discrimination, based on very cheap values’. Brendan is in his sixties as well. He maintains that the values of youthfulness that prevail in the gay milieu—where one has ‘to live life to the full and live it now’—mean that people overlook the fact that gay men grow old and are old. Lindsay concurs: ‘The premium placed on attractiveness and youth in the bar and club scene means that to be old and gay is regarded negatively’.

In addition to these men who feel excluded from gay social spaces because of their age, another group of men in the old cohort, while aware of why they are unwelcome on the scene, expressed no distress because of it. It did not concern them that they were not welcome to socialise with young men or in clubs and bars. One reason for this may be that they have accepted their own ‘social obsolescence’. One consequence of the social practices of the scene is, as we have seen, to make commodities of its patrons: intimacy and sex are exchanged like goods and services in a market, and an effect of its youthful aesthetic is to signal when the commodities are out of date, when their worth has expired.

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25 Thirteen men, or fifty-nine per cent, of the old cohort reported this experience: Gerald (75), Leslie (74), Harold (71), Ronald (68), Charles (67), Kenneth (65), Maurice (65), John (65), Terrence (64), Clive (64), Brendan (64), Douglas (63) and Lindsay (62).

For gay men, social obsolescence is the age when they are no longer welcome or feel out of place on the scene. Lindsay describes it as follows: ‘When you get to a certain age, you just drop out of the public gay scene and divide your time between the dogs and doing the garden’. Nonetheless, he knows some men who will not allow such prejudice to keep them from attending gay events or from participating in the social practices of the milieu. He recalls one man, who is 72 and who

pops up at every conceivable homosexual event, often dressed in his net singlet, his baggy shorts and cap. He is like a heroic father figure. Everyone knows who he is. People are fond of him. His is a kind of elder of the tribe.

The age at which a person ‘drops out’ of the scene varies according to his involvement in it and individual response to it.

Another man who refuses to be intimidated by the social power of the young is Ronald. He is 68 and believes a considerable social distance separates him and young men. Moreover, because he objects to their social practices, he is not sure if he wants to bridge the distance: ‘I cannot relate to the young gay scene of discos and drugs. I have this image of younger homosexuals as fairly pleasure-oriented in a way that I am not all that sympathetic to’. He admits to knowing few young gay men but that, when he does meet them in social spaces that are not alienating (for example, at dinner or with friends) he is always ‘interested in their world outlook’. He does not expect young men to be interested in him because he was not interested in men his age when he was young. While genuinely happy to meet them, he finds himself prevented from doing so because the social spaces of the gay milieu are anathema to him as are the social practices of the young men who make the scene the principal site of their social engagement with other gay men.

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It is significant that almost half the men in this sample were aware that in the gay milieu old gay men are treated as though they are invisible, for it is now more than twenty years since Berger’s research on old gay men drew attention to the negative effects of age segregation in the gay milieu.27

In the young cohort, the views ranged from condemnatory to compassionate. The men in their twenties know that theirs is the most valorised age of life in the gay milieu, as it is in the wider community and wherever the cult of youth is worshipped. Some of these young men seem to be impatient of old gay men and are quite dismissive of them. Among the men in their thirties, there are, however, more signs of compassion for an old gay man’s situation. One interviewee referred to the scene as a ‘hostile

27 See, for example, Berger *Gay and gray*; pp. 24–25, 42 and passim.
environment’ for old gay men. Such compassion may be seen as evidence of greater maturity and a more developed understanding of the scene’s social shortcomings. The representatives of men from the middle cohort largely concurred with these observations, that is, that the cult of youth causes age segregation on the gay scene. In the accounts of the men from the old cohort, there were two prominent themes. The first concerns the sense of marginalisation that some interviewees feel because of their age. The second, and more interesting, narrative comes from those men who, though aware that they are excluded from most gay social spaces, do not exhibit any bitterness or regret.

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Part Four. The old gay man as contemptible.

Twenty-six interviewees, or almost one third of the sample, had knowledge of old gay men being treated with contempt in the gay milieu—largely on the scene. Many more interviewees from the middle and young cohorts reported witnessing such treatment. The most likely reasons for this behaviour are first, that few if any men from the old cohort go on the scene and, second, that in any sample of gay men, there is bound to be a higher proportion of men aged 20–49 who are likely to participate in the scene, and therefore have current knowledge of its social practices, than men in their 60s and 70s. The discussion that follows is organised such that representatives of the young and middle cohorts speak first, followed by those of the old cohort.

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Almost 40 per cent of the young cohort report evidence of contemptuous behaviour toward old homosexual men or are aware of contemptuous attitudes toward them. They are represented here by two men in their thirties and two in their twenties. Tony and Vincent are in their thirties. One of them is Aboriginal, the other is not. The stories they relate concern social interaction between men of different ages on the scene. Both men have knowledge of the Melbourne scene and some experience of the scene in Sydney as well.

The behaviour toward old gay men, says Vincent, is appalling: ‘I still cannot understand why people treat older gay men with such disdain. Whether it is at the sauna, on chat rooms or at bars, you observe dismissive behaviour’. Culturally, he struggles with the prejudice against age, which he noticed when he first started going out: ‘It is foreign to me because as an Aboriginal person I was taught to respect elders from day one. Even though a lot of those traditional values are twisted nowadays, we are still

28 This group of twenty-six interviewees comprised four men from the old cohort, eleven men from the middle cohort and eleven men from the young cohort.
brought up to respect our elders’. Tony says he suspects young homosexual men are dismissive because they think old gay men should not be on the scene. This is supported by North American research into the same phenomenon.29

Angus and Jack are in their twenties. Two are from capital cities and one is from the country. Between them, they have knowledge of the scene in the mainland capitals of the east coast, Canberra and some country towns of New South Wales. All have seen how contemporaries and friends treat old men but they say there are two sides to the story of the contemptuous treatment of old men. They admit that in bars and clubs young men often scorn old gay men. But they also say old men ‘deserve’ the treatment they receive because either they should not be in the same place with the young men or, if they are, they should realise that young gay men are not interested in them sexually.

For Angus, the disjunction between the generations exists because of the body culture of the scene and the predatory manner of older gay men: ‘I am sick of getting hit on by older guys who maintain this ridiculous image of “mutton dressed as lamb”’. He explained that people his age understood the phrase ‘mutton dressed as lamb’ to refer to men in their forties or fifties who,

have had plastic surgery or maintain a ridiculous tan because they think it makes them look young or who go to a gym four days a week. They are trying to live up to an ideal of youth that is not even true. It is something I could not do and I am 23.

Angus objects to the manufactured attempts by middle-aged men to appear young and the flawed performance of youthfulness that they represent. What he identifies is one of the problems of a culture that glorifies youth and the young: there is no place to grow old. Young men seem repelled by what they see as any attempt by older men—like Aschenbach in Thomas Mann’s story Death in Venice—to appear younger than they are.30 Interestingly, it is not old men as such who repel them but any man who attempts to hide his true age—to masquerade as young, and hence the reference to mutton and lamb.

At 22, Jack is the youngest man in the sample. He is thoughtful and socially compassionate but nonetheless feels that his social space is invaded if he has to share it with old men. He sees them as intruders. And, in the case he describes, he does refer to men who are old, not just to middle-aged men pretending to be twenty. And, like Angus, he is annoyed by the artificial look they present in public.

If I see 60-year-old gay people wearing tight tee shirts or leather or exposing flesh, my reaction is that I do not want to end up like that. People should act their age. Young people do these things. Why are 60-year-

29 See Berger Gay and gray; p. 228.

olds here interrupting our social space? Gay clubs are seen as young spaces or where beautiful people hang out. That is not meant to prejudice old men but they do not fit the criteria of cool in the top social set of the gay world.

Simone de Beauvoir argues that, in order to treat old people with indifference or hostility, those who are not old must see them as belonging to a ‘different species’. And once it has been determined that they are different, it is possible to shut them out. This is accentuated by the fact that the young interviewees do not see any old gay men on the scene whose lives they want to emulate or who signal what they themselves might become. Perhaps the young men are upset when they see old homosexuals on the scene because old men should be somewhere else—at home in bed with a hot water bottle perhaps, but certainly not in a bar at midnight. This prejudice against the old enjoying themselves is not restricted to the gay world, for, says Beauvoir, there is a general ‘desire’ that old people should conform to the image that society has formed of them. They are required to dress themselves in a certain way and to respect outward appearances. More than any other, it is in the sexual aspect of life that this repression makes itself felt.

And here we have it. The young men are likely to be angry because the scene is a sexual market place and the presence there of old bodies somehow detracts from the beauty of the young. Does the presence of the old taint the nature of the exchange that takes place in the sexual market place? Or does their presence remind young people that they too will age?

Stories from the middle cohort that report knowledge of contemptuous treatment of old gay men raise themes similar to the stories from the young cohort. Richard (aged 58) says the attitude toward old homosexual men is ‘absolutely disgusting’ and that ‘the homosexual community by and large despises the old’. According to Glen (aged 49), young homosexual men treat old homosexual men ‘with very little respect and probably worse than straights treat old homosexuals’. Simon (aged 46) has observed among young homosexual men on the scene what he describes as a ‘kind of gloating at being younger’ and what he calls ‘a bit of attitude’ simply because they are young. Matthew (aged 42) meanwhile says that some young men seem to despise old homosexual men because of what they represent: ‘I suspect they frighten them. They see in them what they are eventually going to become themselves and they do not like it’. Ivan simply says that attitudes on the scene are ‘pretty atrocious’ because most people on the scene are only interested in body image.

31 Beauvoir *Old Age*, p. 244.

32 Beauvoir *Old Age*, p. 246.
Neil (aged 46) believes that old gay men are not sufficiently appreciated for what they endured in the years before gay liberation. And, as he explains in the following extract from his interview, he sees a direct link between their suffering before gay liberation and the relative ease with which gay people may today enjoy being homosexual.

In the gay community old gay men are not appreciated for living their lives as gay men and the influence that has had on freedoms we now enjoy. People do not recognise that these gay men might have wisdom. They assume that if they are single and old they are only interested in young gay men for sex. Some gay men tend to judge other people on the basis of externals and that makes the ageism in the gay community worse than it is in the general community. It is even more damaging to older gay men.

A number of Neil’s observations about social relations on the scene recurred in earlier stories from the young and middle cohorts. These include the belief that in the gay milieu people generally do not associate old age with the getting of wisdom; that old people are rarely respected for having lived a long life, for having survived less tolerant times or for the contribution they have made; that personal value is frequently limited to external appearances; and, that old gay men are viewed as sexually obsessed.

In contrast with stories from the middle and young cohorts, the interviewees from the old cohort report relatively little evidence of old gay men, themselves or other men, being treated with contempt. Only four men have such stories, and their views are represented here by the accounts of two men in their seventies and one man in his mid-sixties.

Vernon and Harold are in their seventies. Both are single and speak of the careless, even cruel, behaviour of young gay men. Harold related his experience on the Internet: ‘I find it very offensive when you happen to be on a chat line and the second question they ask is how old you are. You are either honest or you are not. If you are honest they flip off straight away’. Vernon’s account of young people’s attitudes similarly relates to anonymous encounters of a sort. He told the story of a friend his age who was ‘doing the gardens’ one night and got into a car with another man, after which they started to have sex in the back seat. Vernon continues the story:

Two young queens sitting on the lawn rang the police from their mobile phones and put them in. In other words, how dare silver hairs have any fun on our beat. That is terrible. It is indicative of the attitudes of some unthinking young people. It is nasty, isn’t it? It is saying that their sexual hatred of old people is stronger than any sense of sexual identity.

Vernon interprets the young homosexual men’s behaviour, which is vindictive and hypocritical, as breaking a bond that he believes should exist between all homosexual men because of our shared sexual...
identity. He is genuinely shocked by their behaviour, possibly because of an earlier encounter of his own on a beat:

I do not do the bogs [public toilets] very much these days but I did about ten years ago and there was a guy who was thirty-five years old who said to me, “Why don’t you old queens fuck off?” And I said, “You will be an old queen yourself one day and when you are, my friend, you won’t be nearly as interesting as I am. And your face which is already fallen will have gone further”. I was really furious.

John (aged 65) says that he has noticed an ‘attitude’ toward anyone who is older than 25 among young men on the scene: ‘If you look at the homosexual community in general, you would say that a lot of young homosexual men do not even think about age or they see us as wrinkled old things that the world would be better off without’.

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There was no shortage of evidence to show that old gay men in this sample are treated poorly in the gay milieu, especially if they happen to occupy social spaces that young gay men regard as their preserve. The prevailing view among the young cohort seemed to be that it is not appropriate for old gay men and young gay men to socialise together and, that, if they do, the old men should expect a poor reception from the young men. One fact the young men overlook is that old gay men have to socialise in the same bars and clubs with young gay men because there are no other social venues for gay men.

And yet, interestingly, only a handful of men from the old cohort related experiences of being treated poorly. Where they did, however, it was personally distressing to the men involved and often occurred because they had strayed into spaces where young men predominate, such as chat rooms on the Internet or beats. In these places, the power of the old men is greatly diminished, a point Elias makes most powerfully in The Loneliness of the Dying: ‘The feeling, “Perhaps I shall be old one day”, can be totally lacking [in the young]. All that remains is the spontaneous enjoyment of one’s own superiority, and the power of the young in relation to the old’. 33

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Part Five. The old gay man as predatory.

A powerful stereotype exists in Western countries of the old gay man as a predatory being. Both homosexuals and heterosexuals share this public narrative. Berger describes it thus: ‘[O]lder gay men are

said to have desperate unfulfilled sexual needs which are satisfied by preying on the young’. 34 This
dominant story has a complex provenance because it comprises a number of contradictory minor
narratives. One of these is that people over the age of 59 continue inappropriately to have sexual desires
and sex lives, while another is that sexual relations in the old are repulsive, regardless of gender and
sexuality. Beauvoir gives an instance of this:

Sadism sometimes comes into this mockery [of the old]. I was taken aback in New York, when I went to
the well-known show in the Bowery, where horrible old women in their eighties sing and dance, lifting up
their skirts. The audience roared with laughter: what exactly was the meaning of all this mirth?35

Sixteen interviewees, or one fifth of the sample, had stories to tell about how the notion of the
predatory old gay man is understood and circulates in the gay milieu.36 The majority of these are drawn
from the young and middle cohorts, for only one man in the old cohort refers to it. He is Edward and he
speaks of a ‘well-grounded expectation’ among the young that old gay men will conform to this stereotype
until they discover that they want friendship, fun and things like that. The initial needless assumption, that
the old men are being friendly because they think they can get young men into bed, is probably based on a
lot of experience. It is probably empirically justified.

Joseph, Drew and Adam are single and represent here the five men from the young cohort who
had stories of the old gay man as a predator. Joseph (aged 35) believes that, as a community, gay men are
showing more signs of maturity. He sees the emergence of more ‘spaces and places for older men’ as an
example of increased social maturity.37 He has been in bars where ‘the average age is a lot older than in
some of the others’. Joseph knows, however, that one of the more enduring public narratives of the gay
scene portrays old gay men in negative terms: ‘If you are older, you must be a pervert or a child molester.
An older man who is on his own is not seen in a positive light on the scene’. When he was 18, Drew
(aged 39) had a friend who was in his late sixties and gay. His friends suspected that the older man
wanted sex with Drew. It was, however, a ‘purely platonic relationship’. But he knows the power of the
dominant public narrative concerning old gay men:

34 Berger Gay and gray, p. 191.
35 Beauvoir Old Age, p. 247.
36 The sixteen men comprise one man from the old cohort, who is Edward (60); ten men from the middle cohort, who
are Samuel (57), Ross (54), Bill (52), Thomas (52), Donald (52), Glen (49), Trevor (49), Stuart (49), Neil (46),
Simon (46); and five men from the young cohort, who are Drew (39), Joseph (35), Harry (28), Adam (24) and Angus
(23).
37 Joseph is referring to social groups such as Mature Age Gays in Sydney and Vintage Men in Melbourne.
I have seen the writing on the wall at the beat saying, “Fuck off all you old cunts”. It is hard because being a man you are going to have a sex drive all your life. And just because we are getting older does not mean that we should stop having sex either.

Adam (aged 24) tells a similar story. He says that young gay men on the scene have a picture of old gay men as ‘dirty old men’. ‘It is not the sexual desire that is the ugly thing in the older man’—Adam and men his age assume that desire is constant and also a constant in the make-up of gay men—‘it is the decay of the body that revolts people. And people in their twenties have not got to that point’.

*  

Ten men, or one-third of those from the middle cohort, confirm that an assumption exists in the gay milieu that old gay men are predatory. They are represented here by the accounts of Donald and Bill, both of whom are 52.

Donald belongs to a gay social club in a capital city where the problem is the absence of young members, possibly because of the public stereotype that positions old gay men as predatory: ‘I think it is because it is seen as an “old boys’ club” and the young things suspect they will not feel comfortable or the old boys will try to crack on to them. And I find that quite sad’.

At one point in his younger days, Bill worked in a male brothel while he was travelling overseas. The brothel’s clientele were mainly men in their fifties, sixties and seventies. He describes in the following excerpt what he learned about sexual and emotional desire in older men while he was a sex worker.

The old men were still sexually active and desired physical contact but often could not get it because they could not relate to many people their own age. Two 70-year-olds or 80-year-olds do not necessarily want each other. They want companionship and when it came to sex they wanted a younger man.

Bill explains that the dominant public narrative then, in the 1970s, was that old gay men were predatory and sought fifteen-year-olds for their sexual pleasure. The narrative conflated homosexuality and paedophilia. Bill’s experience was that they were separate sexualities: ‘The old gay men did not want fifteen-year-olds. Desire for the very young was relegated to fantasy and never acted upon. It was an ideal but not the reality they wanted’. Although his encounters with clients were episodic and contractual, he believes that they were often seeking a connection with him that went beyond the sexual:

They wanted men between 25 and 35 because they were looking for more than a sexual encounter. They wanted some sort of relationship with someone younger because it made them feel vital. The sex was a way of giving form to their vitality. I think the clients could relate to me on an emotional and intellectual level.
which made the physical more worthwhile. Those men came to the brothel for companionship and the possibility of having sex but it was also a form of surrogate family for them.

Many of his clients were married. They maintained their relationship with him by asking for him every time they visited the brothel. Few of the men who worked with Bill shared his view. Younger than he was, they ‘saw the clients as “dirty old men”, which was unfortunate because it denied the idea that at 70 or 80 a person could still have an active libido’.

* *

It is clear now that what repels young men such as the sex workers to whom Bill referred and the young men about whom Adam spoke is the thought of sexual desire in an old body. Given that a negative image already exists in society of sexual desire in an old male body—the ‘dirty old man’—it is relatively easy for young gay men to make use of this to disparage old gay men, whose presence in the sexual market annoys them. The young construe the presence of old bodies in the sexualised spaces of the scene as predatory because they are horrified by the thought of sexual desire combined with old flesh.

* * *

Conclusion.

The majority of men in this sample associated old age with some form of bodily decline. Where interviewees from the old cohort, who were chronologically old, resisted the notion of regarding themselves as old, this is best understood in light of Beauvoir’s argument that age is often more apparent to an outsider than it is to the person who experiences it, in other words, in terms of the dissonance that exists between the inner self and the outer self.38

Age segregation is a dominant feature of the gay milieu and, in particular, on the scene. From the accounts of the men in this sample, very few young gay men seem to have knowledge or evidence of old gay men being treated well in the social spaces they frequent. It is also highly significant that at least three quarters of the men interviewed for this thesis were aware that old gay men are treated with contempt or as invisible and ignored in the gay milieu.

From the accounts of the young gay men in this sample, it seems they find it difficult to enjoy themselves in the presence of old people. Stories from the middle cohort underlined this prejudice: old gay men were not welcome to share social spaces with young gay men because their physical presence, their actual bodies, clashed too radically with the valorised youthful bodies of the scene. An interesting

38 Beauvoir *Old Age*, p. 315.
corollary to this is that, while being overlooked and ignored hurt some of the old interviewees, other old gay men did not resent it. They appeared to accept age segregation as a normal development in the life course, something that was to be expected because of the youthful focus of the gay milieu. In the main, they did not seem to experience any sense of loss because they were not welcome on the scene. Instead many had no desire to be part of the scene and, on the whole, seemed content with their lives and to anticipate the future in a positive spirit.

The public narrative that depicts old gay men as lonely was not examined in this chapter, or elsewhere in the thesis, because so few men in the sample referred to it, and, as mentioned in earlier chapters, there was little evidence of men interviewed for this thesis living lonely lives, at any age. An associated negative stereotype that views old gay men as predatory was examined. While the men’s stories provided no evidence of any basis for the stereotype, the very existence of such stories, as public narratives, showed how virulent and pervasive it is. An analysis of the stories suggests that the fear that lies behind them is of any association, in the imagination of the young, between sexual desire and practice, and old or ageing flesh.
Conclusion.

‘You hear people say that when they die they would like to be reincarnated as something else. I want to come back exactly as I am right now. I am quite happy with everything about being gay and being me.’

Drew, 39.

* * *

This thesis has mapped the lives of 80 Australian gay men, aged 20–79, over the second half of the 20th century. It began with an examination of what coming out has meant to different generations of gay men and then looked at their involvement in the gay scene and gay community. The final chapters examined the interviewees’ intimate relationships, first with their partners, then with their families and friends, and finally considered their experience or views of what old age is like as a gay man.

Coming out was seen as transformative and as the first step gay men take to establish their sexual identity as homosexuals. The interviewees’ stories revealed that coming out is frequently affected by birth and upbringing: their coming-out accounts varied by age cohort, according to the year of the interviewees’ birth and when they reached maturity. For example, while the statement, ‘I am a gay man now but once I was married’, may accurately reflect the life stories of more than a third of men from the old cohort, and is a narrative with which many in the middle cohort would be familiar, it would have little relevance to the lived experience or life path of the men from the young cohort.

Coming out, as the public declaration of one’s sexuality—which is how it is now generally understood—was the creation of the ‘baby boomer’ generation of gay men and lesbians. They understood it as both a personal act and a political statement. It was an important personal act because it freed the individual from what gay liberationists regarded as the oppressive condition of having to lead a double life, to pass as straight, to deny the truth of one’s existence; they also viewed coming out publicly as a necessary act for gays and lesbians to take in order to free themselves from the repressive social order of the time.

The coming-out experiences of the baby boomers, as revealed here in the stories of the men from the middle cohort, were not always as straight-forward as the gay liberationists promised, however, and were sometimes characterised by trauma or rejection. By contrast, their predecessors, represented here by the men from the old cohort, came out secretly and almost exclusively in private, if they came out at all. Some married and many lived closeted, though not necessarily unhappy, lives.
Today the situation for young gay men is quite different. On the whole, the stories of the interviewees from the young cohort suggest that coming out became progressively easier during the last two decades of the 20th century—notwithstanding the increased stigma associated with the gay identity because of the HIV-AIDS epidemic. Heartening though this change is, as evidence of greater acceptance of gay people, there was still a small number of men for whom coming out was a struggle, largely because of their parents’ response, and also a handful of young men who had to wait until they had left home or their home town before they came out. While all the young men interviewed for this thesis were aware of, and had experienced the personal significance of coming out, none described it as a political act, which gay liberationists could reasonably consider as evidence of the success of their 30-year campaign to reduce gay men and lesbians’ personal experience of oppression.

Most gay men encounter the gay scene at some point in their life. Comprising bars, clubs and sex venues, it is where they may go to socialise with friends, be with other gay men, have sex or find a sexual partner. Because its primary purpose is as a sexual market for young or youthful men, participation on the scene is largely determined by age. Its attractions appeal less to men as they grow older, for its social practices are geared to the demands of the young. Interestingly, despite its primacy in the gay world—mainly due to the fact that its venues are the only safe locations for gay men to congregate in large numbers—men of all ages interviewed for this dissertation had mixed views on the scene’s worth. And those with the loudest criticisms were among the men from the young cohort, including Aboriginal and Asian interviewees who complained about the racist practices of the scene.

A large majority of the sample recorded some level of involvement in the community institutions of the gay world. Equal numbers of interviewees, spread fairly evenly across the age cohorts, were involved in either HIV-AIDS support groups and counselling services or their local social group—the latter being particularly important for gay men living in small cities or country towns. In addition, a minority of interviewees expressed strong dissenting views. These were men who either did not agree or could not comply with the dominant gay narratives of community, and questioned its existence or challenged its purpose.

In contrast to popular stereotypes that portray gay men as sex-obsessed and incapable of sustaining couple relationships, the stories of the men interviewed for this thesis were remarkable for the relatively conventional, even ordinary, lives they revealed. The two central relationships in their intimate lives, for example, were the couple relationship and friendship.

A majority of the sample, including men of all ages and from all classes, reported a strong desire to pursue a couple relationship similar to the companionate marriage. It was important in their view both as the central focus of their life and because it was where they looked for love, intimacy, companionship.
and sexual satisfaction. As well, a small group of men gave details of how they maintained ‘open’ relationships with their partners that allowed them to combine the security of the couple relationship with a degree of sexual adventurism.

More important than the couple relationship, however, to a greater number of interviewees, was friendship, which they valued for the social interaction it provided and the mutual exchange of care and support. The latter was regarded more highly by men from the old and young cohorts, possibly because, as old people and young people are more vulnerable to fluctuations in the housing market and are more highly represented in low income groups, they are more likely to make use of informal networks of support that friends can provide. The value men in this sample placed on friendship is in contrast to how friendship is regarded between men and in general. Scholars such as Philippe Ariès and Henning Bech have argued that friendship between men is now rare, if it exists at all, while Lynn Jamieson believes that the couple relationship is now generally considered to be the premier intimate relationship. In response, I have argued that, like women, gay men may pursue same-sex friendships more easily than heterosexual men because they have less to fear if these are interpreted as sexual. And that, even though they esteem the couple relationship, friendship is likely to be more important to them because friends can provide continuity if, as is the case with the majority of men in this sample, their intimate lives are punctuated by relationships that either do not fully develop or are relatively short-term—defined here as less than seven years’ duration.

Even though a majority of the men interviewed for the thesis gave accounts of poor or problematic relations with their natal families, such stories were not uniform across the age cohorts. In the case of the ‘baby-boomer’ generation, weak or poor familial relations were often a legacy of the rejection that accompanied their coming out. By contrast, fewer of the men from the old cohort reported negative dealings with their families—often because their parents were dead and relations with their siblings, whether supportive or estranged, were unlikely to change. Of the three age cohorts, the men from the young cohort had the best relations with their natal families, which may reflect their level of dependence on their parents or the acceptance that greeted news of their homosexuality.

As well as couple relationships and friendship, the interviewees spoke of a third type of intimate relationship that they valued—the ‘gay family’. In its best known form, it comprises a gay man who has been formerly married or in a de facto heterosexual relationship, his same-sex partner and their children. Three other versions were discussed, viz., a co-parenting arrangement between a gay couple and a lesbian couple, a gay nuclear family, and a family of choice. While these represented the experience of only two men from the young cohort, and therefore did not reflect widespread behaviour among the men in the sample, they are significant for what they presage and reveal about people’s ability to mould or re-create the family unit to suit their intimate and affective needs.

Conclusion.
There was no evidence from the life stories of the men in this sample that gay men led lonely or isolated lives at any point in the life course, including old age. It was for this reason that the negative public narrative that pictures old gay men as solitary, lonely figures was not investigated. By contrast, the stories of the interviewees from the old cohort revealed a group of fairly resilient men who seemed reasonably content with their lives and to anticipate the future with optimism. They disclosed that, like everyone else, they resisted the notion of being old, and tended to accept the fact only when physical decline made it impossible to ignore. For reasons explored by scholars such as Simone de Beauvoir and Norbert Elias, the younger men’s views on old age lacked empathy: a large majority of interviewees was aware that old gay men are treated as Other. The stories of the men from the middle and young cohorts showed that many of the negative attitudes toward ageing and old age that exist in the wider society are accentuated in the gay world. This was especially so on the gay scene where age segregation is most prevalent.

As a researcher I went into the field with my own personal knowledge, and some preconceptions, about the shape gay life paths may take. During the course of my engagement with the interviewees, two dominant stories emerged concerning how age and sexuality may affect a gay man’s understanding of himself. Both of these strongly contradicted popular stereotypes that depict gay men as lonely in old age and sex-crazed throughout their life. What they did reveal, however, was that the lives of gay men in Australia, as represented by the interviewees in the sample, have improved considerably since the 1950s. At every stage in the life course, the men interviewed for this thesis demonstrated relatively positive views of themselves, their intimate relationships, and, importantly, their relations with the wider society. Such freedom to express affective relations openly and without fear is a comparatively new experience for gay men, and represents real social advancement—as many of the stories from the men in the old and middle cohorts testified. The gay identity is no longer hidden or shameful, and, while some gay men may still experience rejection when they come out, the majority does not, and, since 1997, no homosexual in Australia has had to fear persecution by the state. This social change has occurred because of gay people’s continued determination to defy anti-homosexual prejudice, to come out and so contribute to the variety of gay public narratives in circulation.
Appendix One. The interview schedule.

A Working life.
1 Would you briefly tell me the story of your working life, and what it is that you enjoy/have enjoyed about work?
2 How would you describe your standard of living?
3 Have you ever had any experience of poverty?

B Identity.
4 Would you briefly tell me the story of your coming out?
5 What has been your experience of acceptance as a homosexual/gay man?
6 What does being homosexual mean to you, and how important is it to your sense of self [who you are in the world]?
7 How would your life be different if you were not homosexual/gay?
8 What effect has HIV-AIDS had on your sense of self [who you are in the world]?
9 How important to your sense of self is your body, your body image?
10 Now I would like to spend a moment exploring what you regard as meaningful in your life.

C Relationship status and meaning.
11 What’s the story of your [most recent] relationship? [Duration?]
12 What do you regard as the most significant aspect(s) of your [most recent] significant relationship? Eg, commitment; companionship; good times; love; property; sex life; shared interests; shared values; growing old together?
13 What effect has HIV-AIDS had on your [most recent] relationship?
14 What preparations or plans have you [and your partner] made for your retirement and old age, and when did you begin to make them? In particular I am thinking of preparations or plans that you have made to secure your living arrangements, financial well being, and social life. If you have not made any such preparations or plans, do you think you will and if so, when?

D Experience of age and ageing.
15 How do you think the general community regards old homosexuals/gay men?
16 What in your opinion is the attitude of other homosexuals towards old homosexuals?
17 Do you regard yourself as old? YES/NO.
   As you do regard yourself as old, when did you first realise that you were getting old, and what does it mean to you to be old and homosexual/gay?
   As you do not regard yourself as old, what age do you regard as old, and what will it mean to you to be old and homosexual/gay? That is, what picture do you have of yourself as an old gay man?
18 What effect has HIV-AIDS had on your experience of age and ageing?
19 Are you apprehensive about growing old and, if so, what are your apprehensions? Are you worried about e.g.: being poor or lonely or institutionalised in a heterosexual environment; about losing your independence or mobility, or your desire or sexual performance or lack of sexual expression?

20 Do you take any measures to hold back or retard the physical effects of ageing?

21 Think back to when you were in your twenties or thirties. *Re-phrased for 20 year olds:* Think back to when you were younger or when you first ‘came out’. How did you see old homosexuals/gay men then, and how do you see them now?

22 Has growing older affected your sense of yourself as a sexually attractive man?

E Social life.

23 What proportion of your close friends is homosexual/gay?

24 What has been your experience of or involvement in the homosexual/gay community?

25 In which homosexual/gay venue do you feel most welcomed, at ease, accepted? *Re-phrased for 20 year olds:* Is there any homosexual/gay venue where you do not feel welcomed, at ease, accepted?

26 Do you use the Internet to supplement your social life?

27 Has growing older affected your social life?

28 What effect has HIV-AIDS had on your social life?

29 What picture do you have of yourself in five/ten/fifteen years’ time?
Appendix Two. The age cohorts and the interviewees.

The old cohort.

In the old cohort there are 22 men. Six of the interviewees are in their seventies; their pseudonyms and ages are as follows: Reginald (79), Gerald (75), Vernon (75), Leslie (74), Chester (71), Harold (71). Sixteen of the men are in their sixties; their pseudonyms and ages are as follows: Geoffrey (69), Ronald (68), Charles (67), Kelvin (66), John (65), Kenneth (65), Maurice (65), Oscar (65), Brendan (64), Clive (64), Terrence (64), Douglas (63), Leonard (63), Barry (62), Lindsay (62), Edward (60). Fifteen of the interviewees in the old cohort have partners. The average length of their relationships is 20 years. Six men have been in relationships of longer than 30 years’ duration and one 60 year-old man has been with his partner for 39 years. More than one third of interviewees (eight men) were previously married. Four had been married for longer than 30 years including one man (in his 60s) who had been married for 40 years. The average length of their marriages was 28 years. All but two of the men who were married had children.

It is in this cohort that we might expect to see also a high proportion of retired men. Slightly more than 60 per cent of the interviewees are retired. Of the eight men who are still working, four are sixty-five or older and work part-time. The oldest working man is 75. The working lives of the men in this cohort have chiefly been in middle-class occupations, including as teachers, academics, and public servants. Two are self-employed small businessmen. Two have working-class jobs. A little over one third receive old age pensions or sickness benefits. Slightly less than three-quarters of the cohort have superannuation. The average income of these men in their sixties and seventies is $35,000 per annum. A number of points need to be made in relation to income. Four men earn incomes less than $15,000 per annum; five have incomes in the band $15,000–$25,000; and three have incomes not in excess of $35,000 per annum. In other words, more than one half of the cohort are low-income earners, which may be explained by the number of men who are on the old age pension. Only two men out of the twenty-two men in this cohort do not own their residence. More than two thirds of the old cohort hold bachelor’s degrees or higher.

The middle cohort.

The middle cohort comprises 30 men. Fifteen interviewees are in their fifties; their pseudonyms and ages are as follows: Lionel (59), Noel (58), Richard (58), Roy (58), Samuel (56), Ross (54), Patrick (53), Bill
Appendix Two. The age cohorts and the interviewees. 182

(52), Donald (52), Graham, (52), Kevin (52), Michael (52), Thomas (52), Des (50), Henry (50). Fifteen of the interviewees are in their forties; their pseudonyms and ages are as follows: Glen (49), Jerome (49), Nigel (49), Stuart (49), Trevor (49), Bob (48), Alan (47), Neil (46), Simon (46), James (45), Scott (45), Roger (44), Matthew (42), Ivan (40), Ken (40). Eighteen men in the middle cohort are in relationships, the average length of which is sixteen years. The average age of the partners of the men in their 50s is 52, and for the 40-year-olds is 46. Twelve interviewees in the middle cohort are single. Two men, both in their 50s, said that they had been single all their lives. Compared with the experience of the men in the old cohort, a smaller proportion of men in the middle cohort are formerly married. In the middle cohort, five men—or one sixth of interviewees—were married, half what it is in the old cohort. All formerly married men in the middle cohort have children and one man who is in his mid-50s has two grandchildren. The average length of the time they spent in a heterosexual marriage is eleven years. One fifty year-old man was married for 20 years.

Five of the middle cohort are retired: two men in their late forties, one man in his early fifties and two in their late fifties. It is clear however that not many men in this sample are taking early retirement. The youngest retiree is 49. Of the remaining men who are working, all but one is in full-time employment. That is, of the 30 men in the middle cohort, 25, or more than 80 per cent, are in full-time employment. One man did not have any superannuation of any kind. Of the others, almost half did not tell me or could not remember how much was held for them in superannuation schemes. The average annual income of the men in this cohort is $47,250. Four men earn incomes less than $15,000 per annum; another man has an annual income of between $15,000 and $25,000; and five men earn more than $25,000 but less than $35,000 per annum. That is, ten men, or one third of the cohort, live on low incomes. Eight men have annual incomes in excess of $70,000, two of whom earn more than $85,000 per annum. The majority of men in the middle cohort own their residence. More than three quarters of them have bachelor’s degrees or higher.

*     *

The young cohort.

The young cohort consists of twenty-eight men, eighteen of whom are in their thirties. Their pseudonyms and ages are as follows: Drew (39), Travis (38), Robert (38), Neville (37), Andy (37), Alex (37), Jeremy (36), Joseph (35), Jason (35), Daniel (35), Julius (34), Paul (33), Mick (33), Tony (33), Luke (32), Vincent (30), Brian (30), Adrian (30). Ten of the interviewees are in their twenties; their pseudonyms and ages are as follows: Ian (28), Harry (28), David (28), Mark (25), Troy (24), Myles (24), Lachlan (24), Adam (24), Angus (23), Jack (22). The majority of men in the young cohort are in relationships. Twelve men or slightly more than 40 per cent are single. Of those men who are single only one said that he had been
single all his life, a thirty-year-old who lives in Sydney. This is the age group when people traditionally
devote a great deal of their time, money and energy in search of partners, and in many cases of life
partners, and/or casual sexual encounters. The average age of the partners of the men in relationships is
37 for the men in their 30s, and 28.5 years for those in their 20s. The average length of relationships for
the men in the young cohort is slightly less than four years. No man in this cohort is or has been married
but three men, all of whom are in their thirties, are bringing up children. One man and his ex-partner are
foster parents of two teenage boys; another man and his partner are bringing up two young girls who are
part of his extended family; and one man and his partner are parents with two lesbian women of a infant
girl. The image of young gay men as promiscuous is at odds with the lived reality of these men.

No one in this cohort is retired. Six men are students. Three are enrolled in TAFE courses and
three are at universities. Half are mature age students (all in their 30s). Of the twenty-two men who are in
work, five have working-class jobs, and these are in transport and hospitality. Two thirds have middle-
class occupations, mainly in the public sector and caring professions, such as social work, disability
support and health care. All but four of the men in the young cohort have some funds invested in
superannuation schemes. The average income for the men in the young cohort is $44,000 per annum,
which is more than the average for the old cohort but less than for the middle cohort. Ten men, or more
than one third of the young cohort, live on low incomes, that is, on yearly incomes of $35,000 or less.
Three men have incomes of less than $15,000 per annum; all are students. Five men (all in their 30s) earn
more than $85,000 per annum. Meanwhile, six men in the young cohort receive some form of
government income assistance, including Austudy, unemployment, or disability benefits. The young
cohort has the lowest proportion of owners of houses or flats. Nine men own their residence, two jointly
with their partners. Excluding the tertiary students, eight men have secondary qualifications only. Twelve
interviewees have university degrees.
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