



## Perils, Precariousness and Pleasures: Middle-Aged Gay Men Negotiating Urban 'Heterospaces'

by Paul Simpson  
University of Manchester

*Sociological Research Online*, 17 (3) 23  
<<http://www.socresonline.org.uk/17/3/23.html>>  
10.5153/sro.2665

Received: 13 Dec 2011 Accepted: 24 May 2012 Published: 31 Aug 2012

---

### Abstract

Based on interviews with 27 gay men aged 39 - 61 living in Manchester, this article examines how middle-aged gay men are differentiated and negotiate relations in heterosexually defined spaces. I focus on what informants' accounts of relations in these 'heterospaces' say about middle-aged gay men's responses to homophobia. I argue that 'ageing capital' is implicated in subjects' accounts that capitulate to, negotiate with and challenge heteronormativity. First, the normativity of certain heterospaces could compel self-censoring/'de-gayng' of the self. Middle-aged gay men were differentiated by others who claim greater legitimacy within them. Second, informants differentiated themselves through involvement with heterosexual friends from ghettoised 'scene queens.' This ambivalent claim to difference could deny inequality and reinforce homophobia. Third, the normativity of heterospaces was thought to offer freedom from the ageist gay gaze, allowing expression of more 'authentic' aspects of the midlife-aged self.

---

**Keywords:** *Ageing Capital, Ageism, Differentiation, Gay Men, Heterospaces, Heteronormativity, Homophobia, Middle-Age, Urban Gay Villages*

---

### Introduction

**1.1** With its highly developed and differentiated facilities, including bars and social groups, Manchester is a regional magnet for gay men in the North West of England. Since the late 1990s, its city centre 'gay village' has been marketed by the City Council as a tourist attraction (Hughes 2005: 250). Scholarship on gay ageing pivots around the idea of 'accelerated ageing' (Bennett and Thompson 1991: 66) or being adjudged old before one's time in a commercialised bar culture that places excessive value on youth (Cruz 2003; Heaphy et al 2004). But, over the last ten years or so, urban 'gay villages' have also become a focus for research on the relations of sexual (as well as age) difference where homophobia might trump ageism. However, one study has highlighted how gay people themselves express a class-tinged cultural imperialism towards groups of working class heterosexual women. The more self-entitled users of this space considered the latter to represent a brash, excessive form of sexuality that embodies a lack of requisite cultural capital (knowledge of the situational rules of the game and appropriate self-expression) for legitimacy within this putatively cosmopolitan field (Binnie and Skeggs 2004). Another study has drawn attention to the village as a site of class-based antagonisms *between* gay men where divisions of age aggravate effects of a capitalist ideology that places excessive value on youth. Whittle (1994) conceptualises social relations as overly structurally, socio-economically determined, offering no vision of agency or cross-generational conviviality. Like Binnie's and Skeggs' contribution, Whittle constructs users of the space as alienated victims of thoroughly commodified, but in this case, intrinsically ageist gay (and consumer) culture(s). If younger men are its dupes, older men are rendered abject by it. In contrast, another empirical study concluded that use of village bars expressed 'communitas, individualism and diversity,' reflecting individuals' identities and moods (Haslop et al 1998: 320). A large scale cross-disciplinary study by Moran et al (2004) concluded that long-standing institutionalised state and public hostility have ensured that physical and symbolic violence structure gay men's experiences of social space. Although this now has been eclipsed by recent law and greater tolerance, it underlines the need to know about homophobia for reasons of social policy and ensuring equality in terms of justice and protection.

### Argument and theoretical framework

**2.1** Whilst some of these studies have produced useful insights into the dynamics of situated sexual politics, lives are more braided and we should avoid reinforcing the exclusionary view that (midlife) gay men lead parallel lives in a lavender ghetto of separate social, relational and residential spaces (Knopp 1995: 143). A fuller more nuanced account is to be had through examination of how middle-aged gay men negotiate heterosexually understood social spheres - what I call 'heterospaces.' Indeed, interview informants described the village and their gay lives as part of their wider cultural experience. Further, most men spoke of the domestic spaces of 'constructed family' (Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan 2001), involving heterosexual friends and a few relatives, as more valuing because they were freer from the ageism, sexualised and discursive pressures of homonormative self-presentation apropos dress and grooming on 'the gay scene' (Simpson 2011: 95).

**2.2** Based on interviews with 27 middle-aged gay men, overlooked both in social gerontology and studies of sexuality (Simpson 2011: 37), I attempt to address some of the above-identified gaps in scholarship by locating informants in heterospaces and looking at their varied responses to heteronormativity. Specifically, I examine how men deploy or are prevented from deploying 'ageing capital' (see below) in their relations with heterosexuals in city streets/neighbourhoods, friendship groups, workplaces and the local gym. These spaces emerged most frequently in men's account, though questions were asked about the gym given that gay men are stereotyped as investing in bodily projects of the self to prolong sexual marketability (Berger 1992: 219). I argue that, in using ageing capital, midlife gay men respond to heteronormativity in three ways. These involve capitulation to, negotiation with and challenge to the latter. This tripartite schema complicates the view that (threats of) symbolic and physical violence from heterosexuals dominate(s) gay men's social experiences. More importantly, the article offers food for thought apropos continuing social injustice and antagonisms around inequalities in queer access to/use of space (Valentine 1996), recent gains in tolerance (Weeks 2007) and the cultural labour required to move further towards a genuine 'erotic democracy' (Hawkes 1996: 117) where sexual differences are recognised but largely inconsequential.

**2.3** Specifically, the theoretical framework underpinning this work is designed to address the binary view of intersubjectivity appearing in much of the literature germane to gay male ageing and experience of heterospace where (ageing) gay men are either oppressed by its normativity (Valentine 1996: 19) or are largely agentic, courtesy of mastery over the stigma of age and homosexuality, and are defiant in the face of heteronormativity (Berger 2000: 61). This binary of constraint/voluntarism overlooks men's ambivalent and *distinctive* experiences as ageing subjects within heterospace. To address this theoretical gap and explore ambivalences as well as the constraints and choices featured in men's stories of heterospace, I deploy Bourdieu's notion of 'habitus' (1984) - deeply ingrained, pre-reflective, embodied forms of knowledge which I recognise as shaped by the *intersecting* influences of ageing and (gendered) sexuality as well as social class. To my knowledge, this theoretical move has seldom if ever been applied (at least in the United Kingdom) to an empirical study (involving a diverse sample) of middle-aged gay men and their experiences in heterospaces. Indeed, I demonstrate how middle-aged gay men's 'ageing capital' enmeshes with different forms of cultural capital (knowledge of the workings of cultures and society) that enable or constrain expression of midlife identity and relating in various heterosexual fields of existence with their distinct norms/'rules of the game.' Ageing capital is a multivalent concept appearing in men's accounts of ageing that variously index emotional strength, self-acceptance, age-appropriate bodily display and performance (especially on the gay scene), awareness of the relations constitutive of gay culture and wider society. Ageing capital could compensate for 'deficits' in education/'cultural capital' to help men, regardless of class (and race) challenge homophobia, homophobic ageism and gay ageism, though I also draw attention to the failures of ageing capital that can be both overwhelmed by and complicit in reproducing homophobia.

## Methods

**3.1** Accounts of experiences of heterospace were generated through in-depth interviews with 27 gay men. This method was chosen because it is suited to investigation of social processes rather than yielding 'factual' outcomes (Maxwell 1996: 20). Indeed, it enabled exploration of different experiences of homophobia and ageing. In-depth interviews elicited detailed, *spoken* narratives that would be difficult to tell/hear in participant observation in village bars with their many sensory 'distractions.' Semi-structured interviews combined order with flexibility: the structure lends a sense of coherence to the interview process whilst allowing for exploration of unexpected thematic, theoretical leads or significant 'minority reports' (Arksey and Knight 1999: 169). Researcher subjectivity and interaction with interviewees proved not an impediment to but rather a resource leading to more finely tuned knowledges (Holstein and Gubrium 1997: 118). Rather than biasing the research, interviewing brought me closer to the 'object' of study - midlife gay men's experiences of ageing in Manchester - resulting in accounts that are *plausible* (Maxwell 1996: 87). The test of 'plausibility' is not whether stories are accurate representations of gay male midlife/ageing but whether they are substantively recognisable by/credible to subjects (Stewart 1998: 12) and the academic community. Indeed, I was more concerned to examine the meanings of midlife and the *processes* by which subjects produce accounts of lived experience. The method also enabled the generation of accounts that might transcend the environments in which they were generated (Maxwell 1996: 98). The stories of ageism and homophobia that men recounted might be transferable (generalisable theoretically rather than empirically to another population) because they could be told in comparable cities with gay villages and higher levels of tolerance such as Birmingham, Glasgow, Leeds and Liverpool.

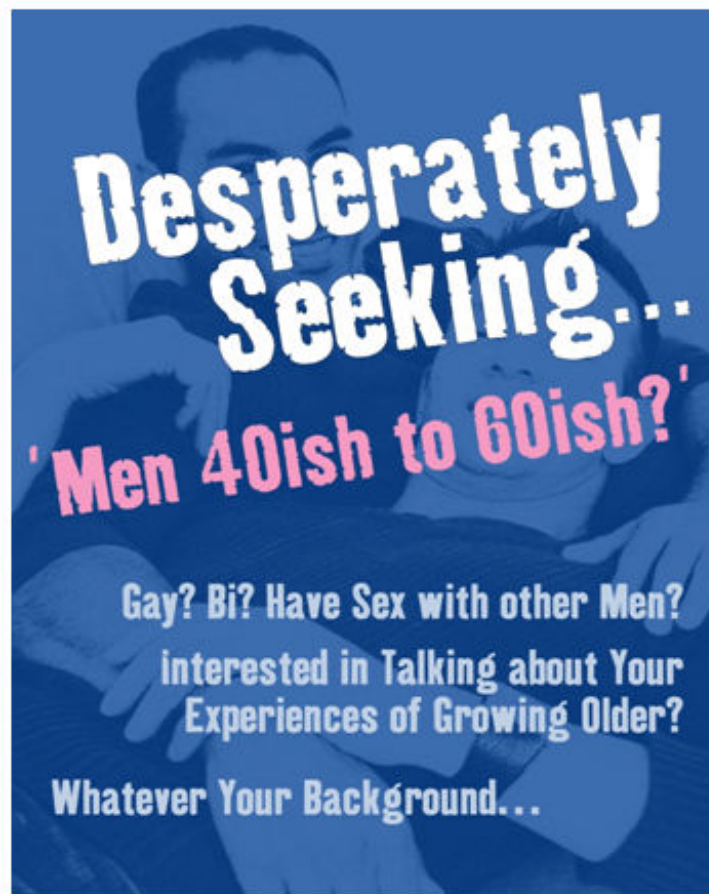
## Sampling strategy

**3.2** The sampling strategy was designed to accommodate key dimensions of difference: age (early and

late midlife); class; ethnicity; and relationship status/practices (single, partnered etc) and thus avoid a homogeneous sample of 'conscience constituents' (white, single, middle class men generally open about their sexuality). Central to sampling/recruitment of interviewees was project publicity that consisted of a leaflet and poster. Figure 1 (below) shows the front page of the leaflet, which was also the basis of the poster. Publicity was distributed within personal networks, gay social/support groups, (which yielded 16 (60%) of informants), bars associated with different clienteles by age and class and other gay/gay-friendly businesses e.g. gay sauna, clothes/sex aids shop and a barber's shop. Personal networks were trawled and gay social groups contacted because they might yield respondents more involved with social and friendship groups than the bar scene (Harry 1986: 26). Groups might enable contact with non-white men (relatively absent from the village scene), men in the later part of midlife who might feel particularly unwelcome on the bar scene and men who might define their sexuality in more fluid terms. Publicity in the village sauna and clothes/sex toys shop could have attracted interest from non-white men or men who do not identify as gay and who might choose not to socialise on the bar scene or feel obliged to avoid being seen there.

**3.3** The overall tone of the publicity suggested a non-judgemental take on ageing given the breezy reference to a 1980s film; a farce centred around mistaken identity and mis/adventures around personal ads, *Desperately Seeking Susan*, starring gay icon, Madonna. The two men whose feature on the leaflet/poster (probably in early midlife) are almost stereotypical – well-groomed, ostensibly happy, possibly a couple given their embrace. (When organising the design of the publicity with a graphic designer, we were struck by the lack of available images and that what little existed was mainly of this ilk). The wording suggested a chance to explore highly habituated experience but that any interview would not be overly formal. The publicity also frames midlife as relatively porous – "forty-ish to sixty-ish." Although, it did not refer specifically to race or social class, enquiries were invited from men regardless of "background." The emphasis on "background" aimed to avoid excluding men who regard their sexuality as more fluid and specifying my own sexuality might have offered reassurance that homosexuality would not be problematised. Taking maleness for granted did not deter one interviewee who recognised the indeterminacy of his gender.

**Figure 1.** Leaflet (front)



**The sample**

**3.4** The sample consisted of 14 men (52%) aged between 50 and 61 and 13 men (48%) aged between 39 and 48. Seventeen respondents (63%) were single and the remainder were partnered. Twenty four respondents (89%) described themselves as 'white British,' one self-defined as 'mixed race' another as 'oriental' and another as 'Irish *and* European.' Following Bourdieu (1984), social class was defined in terms of inter-related socio-economic and cultural dimensions as below.

**Table 1.**



Socio-economic dimensions		Cultural dimensions	
Middle class	Working class	Middle class	Working class
13 (48%)	14 (52%)	22 (81%)	5 (19%)

**3.5** Interviewees were allocated to a socio-economic class category on the basis of employment and income-related data i.e. whether employed full-time or receiving lower levels of pay, for example, whether connected to part-time work or minimum wage and offering fewer opportunities for career development. In cultural terms, class was defined according to Bourdieu's notion of 'cultural capital' - the forms of embodied knowledge men required to access and carry out certain cultural pursuits (and occupations). The sample is evenly spread across the two socio-economic classes but less so in terms of the cultural dimensions of class, though nine of the culturally middle class men reported originating from working class backgrounds. The sampling strategy yielded a group of men on lower to modest levels of income, which could set limits on participation in gay (and other) cultural 'scenes.' The sample appears better resourced in terms of cultural capital. Twenty two respondents described the kind of eclectic interests associated with the more culturally 'omnivorous,' suggesting an ability to access pursuits from across the cultural spectrum. However, the cultural dimensions of class appeared insignificant in men's stories of capitulation or resistance to homophobia but stories differentiating the self from the putatively degraded mono-culture of the village were more likely to be told by men able to mobilise more intellectual, middle class cultural capital. In practical terms, NVivo8 was used to place men's stories into themes, which were then analysed in terms of their content and structure - the discourses that men drew on to construct narratives. This was used in a 'light touch' way as a basis for theoretical unpacking of stories but on several occasions thematic categories were recoded and prompted concept building e.g. 'ageing capital.'

### Constraint: unequal, risky heterospace

**4.1** Respondents generally took for granted that public space was heterosexually defined (Browne, Lim and Brown 2007: 8). The experiences of lesbian/gay interviewees in one study of ageing sexuality and experiences of 'coming out' are described as, "constrained by and structured around conflict with heterosexuals" (Rosenfeld 2003: 99). Indeed, some men's accounts indicated the persistent power of homophobia felt by a generation of gay men whose formative years were overshadowed by it. Despite informants' claims to 'maturity' and gains in self-worth, the heterosexual gaze (Johnson 2002) could still be feared for its potential to escalate into verbal, symbolic threats and/or actual physical danger (Moran et al 2004: 6). This gaze involves appropriation of the right from a position of social superiority/legitimation to consume or subject others, considered inferior, threatening or out of place, to unwelcoming scrutiny. Experiences of the heterosexual gaze underscore the persistence of inequalities in access to and a sense of safety within the locality where the home and (rare) experiences of friendship with heterosexual men could be fraught with risk (Price 1999). Indicating the intersections of age, sexuality and class in producing discrimination, Alec (46) described how his interest in photographing the local working class area and its people was misconstrued as evidence of paedophilic intent and, consequently, he was forced to escape to accommodation on the opposite side of the city. The heterospaces of his friendship circles with black friends from his country of origin organised around shared religious faith were also risky because he was not 'out' to them and previous disclosures had resulted in rejection and condemnation as unnatural and 'un-Catholic.' But, religion trumped sexuality insofar as Alec's religious community offered respite from ageism and racism in gay culture. Nonetheless, a 'double life' had become part of Alec's *modus operandi* (habitus) that involved keeping gay and straight friends rigidly apart and thus partial concealment/denial of his gay experience. Following an abortive police investigation prompted by the local authority of a loving relationship with a man in his twenties with learning difficulties, Les (53) felt obliged to leave his hometown in Yorkshire to seek refuge in Manchester. He moved because he feared recriminations that might follow from accusations of corruption of a younger man for whom he had been acting as unpaid carer. This experience has the familiar ring of a homophobic ageism that casts older gay men as predatory, exploitative if not quasi-paedophilic. When considering buying a new home in a less familiar district in order to escape neighbours' homophobic intimidation (in an affluent, middle class district), Warren and his partner, middle class by education and in their late forties, felt obliged to take the strategic precaution of 'gaying' themselves to prospective new neighbours.

**4.2** As already intimated, heteronormativity could be age-inflected (Meisner and Hynie 2009):

'I've often thought of it but wouldn't dare do it, unless I got a taxi there and back, but I'd like to go out in full camouflage gear... I'd just feel a prick getting on the tram like that. I'd feel okay once I got there but I'd feel self-conscious about straight people looking at me. It could feel a bit threatening... If I went up the road like that, I might get a few comments or more... I wouldn't take the chance.' (Jamie 54).

**4.3** The norms operating within more 'public' heterospaces imposed constraints on expression of ageing homosexuality through dress or bodily semiology (Keogh, Reed and Weatherburn (2006: 31). Jamie speaks less of negotiating movement through heterospace than compliance with what he considers to be its requirement that men should not dress in an overly 'gay' fashion. 'Full camouflage' is not just a 'gay' image but associated with the erotic imaginary of middle-aged/older gay men (Levine 1998: 56) that (for some) might be considered part of a middle-aged gay habitus. Any claim to validity as a middle-aged gay man when moving through heterospace from the gay space of the home to the gay space of the



village becomes tenuous. Heterospace is risky space - something to be traversed rather than occupied, where men might have to run the gauntlet of the (masculine coded) heterosexual gaze before entering the relative sanctuary of gay space. The heterosexual gaze can severely restrict subjects' uses of ageing capital - here referring to self-acceptance in terms of one's appearance and indicating capitulation to pressures towards privatisation of certain expressions of a midlife gay male erotic self. Jamie's words are a reminder that those thought to embody sexual difference still figure as matter out of place because their appearance threatens the normal heterosexual order (Burgess 2005: 27). His account also indicates that the risks of heterospace are navigated by means of body management strategies (Goffman 1971: 162) and ritual avoidances, involving self-surveillance and distancing from homosexuality (Rosenfeld 2003: 103). The 'de-gay' of the self suggested in Jamie's narrative invokes the power or symbolic violence of the heteronormative gaze and its capacity to stigmatise, unsettle and discipline (Johnson 2002). Such anxieties register how heteronormative 'knowledge systems,' through which those understood as sexually different are 'constructed and recognised,' render subjects vulnerable to homophobia (Moran et al 2004: 17).

**4.4** Similarly, a discomforting self-surveillance could be required even in familiar heterospaces where middle class men might feel conspicuous about being read as a gay couple/pair:

'There is a pub locally and (laughs hesitantly) it's quite a family pub-restaurant... We pop down there to eat sometimes and you're talking away and sometimes we both check ourselves as to what we say... lower our voices... I, I, I've never really felt... uncomfortable there... but you feel you don't want to put yourself into a situation where you are... Also, we wouldn't walk along holding hands in Manchester... unless in the village... Once we were holding hands near the end of our road late at night but, as soon as a car came, we stopped... I've a friend who was physically and verbally abused for that' (Jonathan 42).

**4.5** The above narrative indicates how middle-aged gay men can react when they sense they are differentiated by heterosexuals who might claim, exude and take for granted a greater sense of legitimacy in inhabiting certain spaces. For Jonathan and his partner, being in this 'family' heterospace, located in a middle class area, calls for small but no less significant pre-emptive acts that 'de-gay' or downplay habitual, relational selves through circumspection, self-censorship, modification of talk and the give-away signs of couple intimacy. This does not just require denial of their seven-year cohabiting relationship but also obliges highly educated men to override (a form of) gay habitus, (informed by ageing capital), that in most fields of existence in which they move, experiences self-worth. The ever-present threat of psychic violence (e.g. 'cat-calls' or mimicry of the acoustics/gestures suggesting lack of normative masculinity) and/or physical violence from heterosexuals whether in the 'family pub' or delivered from a passing vehicle, operate as explicit injunctions restricting the expressions of affection that are part of Jonathan and his partner's *modus operandi*. Jonathan's story indicates that gay couples are understood as disrupting the 'natural' heterocentric order (Johnson 2002) that consists of 'proper' hetero-coded relationality.

**4.6** Notwithstanding gains in tolerance and legislative change in the direction of equality, norms operating in the hetero workplace continue to construct sexual difference as problematic. Here the difference of sexuality trumps the difference of age. Parity of esteem for LGBTQ workers of any age could be tenuous. Ben (50), able to mobilise middle class cultural capital, described how despite good induction training in equal opportunities, there was a lack of vigilance among his civil service managers and how colleagues could bracket such sensibilities off from what they saw as the 'real' demands of the job. Interviewees' accounts of the workplace echo findings of a case study conducted in gay-friendly Brighton where 25% of survey respondents reported experience of homophobic harassment and most interviewees described the need to be on guard. Even those who were 'out,' described censoring details of their personal lives that heterosexuals would express quite freely as well as having to negotiate covert prejudices and insensitivity (Ryan-Flood 2004). This was the case for some men in gay-friendly Manchester. Typically, Leo opined:

The guys in the office and what they wouldn't do to the blonde in Finance and all that... I get people at work asking me, 'Do you fancy any of the people you support?' And I said, 'If I did, I wouldn't tell you (intoned evenly without rancour or sarcasm) because it wouldn't be the same in your eyes...' I can't talk about my relationship in the way they talk about theirs. And there was one colleague who said, 'Oof, she's gorgeous. And, I think, I couldn't do that. It could be used in another way.' (Leo 61).

**4.7** As a gay man, any overt expressions of desire towards the young people Leo taught could be interpreted in an incriminating way compared to his heterosexual peers. He refrained from sex talk within the office not for reasons of privacy or because he wanted to stand aloof from such talk. Rather he intimates that any disclosures might be used to portray him as a predatory middle-aged gay man (Jones and Pugh 2005). Although the informant felt confident about using ageing capital (accumulated sense of self-worth, and relational skills) to level with his colleagues about this inequality, his account registers that those associated with same-sex desire is still assumed as other in the heterocentric order. Such inequalities in access to spaces understood as public (the streets) and private (work) register the limits of tolerance towards LGBTQ individuals and groups and remind us that sexual difference is not regarded as inconsequential - 'part of life's rich tapestry.' There is a great deal of cultural labour that needs to be done before we are anywhere near erotic democracy. Stories indexing in/tolerance offer some support for conclusions in Moran et al's empirical investigation of the experiences of lesbian and gay people living in Manchester, which pointed up how (the potential for) homophobic violence, actual and symbolic, signifies as ever-present threat in 'queer' experiences of public space (2004: 6).

## Stories of ambivalence

**5.1** The relational norms obtaining in heterospaces by no means completely thwart possibilities for the deployment of age-related cultural capital. However, involvement in heterospaces could involve age- and class-inflected moral claims to differentiation from other gay men in ways that were double-edged. For instance, Leo (61) distanced himself from gay men 'whose whole life is in the gay community. I'm a man who happens to be gay rather than a gay man full stop.' Indeed, men commonly spoke of the quality of their non-gay relationships, which involved talk about politics, theatre, literature, personal feelings etc. Leo rightly claims to be more than his ageing sexuality but, courtesy of a certain amounts/combinations of middle class cultural capital, also invokes a form of distinction that resists being reduced to a homogenised homosexual existence. He contrasts the lavender ghetto of the youthful gay village with a relational space where a more rounded, 'authentic,' emotional and intellectual self (part of habitus denied to him in the village) can be staged.

**5.2** The statement below from Clive (45) also involves a claim for distinction but is ambivalent in another way. Although Clive had become middle class by education, he differentiates himself from the majority of (imagined) gay others not through class/taste but knowledge about the dubious political claims he considered to be emanating from gay culture:

'We'd all love to clasp the feather boa to our bosoms and complain that there's an awful stigma, life is horrible and nobody likes us... The way young people have responded gives me enormous hope for the future for the gay community and we should stop this constant idea that we are all being persecuted and that the world is a horrible place to be if you're a gay man. We need to start accepting that the straight community doesn't have the problems some of us think they have.... My straight mates do not wanna keep hearing me banging on about how much the gay community is hated by the straight community. 'Cause they would argue, 'We don't hate you; you're your own worst enemy...' I think it's become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

**5.3** On the basis of his experience of friendship with younger heterosexually identified men, Clive describes the differences of age and sexuality as much less problematic and divisive than the 'gay community's' assertion of its difference, criticism of the 'straight community' and its ongoing clamour for equality. Clive's commentary is reflexive in various ways. It registers the gains that have been made in tolerance of sexual difference among younger straight men. Clive also expressed a desire that we might dismantle rigid definitions of sexuality or that they could at least be reduced to the status of a much less consequential form of difference. But, his proposition is ambivalent in its claim for moral and epistemological distinction from those middle-aged gay men/LGBTQ others thought of as in thrall to a community ideology that continues to be based around if not obsessed with proclaiming victimhood. Clive implies that gay men generally want to perpetuate this status – one of 'stigma' and 'persecution' - for dubious personal-political gain. But, this account is suggestive of a form of self-governance which decrees that a reasonable level of equality or erotic democracy has been achieved and, as a corollary, LGBTQ people/groups should now refrain from militating for further gains in acceptance and extension of rights. It suggests that the battle for equality has been won (Hughes 2006: 239) and any further demands would risk unfair bias in favour of the 'gay community.' The view that most within the 'gay community' protest too much and are handicapped by a self-imposed, 'self-fulfilling' victim mentality is itself indicative of a homonegativity that affects *all* who live in a culture suffused by such discourse (Russell and Bohan 2006). Clive's vivid metaphor of 'clasping the feather boa to our bosoms' also invokes the notion that protest and expression of grievance by gay men are shrill, feminising and thus invalidating. If anything, Clive's knowledge is more suggestive of how the tacit rules of the heterospaces of friendship with his twenty-something male companions can encourage or exact political quietism, quiescence and discretion in exchange for toleration. Clive's acceptance of his friends' views or fears about widespread gay militancy illuminates how heteronormative thinking can lead to trivialisation of any resistance to it whilst simultaneously abrogating heterosexuals of the responsibility to address ingrained homophobia. It appears that ageing capital, (involving greater acceptance of self and others), is occluded in this 'politics of respectability' that stems from the ambivalence of gay social positioning as insider and outsider where men make necessary claims for social belonging whilst being 'othered' by heterosexually identified people and institutions (Gould 2001: 136).

### **Querying and queering the gym: ambivalence and agency**

**6.1** The norms operating within the gym as a space of play could elicit a range of stories that indexed constraint, negotiation with and resistance to their exigencies. Fourteen informants, and generally more educated and/or possessing enhanced capacities for social criticism, were critical of the obedience the gym demanded to develop the body beautiful. But such criticism was bought at the expense of younger people (gay and straight) deemed to be in thrall to the 'shallow' and conformist motive of enhancing sexual marketability. Informants differentiated themselves morally, epistemically and in class-inflected terms from obsession with building a better (middle-aged gay) body. Chris (48) explained why he had long abandoned going to the gym, which he found 'boring and frustrating... not a good use of time and full of these huge lumps of fellas that could just lift these huge weights and steam'd rise off them.' He considered himself 'too complex to follow a programme through' and found that gym goers resisted any conversational gambit 'as though you were deeply unsound.' In Chris' narrative, the heterospace of the (city centre) gym was neither convivial nor was it free from the kind of bodily hierarchy evident in homospaces (Edwards 2006: 49) such as bars and saunas. For Chris, the gym figures as asocial, atomised, alienated space where attempts to be sociable infringe norms that require silence, dedication to solitary projects and hyper-individualism. The rules of the game in this youth, hetero and working class coded field appear triply alienating towards a more 'complex' middle-aged habitus that operates in the realm of mind and strategises in the maximisation of time. Indeed, Chris' 'fish out of water' experience as a midlife gay man of a more intellectual predisposition suggests the use of age-inflected cultural capital

that enables embodied, classed, epistemic and moral distinction from the self-obsessed forms of masculinity thought to characterise this particular heterospace.

**6.2** However, more commonly, such strategising as just described was challenged by men's accounts like that of Ben (50) whose use of ageing capital reclaimed his local authority gym as a space for sensory and sensual pleasures consisting not least of the delights of looking at (heterosexual) men. Besides, 'working out' does not mean straightforward replication of hegemonic masculinity - muscles being erotic rather than part of gay men's armoury (Halperin 1995: 114) - and could enable middle-aged men to realise Woodward's idea of an older 'still watchable older self' (1999: ix) worthy of the regard of others. Such a self could be displayed in the gym and, in one case, the local leisure centre changing rooms (homoerotic space *par excellence*), were 'gayed' at least temporarily:

'I find it quite exciting... looking at guys and kinda flirting... especially when you go to the showers afterwards. I find that quite a turn-on... There was this youngish guy, local lad and I think he's straight... Anyway, he was looking when I came out of the showers. And I actually started a conversation with him... He opened up straightaway. And, as I left, I thought, "I can do it *now* when I want to..." I know it's quite naughty but I quite like winding straight guys up, y'know, perving at them without actually doing owt' (Jeff 48).

**6.3** In the above account, age, ageing and ageism do not appear to matter very much nor present any barrier to sexual inquisitiveness. Not only are the differences of class practically irrelevant in this erotic encounter but Jeff's anecdote also indicates the use of ageing capital to blur the categories of sexuality. The informant troubles heteronormativity by subtle appropriation of the right to train the gaze on and flirt with younger, (possibly) heterosexually identified men. The psychological *force majeure* involved in being able to confuse and playfully unsettle heterosexual men, through confident performance of sexual ambiguity, is clearly linked to increasing sense of self-worth and confidence that come with age.

**6.4** Informants' accounts often constituted moral claims that the rules of contemporary heterospaces enable opportunities to occupy, move freely within and appropriate them. Mirroring the trend towards toleration in more recent years, anxieties concerning safety and status within public heterospace were more often eclipsed by counter-discourses, referencing civic freedoms rather than immobilising fear (Hubbard 2001). Indeed, ageing sexuality might serve as a resource and 'a condition of freedom' rather than constraint (Connell 1995: 161). Further, informants most commonly spoke of heterospaces as providing freedoms of association and ease of communication thought lacking in gay male culture. Ageism was experienced as much less salient than in the homospaces of bars/clubs, saunas, websites and social groups. Healthier relationships were thought more readily available in heterospaces where middle-aged gay men could feel liberated from the ageist, sexualised, competitive gay gaze. Consequently, heterospaces provided greater opportunity to express aspects of midlife authenticity that might be considered off-limits in homospaces. Sam (45) contrasted his experience of the village bar scene with the more fulfilling social relations and mutual respect across age differences he found among younger people who socialise in 'Northern Quarter' bars.

**6.5** Moreover, Jed, who works as a hairdresser, embodies an illuminating case study of how ageing capital can be used to queer heterospace and homospace:

Sometimes I wear mini-skirts, tights and high heels... I wear a lot of really caked on make-up... I kind of look like a drag queen... But, I don't wanna look like the other TVs (male cross-dressers) 'cause some of them take it too seriously. They try to sort of blend in and they're quite conservative in the way they dress... I'm making a statement about the gender divide... I sort of identify myself as a trans guy... a trans queer... I'm sort of gay but I don't know whether dressing kinda makes me a heterosexual female when I go out or whether I'm a gay man dressed as a woman... But, Marigold [alter ego] is really feisty, in yer face... bit of a vamp... But, it's all very kind of blurred and confused... I have been there [to the gay village] on the bus a few times... People might look but they tend not to say much... I get a mixed response, really. There's been a few comments occasionally... a few might mutter things. But, so what? ...I was on the bus the other day on the way through our estate and observing some of the younger men. They all tend to look similar. They've all got the same masculine ways, the walk, the style of clothing and everything.... And I thought, 'what makes them like that? Why do they copy each other?' It's masculinity... eh? (Laughs ironically).

**6.6** In contrast to Jamie's story analysed above, the protagonist does not fear public rebuke for his queer self-presentation. In effect, when 'dressed,' Jed adopts an alter ego, 'Marigold,' who normalises her difference by going out to the village on the bus. Indeed, Marigold differentiates herself from the cross-dressers who try to 'pass' or 'blend in' as 'real' women. Jed's/Marigold's conscious epistemic and moral claim in relation to a productive gender 'confusion' points up the incoherencies of gender and sexuality and is redolent of Butler's theorising that all genders and sexualities are performative (Butler 1993: 227) - products of often repeated discourse that are social constructions lacking any interior essence. Further, ageing capital enables Jed/Marigold to do other than comply with the rigidities of conventional gender categories. It has enabled the subject to develop counter-discourse that might broaden the parameters of sexual citizenship (Butler and Scott 1992: xv). His gender difference and cross-dressing have also afforded insight into the performativity of the classed hexis of the young men living on his housing estate and the form of masculinity they represent for him. Here Jed's ageing capital grants him the ability to train the gay/trans gaze on heterosexual men and in ways that avoid vengeful symbolic counter-violence.

**6.7** In contrast to the local 'family pub' etc., the city centre offered spaces of freedom where middle-aged gay men invoked the right to go about their lives:



We went to X store in town. Anyway, there was this slip of a bloody schoolgirl trying to sell jeans and he [partner] put these jeans on and she said, 'Oh, they look really lovely.' And I just looked at him and said, '**No way! No way!**' They were hangin' off his arse. So, I called her over and I said, 'Excuse me, love, I'm gonna give you one more chance.' I said, 'I don't like shopping at the best of times, right? Now, I'm looking for a pair of jeans that I can see his arse in. And that's what he's lookin' for too... a pair o' jeans where people will see his arse and think, 'that's a nice arse.' So, she went away, came back, he tried on these jeans and I said, 'Perfect' ...Anyway, the manager thanked us afterwards (Warren 52).

**6.8** Warren and his partner may be differentiated as a gay couple of a certain age out on a clothes shopping expedition but their *folie a deux* represents a mundane but important claim to equality and inclusion within sexual citizenship (Weeks 1998: 37). In the above anecdote, the shop assistant, duly despatched to return with a pair of jeans that 'show off his nice arse,' and the shop manager are included in the couple's comic, freely expressed intimacy. The various appropriations of heterospace described, courtesy of ageing capital, remind us of the greater opportunities now available for 'gaying'/queering heterospace.

## Conclusion

**7.1** This article has attempted to contribute to understanding of key debates in sexuality. First, it has pointed up continuing social injustice and antagonisms around inequalities in queer access to and use of space. This is particularly salient for midlife gay men who have not only been overlooked in studies of sexuality and gerontology but who will also remember much more hostile times and marks limits to the tolerance enjoyed in more recent years. Second, studying middle-aged gay men's experiences of heterospace has enabled a more detailed appreciation and specification of how some of the recent gains in tolerance of a kind elaborated by Weeks (2007) are actually accomplished in social space. Third, I have intimated the scale and kinds of cultural labour that might be needed (in particular fields of existence) if we are to move away from institutionalised 'homonegativity' (Russell and Bohan 2006) towards a genuine erotic democracy where difference is recognised but considered so mundane as to be largely inconsequential.

**7.2** Specifically, I have shown how discourses of homophobia (sometimes enmeshed with ageism) are organised and play out in various hetero-coded fields experienced by middle-aged gay men living in Manchester. Men's accounts of ageing capital, which extends Bourdieusian theory, by drawing attention to the intersections of class, sexuality and ethnicity in promoting or limiting expression of an authentic, relational, age-inflected (middle-aged) self (habitus) across various heterospaces ((sub-)fields). Subjects were differentiated by heterosexual others and differentiated themselves from (younger) gay others through various forms of embodied, moral, epistemic, age- and class-related claims in relation to city streets, neighbourhoods, friendship connections, workplaces and the local gym. Although there were intimations of homophobic ageism, heteronormativity more than ageism sets limits on expression of middle-aged gay male identities and men's ways of relating in local heterospaces. I have also highlighted how the contextual norms of heterospace sanction three ways in which midlife gay men might deploy or not ageing capital and which takes us beyond a binary of constraint or voluntarism. In the first instance, heterospaces could thwart use of ageing capital and limit expression of midlife gay identity and relating. Here (socio-sexual) citizenship is normatively heterosexual and those read as other unsettle the heterocentric order (Johnson 2002). Subjects could feel conspicuous in the 'family pub,' on the way to the gay village and in heterosexual workplaces that require navigation of covert homophobia. Such experiences could compel self-surveillance and self-censoring of everyday practices in the form of body management tactics that involve toning down - 'de-gaying' - the self. In the second and more ambivalent instance, informants used ageing capital to differentiate themselves through their involvement in heterosexual friendships from forms of relating in public space that they associated with younger people in the gym and in ways that were inflected by social class. But, securing 'legitimacy' in heterospace could also involve reinforcement of homophobia. In the third and most common instance, heterospaces were narrated as providing considerably greater freedoms than homospaces to express midlife authentic selves because of respite from the sexualised scrutiny and ageist gaze thought to prevail in homospaces. This was thought to enable more rounded forms of relating that exceed anxieties over the ageing body and obsession with sexual opportunity. Such accounts also involved mobilisation of ageing capital to differentiate selves (from heterosexuals and young gay men) whilst staking a claim to social inclusion. These accounts of differentiation involved the 'gaying' of heterospaces through confident, socially skilled, playful, age-inflected performance, which included turning the gaze back onto heterosexual men but without vengeful symbolic violence. The tripartite account of men's experiences of heterospace elaborated above partly supports but also complicates Moran et al's conclusion from their Manchester-based study (2004) that threat of violence (and state-sanctioned symbolic violence) structure the social experience of gay men (and others seen as sexually different). Although such concerns will resonate with midlife gay men in Manchester who grew up during a fervently anti-gay era, a combination of ageing capital and the more recent tolerance dividend have meant greater opportunities to challenge homophobia.

---

## Weblink

Images of the gay village are available at:  
[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canal\\_Street\\_\(Manchester\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canal_Street_(Manchester))

---

## Acknowledgements

Thanks are offered to Dr Vanessa May, Professor Brian Heaphy and Dr Wendy Bottero at Manchester University and especially to the three anonymous reviewers all of whose judicious comments have substantially improved this article.

---

## References

- ARKSEY H and Knight P (1999) *Interviewing for Social Scientists: an Introductory Resource with Examples*, London: Sage Publications
- BENNETT K and Thompson N (1991) Accelerated Ageing and Male Homosexuality: Australian Evidence in a Continuing Debate, *The Journal of Homosexuality* Vol. 20 (3-4): 65-75. [doi:10.1300/J082v20n03\_04]
- BERGER R (1992) *Research on Older Gay Men: What We Know; What We Need to Know* in Woodman J (ed.) (1992) *Lesbian and Gay Lifestyles: a Guide for Counselling and Education*, New York: Irvington Publications Inc.
- BERGER R (2000) *What Are Older Gay Men like? An Impossible Question?* in Kimmel D and Lundy Martin D (2000) (Eds.) *Midlife and Aging in Gay America*, New York: Harrington Park Press.
- BINNIE J and Skeggs B (2004) Cosmopolitan Knowledge and the Production and Consumption of Sexualised Space: Manchester's Gay Village, *Sociological Review*, Vol. 18: pp 39 – 61. [doi:10.1111/j.1467-954X.2004.00441.x]
- BOURDIEU P (1984) *Distinction: a Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, London: Routledge.
- BROWNE K, Lim J and Brown G (2007) *Introduction or Why Have a Book on Sexualities of Geographies?* in Browne K, Lim J and Brown G (Eds.) (2007) *Geographies of Sexualities: Theory, Practices and Politics*, Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited.
- BURGESS H (2005) Queering Heterosexual Spaces: Positive Space Campaigns Disrupting Campus Heteronormativity, *Canadian Women's Studies and Lesbian, Bisexual, Queer, Transsexual/Transgender Sexualities*, Vol. 24 (2 – 3): 25 – 48.
- BUTLER J (1993) *Bodies that Matter: on the Discursive Limits of 'Sex,'* New York: Routledge.
- BUTLER J and Scott J (Eds.) (1992) *Feminists Theorise the Political*, New York: Routledge.
- CONNELL R (1995) *Masculinities*, (Second Edition), Cambridge: Polity Press.
- CRUZ M (2003) *A Sociological Analysis of Ageing: the Gay Male Perspective*, New York: Harrington Park Press/Howarth Press.
- EDWARDS T (2006) *Cultures of Masculinity*, London: Routledge.
- GOFFMAN E (1971) *Relations in Public: Micro-Studies of Public Order*, Harmondsworth (Middlesex): Pelican Books.
- GOULD D (2001) *Rock the Boat, Don't Rock the Boat Baby: Ambivalence and the Emergence of Militant AIDS Activism* in Goodwin J (Ed.) (2001) *Passionate Politics: Emotions and Social Movements*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- HALPERIN D (1995) *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- HARRY J (1986) Sampling Gay Men, *Journal of Sex Research* Vol. 22 (1): 21 – 34. [doi:10.1080/00224498609551287]
- HAWKES G (1996) *A Sociology of Sex and Sexuality*, Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- HEAPHY B, Yip A and Thompson D (2004) Ageing in a Non-Heterosexual Context, *Ageing and Society* Vol. 24: 881- 902. [doi:10.1017/S0144686X03001600]
- HOLSTEIN J and Gubrium J (1997) *Active Interviewing*, in Silverman D (1997) *Qualitative Research: Theory, Method and Practice*, London: Sage Publications.
- HUBBARD P (2001) Sex Zones: Intimacy, Citizenship and Public Space, *Sexualities* Vol. 4 (1): 51 – 71. [doi:10.1177/136346001004001003]
- HUGHES H (2006) *Gay and Lesbian Festivals: Tourism in the Change from Politics to Party* in Picard D and Robinson M (Eds.) (2006) *Festivals, Tourism and Social Change*. Bristol: Channel View Publications.
- JOHNSON C (2002) *Heteronormative Citizenship and the Politics of Passing*, *Sexualities* Vol. 5 (3): 31-336. [doi:10.1177/1363460702005003004]
- JONES J and Pugh S (2005) Ageing Gay Men: Lessons from the Sociology of Embodiment, *Men and Masculinities* Vol. 7 (3): 248 – 260. [doi:10.1177/1097184X04265990]

- KEOGH P, Reid D and Weatherburn P (2006) *Lambeth LGBT Matters: The Needs and Experiences of Lesbians, Gay Men and Trans Men and Women in Lambeth* sigmaresearch.org.uk/downloads/report06.pdf. (Accessed 5 August 2011).
- KNOPP L (1995) *Sexuality and Urban Space*, in Bell D and Valentine G (1995) (Eds.) *Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexualities*, London: Routledge.
- LEVINE M (1998) *Gay Macho: the Life and Death of the Homosexual Clone*, New York: New York University Press.
- MAXWELL J (1996) *Qualitative Research Design*, London: Sage Publications.
- MEISNER B and Hynie M (2009) Ageism with Heterosexism: Self-Perceptions, Identity, and Psychological Health in Older Gay and Lesbian Adults, *Gay and Lesbian Issues and Psychology Review* Vol. 5 (1): 51 – 58.
- MORAN L, Skeggs B with Tyrer P and Korteen K (2004) *Sexuality and the Politics of Violence and Safety*, London: Routledge.
- PRICE J (1999) *Navigating Differences: Friendships between Gay and Straight Men*, New York: Haworth Park Press.
- ROSENFELD D (2003) *The Changing of the Guard: Lesbian and Gay Elders, Identity and Social Change*, Philadelphia (PA): Temple University Press.
- RUSSELL G and Bohan J (2006) *The Case of Internalised Homophobia: Theory and/as Practice*, *Theory and Psychology* Vol. 16 (3): 343 – 366. [doi:10.1177/0959354306064283]
- RYAN-FLOOD R (2004) Beyond Recognition and Redistribution: a Case Study of Lesbian and Gay Workers in a Local Labour Market in Britain. *Gender Institute New Working Paper Series*. Issue 12 (2004) London School of Economics.
- SIMPSON P (2011) *Differentiating the Self: How Gay Men in Manchester Respond to Ageing and Gay Ageism*, Unpublished PhD Thesis: University of Manchester.
- STEWART A (1998) *The Ethnographer's Method*, London: Sage Publications.
- VALENTINE G (1996) *Renegotiating the 'Heterosexual Street': Lesbian Productions of Space* in Duncan N (Ed.) *Bodyspace: Destabilising Geographies of Gender and Sexuality*, London: Verso Books.
- WEEKS J (1998) The Sexual Citizen, *Theory, Culture and Society* Vol. 15 (3 – 4): 35 – 52.
- WEEKS J (2007) *The World We Have Won: the Remaking of Erotic Life*, London: Routledge.
- WEEKS J, Heaphy B and Donovan C (2001) *Same Sex Intimacies: Families of Choice and Other Life Experiments*, London: Routledge. [doi:10.4324/9780203167168]
- WHITTLE S (1994) *Consuming Differences: The Collaboration of the Gay Body with the Cultural State* in Whittle S (Ed.) *The Margins of the City: Gay Men's Urban Lives*, Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited.
- WOODWARD K (1999) *Introduction in Women, Bodies, Generations*, Bloomington (IN): Indiana University Press.