

**Sexual citizenship:
An analysis of gay men as sexual citizens
in nonmetropolitan England and Ireland**

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Declaration

I, Aidan McKearney, hereby declare that this thesis is my own work

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Abstract

This study explores the concept of sexual citizenship as it applies to the lives of gay men living in nonmetropolitan areas of Britain, and Ireland. Both countries have undergone dramatic social, legal and cultural changes over recent decades, and have witnessed profound and progressive shifts in public attitudes towards lesbian, gay and bisexual people. Given historical tendencies towards a metrocentric bias in researching gay lives, this study takes place outside the large metropolitan centres of population. It travels to a world of smaller towns, villages and farms. In making this journey, the research aims to understand the life world and experiences of gay men living within these locales. It seeks to explore the dynamics created by the intersection of sexuality and the space of the rural. Crucially it strives to develop an understanding of the nature, depth, and scope, of the men's sexual citizenship, as it applies within their geographic context.

Forty-four men were interviewed: twenty-two in England and twenty-two in Ireland. The study finds that rural men in both countries share similar experiences, concerns and worries. All of the men recall an awakening in childhood and adolescence that they were different from other male age mates, followed by a slow realisation (often resisted) that they could be gay. The study finds that profound social, and cultural changes have been of critical importance to the men, in encouraging many of them (though not all) to begin, the uneven, and continuous, process of coming out, embracing a sexual minority identity, and in doing so, *becoming* sexual citizens.

The study finds clear consensus that the nonmetropolitan context is relevant to the men, especially in how they negotiate their sexual identity. While life outside the cities can bring a number of distinct advantages, such as tranquillity, and a more relaxed pace of life, the men also report numerous challenges which include social isolation, powerful hegemonic narratives around rural masculinity, and a pervasive heteronormative culture. As such, the rural space can be an alienating environment. Nonetheless, these men continue to live in the rural, and by their presence and increasing disclosure, they are changing the cultural narrative of what it means to be gay in the space of the rural, creating rural gay (male) identities, which can appear different from metropolitan gay (male) identities. In many ways, their rural environment creates similar identity characteristics, and limitations, despite their residency in different countries.

In assessing the men as sexual citizens, the study takes the opportunity to interrogate the model of sexual citizenship. To this end, it finds the citizenship model of rights and obligations to be seductive and appealing to many of the gay men. However, the study also highlights its exclusionary tendencies, and as its propensity to promote a de-sexualised, de-politicised, and de-radicalised gay identity; tendencies which are exacerbated by the context of the nonmetropolitan, small town, and rural spaces. This research concludes that, while the men may be considered, *constitutional sexual citizens*, which is an enormous advance from the dark times of the past, there remains a legacy of stigmatization, which helps ensure compromised citizenship on a number of levels. As such, the journey has not yet ended.

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Chapter 1. Introduction to the thesis

The love that dares not speak its name has never stopped talking. If it was once ‘peccatum illud horrible, inter christianos non nominandum’- that horrible crime not to be named among Christians- it has been endlessly discussed!

(Ackroyd 2017:1)

A discussion to be had

In reading the histories of same-sex intimacies it should come as no surprise that homosexuality has existed throughout all of history, in all types of society, and among all social classes and peoples (Weeks, 2016:3). However we also learn to appreciate how, over the millennia, our societies have been convulsed and obsessed by the presence of same-sex desires and practices. Often, the “endless discussions” that Ackroyd refers to above, have in fact, consisted of endless discussions about how to *avoid* speaking about it, in other words about how *not* to talk about it. Historically, various penalties, punishments and regulations against homosexuality have been dreamed up and zealously enforced with a fervour that has successfully stigmatised same-sex intimacy, and seen whole societies become complicit in a sophisticated conspiracy of silence and invisibility. Such strategies of erasure have had a (probably intended) outcome whereby there appears to be a lack of detailed historic testimonies *from* LGBT people, which is certainly the case in Irish historic texts (Rose, 1994; Inglis, 2005). In writing about British Queer history, Lewis makes the point that “at the turn of the millennium, a gathering of modern (nineteenth-and twentieth-century) British gay and lesbian or queer historians would barely have filled a taxi” (2013: 4).

Relaxations in this schema of silence and absence in our modern (Western) world came reluctantly and begrudgingly. A small but insightful example of this can be seen in the language used in the Britain of the 1950s when the Lord Chamberlains office, the official censor for theatre performances at that time, reluctantly decided to relax the strict exclusion of topics concerning homosexuality in 1958, but only on condition that plays were not to be “violently pro-homosexual”, and were not intended for propaganda purposes, concluding by reminding the population that “we will not allow plays to include embraces between males or any practical demonstrations of love” (British Library, 2017b).

Fast forward to the mid-1990s, and within the context of two or three decades of profound social and cultural change, Andrew Sullivan remarked that “amid a cacophony of passion and reason, propaganda and statistics, self-disclosures and bouts of hysteria, the subject [of homosexuality] is being ineluctably discussed” (1996: 18).

And so, as the march of history continued apace, at the turn of our twenty-first century Plummer (2003) felt able to declare that “maybe as never before, our postmodern times are inviting us to consider a plethora of new ways to live our intimate and sexual lives” (ibid: 5) with public discussions on all matters including sexual orientation, and sexual identity. Late modernity has finally allowed, Giddens (1991) argues, for the creation of a ‘reflexive project of the self’ opening up an array of new options for individuals as to how they might define themselves (Cooper, 2103: 12). The discussion is, at last, being actively had.

And in our most recent years, discussions and conversations have evolved to embrace a language of rights (Plummer, 2003, 2006) and the emergence of *sexual citizenship* and the *sexual citizen* (Weeks, 1998), concepts which are central features of this study. As a model of rights and duties (Richardson, 2000:107) we can see sexual citizenship as the construction of subjectivities to which rights and obligations may be ascribed (Plummer, 2006: 10). In this case, subjects can be conceived of as people, empowered to self-identify as sexual minorities and to seek their rightful place in society accordingly. Jeffrey Weeks’s work on the sexual citizen (1998) has proved critical in attempting to define and conceptualise notions of sexual citizenship, and his work charting the profound role that, social, cultural and political changes have had on the lives of sexual minorities, from positions of sexual criminal to sexual citizen, is a key conceptual companion throughout this research.

However, sexual citizenship is not without controversy, and has been heavily problematized (Taylor, 2011; Cossman, 2007; Seidman, 2002) as we shall discover in the chapters that lie ahead. Furthermore, it can be mediated, in similar ways to the identities that it is based upon, by a range of contextual factors, including characteristics such as gender, but also geography, space and specifically rurality (Bell and Binnie, 2000; Gormann-Murray et al, 2013). These factors intersect, and indeed may limit, the identity or citizenship potentialities available to individuals (Cooper, 2013:12). The intersectional implications of rurality and sexuality for men living in the nonmetropolitan space are implicit concerns in the research that I have undertaken.

Nonmetropolitan focus

“Nonmetropolitan” are regions which lie outside of a metropolis, and it can be a deliberately imprecise term, embracing areas of deep rurality as well as towns, small towns and suburban hinterlands around cities; indeed the term can encompass whole historic shires and counties (Local Government Association, 2014).

In choosing to inquire into the nature of sexual citizenship within the context of the nonmetropolitan space, this study hopes to address, in some small way, the long standing academic neglect of sexual minorities in the rural (Knopp, 1995; Binnie, 1995, Bell & Binnie, 2004). The result of such historic neglect and metrocentric bias (Delamore, 2013; Bell & Valentine, 1995) has been a tendency to understand LGBT identities as inherently urban identities (Kazyak, 2011). The theoretical implications of such a conflation between urban and LGBT identities may be that the currency of sexual citizenship as a theoretical frame for thinking about sexual minority positioning may carry with it exclusions of the nonmetropolitan; a possible exclusion this study seeks to respond to.

Practical considerations played a part in defining the borders of the nonmetropolitan study regions. I chose to conduct my inquiry in the north-western quarter of the Republic of Ireland because (a) this is where I had grown up, and therefore an area that I was familiar with, and (b) given the need for me to travel back and forth from my place of current residence (London) to conduct interviews, it made practical sense to choose a region where I had family, and therefore lodgings, during my stays. The region covers seven counties and has population densities of approximately 30 persons per square kilometre (Western Development Commission, 2016) compared with 70 persons per square kilometre people per square mile for Ireland nationally (Central Statistics Office, 2016). Please see appendix 1 for a map of the Irish study region.

In choosing the East of England and East Anglia, I was attracted by factors such as typical travel time from London, which at between one and a half hours to three hours, was similar to the typical travel time from areas in the Irish study region to Dublin. I felt that consistency in both countries with regard to journey times to their respective capital cities was an important factor to consider, as both capital cities also serve as important centres of, metropolitan, social life, with developed gay scenes and gay cultural activities.

The English study region consists mainly of Norfolk and Suffolk, and some adjoining areas. The East of England region is physically defined by large tracts of arable and agricultural

farmland, forests, small towns, and hamlets. There are two cities, Norwich and Ipswich within the study region. Population density of the region is under 300 people per square kilometre with some lower readings of c.100 people per square kilometre in parts of Norfolk. This compares with a population density of almost 400 for England as a whole (Office for National Statistics, 2009:79). Please see appendix 2 for a map of the English study region.

Originally, I had considered using the term 'rural', but on reflection felt the term 'rural' may prove to be inaccurate or misleading. For example, the study region of north-western Ireland, while physically dominated by farmland, lake, forest, moor and mountain, contained a small city, and many numerous towns, small towns and villages. With this in mind, it was felt that the technical term 'nonmetropolitan' was the most accurate term to use as it seemed to encompass those who lived, on a farm, in a village, or in a town. From a stylistic (writing) perspective though, I found that continuous use of the term nonmetropolitan to be rather tedious and formal. Therefore, at times, I use the term rural and nonmetropolitan interchangeably, as a way of creating a more interesting and appealing narrative. My reflections and notes also highlight my observations that even in cases where men live in medium sized towns (such as Kings Lynn, or Sligo) the region in which they sit is geographically rural. In other words, I found that even towns of quite a substantial size, had a culture which was influenced by the rurality of their surrounding demographics.

In adopting a cross- country perspective, by conducting interviews in nonmetropolitan areas of the Republic of Ireland, and Great Britain, I am addressing the lives of gay men, in two legislatively progressive jurisdictions. In tandem with many other European countries, these two States have undergone fundamental, constitutional and legislative reforms in the area of LGBT equality (Rose, 1994; Weeks, 2016).

Identity categorisations

In using the term, *Gay*, I am sensitive to the controversies concerning categorisations, such as MSM, bisexual, gay, polysexual, queer, etc., and acknowledge the theoretical problematizing of taxonomies such as 'homosexual', 'heterosexual', 'gay', 'straight' and 'LGBT' (Jagose, 1996). While *Gay* is often considered to be a descriptor of sexual identity, queer can be used in much broader contexts which may not directly refer to sexuality as such (Bartle, 2015). I am open to accusations of conforming to, and perpetuating the usage of unsatisfactory binaries in using the term 'gay' to describe my men. However, I have taken into consideration that this

study involves men whose sexual identity is, however imperfectly categorised, understood in postmodern parlance, as *Gay*. To this end, all the men would have used the term *Gay Man* to describe their sexual identity. In this regard, I am minded that:

Even if the term Queer has stormed the academy, it has little traction outside, suggesting a huge and problematic disconnect between public and ivory tower (Lewis, 2013:2).

When considering the issue of bisexuality, the study sought to interview men who considered themselves to be gay men rather than bisexual men. In doing so, it supports the view that bisexuality, and bisexual citizenship can have important differentiating characteristics from gay, and lesbian sexuality and citizenship, as articulated by Monro (2005:155-6):

Bisexual citizenship can be seen to be unique because bisexual identities are different from lesbian, gay, and heterosexual identities in a number of ways. Bisexuality typically includes the experiences of fluid and multiple desires. Some bisexual people are attracted to people on the basis of characteristics other than sex, others desire men, women and others simultaneously, others shift in cycles between desire for women and men. Bisexuality is subjectively different from monosexuality [same-sex or opposite-sex desire, which is the norm for lesbians, gay men and heterosexuals] (cited in Richardson and Monro, 2012:70).

While a number of men had sexual relations with women in the past, they all considered themselves to be gay and not bisexual.

Aim and objectives of the study

The overall aim of this study can be articulated as:

To assess the extent to which gay men can be considered sexual citizens within the context of the nonmetropolitan space in both Ireland and England.

This aim is achieved through a number of key objectives, such as:

1. To chart the sexual identity journey of individual men and explore the construction and negotiation of identities in the context of time and place.
2. To discuss the political, legal and social changes in both Ireland and Britain and consider whether these forces influenced the men's sexual identity or their emergence as sexual citizens.
3. To explore how sexuality intersects with the space of the nonmetropolitan and rural, cutting across the personal and the political in ways which influence belonging, or exclusion.

4. To examine the personal strategies that rural gay men use in order to cope with intersectional challenges, and the implications of such strategies.
5. To interrogate and problematize sexual citizenship as an effective model for furthering authentic equality, diversity, and inclusion for gay men.
6. To contribute to the growing body of knowledge on sexual citizenship and address gaps in the literature by means of (a) providing a comparative, cross-country study and (b) pursuing a nonmetropolitan focus.

The stories in this study are a testament to the lives of gay men in both England and Ireland over the past few decades. The testimonies are from men who live outside the city walls, and away from the metropolis' bright lights. Their stories are powerful, and they tell of a search for authentic sexual identity, truth and love in an often barren landscape of stigma, alienating hegemonic masculinity and pervasive homo-negativity. Equally it is also a testament to joy, acceptance and fulfilment (O'Brien, 2003:14) as their journey sees them emerge as ever more accepting, and confident men; so-called sexual citizens within a dramatically altered legal and cultural context. Laws, reports, recommendations, etc., are important and significant aspects of that journey (ibid), but ultimately it is a journey of the individual person and his place in the space of the rural.

Original contribution to knowledge

This study seeks to address the metronormativity of research on gay lives and in particular intends to address the significant gaps in existing empirical literature on researching gay lives in the nonmetropolitan context. To date, much of the work documenting the lives of rural gay people has been conducted in North America, with less comparable research in a European, and certainly a British or Irish context. As such, this study hopes to make a valuable contribution to knowledge by exploring gay lives in rural Ireland and England, thereby providing useful insights on an under-researched community.

The study intends to provide new insights into recent LGBT history, and in particular how social, political, and legal changes have led to the emergence of the sexual citizen (Weeks, 1998). The study also seeks to make an original contribution to knowledge by applying the sexual citizenship model in a new context, thereby showing the applicability of the model in

the space of the rural in Ireland and England. In taking this approach, the study aims to assess ways in which the space of the rural intersects with sexuality in the early years of the twenty-first century, in two legislatively progressive nations.

Chapter profiles

Chapter 1: *Introduction to the thesis*. The aim of this chapter has been to highlight how historic, and pervasive silences around discussions of homosexuality have given way to much more open and public debate. Conversations have recently embraced equal rights for sexual minorities through concepts such as sexual citizenship. The Introduction attempts to explain the nonmetropolitan focus of the research; and also outlines the research aim and objectives.

Chapter 2. The *Literature Review* chapter seeks to provide an overview of some of the main contextual factors which has led us to arrive at the point where we are having discussions about sexual citizenship for gay men. The chapter explores the wider political processes that have helped underpin the turn to citizenship narratives for lesbian, bisexual and gay people. The chapter also seeks to problematize and critique sexual citizenship as an effective model for authentic liberation, especially within the intersection of the space of the rural.

Chapter 3: The *Methodology* chapter describes and discusses the philosophical positions that provide the foundations for the study. The chapter outlines the research strategy, and research design with issues discussed including: my experiences of gaining access to hard-to-reach populations; recruiting participants; collecting data; and analysing the data. Topics such as reflexivity, being a native-stranger, and the implications of adopting an insider perspective are discussed.

Chapter 4: This chapter, entitled *Early Awakenings: Growing up Gay* is the first data chapter and explores respondent's memories of first awareness of difference from other age mates; awakening to the realities of same-sex attraction; of the dilemmas, and struggles in accepting a sexual minority identity. The memories of the men are accompanied by sexual identity formation models and placed in historical context in both Ireland and England.

Chapter 5: In *Sexual Criminals to Sexual Citizens: The Law Speaks* we explore the impact that legislation has had for the lives of these men. Here, we hear the men reflect on what legislative advances meant for them. They discuss such areas of law as the decriminalisation

of homosexuality, employment equalities legislation, civil partnership and marriage, and access to goods and services.

Chapter 6: The role of social changes in laying the foundations for the men to tentatively emerge, and come out as gay, and begin a journey as potential sexual citizens, is explored in this chapter, *Becoming sexual citizens*. Pivotal changes in social attitudes towards homosexuality set in train a series of steps through which more men began to self-accept, and find their place within a newly tolerant society.

Chapter 7: This chapter, *Life in the rural: a bleak house for gay men?*, seeks to explore the intersectional significance of the nonmetropolitan and rural space for gay men. With this in mind, the chapter seeks to ask, why do gay men live in these environments? The motives of so-called remainers, returners, and incomers are examined. Furthermore, what are the benefits, and also what are the challenges, of living as a gay man, in the rural and small town environment?

Chapter 8: Following on from the previous chapter, in *Coping with life in the rural*, the men share with us, the ways in which they engage in personal strategies in order to effectively deal with troublesome areas of intersection between their sexuality and their nonmetropolitan locales. They describe how careful, and selective interaction with the local community is important, and how best to avoid certain situations; as well as pursuing a policy of Don't Ask (me) and (I won't) Tell (you), thereby attempting to prevent awkward dilemmas.

Chapter 9: In the concluding chapter, we return to the prime aim of this study, *Assessing gay men as sexual citizens in the nonmetropolitan space*. I make efforts to provide an interrogation of their status as supposed sexual citizens. I attempt to draw attention to the role of place, and I present a number of ways in which we can possibly conceptualise the men as emerging sexual citizens, and recognise sexual citizenship as a continuous journey, which seeks ever more inclusive belonging. To this end, I also reflect on what the future may hold.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Fifty years ago the formal sexual rights of women, lesbians and gay men were hardly recognised anywhere in the world; in general such rights were denied and ignored, and traditionally gays as a group were castigated as ill, immoral and dangerous people deserving of treatment or penal sanction but certainly not ‘rights’ (Plummer, 2006: 1).

A time before we were ‘sexual citizens’

As the quote above suggests, the idea of sexual minority “identities”, and “rights” based on those identities, appears to be a rather new concept; a defining feature of our late modern times, as we continue to journey from a historic ideological position which viewed “homosexuality” as primarily about sex acts and behaviours, towards a new positionality and understanding of sexuality as also about encompassing “identities” and “beings” (Howard, 1999; Reay, 2009:214). Plummer’s quote also alludes to the oppression and vilification heaped upon those people who embraced same-sex activity, and same-sex relations; an oppression which constituted a violent assault on intimacies, an assault which developed erratically but progressively during the modern era (Altman, 1972). However, a reading of the histories of same-sex intimacies reveals a more complex, and sympathetic, pattern from the ancient and medieval societies of these islands. While there is a well- recognised pattern of (albeit) age-or rank-differentiated, same-sex relations in Roman and Greek cultures (Clark, 2009:53) there is also strong suggestive evidence of non-stigmatized same-sex activity in Celtic and Anglo-Saxon tribes (ibid:53; Freeman, 2002). Although effeminacy among men was frowned upon, the histories of the ancient world are insightful in so much as they display a general lack of public worry or concern about homoeroticism and same-sex activity. Indeed, the secular Anglo-Saxon law-codes seemed not to prescribe penalties for same-sex acts and similarly the Gaelic law-codes (the Brehon laws) showed no inclination towards outlawing or punishment (Clark, 2009; Kelly, 1988) and hidden within ancient Gaelic mythologies, in the relationship between Cú Chulainn and Ferdiad, we see signs of a cultural acceptance of same-sex eroticism, and love, written in poetic prose (see *The Táin*). The arrival of Christianity however, saw a slow but progressive increase in ecclesiastical prohibitions and penalties develop over the centuries (Clark, 2009:58). The influence of twelfth century theologian Thomas Aquinas, is

seen as significant in this regard, due to his interpretation and articulation of biblical scriptures, in which he asserted that “genital expression which did not allow for procreation was a sin against nature; the natural order; and God as the creator of that natural order” (Freyne, 2003: 249). Throughout the centuries, religion becomes a primary force in framing debates around concepts of sexuality and for the most part, their cultural messaging has maintained an aggressive condemnation of same sex relations throughout (Plummer, 2006; Weeks, 2007) as seen in the form of well-rehearsed narratives, which condemn same-sex relations as alien to human nature; as abhorrent sex acts which constitute “acts of vandalism against God’s ordered creation” (Sullivan, 1995:57). This “defiance of nature’s will” eventually crossed over from theological condemnation, into statute law in England under the 1533 Act of Henry VIII, introducing the death penalty for sodomy- the “Abominable vice of Buggery” (Weeks, 2016: 12).

Although the death penalty for sodomy was abolished in the United Kingdom in the late nineteenth century, the very same period - of Victorian expansion, scientific development, capitalism and industrialisation - saw a distinct sharpening of social hostility towards same sex intimacy (Weeks, 2000; 2016). The historic ‘sin’ and ‘vice of buggery’ became increasingly medicalised, categorised and codified (as “homosexuality”), wherein sexual binaries were created, the term homosexual being invented in 1869, and entering the English lexicon during the 1890s (Weeks, 2016: 3). The new socially created category “the homosexual person”, was systematically criminalized (Spencer, 1995; Foucault, 1976). For Foucault, the categorisation of same sex attraction and practices as “homosexuality” and persons as “homosexuals” was a deeply troubling development; he held the view that such culturally created categories were invariably constructed by the patriarchal and the powerful; are inherently and intrinsically related to the maintenance of unequal power relations; and promote social division between those seen as “normal”, and the “others” (Foucault, 1976, Sullivan, 1995). Such a rigorous taxonomy saw a practical end to earlier ancient, medieval, and even early modern, cultures in Britain and Ireland, where it was socially and culturally acceptable for men “to express open physical affection for one another, and to use homoerotic language” allowing for a “normality of homoeroticism”. Now, such things were “proscribed and outlawed for ‘normal’ men” (Reay, 2009:217).

The reviled homosexual became not only a sexual deviant, who relished in the unspeakable act of buggery, which was, in and of itself, a diabolical affront to decent (“normal”) men and women, he also became a legislative criminal; a social outcast, scorned, castigated, disowned,

marginalised and stigmatised (Weeks, 2016; Lewis, 2013; Altman, 1972). It was in this context, that the law in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland became even stricter, in 1885, with the passing of the Criminal Law Amendment Act which considered all homosexual acts illegal, even those conducted in private. It emphasised that “any act of gross indecency between men, whether in public or private, was punishable by up to two years in prison” (British Library, 2017b) and it was under this legislation that Oscar Wilde was prosecuted, in 1895. It remained on the statute books until 1967 in England and 1993 in Ireland. This Victorian era imperial hostility towards “homosexuality” was exported, spread and implanted into colonial legislatures by the forces of Victorian era empire building (Aldrich, 2003) and is responsible for much of the continuing criminalization of same sex relations in many countries today (Weeks, 2000; 2016).

Illustrating the oppressive, and successful, silencing and invisibility of homosexuality, Petchesky (2000) highlights that prior to 1993, sexuality was virtually absent from all international human rights discourse (in Plummer, 2006:1). For example, the adoption in 1948, by the United Nations, of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights completely neglected and ignored issues of sexuality (United Nations Charter on Human Rights 1948, Article 55). This was the era of McCarthy witch-hunts, police raids on gay meeting spots, and a general moral panic about the homosexual, fed by a frenzied media (Weeks, 2016), who promoted and peddled a hysterical stereotype of the homosexual as immoral, sick, criminal and politically extreme. These views were not only held by individuals, but were sanctioned by society at large (Robertson & Monsen, 2001: 17)

It is only now, in what Giddens (1992) calls ‘late modern times’ that we hear a language of rights around sexualities (Plummer, 2006). Within the British context the so-called Wolfenden Report of 1957 broke important ground. While Lord Wolfenden reportedly found the topic of homosexuality to be a most distasteful matter (British Library, 2017b) the report argued that it should *not* be a crime and recommended a partial decriminalisation of same sex acts. Therefore, homosexuals should have a degree of sexual conduct rights (Richardson, 2004), so long as the sex act was conducted in private (Weeks, 2016). From these humble beginnings, we have seen lesbian and gay issues increasingly enter the public sphere. In recent decades long silenced and oppressed voices have become heard in unprecedented ways, through civil rights movements, inter/national lesbian and gay rights-based activists, trade unions, and collectives. These voices called for homo-emancipation and liberation (Mailiepaard, 2014). As we approached the twenty-first century the language of rights around sexualities, began to coalesce around a call

for citizenship, or more accurately for a *sexual citizenship* which embraced lesbian, gay and bisexuality, a parity of esteem between the old culturally created binaries. The turn to sexual citizenship as a means to end exclusion, marginalisation and stigmatisation has come to dominate gay politics, and the language of citizenship has become popular in the media, in legislature, and latterly within the political mainstream (Chasin, 2000 in Richardson 2004; Rose, 1994; Plummer, 2003; Weeks, 2016).

The political underpinnings of sexual citizenship

The Wolfenden report as indicated above, contributed to an unravelling of the tightly woven web of silence around homosexuality and allowed untold stories from a hidden and closeted section of society, to emerge into the public realm, not only in Britain, but also later, in Ireland and further beyond (Reynolds, 2007; Robson and Kessler, 2008; Meek, 2015). The immediate ‘post- decriminalization’ years, saw the emergence, in Britain, of an ever more confident and assertive Gay Rights movement personified by the emergence of the Gay Liberation Front (Weeks, 2000; 2016). This movement built on the politics of identity to bring out sexual minorities as self-identified people demanding rights (Bell and Binnie, 2000). With “new slogans, lists of demands and rights, badges and marches, it raised public awareness of homosexuality in a way that simply had not happened before” (Plummer, 2006: 7).

Similar gay liberation movements began to emerge in Ireland during the 1970s, such as the Irish Gay Rights Movement, founded in 1974, and while they inhabited a terrain of silence and abject invisibility (Rose, 1994), they nonetheless succeeded in raising awareness of homosexuality at a national level for the first time, through pickets and small scale marches and demonstrations. High on the political agenda of the gay and lesbian liberation movements in both countries was to erase homo-negativity from society, in particular the notion that same-sex relations were abnormal and/or unnatural (D’Emilio and Freedman, 1997 in Richardson 2004: 395). Lesbian and gay liberation movements challenged the presumption of heterosexuality in the public sphere through ‘coming out of the closet’ and claiming the right to public visibility (ibid). A central and constant theme of the feminist, lesbian and gay (and later transgender) social movements was to challenge cultures of social and material marginalisation, disadvantage and discrimination (Hines, 2013:34). They were as Richardson (2004) reminds us, highly critical of ‘mainstream society’; they contested many core institutions and cultural values in fundamental ways, and a major focus of their political action

was opposing traditional, gendered, patriarchal, heteronormative and heterosexist definitions of family. As such it was no accident that they adopted radical names such as *liberation front*, popular with other secessionist movements at the time.

A number of the early movements were informed and influenced by queer theory – a theory which viewed “queer” as a political project; a coupling of sexual identity with a wide-reaching and radical emancipatory agenda (Penney, 2014: 3); a radical politics that sought to readdress the oppressions of gender, race and social class, imperialism and patriarchy (Hines, 2012:200); and a politics that actively rejected traditional taxonomies of sexuality, gender and intimate lives (Plummer, 2006; Jagose, 1996). For Smyth (cited in Bell and Binnie) queer promised a refusal to apologise, or to assimilate into invisibility. In queer we discern a way of asserting desires that shatter gender identities and sexualities with ultimate aims to make the binaries of sexuality and gender irrelevant (2000:51). Queer also sought to interrogate political decisions and choices made by elements of the gay community, by warning of a mistaken and unwitting embrace of assimilationist policies and an implicit acceptance of the ‘good gay’ citizenship model (Richardson, 2004). Queer politics sought to disrupt and destabilise the patriarchal and gendered status quo (Penney, 2014:19), and was inherently suspicious of ideas that advocate normalization, de-radicalisation and de-politicization, which it sees as an integral and embedded feature of the sexual citizenship model (Bullough, 2002; Penney, 2014).

In turn, critics, including mainstream politicians and the right-wing press, labelled queer politics and queer activists as counter-cultural, anti-family, subversive and dangerous (see Tatchell (1983) for an account of the homophobic tactics used against him, in the Bermondsey by-election). As Richardson (2004) chronicles, it was against this backdrop that we saw the emergence of neoconservative gay male writers who began to advance an ‘integrationist’ argument. These ‘gay conservative’ contributors opined that most gay people want to be seen as ‘normal citizens’, they desire nothing more than to be included and integrated into society. This is often referred to as a ‘politics of assimilation’, in so far as it emphasizes ‘wanting in’ to the mainstream (D’Emilio, 2000; Bell and Binnie, 2000).

What followed from this ideology was a narrative that tended towards the belief that the best way to achieve gay rights was by a sexual politics which promoted, if you like, an insider approach, involving dialogue, and engagement, with social institutions (such as the state, political parties, and trade unions). Advocates of this approach believe that the acquisition of gay rights can be assisted by de-mystifying homosexuality, and ‘normalizing’ the lives of gay

people - by saying 'invite us in to your structures and systems, we are not that different after all' (Bell and Binnie, 2000; Weeks, 2016).

Weeks seems to argue that queer politics was "a phase to be passed through *en route* to a more mature sexual politics" (Bell and Binnie, 2000:38) a politics which seemed to have the opposite aim, namely that of normalizing sexuality. And thus, queer politics ceded ground to a new approach, but an approach which was and is heavily criticised for being divorced "from offering any critique of capitalism, inequality, or any programme for far-reaching social change" (Penney, 2014:3). Bell and Binnie (2000) argue that the historical 'queer phase' should not be devalued - that it was an invaluable and necessary protest phase, without which the rights agenda as we know it today could not have emerged. The unsettling, disruptive and radical nature of queer politics forced a reluctant society to at least hear (if not always acknowledge) the levels of prejudice, discrimination, hurt and pain felt by gay and lesbian people. Weeks acknowledges this in his seminal paper (1998), but argues that subversive politics alone would most likely not have granted the equal rights so sought after by gay and lesbian activists and individuals.

For Bell and Binnie, Weeks does make a distinction between these two approaches, the strategies for subversion ('the moment of transgression) and the strategies for acceptance (the 'moment of citizenship') (2000: 28). They argue that Weeks' seems favourable towards a third way of politics which in some ways combines the moment of transgression and the moment of citizenship. They highlight Weeks' position of a need for both transgression and citizenship in a 'conversation' Weeks conducted with Sue Golding:

What I suggest is that in any radical political movement there's always the moment of transgression when you try to pull the pillars down, when you try to challenge the status quo...But linked to that is the moment of citizenship, which is the moment of making claims on society, a claim for inclusion. Making that claim for inclusion may seem assimilationist, but actually making demands on a culture which denies you is extremely radical: it identifies the frontiers of the conventional, it demarcates the lines of struggle. So, you can see transgression and citizenship as simply different faces of the same moment of challenge. One is separating, the other is calling for belonging. But you can only do one with the other (Weeks 1997 in Bell and Binnie, 2000: 29).

This may lead us to view the effective abandonment of queer, and ascendancy of mainstream gay politics advocating a sexual citizenship as a *hermeneutic of continuity*; a transition which did not effect a rupture, or break with the radical homo-affirmative and homo-emancipatory objectives of the earlier liberation movements but by being seen as continuous, they are seen

as parts of a whole; both approaches are presented as radical. Nonetheless, purist advocates of queer must have been truly alarmed by a story recounted by Brooke that, on hearing news of another progressive piece of New Labour legislation (repeal of section 28), the chief executive of Stonewall said that New Labour's legislative programme of equal rights "gave gay people a visibility and a sense of civic respect for the first time: they can feel simply ordinary andsay it quietly.....*normal*.....just like everyone else (in Brooke, 2011:265).

The offer of sexual citizenship rights was seductive to many LGBT people, and broadly welcomed as a route towards greater inclusion and equality (Weeks, 2007; Plummer 2003). Citizenship rights seemed to be an accessible, practical, and relatable concept, in a way that queer might not have been. Weir (1996) picks this up when he says that the demise of queer activism in the 1990s, and the grassroots embrace of rights through sexual citizenship, and new gay politics, was due in part to the perception that queer politics was a metropolitan and 'left-wing' preoccupation and not fully understood by many ordinary gay men and women, many of whose 'life world' existed in conservative, and provincial, nonmetropolitan areas. And, for Weir, it simply did not have the same broad appeal as the assimilationist agenda, which assured that we entered a 'post queer' era (Bell and Binnie, 2000).

The changing shape of politics in the United Kingdom under 'New Labour' is also a factor in helping to explain the demise of queer politics and the new dominance of mainstream gay politics. In the early days of the 'New Labour' project there were clear signs of a commitment to some measure of gay rights (Brooke, 2011) with Tony Blair, declaring that:

It is wrong to treat a man as inferior because his sexuality is different. A society that has learned, over time, to embrace racial and sexual equality can surely come to terms with equality of sexuality. That is the moral case for change now (in Brooke, 2011:259).

With New Labour in government from 1997-2010, the period (and beyond) saw significant, and indeed transformative, legislative gains for LGBT communities (Weeks, 2007; 2016). The importance of the European Union should not be underestimated in this regard though. By adopting and incorporating the Treaty of Amsterdam in 1997, directives forbidding discrimination based on sexual orientation became EU policy and both Ireland and the United Kingdom were obliged to enact legislatively. Furthermore, the EU, through the European Court of Justice and the Fundamental Rights Agency also provided new avenues for LGBT activists (Ayoub and Paternotte, 2014:13) which were used to good effect to challenge discrimination and disadvantage in member countries, including Ireland (Rose, 1994).

The result of Blair's approach (largely continued by Cameron-Clegg-May) has been the re-positioning of sexual politics so that it has (largely) become part of mainstream party politics (Bell and Binnie, 2000; Weeks, 2016). In Ireland, where dominant political structures and narratives have traditionally been marked by an absence of a 'hard left' - 'hard right' dichotomy, instead marked by a social conservatism under influence of the Catholic Church (Inglis, 2005) a re-positioning occurred. Even here, and on the issue of gay rights in particular, the 1990s saw mainstream political parties embrace equality, often as the result of lobbying by GLEN (Gay and Lesbian Equality Network) which successfully argued that the Republican ideals of the founding fathers of the Irish state, as articulated in the 1916 Easter Rising proclamation, demanded equality for all citizens, regardless of sexuality (Rose, 1994).

Whether by appealing to the sentiment and embrace of a 'true' republican vision, as in (still Catholic) Ireland; or whether through the discourses of Blair, Clegg or Cameron in Britain, we can discern a political narrative, in both countries, which seeks to "morally reframe" (Khazan, 2017) arguments for LGBT equality that appeals not only to liberal sentiment, but also to "the middle ground" of opinion, as well hoping to persuade socially conservative citizens that the ethical codes of the modern nation demand equality. This could be seen most clearly, in the speech of Prime Minister David Cameron in 2011, when he said:

I don't support gay marriage despite being a Conservative. I support gay marriage because I'm a Conservative (The Guardian, 2011)

Some question however, whether in 'Western' societies we now also see the rise of a homo-nationalism (Puar, 2007) by which is meant the taking of excessive pride in the achievements of gay rights activists, in the West (Epprecht, 2013:13), the favourable association of LGBT rights with (usually western) nationalistic ideals (Puar, 2007), and a deep disdain for those cultures considered hostile to LGBT equality. The result can be prejudiced, chauvinistic and sometimes racist, orientalist public discourse and populist sentiment (and actions) against those perceived to be non-progressive towards LGBT equality and citizenship (Puar, 2007; Epprecht, 2013, Moss, 2014).

Nonetheless, we now inhabit a landscape which recognises a language of rights, a model of sexual citizenship, and the emergence of the sexual citizen. But what exactly, does a *sexual citizen* look like? And what is *sexual citizenship*?

Conceptualising sexual citizenship

Contemporary academic work on citizenship tends to take its lead from the work of T.H Marshall's classic model of citizenship (1950) whereby citizenship is seen as a concept which includes civil, political, legal, cultural and social rights. The debate centres on notions of who has the right to be seen as 'citizen' with all the protections, rights and privileges that flow from that status (Richardson, 2004). Citizenship becomes a prized and esteemed status, conferring rights and duties that secure participation and protection within the framework of the nation-state (Andersen, 2011:121).

Bell and Binnie (2000) emphasise that citizenship rights are multidimensional in nature and the 'citizen' is not only a legal category, but also a political category, a sociological category and an economic category. The concept of citizenship therefore is broader than just the legal; for example, when we think of cultural citizenship we can refer to Marshall's definition as "the capacity to participate effectively, creatively, and successfully within a national culture" (Robson and Kessler, 2008:539) but also as the "right to be different, to re-value stigmatised identities and embrace hitherto marginalised lifestyles" (Pakulski, 1997 in Richardson 2000: 121). As such citizenship can signify a model of social inclusion or full participation at civil, legal, political and cultural levels (Richardson, 2004).

Citizenship promises much and can be a seductive and appealing concept; Plummer refers to it as "an elegant and influential model" which generously offers people certain rights and the status of belonging as long as they live up to the expectations of their society (2003:51-52). But herein lies a problematic core at the heart of citizenship: that as a construct it is inherently patriarchal, parochial, gendered and exclusionary; it tends to divide the world into good citizens and deviant outcasts, effectively marginalising "outside" groups (Richardson, 2004; Cossman, 2007; Plummer, 2003). To be a citizen implies "the other" who is not a citizen (Plummer, 2003:52). However, since the beginnings of the 1990s some radical shifts in the debates over citizenship have occurred which have attempted to develop a poststructuralist position which recognizes the character of "a changing, multi-voiced, late-modern world" where recognition of a plurality of groups can be more easily achieved (ibid:52). These shifts in the nature of debates on citizenship have opened the possibility of embracing same sex intimacy and sexuality as inherently deserving of the promises of citizenship, and ergo the emergence of sexual (minority) citizenship.

Here, I use the word minority, because, of course, citizenship has always been inflected with sexualities, but traditionally that inflection has been strongly and supremely heteronormative and has presumed heterosexuality (Bell and Binnie, 2000; Robson and Kessler, 2008). Gay people have not been equal citizens and historically, lesbians, bisexuals and gay men have had a troublesome relationship with the state and its criminal codes, laws, policies, judiciary, police and media. Gay people have had an ambiguous and uncertain citizenship status, neither fully accepted nor totally excluded; their place in the national imaginary has been as marginal or partial citizens (Phelan, 2001 in Richardson 2004). Their sexuality belonged in the dark recesses of the “private sphere” and it has been seen as undesirable that they should ever “seek public recognition or membership in the political community” (Robson and Kessler, 2008).

Homosexuality has often been viewed as a threat to the welfare of other law-abiding and morally upright citizens and indeed to the security and safety of the institutions of the nation-state (Weeks, 2016); gays and lesbians have faced exclusion from the “construction of ‘nation’ and nationality” (Robson and Kessler, 2008:541) and it is these exclusions that LGBTQI political activists and campaigners have sought to overturn in order to claim ‘social inclusion’, and an end to the silencing, invisibility and exclusion of sexual minorities from traditional citizenship rights and obligations (Richardson, 2004). In attempting to understand sexuality *in citizenship* then, we are essentially reflecting on the relations between the state, society and its sexualised citizens (Maliepaard, 2014).

The starting point for discussions of sexual citizenship is usually cited as David Evans’s 1993 text, *Sexual Citizenship* (Robson and Kessler, 2008; Richardson, 2004; Bell and Binnie, 2000). He considers male homosexual sexual citizenship as something which was very limited and restricted to the dimension of economic consumerism; as gay men claimed their “leisure and lifestyle market, the market has claimed them, colonised them and exploited gay sexuality” (Evans, 1993:100). Meanwhile he laments the “continuing stigma of immorality which bans this citizen from the ‘moral community’ and polices him into privacy” (ibid).

Why such a narrow and pessimistic interpretation of sexual citizenship? One possible explanation lies in the fact that, apart from the partial decriminalization of gay sex in 1967, gay people in Britain had (by 1993) achieved precious few new political, legal or social rights *per se*, and indeed suffered under the indignity of section 28. There had emerged though, by this juncture, a vibrant commercial, urban, metropolitan gay scene (Brown, 2008) where gay men and women had ‘pink pounds’ to spend. They were consumers and increasingly visible as such.

So, for Evans their citizenship was, in reality, restricted to the power of gay men and women as consumers. For Bell and Binnie, Evans's contribution encapsulates "the reduction of sexuality to a commodity form, through the marketization of 'identity' as 'lifestyle'" (2000: 13) and they argue that Evans was actually quite critical of the term "citizenship", which he felt was imbued with heterosexist, patriarchal principles and practices, rhetorical about equality but doing little to embrace sexual minorities.

The mid 1990s saw further contributions to the citizenship debate from Lisa Duggan and Davina Cooper. Unlike Evans, both Cooper and Duggan broaden their focus to include an examination of politics and the state, especially how gay and lesbian people can use the current political system to foist change. In 'Power in Struggle' (1995) Cooper focused on the relationship between power, sexuality, and *the state* and highlighted the endemic sexualization of everyday life. On lesbian and gay presence in British local politics ('Sexing the City' 1994) she offers a pragmatic view of how gay activists can access and then use state power to bring about positive change which broadly advocates changing the system from within.

Duggan offers a more radical/queer perspective. In 'Queering the State' (1995) Duggan focuses on the backlash to gay rights in the USA, how right-wing and fundamentalist organisations seek to uphold the state's role in promoting heterosexuality and thereby ensuring that gay rights are also vulnerable. Duggan considers how gay activists should try to 'denaturalize heteronormativity' as well as protect themselves from homophobic efforts at removing personal freedoms. The value of Cooper and Duggan then, was to centre our attention on the attainment of political and legal citizenship rights for LGBT subjects, rights which go beyond the rights of pink market consumers. In essence, we see the trajectory of debate moving towards an acknowledgement that if it is to mean anything, sexual citizenship needs to interrogate the relations between the state and its LGBT citizens (Maliepaard, 2014) and to *engage with* the state, at the level of local and national politics in order to effect and agitate for substantial changes in how LGBT identity was treated by the state.

In attempting to conceptualise sexual citizenship as a model of rights and duties, Richardson describes three categories or classifications of rights claims, namely: "conduct-based claims, identity-based claims, and claims that are relationship based" (2000:107).

Conduct-based claims refer to the possibilities and limitations of sexual behaviour and body control, seeking rights to various forms of sexual practices, or at its most fundamental the right to participate in sexual acts. Identity-based claims refer to the potentialities of defining a self-

identity autonomously, and the possibilities and constraints of labelling oneself to the outside world; the right to self-identify as lesbian and gay. Relationship-based claims are the claims or rights to freely engage in a relationship, and validate a relationship in public space; the right to public validation of various forms of sexual relations, including same-sex marriage (Richardson, 2000: 108; Maliepaard, 2014). Therefore, the relationship with the state and its social, political and legal framework is key.

It is also important that we don't lose sight of *the person* in debates around rights, whereby sexual citizenship is seen as the construction of people (or subjectivities) to which rights and obligations may be ascribed (Plummer, 2006: 10). In this case, subjects are people who feel enabled to self-identify as lesbian and gay or bisexual or transgendered and seek their rightful place in society accordingly.

Jeffrey Weeks's seminal essay on the sexual citizen (1998) has proved critical in attempting to define and conceptualise what the sexual citizen might look like and what sexual citizenship may be. Again, key to Weeks' interpretation of the sexual citizen is the idea of persons (subjects) adopting and proclaiming (to self and/or to others) new identities (new subjectivities).

In attempting to develop an understanding of the emerging concept of sexual citizenship it may be useful to reflect on whether sexual citizenship be summarised succinctly and simply. From my perusal of literature I can possibly be bold enough to try and offer a personal and simplified concept of sexual citizenship, whereby I conceive it to be, a situation where sexual orientation is acknowledged by the state and by society at large as a valid and important aspect of personhood and human identity and where different sexual orientations (albeit unsatisfactorily categorised as homosexuality, bisexuality, heterosexuality) are seen as equal both legislatively and through the varied social, economic, emotional and cultural mechanisms of society. A society where there is 'parity of esteem' between persons regardless of sexual orientations. But crucially, a parity of esteem which moves beyond the rhetorical and is experienced as 'reality' by people of all sexualities, identities and intersections thereof.

In a similar way, one can perhaps attempt to consider the sexual citizen as, a person who feels able, to publicly and confidently declare their sexual orientation (whatever that might be) and who is able to (practically and holistically) live a life where his/her integration into, involvement with, and contribution to society is unhindered by prejudice, discrimination, stigmatisation or heteronormative hostility towards their actual or perceived sexual orientation.

Where sexual orientation is no barrier to legal protection, or engagement with the state, with institutions, organisations, career, community and social affections. Sexual citizenship which delivers on its promise requires that dominant cultural narratives move from homo-negativity, or indeed mere tolerance, but rather towards an embracing, inclusive and representational celebration of sexual identity in all its manifestations and performances. Indeed, sexual citizenship promises much but as we return to the literature, we can discern a more nuanced understanding, and therefore a more critical appreciation of sexual citizenship, and the place of LGBT people within its borders as *sexual citizens*.

The problem with sexual citizenship

Whilst proponents argue that the turn to sexual citizenship has been responsible for innumerable, previously unimaginable and wholly positive advances in legislation and politics, numerous scholars urge us to reflect on the limitations and troublesome aspects inherent in the concept of sexual citizenship (Richardson, 2004; Cossman, 2002; Stychin, 1998; Seidman, 2002). They point out that the invitation to citizenship is based on compromise, and that acceptance of this invite requires “an accommodation to heterosexual standards and the loss of distinctive differences, ways of being, and relational practices” (Taylor, 2011:583).

Citizenship can be conceived as a *negotiation of belonging* (Cram, 2016:270) and for Richardson (2004) the outcome of this negotiation is the integration of lesbians and gay men into social and political life as ‘normal citizens’, and this represents a significant shift, holding the potential for both positive and negative outcomes. Indeed Seidman (2002) offers some examples of positive outcomes of normalization for individual gay, bisexual and lesbian people, such as greater self-acceptance, pride in their sexual identity, and confidence to seek respect and equality. Other positive outcomes of normalization *may* be to facilitate a diminishing of the traditional hetero-bi-homo binaries whereby homosexuality (and bisexuality) has been perceived as threatening, subversive, anti-social and dangerous (Bell and Binnie, 2000; Seidman, 2002; Richardson, 2004).

The sexual citizenship compromise though, leads inevitably to forms of normalisation, which encourages an assimilation that involves “accepting a condition implicitly imposed upon homo-sexual citizens where sexual subjects are privatized, de-eroticized and depoliticized” (Cossman, 2002: 483). After all, it can be argued that one of the ultimate wins for advocates of a conservative society is the creation of the desirable gay, de-radicalised, and depoliticized.

Seidman (2002) reflects on the nature of the ideal of the desirable ‘good gay’ and argues that this requires the new gay identity to be conformist, conservative and reflective of hetero-sexual values linked to family, marriage and politics. The cost, in terms of performing ‘good sexual citizenship’, is also identified by Carl Stychin, because “in attempting to achieve legal victories, lesbians and gays seeking rights embrace an ideal of ‘respectability’, a construction that then perpetuates a division between ‘good gays’ and (disreputable) ‘bad queers’, with the latter excluded from the cultural, and social embrace of citizenship (1998: 200).

For their part, Bell and Binnie (2000) contribute to the debate on problematizing sexual citizenship by arguing that while sexual minorities are seeing the end to their historical exclusion from notions of sexual citizenship, this is occurring in relatively specific (‘westernized’) geo-political contexts (and even here the situation is uneven). The notion of the reflexive sexual citizen whereby individuals and groups (in the ‘west’) increasingly feel free to mobilise identity around their innate sexuality (ibid: 33) perhaps brings into question whether sexual citizenship is an inherently ‘western concept’ with little agency outside of that cultural context; whether it is premised on the primacy of the individual (arguably another ‘western’ cultural artefact); and whether there is an undue emphasis on the personal life of individuals, which potentially encourages a (re) privatization of sexual citizenship (Richardson and Monro, 2012:72).

Importantly, given the increasingly global reach of citizenship debates, there is a need to emphasise the different forms and modes of citizenship that pertain to gay men and lesbians in different environments - for example the gay male citizen is not a universal citizen and may have different concerns, priorities and strategies in different regional and national environmental contexts (Bell and Binnie, 2000: 33).

We can conclude then that a central concern being discussed here is the potential exclusionary impact of citizenship. Who are we leaving behind in our seeming unquestioning embrace of the citizenship model? For example, are we excluding gay asylum seekers and refugees? (Giametta, 2017). Do we passively acquiesce in the perpetuation of intersectional marginalisations within LGBTQI communities, for example, where sexuality intersects with race/ethnicity, gender, class, or disability? (Monro, 2006; Monro and Richardson, 2010; Plummer, 2003). And, is access to this new privileged citizenship status, located primarily through being in a (good gay) publicly recognized, normative, monogamous couple relationship, economically independent, not reliant on welfare, conformist and politically de-

radicalised? (Bell and Binnie, 2000; Richardson, 2004; Plummer, 2003), Furthermore, the literature begs reflection on whether the sexual (minority) citizen, and the concept of sexual citizenship is restricted in practice, to those who live in the privileged Global North, where such debates may well seem entirely apt, while conversely, these same debates may appear indulgent and puerile in the face of immense economic, social, and other multifaceted hardships faced by many in the developing world and Global South (Plummer, 2003).

The sexual citizen: Why now?

Leaving aside the controversies, contradictions and ‘blind spots’ surrounding the concept of sexual citizenship, one thing is certain: the emergence of the sexual citizen and of sexual citizenship is, in historical terms, a very new type of self-identification and a very new type of ‘rights claiming’ (Plummer, 2006:10). What has driven this phenomenon (most extensively in ‘Western’ societies)? What has happened to drive such powerful and radical changes?

Weeks provides plausible answers to these questions, and they correlate to the British and Irish context as well as many other countries. He details the transformational changes that have taken place in recent decades and which have cumulatively contributed to the emergence of the sexual citizen. Many of the social changes are well documented by Weeks (1998; 2000, 2007, 2016) and include changing types of relationships, the emergence of new identities and the freedom and confidence which has allowed new stories of the self to be heard in public for the first time.

The sexual citizen, this ‘reflexive agent’, feels able to self-identify as (for example) gay, chooses to mobilize around their sexual identity and then claims citizenship rights such as equal rights in employment, social status, access to welfare provision, parenting rights and partnerships or even marriage for same-sex couples (ibid: 37). Needless to say, the first important step is for the individual to feel sufficiently secure, safe and empowered to ‘come out’ and self-identify as gay or lesbian or bisexual. Public recognition of someone’s sexual identity is crucial, because ‘the ability to be “out” and publicly visible is [...] crucial to the ability to claim rights’ (Richardson, 2000: 120).

Weeks, as a sexual and social historian, places much emphasis on identifying the social changes which have given rise to this assertive self (and public) identifying sexual citizen and he cites three key themes which have changed the way we live and have thereby contributed to the

desirable and inevitable creation of the reflexive sexual citizen seeking citizenship rights. These themes include: the general democratization of relationships; the emergence of new subjectivities (identities) and the development of new narratives (stories) (1998: 39).

Firstly, Weeks argues that there has been a long-term tendency towards the democratization of relationships. Here he suggests that, in general, relationships between men and women have become somewhat less traditional, less hierarchal with a greater emphasis on mutual responsibility and autonomy (ibid: 41). Institutions, such as the churches, who propagate traditional values, have seen their influence diminish. Instead, there has been a growing acceptance of pre-marital sex, divorce, single parenting, delay of marriage, rise of cohabitation, new patterns of domestic involvement and the emergence of new patterns of intimacy - all of which point to profound change in family arrangements.

Such examples of de-traditionalization have unsettled and destabilized traditional patterns of relationships and Weeks hints that this destabilization has 'opened up' the possibility of new and diverse types of relationships and families emerging and becoming established (for example those involving same-sex couples) (ibid: 44).

Weeks also refers to the impact of neo-liberal economic policies, decline of traditional collective industrial relations, and a growing marketization of all forms of public life. These influences have created a greater sense of individualisation, but are also the cause of labour market fragmentation, and inequality.

Secondly, the emergence of new subjectivities (identities) which he sees as fluid, where people feel free to self-identify and to embrace multiple identities. It is, for Weeks, a testimony to what Giddens (1992) has called the 'reflexive project of the self' (ibid: 45). The women's movement and the lesbian and gay movements have also been pivotal in shaping the debate, and have helped identities today display a greater fluidity, and to be conceived of as liquid and intersectional (Reynolds, 2007; Taylor et al, 2010).

Thirdly, and aligned to these new forms of public self-identification has been the emergence of new stories, narratives and voices from a previously unheard community of individuals. For Weeks, these new stories of the self from ordinary individuals, about sexuality and gender, make the sexual citizen visible and audible, 'because these stories (often involving every day persons 'coming out' and disclosing their sexuality to friends and family, work colleagues and the media) tell the world of what 'it is like to live life as gay or lesbian', and their stories of exclusion and marginalisation. These 'coming out' stories, have as their corollary the demand

for inclusion, for equal rights under the law, in politics, in economics in social matters and in sexual matters' (ibid: 47).

Throughout Weeks' seminal work, we can see his interest in the broad but pivotal social, cultural and economic transformations that have created the preconditions for the figure of the sexual citizen to emerge on the landscape of citizenship. In summary then, for Weeks, the moment of the sexual citizen appears to be the moment of transfiguration, when our hero, our reflexive sexual subject seeks to become a *sexual citizen* by telling his/her story (often of exclusion) to the world and claiming his or her citizenship rights; that is, when s/he confidently expects, seeks, demands *and receives* full equality under the law and when s/he asserts her/his right *and experiences* social acceptance, belonging, inclusion, involvement, voice, freedom from harassment and end of heteronormative subjugation by society at large.

Weeks also reminds us that attempting to define or conceptualise sexual citizenship is **not** merely an abstract, academic concern. Understanding how gay rights activists and individual gay and lesbian people have utilised the citizenship model to (successfully) claim equal rights in many countries offers a possible frame for LGB people in countries where repression and discrimination continue to dominate the lives of sexual minorities (Weeks, 2000; Baird, 2004). The term *possible frame* is important, for as Plummer reminds us, challenges exist which make the simple 'transfer' of such an approach highly problematic:

Once we move into discussions of [sexual orientation, sexual citizenship or] intimate citizenship in the non-Western world, we are in the main, considering countries where the basic economic conditions of life make such discussions of intimate relationships seem like a cruel joke- an example of Western self-indulgence. It is hard to discuss the legitimacy of "choices" around lesbian and gay marriages in societies in which most of the population lives on the breadline. (Plummer, 2003: 118)

Notwithstanding the huge challenges posed by global economic, social, and cultural divergences, it is clearly evident that conversations around intimacies are occurring in every part of the globe (ibid) as arguments originating in one country often find themselves being discussed and contested in others (Plummer, 2003: 140; Rahman, 2014). Intimate and sexual citizenship are models and concepts which can *plausibly* provide a basic, fundamental and universalist 'language of citizenship rights' in many different settings, although the term "rights" can be distinctly problematic given its cultural, western, and individualistic bias (Plummer, 2003: 143). And there should be no doubt as to the residual resistance that the call to sexual citizenship can attract globally, often initiated by a perception, outside the Global

North, that the push for LGBTQI rights is a form of “gay imperialism” (Epprecht, 2013) or “homocolonialism” (Rahman, 2014).

Growing examples of violent resistance abound, whether by way of neo-nationalist, or far-right attacks on gay demonstrations or Pride marches (Moss, 2014; Binnie and Klesse, 2014) or LGBTQI hostile legislation which seeks to curtail personal freedoms and rescind any existing rights. This backlash is consistent with research that shows increasing violence as a reaction to a more general rise in gay visibility (Ozturk & Ozbilgin, 2015:156). The rise of religious fundamentalism, and the export of anti-gay rhetoric against LGBTQI people in sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia has the effect of further increasing negative cultural messaging and sustains an ever more hostile environment for sexual minorities in these societies. North American Evangelical Christian activity also plays a role in undermining LGBT rights in the USA, as well as overseas through well-funded missionary activity (Epprecht, 2013:3). In short, no continent is free of homophobia, biphobia and transphobia, and increasingly we see the emergence of renewed forms of anti-LGBT rhetoric and politics as a way of asserting nationalist sentiment, and neo-traditional values (Weeks, 2016: xxvi).

A note on Intimate citizenship

It is also important to consider the work of another key contributor to the debates around citizenship and sexual minority rights, namely the work of Ken Plummer. Plummer’s initial research interests lay largely with political conflicts over gay and lesbian lives, but his work then widened and broadened to include all matters of intimacy (Plummer, 2003: 140) and ergo his research which involves an exploration of *intimate citizenship*. Some scholars and writers show a preference for the term *intimate citizenship* rather than *sexual citizenship*, on the basis that it permits a wider inquiry of areas concerning personal life and access to rights, rather than merely those which are designated as ‘sexual’ rights and obligations (Richardson & Monro, 2012: 69). For example, within the orbit of *intimate citizenship* come concerns around a plethora of new personal and intimate dilemmas. Intimate citizenship thereby clusters around not only dilemmas about sexuality, but also areas concerning eroticism, the human body, relationships, gender roles, and emotions (Plummer, 2003:141) as well as polyamorous relationships, open relationships (ibid:122), surrogacy, reproductive rights, fertility assisted by new reproductive technologies, sale of body parts in low-income countries to their consumption in wealthier ones, religious fundamentalism trying to re-impose or preserve traditional,

patriarchal views on gender, the role of women and the family (ibid: 118), child spouses, domestic and sexual subservience, sex slavery and human trafficking (ibid: 119), internet cybersex, sexualised music and teens; and global consumer markets which utilise the body and intimacies (ibid: 126). Plummer see “Homosexuality” as *another one* of the many “intimate” issues at the forefront of this global conversation (ibid: 129) and gay and lesbian partnerships, marriages and families *as part* of the way that new citizens, new identities, “intimate identities”, new types of families and families of choice, are being created in postmodern times (ibid:141)

There are many layers of explicit and implicit overlap, and the concepts of intimate citizenship and sexual citizenship share similar concerns. Plummer also shares Weeks’ social historian conviction that intimacies can only be understood in relation to the major changes and conflicts characteristic of the late modern world (ibid: 140).

Another area of mutual conceptual and scholarly interest lies in their respective acknowledgement of the need for greater plurality and diversity in any study of sexual and intimate citizenship. Herein, we see a need for developing an intersectional perspective. If postmodern theories are intended to offer a reform of the older “grand narratives”, and the “monolithic metanarratives” of the past (Plummer, 2003:53) then sexual and intimate citizenship do succeed in offering a recalibration of classical modernist concepts (such as Marshallian concepts of citizenship) and in doing so, embrace those whose subjectivities were excluded from previous debates. But herein lies a need to go further; the call to adopt an intersectional approach across sexualities and intimacies, to include expositions of the multiple inflections created by intersections of gender, location, place, class and so forth. For example, rights and access to intimacy are often denied to those with physical or intellectual disabilities (Ignagni, et al. 2016) and full intimate citizenship continues to be elusive for those living outside normative families, in particular women and members of sexual and ethnic minority groups (Roseneill, 2012). In short, there is a need to develop more precise understandings of what enables and constrains how people experience intimate (including sexual) lives in different cultural contexts, different societies and different groups *within these* (Richardson and Monro, 2012:73).

Intersectionality: the rural dimension

The term ‘intersectionality’ emerged out of work by Kimberle Crenshaw (1989), which explored the inadequacy of non-discrimination protections available to Black women. In her work, Crenshaw, a legal theorist, argued that Black women often experience disadvantage as *Black women*, not simply as a result of the “additive effects of discrimination based on race and gender” but rather that disadvantage was experienced due to “a specific instantiation of an irreducible intersection of the two categories together” (Levon, 2015: 297). As such, intersectionality theory grew out of a critique of models of inequality which tended to frame social forces as operating in layered or additive ways (Monro and Richardson, 2010:99); models which compartmentalized, separated and analysed categories of experience (such as ‘gender’ and ‘ethnicity’) from isolationist and atomised perspectives (Blake, 2014; Levon, 2015).

Intersectionality releases us from this narrow analytical separation and instead, places energetic emphasis on understanding the interplay between categories, within categories and between social forces and multiple, inter-locking and overlapping categories. In this regard, the work of McCall (2005) and her typology of anticategorical, intracategorical and intercategorical intersectionality is important. Anticategorical describes the deconstruction of categories, often linked with postmodernism and post-structuralism; intracategorical examines experiences of multiple, marginalised subjects at neglected points of intersection; while intercategorical explores relationships of inequality between categories, enabling consideration of both advantage and disadvantage (Wright, 2014; 2016)

At its core then, advocates of intersectionality believe that successful interpretations of the lived experience, and the life world of subjects, necessitates an active and committed consideration of ways in which multiple systems of social categorization (e.g., gender and sexuality, race/ethnicity, social class, and place) intersect with one another in dynamic and mutually constitutive ways (Levon, 2015: 295).

For the most part, scholarship which has interrogated disadvantage, discrimination and the lived experiences from an intersectional analytical perspective has tended to emphasise three traditional categories of inequality, i.e. race/ethnicity, gender and class, how these interact with each other and that these categories are *the* most salient categories in understanding domination and inequality (Tatli and Ozbilgin, 2012:250).

Conversely, there has been a tendency for sexuality - and *non* male/female gender identities - to be ignored (Monro and Richardson, 2010:99; Hines, 2010:143) as well as a general neglect of place/space, although recent scholarship has emerged on the intersection of gender/sexuality and place/space which seeks to address this exclusion, such as Boellstorff's (2004) discussion of gays and lesbians in Indonesia, Wong's (2008) focus on the politics of labelling practices among lesbians and gays in Hong Kong, Levon's (2010) work on language and sexuality in Israel, Monro's (2006) work which highlighted intersectional marginalisations of sexuality, ethnicity and faith, Monro's (2010) study of intersectionality and sexuality within the context of local government, Monro and Richardson's (2012) work which included reflections on intersectional complexities in Northern Ireland, Stella's (2010) study of lesbian identity in a Russian urban context, and Little's exploration of gender and rural geography (2003).

Indeed, there appears to be a growing acknowledgment of the importance of place in intersectional analysis, and an increased awareness that there is a consummate need to examine ways in which categories such as gender, ethnicity, class or sexual orientation experience disadvantage in their situated context (Tatli and Ozbilgin, 2012:250). For example, formation of multiple identities, such an integral component of intersectional inquiry, can oscillate and vary depending on location, place, dominant cultural narratives and socio-political contexts (Plummer, 2003; Bell and Binnie, 2000; Kazyak, 2011). As Levon argues, the productions of intersectional interplay are *dynamic*, and we must be attentive to the ever-changing ways "in which different social histories, interpersonal motivations, and local ideological expectations shape the imbrication of categories of experience in real-world empirical encounters" (2015: 298).

The nonmetropolitan and rural is such a place - where local histories, interpersonal relationships, and cultural narratives (about what it means to be gay) interact to produce unique and distinct life experiences. Sexuality may be multi-faceted, but so too is rurality - diverse, in terms of its physical and human geographies (Gorman-Murray et al 2013:2). The open presence of 'rural and gay' identities and subjectivities and/or of 'rural queerness', creates an intersectional dynamic and fluidity that challenges the dominant rural narratives around sex and sexuality, gender typologies and notions of hegemonic masculinity and often results in the creation of new types of social spaces where previously none existed (Delamore, 2013:90) and yet, a review of the available literature on gay and lesbian lives quickly reveals a relative lack of research on gay and lesbians in nonmetropolitan and rural areas.

Whilst recent years may have seen a growing number of empirical studies on the lives of gay and lesbians as an identity category, most of this research has tended to focus on those who live in urban and suburban areas with very little attention paid to the intersection with the rural or with rural queer lives. Numerous commentators have lamented this paucity of research and available literature related to gay people in rural environments (Boulden, 2001; Halberstam, 2005; McCarthy, 2000; Preston and D'Augelli, 2013). Boulden (2001) acknowledges that there have been some studies which have focused on 'growing up' in rural environments, but in general these have been told by gay people who left the rural environment and were living in metropolitan areas at the time of their interviews (Fellows, 1996; Preston, 1992).

Perhaps one explanation for the urban centric approach in exploring gay and lesbian lives may be due to practical and logistical barriers. Simply put, it is easier to locate samples of gay people in metropolitan areas and this might help explain why so much of the research in LGBT populations has tended to focus on where the most subjects could be found, in big cities (Fisher et al, 2014). Perhaps another reason may be the pervasive assumption that most gay people, given the choice, migrate to the cities and that in fact, the rural space is denuded of its gay population; so much so that it has often been thought that the 'rural gay' is a myth, appearing in occasional anthropological works (Wrathall, 2000) feeding a cultural narrative and collective perception that gay identities cannot be constructed in the rural space, that they can only be freely lived and experienced in the metropolitan environment (Kazyak, 2011, Kuhar and Svab, 2014). The result of this metro-centrist approach has been the conflation of gay and urban identities so much so that the voice of gay people appears usually to be the voice of an urban metropolis, demonstrating a "metronormativity" – or an urban bias within society, and research (Boso, 2011:4).

And yet, lesbian, gay and bisexual people have always lived, loved and worked in rural areas, and same sex desire, intimacy and non-normative sexual practices have always existed in the nonmetropolitan space, as the early work of Howard (1999) on gay men living in 1950s and 1960s Mississippi aptly testifies. Howards' work has been followed by more recent scholarship on rural gays including the work of Boulden (2001) which focuses on rural, gay men in Wyoming, Eldridge, Mack & Swank (2006) which showed the persistence of homophobia among rural college students in the Appalachian region of the USA, Gray (2009) who observes how rural gay youth form identities in rural areas of Kentucky, Kennedy (2010) who explores how men negotiate and manage their sexual identity in rural Ontario, Kazyak (2011) which examines how rural gays and lesbians in the mid-west of the USA, modify the cultural narrative

that has linked gay and lesbian identities to cities , Annes & Redlin (2012) who explore rural gay men and masculinity in France and the USA, Kuhar and Svab (2014) on rural gay experiences in rural Slovenia, and the work of Preston & D'Augelli (2013) which comprehensively deals with many issues facing gay men in rural USA, and in particular issues around stigma. These are part of a growing number of studies into rural gays and lesbians. The fact that these studies are successfully recruiting respondents to be interviewed within the nonmetropolitan space confirms the presence of a self- identifying gay demographic in many non-urban areas. This may be due to a number of factors, including the fact that more gays and lesbians are coming out in these areas, the emergence of a more confident “sexual citizen” (Weeks, 1998), increasing acceptance within their communities, and an increased willingness to be counted in surveys (Kazyak, 2011). It has also been suggested that the so-called ‘great gay migration’ of the 1970s and 1980s (Weston, 1998) has slowed (Kuhar and Svab, 2014) with a number of scholars noting a general decline in gay men and lesbians actively seeking out ‘urban gay enclaves’ in cities with a subsequent trend towards gay people and same-sex couples becoming more geographically diverse and visible in non-urban locales (Woodell et al, 2015).

And so, because there is an increasing tendency for gay people to be found in rural and nonmetropolitan areas, there has been an increased interest among sexuality scholars on exploring the intersectional nature of gay, lesbian and bisexual identity. Despite this, significant academic research on this type of intersectionality has been rather slow to develop in the European, and certainly in the British and Irish context with, for example, research in Ireland tending to focus on surveys and studies on issues such as homophobic bullying among LGBT youth (Minton et al, 2008), and mental health and well-being of LGBT more generally (Maycock et al, 2009). A dedicated intersectional approach is key though as it highlights the importance of understanding how other facets of identity (including geography, location and place) might impact sexual identity (Woodell, 2015). Place has a decisive role in shaping individuals’ sexual identity and there is a growing need to study the intersection of gender, sexuality and rurality in order to understand the life world and real-life experience of rural gay men (Annes and Redlin, 2012, Boso, 2011, Kennedy, 2010). An interesting example of work in the British context can be seen in a study highlighting the risk of isolation faced by older gays and lesbians in rural areas of England and Wales (Jones et al, 2013).

The term ‘gay identity’ is salient here. Some of the earlier work on gays in rural areas, while scant in volume and quantity, nonetheless provided a useful focus on gay people in rural areas,

but from the perspective of queer desire and non-normative sexual *practices*. Reality declares that Gay people have always been a part of the rural and nonmetropolitan; they have had same-sex encounters and relationships, but these were usually conducted in a covert, hidden and secretive manner given the local context of hostility and fear. Adopting a gay identity was resolutely not ‘on the agenda’. More recent literature (see Kazyak, 2011) has heralded the arrival of a new focus of study: namely a focus on rural gay identities, people identifying as gay or lesbian and performing that identity in the space of the rural.

Kazyak’s work in particular emphasises the construction, development and formation of rural gay identities and how rural gays and lesbians are modifying cultural narratives about it what means to be gay in the space of the rural. Her work documents how characteristics of rural life can produce, and not always hinder, constructions of gay and lesbian identities, identities which are different from urban gay identities. Furthermore, we see a welcome turn from some earlier scholarship which tended to place emphasis only on the challenges of rural living, leaving us with the impression that rural gay men and lesbians are at a profound and overwhelming disadvantage, both socially and psychologically, when compared to their urban counterparts (Wienke et al, 2013) and that they inhabit an inherently and irredeemably, hostile and bleak environment.

And yet the nonmetropolitan environment can pose significant challenges for gay and bisexual people, with Watkins and Jacoby (2007) highlighting the negative health implications, such as loneliness and depression that stigma and exclusion can cause, in their study of LGBTQI people in the English countryside. In general, prevailing rural cultures and rural spaces are highly heteronormative (Preston & D’Augelli, 2013) and can make the task of ‘coming out’ difficult and traumatic as documented by personal accounts of Irish men and women (see O’Brien, 2003). Traditional, socially conservative values and a culture which valorizes procreation, and the nuclear (heterosexual) family remain the norm (Bauch, 2001). As such, rural cultures can often reproduce stereotypical gender roles and interactions (Annes & Redlin, 2012) and can dismiss LGBTQI people as ‘others’- who hold the potential to breach and rupture powerful normalizing codes (Oswald, 2002; Watkins and Jacoby, 2007).

Rural cultures and spaces can also be doggedly masculinist, where hegemonic conceptions of masculinity dominate, and are influential in setting the tone for what rural men should be, with images of rural masculinity emphasizing ruggedness, physical strength, macho individualism, and emotional independence (Bell, 2000; Bell 2006 in Preston & D’Augelli, 2013). Such

cultural conceptualisations of masculinities allow and support intersectional marginalisation between gender and sexuality, condemning those masculinities that are perceived to be effeminate, as they intersect with homophobia against gay and bisexual men (Monro and Richardson, 2010:105). In such settings, certain ‘non-masculine’ behaviours are discouraged and indeed not tolerated in public (Boulden, 2001) as they offer the potential to disrupt and reimagine the historically uncontested category of ‘rural men’. These powerful cultural forces help create scenarios where rural and small-town identities interact with heteropatriarchal norms to further marginalise those subjects perceived to be gay (Monro and Richardson, 2010:105) although Ní Laoire, offers some optimism towards the emergence of a more open and flexible type of masculinity among young farmers in modern day rural Ireland (2002:16).

Living under alienating conditions, rural gay and bisexual men often feel the need to develop sophisticated coping strategies to allow them to survive in their local heteronormative environments, including the need to engage in self-censorship and continuous self-monitoring (Annes and Redlin, 2012). Survival and coping strategies include remaining closeted (Preston & D’Augelli, 2013) and/or adopting “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” strategies (ibid) with some adopting a lie-low strategy, concluding that rural culture may well accept a gay identity if they (as gay individuals) prove themselves to be “good people first” (Kazyak, 2011) signifying a dividend of traditional, essentialist views, that has historically viewed one’s sexuality as a highly determinative factor in one’s true (good or bad) character and nature (Freyne, 2003: 259) as well as a lingering distrust of the socially and culturally subversive homosexual in the local, rural and nonmetropolitan context.

The rural can therefore, be seen as a place of both belonging and alienation for sexual minorities in ways which are both historic, and current, “real” and “representational” (Gormann-Murray et al., 2013:3). Lived experiences and spatial ideas actively intersect, mutually moulding and sculpting each other (ibid: 4) creating a unique environment which raises barriers in the way of achieving genuine recognition, and inclusion (as a lived experience), but which can offer some tantalising possibilities for the co-creation of new, rural gay and queer identities (Kazyak, 2011).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has sought to provide an overview of some of the key historical and political moments that have led to the emergence, in the post-modern age, of sexual citizenship and the rise of the sexual citizen. These concepts are not without controversy, and yet sexual citizenship remains a dominant, and for many, an appealing approach in seeking an end to the marginalisation, and historical exclusion of LGBTQI persons from the emotional, cultural and political affections of the State and wider society.

In introducing key academic contributors, and in providing some critical conceptual grounding around citizenship, sexual citizenship, and the intersectional dimensions with class, masculinity and space, we now look forward to forthcoming chapters which will extend, and develop, the discussion in a number of directions. Issues around sexual identity development; the impact of social, cultural, and legislative change for gay men; and the role of place, specifically nonmetropolitan and rural spaces, in determining the depth, scope, and authenticity of sexual citizenship for gay men will be explored. Crucially, we aim to reach an understanding of the true homo-emancipatory possibilities that sexual citizenship can, or cannot, deliver for these men within the intersectional context of their rural, and nonmetropolitan environment.

Chapter 3. Methodology

Introduction

This chapter provides an account of the methodological approach adopted in the study. Issues discussed include the underpinning philosophical positioning and subsequent decisions concerning research design, sampling techniques, data collection methods, data analysis, writing and presentation. Hermeneutic, heuristic, reflexive, and ‘insider’ (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2018; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Moustakas, 1990) approaches are embedded within the various methodological stages of this inquiry.

A philosophical home

Hermeneutic phenomenology provides the philosophical underpinnings for this study and informs methodological choices. The development of hermeneutics as a distinct branch of phenomenology is usually attributed to Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), a German philosopher who adopted Edward Husserl’s phenomenology in order to investigate the nature of human existence (Scott & Marshall, 2005: 266).

Like phenomenology, *hermeneutic phenomenology* is concerned with human experience as it is lived (Lavery, 2003). But for Heidegger, a deeper emphasis and pledge of allegiance to the art of understanding was essential. He understood hermeneutics (‘understanding’) to be an analysis of ‘existence’ or ‘being in the world’, and a fundamental concept of ontology (Schwandt, 2007:136). As such, hermeneutics as a philosophical term, can be seen to concern itself deeply with questions of understanding and interpretation (Andermahr et al, 1997:94) which always take place within some background (e.g., historical tradition, web of belief, and practice) which cannot be transcended (Schwandt, 2007:135).

For advocates of hermeneutic research then, the exploration of the person, and the life world, simply cannot ignore historical and cultural meanings of experience. They are a pivotal and embracing aspect of hermeneutic inquiry (Lavery, 2003; Koch, 1995) and they can help us reach understandings of society’s regulations and approaches to a range of intimate issues including birth, personhood, sexual relations, and death (Scott & Marshall, 2005:321). In this light, when speaking of the cumulative effect of context on the subject, and the social world,

Alvesson and Skoldberg assert that within hermeneutics there is a concern “that the meaning of a part (for example, the subject) can only be understood if it is related to the whole” (2018: 116), following the principle that “we can only understand meaning in relation to a world-view of which it forms a part” (Scott & Marshall, 2005: 321).

In a similar way, Munhall (1989) considers hermeneutical phenomenology as taking a view of people and the social and cultural world as intrinsically related and embedded in historical contexts (in Lavery: 8). In exploring the situated meaning of gay men in their rural and small-town environments, the influence of history and context seemed to be especially pertinent. Their experiences, and their identities are shaped through negotiations made necessary by intersection with history, place and context.

I was particularly attracted by this hermeneutic emphasis on *historicality*, especially ways in which time-specific cultural narratives and practices determine what “a person ‘is given’ from birth” and what is “handed down, and presenting ways of understanding the world” (Lavery, 2001: 8) because this resonates with the LGBT experience in Ireland and Britain; as persons adjusting to a changed contextual environment where, rhetorically at least, their subjectivities are being re-cast.

Exploration and Interpretation of Experience; and the role of the self

So, how to go about interpreting and understanding the life world, and lived experiences of rural gay men, according to Heidegger, within the context of trans-historical, social and cultural flux? A process of inquiry, which seemed to me to be consistent with the tenets of hermeneutic phenomenology, and which would allow me to arrive at the level of understanding and interpretation demanded by hermeneutics, is a form of qualitative inquiry known as heuristics. Heuristic inquiry was developed by Clark Moustakas (1985, 1990) and can be seen as an adaptation of phenomenological inquiry but which explicitly acknowledges the involvement of the researcher (Hines, 2001) as a means of reaching understanding. Heuristic inquiry and analysis can prove especially useful in studies of social change (Scott & Marshall, 2005: 267), and especially in areas where the researcher feels a passionate connection with the research questions (Hines, 2001). I discern ways in which heuristic inquiry can help adhere to some of the fundamental hermeneutic priorities such as an interrogation of - history and context, and an avoidance of any implicit ‘bracketing off’, or separation of the researcher from the researched (Moustakas, 1990; Schneider, 2001). In short, the attraction of heuristic inquiry lies in its ability to address the role of the researcher in practical, and accessible ways, which are

compatible with hermeneutic phenomenology, and which can help deliver the hermeneutic desire for richness, and depth of understanding.

The role of the self is repeatedly emphasised as a discerning feature of heuristic inquiry. I was interested in the proposition that the researcher, and his/her experiences were of central significance in the research journey - from idea inception, to instigation, to data collection and data analysis. One quote carried particular weight for me:

All heuristic inquiry begins with the internal search to discover, with an encompassing puzzlement, a passionate desire to know, a devotion and commitment to pursue a question that is strongly connected to one's own identity and selfhood (Moustakas, in Schneider et al, 2001:265).

This quote lent credence to *how* I had arrived at the topic for this PhD study, for my choice of topic had its genesis in my own experiences and was inextricably linked to my own history, identity and selfhood. Heuristic research seemed to say that this was both permissible, and valid; and indeed, seemed to indicate that my own experiences might be pivotal in providing an authentic interpretation process (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2018). In fact, heuristic research, as described by Moustakas (1990), seemed to *require* a personal connection with the topic of inquiry while earlier work on hermeneutics by Devereux (1967) acknowledged that research topics which were of personal significance to the researcher, were a strong feature of heuristic work. Armed with such assurances, I felt that I had been given 'the green light' to pursue an inquiry which was derived from my own historical life world - as a gay man, who grew up in the rural north-western counties of Ireland.

In line with the concept of reflexivity, and reflexive methodologies, which are "close to the hearts and minds of practitioners who value using themselves in their research, and who do not wish to 'bracket off' themselves and their own experiences from the process" (Etherington, 2004a:48), I reflected on the role my own upbringing had on forming my topic of inquiry.

I was born in 1968 in County Monaghan, and as a child moved with my parents to a small, picturesque town (population: c 2,500) in County Leitrim. My family would have been considered middle class. My father was a university educated agricultural scientist from a farming background and worked with the Department of Agriculture as a Regional Manager. My mother had been a nurse but gave up paid employment on becoming married. I have one brother, six years my junior. Looking back, despite some tragic (health related) issues in the immediate family, growing up in this environment was quite idyllic. Open countryside, rural pursuits, cousins, family, and friends. My early primary education, like all local children, was

entrusted to the catholic nuns, and thereafter, I went to the local catholic school for my secondary education, where I was taught by a mix of lay teachers and religious sisters.

During my teenage years, I felt little, if any, physical attraction to girls, and never had girlfriends. I did not encounter family or peer pressure to be more interested in girls during these years (1970s and 1980s), and I put this down to my perception that Irish society was still quite censorious towards any form of intimacy and sexual expression in particular, especially in rural regions. Even during my years at university, in Dublin (1986-1990), I managed to avoid being compelled into dating girls. By this stage, I knew that I found men physically attractive but was unaware of any venue, club, bar or meeting place, where others 'like me' might meet; and even if I had known, I would have been too terrified to go.

On completing university, I returned to work in the rural north-western counties, as a hotel manager. In 1993, I had arrived at a point, where I realised that I was 'gay'; that it was not a 'passing phase', and that to discover what this 'was', I would need to meet other gay people. This seemed quite improbable, dare I say impossible, in County Donegal. I quit my job, and told my parents that in the interests of developing my career, I needed to go to London.

On beginning my first job in the U.K, in a central London hotel, in March 1993, I (knowingly) met my first gay man. He worked at the hotel, and he suspected that I too, was gay. He suggested I join him for drinks with his friends in Soho. I did, and so my journey of self-discovery, and identity formation began.

On reflection, I consider that my relocation to London was necessitated, at the time, by my sexuality. I had no desire to leave rural Ireland, and felt guilty about leaving my (rather unwell) parents, but felt constructively 'driven out' by the historical, and cultural conspiracies of silence, shame, invisibility and denial, which provided no opportunities for me to 'meet others like me'.

I often wonder, what would life have been like if I had remained in rural Ireland? Would I have eventually met another gay man? And established a same-sex relationship? And lived in the communities of north-west Ireland, with which I had an innate connection and affinity? And crucially, what was it like for those who remained? And have their 'lived experiences' changed in light of social and cultural changes, and liberating legislation? On reflection, these questions were instrumental in my choice of topic. As aptly illustrated by Moustakas, heuristic research questions:

Grow out of an intense interest in a particular problem or theme. The researcher's excitement and curiosity inspire the search. The heuristic research question engages one's total self and evokes a personal and passionate involvement and active participation in the process (Schneider et al, 2001: 265)

And so, drawn to the concept of using the reflective 'self' as a tool in the research process, I embarked on my heuristic research, which in its purist form, is a "passionate and discerning personal involvement in problem solving, involves an effort to know the essence of some aspect of (others') lives through the internal pathways of the self", and which can be effectively "utilized as a framework for research, which explores everyday human experiences" (Moustakas and Douglass, 1985, p.39, cited in Etherington, 2004b).

Recruiting the participants

Having decided on the study regions, the next step was to recruit participants. I decided to start the process of respondent recruitment in the Irish study region, during a summer 'at home'. I was aware that a common approach to sampling within qualitative research projects was purposive sampling which provides the researcher a degree of freedom, to identify the population best suited to the research objectives and allows him/her to use judgement and discretion in how s/he selects the cases within the population frame (Bryman, 1989; Phellas, 2012). However, I had no clear ideas about how to go about actually locating gay men in this rural region. I was aware that issues surrounding the lives of rural gay men are sensitive topics for research, and they can constitute a hard to access population, due to the possibility that respondents may be closeted and potentially resistant to the exposure that partaking in research on sexuality may bring (Toft, 2012:43).

In an attempt to start locating these potentially hidden participants, I decided to engage with modern communication technologies, and through gay social networking websites, and apps on android ('smart') phones, I began to connect with other gay people 'online'. The purpose of these online conversations was to ascertain whether gay social events occurred anywhere in the region. During one of these chats, I discovered (to my surprise) that there existed a LGBT network in Longford, just twenty-five miles south-east of my home. I was told they had a Facebook page, which I duly visited and made contact with the moderators. I explained the nature of my research to them, and we arranged to meet. During our meeting we discussed if and how the LGBT network could help facilitate the research by introducing me to potential

study participants. The meeting with these ‘gatekeepers’ (May 1993) lasted over two hours, during which they clearly wanted to know more about me, my growing up experiences, my move to London, my career and research. The meeting went well and they agreed to (a) be interviewed and (b) explore whether I could attend a group meeting.

I therefore had recruited my first two participants, and a few days later they extended me an invitation to attend a meeting of the local LGBT group. Attending the meeting was a further opportunity for me to explain my story, my research and to hopefully recruit more men. That meeting garnered a further five participants. I also took the opportunity, post-interview, to ask the men if they be willing to tell others about the research and to put them in contact with me. This also proved successful, and I was able to arrange further interviews with local men. As such, I was engaging in *snowball sampling*, which involves the selection of participants by nominations or referrals from earlier participants (Preston and D’Augelli, 2013). I was aware of the criticism levied at conventional snowball sampling: that it is prey to a host of biases, and that it can result in a lack of diversity around education, race, income and religion (Heckathorn, in Phellas and Coxon, 2012:19) and also in my case the danger of bunching respondents from small geographical clusters within the region.

One of the interviewees suggested I make contact with another LGBT network in Cavan, a town close to the border with Northern Ireland. He initiated the contact and a similar process of attending a network meeting, and interviewing men from that group followed. I felt it was important to access men from a number of clustered areas within the study region, thereby using a multi-sited sample. A sample of men from several different areas would have methodological strengths and be preferable to a sample from a single area, and it would facilitate triangulation of source (Green, 2006:107). To this end, I made contact with a gay friend in County Donegal, who referred me to two men in that county; a contact in Galway initiated introductions with men in the Connemara district of County Galway; and one of the men who attended the Longford group put me in contact with men in County Sligo. Therefore, I made deliberate, and successful, efforts at recruiting men from a range of localities, and by the end of the fieldwork my participants were spread across seven counties.

Another concern was to try and ensure that the men I interviewed (in both Ireland and Britain) were diverse from the perspective of being ‘out’, ‘partially out’ and ‘not out’. It was proving difficult to recruit men who were resolutely and definitively, ‘not out’. To this end, I made gentle supplications to some of the previously interviewed men, to initiate contact with those

they knew to be closeted. This resulted in one or two successful interviews. I also placed a small note about my research on a gay website, and this rewarded me with another three interviews with men who were broadly not out.

I was struck by how participant recruitment in Ireland seemed to flow very organically, through the power of interpersonal communication, word-of-mouth, and local, informal networks. An important feature of the successful recruitment of participants was derived from the gatekeepers getting to know me first. I also discovered that men who had been interviewed, had texted and telephoned other men to say that, “I was sound”, an Irish phrase to denote that I was trustworthy, friendly, unpretentious and approachable. This encouraged others to self-select and to partake in the research process.

Selecting the sample in Britain was very different. It relied less on local, informal networks, word of mouth, or whether (or not) “I was sound”. There was a greater emphasis on formality in the recruitment process, and in my status as an academic affiliated to a university. Recruiting the sample began at an academic conference in Vienna, during which I met and got into conversation with another attendee, who worked in the voluntary sector and had been involved in a number of equalities-driven research projects in the east of England. During our conversation, it became clear that this person had useful gatekeeper contacts, among equality professionals, working in a number of public sector and voluntary sector organisations. I wrote up a detailed brief of the research, including my contact details and assurance of confidentiality and my gatekeeper contact emailed this information.

I received a number of replies from chairs of local LGBT groups and networks in Cambridgeshire, Norfolk, and Suffolk. Invariably, they gathered the names and email addresses of a number of men who expressed an interest in being interviewed, and I made contact with them. In fact, some became quite proactive and helpful proponents of my study and became instrumental in actively advertising the research on the group’s Facebook page and website. See appendix 5 for an example of recruitment communication made, and appendix 6 for an e-flyer, calling for respondents.

Forty-four men were interviewed; twenty-two in the West of Ireland and twenty-two in the East of England. All conformed to the requirements of the study, which insisted that the men be eighteen years of age or over, self-identify as gay men, live in the locale (and have done so for at least a year), *not* be commuters to London or Dublin, and *not* reside outside the locale for significant parts of the year. The rationale for these specifications was my desire to

interview men whose life world revolved around the nonmetropolitan. I felt that interviewing men who (for example) lived in the south of France for ten months of the year, or who commuted daily to work in a large metropolitan conurbation, would not fully meet the intended aims of this study. I did not want to interview men who adopted an ‘a la carte’ approach to life in the region. The men came from a varied background with regard to occupation, age, class, income, and disability, although sadly, and reflecting a general lack of ethnic diversity in these rural areas, there was, despite efforts made, a distinct lack of visible ethnic minority men among participants interviewed. Please see appendices 3 and 4, for further information on participants

In using the term, “self-identify as gay” in my recruitment publicity, I was aware of the controversies concerning categorisations, such as gay, MSM, bisexual, pansexual or queer. Queer theory is based on the notion that sexualities and attending ‘labels’ are socially constructed (Jagose, 1996) and queer theorists actively critique such binaries as ‘homosexual’, ‘heterosexual’, ‘gay’, ‘straight’; ‘LGBT’; and so forth. Gay is often primarily seen as an identity, while queer is often used to describe a form of defiantly unruly analysis (Bartle, 2015:532) so there is a difference between the terms gay and queer. The unfortunate by-product of binaries can be the effect of categorising and reducing people to fit specific prescriptive labels. I was sympathetic to the idea that in using the term ‘gay’, I was conforming to an untidy and much contested terminology (and not being very ‘queer’ in my theoretical outlook). However, in using the requirement that the men should self-identify as ‘gay’, I was attempting to (a) use language which was direct, familiar, and accessible and (b) ensure that participants had reached a point of internal self-dialogue, where they accepted their same-sex attraction as a predominant aspect of their sexual identity. It is important to note that a number of the men had had sex with women in the past, many had had girlfriends, and some had previously been married to women; nonetheless all considered themselves to be ‘gay’.

Collecting the data

Philosophical and epistemological positions do, of course, impose commitments upon research design and data collection methods (Easterby-Smith *et al*, 2008; Saunders *et al*, 2009). Researchers who engage in hermeneutic research ‘share a commitment to a qualitative, naturalistic, contextual, historic, intersubjective methodology to understand human responses and experiences from a variety of perspectives as they are transformed over time’ (Wilson and Hutchinson, 1991 in Annells, 2006:55). As such, this study adopted a qualitative research

design and utilised qualitative data collection methods because, to borrow from Nickerson (1993), the qualitative researcher “wants to understand unique human experiences and to share both the understanding and the process of understanding with the reader” (cited in Cody et al, 1997) which is certainly entirely consistent with a hermeneutic philosophical position (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2018).

Moustakas reminds us that the qualitative researcher must construct methods that will:

Uncover meanings and patterns of experience relevant to the question, and develop procedures that will encourage open expression and dialogue; where one is encouraged to “permit ideas, thoughts, feelings, and images to be expressed naturally (cited in Schneider et al, 2001: 267).

A typical way of gathering such material is through an in-depth interview, an interview that is not ruled by the clock and which takes place in an atmosphere which encourages trust, openness, and self-disclosure (ibid: 267).

But before engaging in conducting interviews, I was struck by the concept of *pre-interview* ‘exposure’ work, which Moustakas’ considers an essential preparation for discovering the nature and essence of a particular experience (Schneider et al, 2001: 267). In preparation for his work on loneliness, for example, he immersed himself in an environment of loneliness, he walked the streets (got arrested), placing himself in the world of the subject, all in an attempt to more fully comprehend their life world.

Pre-interview immersion in the study regions

Through my own experiences of growing up in the north-west of Ireland, and frequent trips home, I felt innately familiar and confident in my understanding of Irish rural life; the landscape, the people, the rituals, and the cultural norms. I felt I “knew” it in a way that I did not “know” the study region in England and so, in an attempt to overcome this sense of unfamiliarity, I decided to visit the East Anglia region a number of times before (and during) the fieldwork. On one occasion I booked a cottage close to Fakenham, in Norfolk, and stayed a number of days. On other occasions I stayed in local hotels in Norwich and Ipswich. I travelled the rural roads and town streets of Norfolk and Suffolk. In doing this, I was reminded of a seminar that I had attended at the University of Essex. At this seminar, one of the speakers was Louise Nash, who spoke about Lefebvre’s 1991 conceptualisation of space as a social construction. I was attracted by the notion that spatial practices can be evaluated empirically; where ‘phase one’ of fieldwork research can involve “streetwalking”, a combination of

Rhythmanalysis, Flaneur and Psycho-geography. While highly subjective, this aims to use the body to immerse oneself in the setting - noting the rhythms, and recording observations, perceptions, and emotional responses, before proceeding to phase two (participant interviews). I adopted this approach, taking notes of my observations from my 'walking'.

Some diary entries recorded signs of rural poverty, while others remarked on certain villages and small towns which were characterised by "*farmers markets, mulled wine, 4x4's, hunter wellies, barbour jackets, well-heeled folk and their gundogs*". There were many other observations. After driving between interviews in Suffolk and Norfolk, I wrote:

On my thirty mile drive, through open countryside, and prime agricultural land, I pass by large buildings, and places of employment emblazoned with lettering such as, "Best Animal Feed in Norfolk", "Transdoc Trucking Ltd.", and "Family Agri-Food Company"; I pass by large chicken houses, turkey farms, and piggeries. I ponder and wonder about the gay men who must surely live and work here, and I reflect on how the environment and the landscape might affect cultural narratives (on everything!) and how this in turn affects the 'life-world' of gay men here. I also reflect, on the practical difficulties of accessing the few gay bars in either Ipswich or Norwich- spaces which are surely inaccessible for men without a car, or those who may have a car but who wish to have a drink.

I found such immersion in the study region to be invaluable. It also helped inform some of the questions I asked. For example, as a result of my visits, I was intrigued to know the logistical practicalities of *how* men in remote rural areas might be able to visit the gay bars in Norwich, given the wide distances and lack of night-time public transport.

The interviews

The interviews took place at a time convenient for the forty-four men, and at venues of their choosing. Some of the men preferred to be interviewed in their own homes, some in quiet cafés, one or two at their place of work, while a number opted to be interviewed at the premises of their local LGBT networks (Cavan, Ipswich, and Norwich). In Ireland, I also offered men the option of interviews at my family residence, if they so preferred. In choosing to make the men ultimate arbiters of time and place for the interviews, I was attempting to facilitate a sense of comfort, relaxation, and "at-homeness" (Schneider et al, 2001:267).

The duration of interviews ranged from one hour to almost three hours. All of the men were very aware of the nature and topic of the interview before we met, as such information was provided by the LGBT network, or by email and/or telephone conversation with me before they agreed to take part. Thus, all the men had full knowledge of the research before the interviews

began. Nonetheless, at the time of interview, once we had exchanged pleasantries, and were settled, comfortable and ready for the interview, I provided a brief verbal account of the nature, purpose and aims of the research, so as to ensure that there was absolutely no misunderstanding, miscommunication or misinterpretation of the study. I assured the men they could stop the interview, at any time and I emphasised the informal nature of the interview as akin to a conversation with a purpose (Saunders et al, 2009; Bryman 1989). I suggested that, ideally, the interview would be recorded, and assured them of confidentiality. I stressed that there was no compulsion whatsoever to be recorded. In the event, only one man did not want to be recorded, although some men did ask the recorder to be paused when they were recounting particular stories or entering into dialogue on matters which they considered highly sensitive.

And so, with full information provided, and assurances given, the interview began. In general, the interview involved only me and the respondent, although some couples did want to be interviewed together. I strived to be consistent with heuristic research by employing an informal conversational approach. This ‘dialogue’ approach aims toward encouraging expression, education, and disclosure of the experience being investigated. Moustakas cites Jourard (1968, *Disclosing Man to Himself*) in arguing that *self-disclosure* elicits respondent disclosure.

There may be moments in the interview process when primary investigator share experiences that will inspire and evoke richer, fuller, and more comprehensive depictions from co-researchers (respondents). The heart of the heuristic interview is dialogue and dialogue is [more] likely to occur when two people believe each is trustworthy and of goodwill (Jourard :21 cited in Schneider et al, 2001: 268)

The issue of self-disclosure was important to me. I was never in any doubt that I would self-disclose, in other words, that I would disclose my identity as a gay man. I confirmed my sexual identity where appropriate, whether that be at the recruitment stage, or the pre-interview stage. This was a considered and deliberate decision. Having said that, I did not arrive at it lightly. I was very aware of the concerns on self-disclosure expressed by other researchers (Toft, 2012; Cooper, 2006) but I agreed with the work of Ellis and Berger (2003) who see the researcher’s disclosures as “more than tactics to encourage the respondent to open up; rather, the researcher often feels a reciprocal desire to disclose, given the intimacy of the details being shared by the interviewee” (cited in Etherington, 2004a:49).

Withholding *my* sexual identity from these men would have felt inauthentic, an inappropriate display of power, and an inhospitable act lacking in reciprocity. In any event, typing my name

into a simple online search would have returned biographic information about me, and my previous academic research on LGB issues. Furthermore, self-disclosure was entirely within the spirit of heuristic research methodologies which disown the positivist obsession with expunging the self. Heuristic inquiry also avoids traditional, normative phenomenological tendencies towards ‘bracketing off’ the self, lest we impart undue influence on the data by our presence and involvement (Etherington, 2004a:49).

The interview conversations were aimed at revealing the meanings and essences of the human life world of these rural, gay men in an accurate, comprehensive, and vivid way, and to this end, I ensured that the questions were stated in simple, clear and concrete terms (Schneider et al, 2001: 266). I was very aware, from my experience of conducting research interviews in the past, that oral discourse eventually became texts, and these texts were then the basis of interpretation and analysis (Kvale, 1996). If the research was to meet the research aims, and objectives, I would need to ensure that the dialogue was in line with my interview schedule, otherwise the text narrative would be quite irrelevant to the purpose and goals of the study.

The interview guide consisted of twelve, non-sequential questions (please see appendix 7). These questions sought to address four main themes:

Growing up: Awareness of difference; emergence of sexual identity; (non-) disclosure of sexuality.

The intersection of sexuality with the nonmetropolitan (rural, village, small town and town) environment.

How sexuality cuts across the personal and the political: Inclusion, Exclusion, Marginalisation and Belonging.

The impact of legal, political, social, and cultural changes for the men and their life world.

In directing the conversation, I attempted to ask questions in an open manner (Kvale, 1996), and rather than ‘fire’ twelve questions at the participant in a form of directive interrogation, I approached the questions in a thematic fashion. In other words, I asked them to talk about the themes, and as they were doing so, I kept a watch on my interview guide to ensure that *they* were addressing the various questions embedded in the themes. In many ways, the interviews conformed to what are known as ‘life story’ or ‘life history interviews’, where the person chooses to “tell a story about the life he or she had lived told as completely as possible usually as a result of a guided interview by another” (Atkinson, 2002 in Annes and Redlin, 2012: 263).

Life history interviews seemed relevant and consistent with both the principles of hermeneutic inquiry, and the aims of my study, given that they can reveal much “in-depth understanding of social, cultural, and historical structures shaping this personal experience over the life course” (ibid: 263). Furthermore, they are often considered suitable for researchers working in the field of sexuality in that they provide a scholarly audience for new stories not previously heard such as the coming-out stories of gay and lesbian people (Robinson, 2013:9).

Once recording had commenced, I started each interview with the same question – ‘*Could we chat about your memories of growing up: where you grew up, your home and family background, where you went to school*’ subsequently followed by ‘*and when (or indeed if) you began to notice differences between yourself and other boys of your same age*’. I found that this entry question worked well; the men engaged with it effortlessly and eagerly talked at length, recalling their early and formative years. In general, I did not intervene in ways that would halt their flow and their reflections. On occasions though, I did feel the need to gently nudge them on to the other aspects of their life story and their life world. In a similar way to questions about growing up, the men were able to naturally engage with questions around experiences of exclusion, inclusion, marginalisation and acceptance. However, I did notice that some struggled with the line of inquiry around normalisation, and assimilation. It was clear to me that quite a number hadn’t really given much thought to this area of debate, and I did have to work hard, probe, and enter into explanatory dialogue in order that the conversation yielded relevant reflections from them.

This brings to mind the term double hermeneutic, used by Giddens to refer to two factors that affect how researchers interpret and explain social life and behaviour (Johnson, 2000:143). Firstly, revealing knowledge about people’s behaviours, and how they make sense of their lives, surroundings and behaviours and secondly, the researcher making use of sociological concepts (ibid) such as sexual citizenship and normalisation to explain what is going on.

Eye contact, active listening, empathic encouragement and appropriate directive support were deployed throughout. For example, on occasions, respondents would ask, ‘*Am I answering the question? Am I going off track?*’ or ‘*Maybe, this will be of no interest, but shall I tell you a story to tell about?*’ I was entirely responsive to the needs of the men when they sought direction and guidance in our conversations with a purpose. I was minded that the purpose of hermeneutic inquiry is to reveal what participants really experienced, from the inside out (Geertz, 1973 in Lavery, 2003) all the time looking for not only what is said, but what is said

between the lines, and paying attention to silences, and what they might signify (Lavery, 2003). For example, some men would recount difficult past experiences, and would perhaps emphasise those moments by silent pauses, glances to the floor, sometimes shaking their heads. At such times, some of the men would also utter words such as, *Well, you probably know what I'm talking about*, intimating that I would understand their feelings, because I was a gay man, who had grown up and remained familiar with 'rural ways'. In all cases, I felt I *did* know exactly what they were intimating, and what they were saying with silence and inflections. This does allude to my 'insider status' (Heilman, 1980) which was a consistent theme throughout the fieldwork, a theme I reflect upon in the concluding paragraphs of this chapter.

A word on the groups

The relationship with the local LGBT groups did not end with the end of interviews and I remained in contact with these local networks. On a number of occasions, I travelled and took part in network events. The result of this ongoing interaction with the groups was that I was constantly updated on issues that they felt relevant, at a local, and national level. A number of the men in the groups were clearly cognitively, and emotionally engaged with my research. They displayed a connection to its remit, its aims, and its purpose and they wanted to ensure that they passed on information to me that they deemed relevant. These extra layers of information from new stories allowed new insights to emerge and a greater, more profound understanding of the rural life world of the men to take hold.

In describing, conceptualising and naming my data collection methods, I do not feel however, that I engaged in ethnographic participant observation in the way that other researcher's have conceived it. For example, in reading an account of participant observation by Alison Rooke in an LGB community centre (see: *A Queer in the Field*) she actively took part in a range of ongoing activities, including volunteering at the centre, carrying out mental health outreach, running sexualities discussion groups, and a series of photography workshops with lesbian and bisexual women (in Nash and Browne, 2010:35). I was not an active member of their groups, partaking in outreach or other such activities. Rather, I maintained contact with the men in the networks, received (vital) new local information from them, was invited to their events, and involved them in the ongoing news of the study, and its emerging findings. In ways, I feel that they were co-authors, and co-researchers; collectively we engaged in ongoing and dynamic dialogue, a form of collegial interaction and solidarity at revealing understanding. After, these exchanges and visits, I made notes of new insights received, new experiences revealed, new

concerns and worries expressed, new political contexts which were changing their sense of citizenship. The relationship with the men in the groups, was crucial in developing a deeper, and extended, longitudinal level of interpretation, providing ever more contextual understanding, as I analysed my material, texts, transcripts, and diary notes.

Data Analysis

Essential to the process of heuristic analysis is intimate knowledge of all the material for each participant. For Moustakas, this involves, in his words, ‘immersion and incubation’ in the data, and becoming ever more familiar with the data, through a hermeneutic circle (Laverty, 2003:21/22), a *circulus fructuosus* (Kvale, 1996), a circular or spiral process which can take many months, during which the core themes and patterns gradually begin to emerge and take shape (Schneider et al, 2001:269). Indeed, my experience of the data analysis process, was of a circular and multi-layered process, which was time-consuming, comprised of multifarious and intersecting layers of complexity. Analysis began from the initial interviews, and never ceased; I always seemed to be cognitively engaged in interpretation and re-interpretation over a period of years.

Reissman’s (1993) approach to Narrative Analysis, and Denzin’s (2001) work on Interpretive Interactionism are also of relevance to my experience of the art of analysis (Cooper, 2006). For Reissman achieving a deep understanding of the significance of stories can be happen through transcription, reading and re-reading the material, and texts in an interpretive process. Meanwhile, for Denzin, the goal of interpretation and interactionism is to make the problematic lived experiences of ordinary people available to the reader. The researcher, as an interactionist, often employing life history interviews, interprets these worlds, their meanings and their representations (Denzin 2001). My experience of using a form of life history interviews is to agree with Connell (2005) in that they provide rich evidence and documentation of personal experience as well as about subjectivity (in Annes and Redlin, 2012: 263), but that they produce huge and overwhelming amounts of data which need to be analysed through coding. Getting to grips with the data seemed daunting at times, but I soon realised that the ‘process’ would not be ‘done’ in a single year, rather it would be ongoing, and as Moustakas remarked, methods of analysing data *heuristically* involves “timeless immersion inside the data, with intervals of resting and returning to the data; the condition of again and again-of repetition- which is essential until intimate knowledge is obtained” (Schneider et al, 2001:269). My overriding

sentiments of the analytical process is very much captured by one word: *repetition*, a never-ending process of uncovering, all the time revealing themes, sub-themes, new insights and new understandings. I can also discern similarities with grounded theory analysis (Glaser & Strauss), outlined by Easterby-Smith (2008) as a seven-stage process which requires the texts to be systematically analysed so as to tease out themes, patterns and categories that create knowledge (2008:175). In particular, Easterby-Smith's reference to familiarisation, coding and *re-coding* as a feature of grounded theory analysis resonates with my experience of what seemed like endless repeating cycles of coding, re-coding, and refinement.

And so, I began by following Moustakas's (1990) guidance, whereby the interviews (with the exception of one) were recorded and later transcribed. In taking the call to immersion and incubation seriously, I got into the habit of listening to the recordings at opportune moments. I initially began to listen whilst walking, whether it be in the forest or the countryside. I found the experience of listening to the men's conversations in these environments, almost meditative - walking in the rural, whilst listening (through earphones) to the men's voices, their inflections, their silences and their words. This practice focused my concentration on what they were telling us. At times, as words created thoughts and these thoughts incubated, I would pause the recording and become self-aware of theorising, '*Now that's interesting, because what he is really saying is that*'

Whilst I did enjoy this habit and practice of immersion, I noticed that I wasn't able to take notes so easily 'on the move', and so I began to make mini-recordings of my 'incubating reflections' on my android phone; or instead to listen to the recordings at a desk, with notepad and pen to make written observations.

Transcription

The transcription process, posed me with a dilemma - I was aware that the transcription process was a further opportunity to become immersed in the data and that interviews are not simply 'typed words', rather interviews can also include forms of non-verbal communication (Davey, 1999, in Green, 2006) but I was also aware of the time-saving advantages from getting recordings transcribed. In the end, I compromised with myself: I transcribed about half the interviews, and engaged a trusted, professional transcriber, who had worked with the university on previous sensitive research topics, to transcribe the remainder. Luckily, I had pre-empted this possibility, at the stage of interview, and had always mentioned to the respondent (before the interview) that transcription would be done by myself *or* a trusted professional.

However, remaining conscious of the possibility that I would lose out on a valuable opportunity to immerse myself in the interview data, I listened to the recordings (again) alongside reading the newly transcribed text, so as to ensure there was nothing amiss, and this allowed me to make occasional marks and annotations. Each transcribed interview provided many thousands of words. The average interview transcript was over 15,000 words (approximately forty pages).

Finding relevance with the research objectives and questions

The next stage was to read each completed transcript to determine ways in which the text corresponded to my original research objectives and questions.

My original research aim and objectives, had been, of course, reflected within my interview guide. In other words, my research objectives and my interview guide were aligned. From previous research, which I had conducted as part of a team (Colgan et al, 2006, 2009) I was aware of the need to keep respondents focused on the research and interview themes/objectives during the interview. Failure to keep the conversation relevant could result in large volumes of text, which simply would not address the issues, and therefore would not address the research aims. Whilst going through the texts, I could see that the narrative was consistent with my objectives and questions. I could also discern some new, surprising themes emerging. However, I needed to break down the transcribed interview text into more manageable displays, which would be easier to work with. In other words, the transcribed interview texts had to be reduced, and 'broken down' into thematic categories which would allow me to 'make sense' of the data. In this regard, data reduction can be seen as a fully necessary aspect of narrative data analysis (Miles and Huberman, 2002).

Creating a home for their narrative

In making sense of the transcripts, I coded the text of each transcript, according to the research objectives and questions. I created thematic categories, aligned to my research questions and assigned thematic labels to these categories. Literature refers to this approach as 'open coding' (Ezzy, in Cooper, 2006: 101). For example, categories were labelled as; *Growing Up*; *PESTLE contextual factors*, *Intersection with the rural*, *Realities (of belonging, exclusion, etc)*; *Role of local LGBT networks*; *Identity*; *Normalisation* and *Religion*. The same categories were used for analysis of the Irish and English interviews (because the same interview guide was used in both countries) but the Irish and English transcripts were analysed separately, creating approximately eighteen separate thematic electronic word documents, which provided a home for relevant narrative text from both countries.

After the transcripts had been coded, I used Microsoft word, to 'cut and paste' the relevant text and deliver to their respective thematic homes- electronic word documents- which provided a platform for visual thematic data display (Miles and Huberman, 2002). This was the first wave of open coding, with the main themes having evolved from the analysis, following this a second wave of open coding began.

Recoding

These electronic, thematic word documents (which on average, contained twenty thousand words of relevant respondent narrative) provided data display, and they were now my focus of new attention for further analysis. This involved identifying key sub themes and patterns (Ritchie and Spencer in Cooper, 2006) within these main thematic repositories. In essence, this *recoding* was yet another heuristic attempt to uncover the life world of these men, discover new layers of depth and complexity. For example, within the one main thematic word document (named *Rural Intersection*), there emerged sub themes of: *Reasons for staying, leaving, or returning to the rural; Advantages of rural life; Challenges of rural life; and Coping strategies* to name a few. These sub themes were highlighted, identified and moved to yet another home, and yet another word document. The sub themes were my new headings, and were supported by numerous carefully chosen respondent quotations, which I felt illustrated or illuminated the patterns that had emerged. Here, we can see how my process of analysis involved coding, data reduction, display, followed by re-coding, re-display (Miles and Huberman, 2002).

Telling the respondents story

From these new data display manuscripts, I could now discern a story, a flow, a logic and cogency, which allowed me to begin 'writing up' each findings chapter, in a coherent narrative, which will make sense to the reader. Using my own creative skills as a writer, my notes and diary entries, and with supporting respondent quotations, I wrote the findings chapters, which then needed to be refined, grammatically and stylistically.

Contextualising and conceptualising with literature

I then proceeded to merge literature with the findings to create each Findings and Analysis chapter. This required me to re-visit aspects of my literature review, to engage it with fresh eyes, and also to engage with new literature in line with new empirical findings from my fieldwork. This was very time consuming and took many weeks. The newly created chapter, a

product of interpretation, reflection, innovation and creativity (Kvale, 1996: 50) was then also refined, edited, and improved.

In completing the heuristic spiral, I was mindful that interpretations are arrived at through a process of ‘co-construction’ of data with participants, through a hermeneutic of understanding (Laverty, 2003:21). Therefore, as I neared the end stages of the creation process, I made efforts to share my emerging findings with the men in the local networks, through informal discussions, as well as a more formal presentation and Q&A in July 2017. This decision was not taken lightly, what would happen if they could not relate to the findings, or questioned my interpretation. In the end, it was well received and I felt affirmed and embraced. It was an act of symbolic verification.

Rigour: credibility, validity, and reliability

When conducting hermeneutical phenomenological studies, researchers need to ensure the credibility of the study (Laverty, 2003:24). Credibility requires that the research is consistently faithful and true to the stories of the lived experiences, as told by the participants and subjects (Beck, 1993). This commitment to truthful and honest reflection of the lived experience is central to the integrity and credibility (believability) of the study. It involves ensuring that the research is conducted in ways that are aligned to the research objectives (Lincoln and Guba, 1985); that construction of texts is credible to the experience; can be understood by insiders and outsiders; and that analysis and interpretation incorporates and mirrors the complexities of the situation (Laverty, 2003). I was struck by Kvale’s assertion that researchers have a *duty* to conduct research into areas that are worth knowing (1996:118) and by Alvesson and Skoldberg’s argument that qualitative inquiry should tell stories that matter (2018: 366). Throughout my research, I have been committed to *my duty* in ensuring that the study remains dedicated to revealing truth as expressed by the men; that there are no politically motivated interpretations, and that there is no deception. Throughout the findings and analysis chapters I have made efforts to provide in-depth description of the complexities of experiences and interactions and these have been embedded in the data and final text (Creswell, 1993 in Laverty, 2003:23). I have been acutely aware that prolonged engagement with, and immersion in, the data is essential in a hermeneutic phenomenological project, and that commitment to the multiple stages of heuristic interpretation (which allow patterns to emerge), are seen as critical and central to the rigour of the study (Koch, 1995 in Laverty, 2003: 23)

Reliability and validity can be discussed within hermeneutic tradition as issues of rigour (Laverty, 2003:23) although it must be admitted that historically, many interpretive and qualitative researchers have had an uneasy relationship with the (inherently positivistic) constructions of reliability and validity (Kvale, 1996). There can be a temptation by some, to dismiss these constructions as some oppressive positivist concepts that hamper a creative and emancipatory qualitative research (ibid:231) but there is a growing acceptance and acknowledgement that qualitative research can be seen as rigorously valid when the researcher's process is transparent and explained (Etherington, 2004a; Richardson, 2000; Denzin, 2000).

The concept of validity concerns evidence, in particular that a valid argument be based on sound evidence (Green, 2006:121). The rich, and voluminous qualitative data that has been produced in this study provides evidence of the topic being addressed. Evidence which is central to our understanding of validity, which succeeds in presenting “an account that truly and accurately represents those features of the phenomena that it is intended to describe, explain or theorise” (Hammersley, 1987:69, cited in Green:121). As outlined earlier, an extensive concern throughout this study was to ensure an accurate, detailed and insightful account of the lives of gay men in the nonmetropolitan environment, through heuristic immersion and interpretation. Therefore, the study attempts to validate their stories and offer the reader an insight into gay men as sexual citizens, within the context of their location and situation.

The notion of reliability is often concerned with the extent to which research lends itself to replicability in other settings using similar methods (Ritchie et al 2008). Reliability also favours accuracy and measurement (Gilbert, 1993). Cooper (2006) however, argues the notion of reliability needs to be updated for contemporary qualitative studies and quotes Holloway and Jefferson (2000) who regard reliability as, “*an invalid criterion in our theoretical view; meanings are unique as well as shared. Contrary to the view of positivist science, however, the situations that we are analysing are never replicable (were they ever?). Meanings are not just unique to a person; they are also unique to a relational encounter*” (in Cooper, 2006:78). While it may be difficult to achieve reliability from a measurement perspective, it is argued that interpretive work is empirically solid and robust when supporting evidence is available, in the form of interview transcripts, coding sheets, thematic categorisation, respondent profiles and reflective notes (Cooper, 2006; Roberts, 2014). In retaining interview notes, transcripts, and evidence of systematic coding and analysis, I am confident that this research can be seen

as rigorous, as well as a ‘flexible, iterative, and continuous’ process (Rubin and Rubin, 1995 cited in Cooper, 2006:77).

Ethical issues

Easterby-Smith et al, refer to the many ethical issues bubbling under the surface of research (2008:132), and the problems faced by researchers in dealing with ethical issues, which more often than not tend to be small-scale, incremental and ambiguous (ibid: 135). My own experiences back up these claims, in that I found ethical questions and dilemmas were a constant companion, always at the back of my mind, and foreground of my concerns, throughout the research. Of course, I was familiar with, and guided by, the university ethics code of practice, and there was confidence in the fact that my research had gained ethics approval. Nonetheless, during the fieldwork, and especially during the interaction with respondents, I was aware that exploring gay sexuality and identity in rural areas is a highly sensitive topic (Preston & D’Augelli, 2013) and that this in turn, required that a sensitive approach be taken to all interactions with the people involved.

My experiences in conducting this study also allow me to agree with Kvale (1996) who states that ethical decisions do not belong to a separate stage of interview investigations alone, but arise throughout the entire research process - ethical questions arise from the very start of an investigation through to the final report (1996:110). For example, during the participant recruitment stage, I was acutely aware that the men who made contact with me may not be ‘out’. The email and telephone conversations were conducted completely confidentially, and I provided full and frank background information about my research. In sharing the nature of the research, its aims and objectives, interview protocol, analysis processes and possible publication outcomes, with all the men, I was adhering to the concept of informed consent and that full information about the design and purpose rules out any deception of subjects (Kvale, 1996: 112; Bryman, 1989; Cameron and Price, 2009).

I was highly cognisant that conducting research interviews, and life history interviews in particular, is a moral enterprise (Kvale, 1996:109) and that there are moral implications of how an interview inquiry should be conducted. Kvale cautions us to be aware that some interviewees may find the interview setting so intimate and so seductive that they may release information they will regret (1996:109). There were times I had to ‘think on my feet’ about how to respond

to certain situations. For example, when a respondent began to speak about his experiences as a teenager, of sexual encounters with an older, local, married man. What do I do? How do I respond? On the one hand, I cannot forcefully intrude and interrupt his story, as this could be interpreted as my ‘minimising’ this particular experience, and may also give the impression that I only wanted to hear a sanitised version of his life, expunging any aspect which was considered unsavoury or controversial, but I was also alive to the dangers of naming others, especially on such a sensitive matter. So, in the moment, can I gently and sensitively ask that we mention no names? I needed to think very quickly, intuitively but with the cognitive support of research ethical codes. Thankfully, the respondent immediately asked me, *shall I mention the name of the person*, to which I suggested that perhaps it is better not to, and he agreed, with a nodding of the head, and continued his story.

My biggest concern though, was to provide complete confidentiality of the research data, and in protecting the privacy of my research subjects, both of which are core to ethical research (Easterby-Smith et al, 2008, Kvale, 1996) and which were of acute importance given that many were not ‘fully out’ within their locales. In addressing the ethical challenges of research on non-dominant sexualities, Wilcox (2012) emphasises the need to protect LGBTQI respondents from potential harm, in an era of where gay people are “under fire” from a number of quarters (:37) while the need for particular sensitivity in researching gay men in rural areas, where communities are tight-knit, and where exposure can have uniquely damaging consequences, is underscored by Preston & D’Augelli (2013). With this in mind, I changed the names of the men, exchanging their real names with pseudonyms (even though some men indicated that ‘I don’t mind if you use my real name’). I also removed identifying features which may compromise their identity; thereby protecting the men’s privacy.

Throughout this research, on this most sensitive of topic, in interacting with gay men in the nonmetropolitan space, I was minded by the advice of Mason (1996) that researchers should operate as thinking, reflective practitioners who are prepared to ask difficult questions about their ethics and politics of their own research practice on a regular basis (in Easterby-Smith, 2008:135). Perhaps this guidance was one of the reasons that ethical issues, dilemmas and self-questioning were a constant feature of my research journey, and they did indeed, continuously ‘bubble away’ under the surface of my work, informing my decisions at every stage of the process from design to delivery.

Concluding comments

Having provided a faithful account of the methodological approach taken in this study, it seems apt to conclude with some commentary on an aspect of my methodological experience, that was an inherent feature of *all* the various stages of this heuristic inquiry- whether it be the initial engagement with topic, or the further stages of immersion, incubation, illumination, explication and creative synthesis (Etherington, 2004a:50).

This constant feature concerns the role of the researcher and specifically my role as an ‘insider’. ‘Insiders’ share the characteristics, roles or experiences under study of the participants (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009) and I felt that my role as ‘insider-researcher’ was an ever-present aspect of the study.

In my reflections, and on reading around the subject of ‘insider’ status, I felt an immediate affinity with the idea of “native-as-stranger” (Heilman, 1980). In his interesting account *Jewish Sociologist: Native-as-Stranger*, Heilman discusses the challenges he encountered in “studying people that were my own” (ibid: 100) how he was seen as insider (due to his upbringing in the community under study) as well as outsider (due to his subsequent career as an academic outside the community). The New York academic remarks that:

While I seek to take the role of stranger to explain the Orthodox Jewish world to outsiders, to convince them of the sociological richness of this group of people, its chosenness, I retain the advantages of an insider. I know where to look for the action and what questions to ask. (Heilman, 1980: 105)

Throughout my fieldwork, I was aware of my extensive experiences, and knowledge of, the themes under study, and this bestowed a certain sensitivity to the nuances of meanings expressed by the men, and the different contexts into which the meanings may enter. (Kvale, 1996:49). I was also aware of the risk that I may so closely identify with them that I would report and interpret everything from their perspectives; that I might become a victim of “countertransference”, or – to use an anthropological expression-that I might “go native” (ibid: 118) and so the concept of *native-as-stranger* was interesting to me. Not a stranger; firmly an insider; but with the presence of some distance.

To the men in Ireland, I may have been a native once, but my twenty years living and working in London, bestowed on me, a sense of the ‘stranger’. I sensed a slight wariness in the initial stages. The meetings with the Irish gatekeepers were in part, I am certain, to ascertain whether I had become a ‘London, city slicker’, with accompanying displays of superiority; or whether

I had retained the ‘grounded, Irish, country boy’ values of my upbringing. One Irish gatekeeper made the comment that, *we don’t want to be examined like monkeys in a laboratory*. I knew exactly what he meant. They would not agree to be studied by an urban outsider who had no experience of rural life, and who displayed any hint of arrogant or condescending attitudes to ‘country folk’ as quaint, quirky, and pitiful figures; country bumpkins who inhabit that dark, miserable place beyond the M50 (the motorway ring-road that circles Dublin).

Thankfully, they acknowledged that, that was not me, and I *was* allowed into their worlds. In relation to our ‘life worlds’: we were similar, but not the same; shared history, shared experiences as gay men, but divergent ‘life paths’. Among the men in England, I was a ‘native-insider’ with regard to sexuality, my upbringing in a rural environment and the fact that I lived in England, but my Irish upbringing, and my Irish accent marked me as separate. By combining familiarity, and insider knowledge, with some degree of distance, and detachment, the *native-as-stranger*, as Heilman asserts allowed him to “discover” something I had always “known” (Heilman, 1980: 105). In a similar way, I felt my native-as-stranger categorisation allowed me to understand, interpret, and present the life world of these men in an intrinsically accurate and authentic way.

Chapter 4. Early Awakenings and Growing Up Gay

Unless you are gay you don't experience the awful weight of history, both secular and religious, both past and present, that works to convince us that in the very depths of our being there dwells no 'rightness' (O'Brien, 2003:14).

Introduction

As I conducted interviews with adult men living in nonmetropolitan Ireland and England, testimonies emerged recounting what it was like to grow up during a time, and in a place where silence, invisibility, and prejudice against same-sex intimacy prevailed. The oldest respondent was born in 1937, the youngest in 1991. As expected, those born in earlier decades recalled experiences which were moulded and framed by a society resolutely hostile to homosexuality, a time where to be gay was, in effect, a criminal offence. In total, one man was born in the 1930s; three men were born in the 1940s; six in the 1950s; eighteen in the 1960s; eight in the 1970s; six in the 1980s and two in the 1990s.

Common patterns emerged regardless of age or location including: a keen recollection of when they began to notice the first signs of difference from other boys; self-awareness of difference as having implications for sexual orientation; and a growing self-realisation of the categorisation of their sexual orientation (it had a name) a dawning which was often accompanied by feelings of, horror, confusion, loathing and panic due to the existence of powerful homo-negative cultural messaging in their environment. Common reactions included strategies of sitting it out, waiting for it to pass, and telling no-one. Later, many men, as young adults, would move towards having occasional, anonymous sex (although many found few opportunities to do so). Their testimonies recall intense feelings of guilt, and shame. They were plagued by self-questioning. Why me? What am I? Am I the only one? Do I confide in others? Who do I tell? Do I come out? Should I continue to deny, or avoid the subject?

Models of identity formation

During interviews, men spoke of what I might refer to as their ‘identity journey’ starting from their earliest memories of feeling different, to an understanding that they were gay, and beyond this towards self- acceptance. For many, their journey has taken them towards forms of public affirmation, with a few becoming local gay rights activists.

The idea of a journey of sexual identity formation has been conceptualised by a number of theorists. Some have postulated that the process of sexual identity formation is different for homosexuals and heterosexuals (Cox & Gallois, 1996; Beard and Hissam, 2002).

Two of the best-known models that conceptualise gay and lesbian identity formation were developed by Vivienne Cass (1979, 1984) and Richard Troiden (1988, 1989). Both models are very similar - both describe and outline a number of ‘stages’ that individuals pass through in order to assimilate and accommodate their gay identity into their ‘self’ (McCarthy, 2012).

The model developed by Cass suggests that there are six stages of development that all individuals move through in order to acquire an identity of “homosexual” that is fully integrated within the individual’s overall concept of self. The six stages identified by Cass include: Stage 1, *Identity Confusion*; Stage 2, *Identity Comparison*; Stage 3, *Identity Tolerance*; Stage 4, *Identity Acceptance*; Stage 5, *Identity Pride* and Stage 6, *Identity Synthesis*.

The model developed by Troiden, identifies four-stages: *Sensitisation*, *Identity Confusion*, *Identity Assumption*, and *Commitment*. This four-stage model is a synthesis of and a development on earlier models, for example it incorporates aspects of Plummer’s influential (1975) model on ‘becoming homosexual’ and also incorporates insights from the Cass model.

The models are similar in that they describe a process whereby the gay person adjusts to their same-sex attraction, but unlike their heterosexual peers they must do so in societies where minority sexualities are often marginalised and stigmatised (Preston & D’Augelli, 2013). The young person must deal with social stigmatisation, which often comes from significant others such as family members, friends, peers, and teachers, whose support and acceptance young people need to successfully embark on their journey through adolescence to adulthood (Schubotz and McNamee, 2009).

Eliason (1996) agrees that sexual identity development theories provide valuable insights into lesbian, gay and bisexual lives, but also cautions that they are limited in a number of ways. For example, the models do not always consider ways by which race, ethnicity, gender, class, and

age may intersect with sexuality. I would also add, the intersectional relevance of location, space and time. There is also criticism that the theories do not satisfactorily account for bisexual identity formation and, of particular salience for my study, there were the worries highlighted by Kitlinger (1987) on the apolitical, and ahistorical orientation of many of the models.

Eliason (1996) identifies the need for more fluid and comprehensive models of development that examine the interrelatedness of various aspects of the individual identity and the role of the socio-political/historical context in which the individual negotiates her/his identity.

In charting the life histories and life journeys of the men in this study, I made use of Troiden's model simply as a companion in analysing the men's stories of their early identity formation. However, it is important to acknowledge that such models can result in a temptation to mechanically slot people's lives into distinct stages, which may be rather rigid and artificial. With this in mind, we must remember that:

Progress through the stages occurs in back-and-forth, up-and-down ways; the characteristics of stages overlap and recur in somewhat different ways for different people. In many cases, stages are encountered in consecutive order, but in some instances they are merged, glossed over, bypassed, or realized simultaneously (Troiden, 1989:47).

So, for example, and as we will see in later chapters, some men may have been 'out' when they lived in big cities, or overseas, thus conforming to what might be labelled by Troiden as the identity *commitment* stage, but on returning to their rural locales they retrenched, and went back into the closet because of their return to a pre-out environment.

The men's testimonies below are also placed in a historical context, considering the history of homophobia and the local environmental specificities of the Irish and British context. Therefore, while utilising the models to help me make sense of the life stages which my men speak about, I am also acknowledging the political and historical dimensions that applied to their young lives.

First awareness of difference

Each of the men in this study were able to recall when they began to feel different from other boys of the same age.

Philip (72) was born into a working class family in the English West Midlands and growing up in the 1940s he recalls how he was made to feel different because he preferred to play with girls more so than boys:

Growing up I was criticised a lot [by adults] because I was always playing with the girls, and I was called a sissy, so I think I felt that I was different from other boys in that respect.

Other men cited examples of playing with dolls, dressing up in their mothers' clothes, putting on make-up, taking the female role in children's role play games or preferring to stay in the kitchen and bake cakes with their grandmothers, mothers, aunts, and/or sisters rather than work outside on the farm with the men (doing men's work) or playing football with the other boys. By deviating from gendered roles, these boys were transgressing from the social norms of their environment. Such transgressions were never welcomed or encouraged, but rather were frowned upon, often earning them retribution, rebuke and condemnation. Many of the men remember fathers expressing worry or concern that their son "would turn out to be an "Oul Molly" (Mac) or a "Nancy-boy" (Mitch).

A lack of interest in certain competitive team sports at school, was a cause of further differentiation felt by many of the men. Cyril attended a renowned all-male boarding school in the Irish midlands, but felt oppressed and marginalised by the huge focus on sports such as rugby and Gaelic football. Sport was an important part of the school identity and those who excelled at sport were highly valued. Cyril was not interested in sports and he remembers the relief when his parents moved him to a mixed gender school back in his home town, in the north-west of Ireland:

If you weren't interested in sport, which [name of school] would have been, that was a big issue [problem], and so [when I moved away from that school] I was probably much happier in an awful lot of ways, because certainly my new school wasn't so sport orientated.

Cyril also found the mixed gender culture of his new school, more welcoming and inclusive than his previous all-male school.

Virtually all the men have childhood recollections of ‘feeling drawn’ to images of other men; this was described as a non-sexualised attraction, a curiosity and appreciation of male handsomeness. For example, many men spoke of how, in their childhood they found certain male movies stars interesting or handsome; whether it be Flash Gordon (1950s) or the Bionic Man (1970s). Philip remembers this from his childhood in late 1940s England:

I remember when I was young my gran had got a record , and on the record sleeve was a picture of Frank Sinatra and something went on in my mind that said to me ‘I like that guy’....and I would say that was around five; and afterwards, the movies, Tarzan moviesI was so attracted to the image of Tarzan.

Joshua was brought up in a church-going family in Suffolk, but as a child (in late 1970s) he recalls finding bible images of men appealing:

When I was very young, four years old or so, the family bought me a coloured children’s bible and I remember it was illustrated, and there were pictures of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and I remember years later thinking back and seeing that image of Adam did something for me, the woman, no, nothing, but the man, yeah, there was something there.

Research indicates that many gay and lesbian adults say that they felt different from an early age, and furthermore that they recognise this sense of difference and apartness long before they realise they are gay (Schubotz and McNamee, 2009; Robertson and Monsen, 2001). Troiden refers to this stage - the stage of feeling different - as Stage 1 of his sexual identity formation model for gays and lesbians, and has labelled it as the *Sensitization* stage, which invariably occurs before puberty. *Sensitization* is characterized by perceptions of being different from same-sex peers and generalized feelings of marginality (Troiden, 1989:50).

Feelings of difference and apartness from other boys can become more pronounced with age, and crucially, during adolescence these feelings can attain *new* meanings (Robertson and Monsen, 2001: 20). Both the Troiden and Cass models agree that adolescence sees childhood perceptions of ‘them as different’, evolve into perceptions of ‘them as *sexually* different’.

As the men in this study progressed through their teenage years they remember other boys developing a heightened interest in girls, a fascination with the female body, and the pursuit of girlfriends. At the same time the men began to notice *their* growing attraction, interest and fascination with the *male* body. Oscar’s “lack of interest” in girls made him feel distinctly different from other teenage boys who were busily engaging in the dating rituals at his Surrey school in the early 1960s:

So I was kind of aware of my own sexuality. In a way partly because by the time you got to thirteen, fourteen, fifteen other boys were sort of asking girls out and you kind of realised that you didn't feel like doing that whereas everybody else did. So it was a sort of sin of omission if you like. Not quite the right term but kind of, made you realise that you were different [in a quite profound sexual way].

Many of the men in this study spoke of how their growing teenage interest in the male body felt natural to them. Malachy remembers how he was increasingly driven to learn more about the male form at his all boys grammar school in the 1960s the north of England:

And then maybe fourteen, fifteen they were all talking about girls. And I suddenly realised I had no interest in girls. And I would, you know, I would find myself in the changing rooms, even in the toilet, I was wanting, not necessarily to touch, but I was wanting to see, I was hoping to get a glimpse of their naked bodies.

For Troiden, lesbians and gay males typically begin to personalize homosexuality during their late adolescent years when they may begin to reflect upon the idea that their feelings, behaviours, or both could be regarded as what society conceptualised as "homosexual" (1989:52). However, Robertson and Monsen argue that while many young people will realise that they do *not* have erotic interest in the opposite sex, they are likely to reject any definition of them being gay, lesbian, homosexual, queer - which society and peers may label them. (Robertson and Monsen, 2001: 20).

The hallmark of this stage is *identity confusion*, inner turmoil, and uncertainty surrounding their ambiguous sexual status, with the person asking themselves, "Am I really a homosexual?" (Troiden, 1989: 53). In late teenage years and early twenties, most of the men in this study became increasingly and acutely aware that their interest in men was unlikely to be a phase. As a teenager in rural west Suffolk in the mid-2000s, Tim began to realise that his attraction to boys was probably a permanent and innate feature of his self:

When I got to about thirteen, fourteen and I started to realise okay, maybe this isn't just a phase, maybe I do like guys. I started to become aware of the idea of sexuality and straight and gay. But I sort of, I don't think I wanted to admit it at the time. I'd heard before it's a phase. I didn't really know anything about being gay. There was nothing around me. I didn't know any gay people obviously. The closest I got to know about gay was occasionally watching So Graham Norton.

All men, regardless of when they were adolescents, in the 1950s or 2000s, whether in Ireland or Britain, were very much aware that their developing bodily, emotional, genital and sexual interest in other men was socially frowned upon and disapproved. While other boys were free, and indeed encouraged to speak openly, and graphically about their interest in girls, the teenage

boys in this study were aware that they could not divulge or share *their* private, thoughts and desires about body and sexuality in public. Their feelings must remain secret, hidden and suppressed. They understood that homosexuality was taboo, sinful, controversial and problematic compared to the privileged male heterosexuality of their teenage peers. The social condemnation of homosexuality created problems of guilt, and secrecy, it inhibits openness and visibility whilst also making it difficult meeting other gay people (Plummer, 1975).

The social stigma surrounding homosexuality sustains and deepens *identity confusion* because it discourages adolescent (and adult) lesbians and gay males (or bisexuals) from discussing their emerging sexual desires with friends, peers or family members (Troiden, 1989). Cass (1979: 225) observes that the individual who feels “I’m the only one in the world like this” will experience inner turmoil and know intense anguish at this stage.

Internal struggle: facing an inconvenient truth

Indeed, we can see the anguish that Cass speaks of, in the stories and testimonies of the men in this study. The creeping realisation that same-sex attraction might be an embedded, innate and permanent feature of the self, posed profound and daunting dilemmas. The men experienced a range of reactions including denial, worry, embarrassment, concern, confusion and anxiety. Many just wanted the feelings to disappear. They had to negotiate feelings and emotions which were simultaneously exciting, dangerous, tempting, and frightening. The men perceived themselves to be in an unenviable situation, they saw themselves in an unwanted, unwelcome and difficult predicament.

For some of the men, the realisation that they were gay elicited internalised reactions of abject terror, panic and foreboding. Robertson and Monsen (2001) argue that gay and lesbian adolescents are very much aware of the prevailing attitudes within society (and in their own families) towards gay people. The young person is also attuned to the many negative stereotypes and prejudices that exist within society. They will have been subjected to historical portrayals of gays and lesbians as deviants, immoral, sick, criminal and politically extreme.

The men in this study feared the possibility of social rejection and isolation. These fears suppressed the desire towards self-recognition and delayed the process of ‘coming out’ to themselves and to others. As a teenager in 1980s County Leitrim, Columba provides a sense of this when he remembers:

Back then I suppose as I was coming into my mid to late teens I began to realise it was guys I was looking at, guys butts I was looking at. And that filled me with [emphasis by slowly saying these three words] Absolute- Dread- and Horror. Couldn't possibly go there. Conservative, Catholic family. I had an uncle and two cousins who were priests. So it was total fear.

For Luke, the realisation (to self) that he may be gay (in 1980s Dublin) was a frightening thought, he did not welcome it and would never have chosen it:

I guess when I got to 14 I think it was then that I began to be aware of being [sexually] attracted to guys and that put the frighteners on me....and so when you hear people talking about gay as a lifestyle choice- it makes me laugh!!! As if I would choose to be a social outcast, a pariah.

Some of the Irish men turned to prayer, they prayed that what they perceived as “a burden”, “a cross”, “an imposition”, may be excoriated from their lives. Turlough, speaking of his late teenage years (in 1970s Ireland):

Despite my denials, I knew I was gay, I knew something wasn't right. I didn't want to be, that's the problem, I just didn't want to be. Spent a huge amount of time praying. Just didn't want to be gay, didn't want to be different. Yeah, like I was kind of hoping that if I prayed it would help me, you know, that the Lord would take it away from me, you know. And if I kept praying, that prayer will make me as normal as possible.

All the men in this study went through a similar process of suspecting, knowing, and coming to terms with their sexuality *in secret*. Many of them were terrified that their private thoughts would become public. They became excellent at concealing and deflecting. Nicholas on growing up in Galway City (1980s):

I was terrified that people would know what I was thinking in my head, so if I found anybody attractive, then I didn't have the vocabulary, but if I wanted to look at guy because I found him attractive, I would deliberately look the other way, so that nobody would see me looking at him, I didn't want them to put 2+2 together.

Stigma management

Both Troiden and Cass observe that many adolescents and young adults respond to their sense of *identity confusion* by adopting one or more stigma- management strategies. This is where the person attempts to ‘manage’ their homosexuality. Some deny the homosexual component to their feelings, fantasies or activities (Troiden, 1989: 56) whilst some try to avoid any behaviour that would encourage suspicion. They may pretend to be wilfully ignorant of

anything concerning homosexuality; they may avoid dancing or dating with girls which might run the risk of them not getting erect; in fact numerous strategies are employed in avoiding romantic intimacy issues so that peers or family members don't become aware of their lack of heterosexual credentials (ibid:57).

Some men in Ireland spoke of avoiding the "slow-sets" during discos or dances (this was often achieved by hiding in the toilets until the "slow-set" was over!). They did this to avoid peer pressure which would have expected them to ask a girl out to dance, which was the convention in those days during "slow-sets". At a meeting of one of the Irish rural gay networks I attended, men spoke of the elaborate mechanisms they deployed to keep their private feelings hidden "*deep below the surface*" (Mel), by joining in with the boys, laughing at their lewd jokes, and feigning interest in girls loudly and publicly. Here we can see how heterosexual masculinity provides a powerful social context in the lives of boys and young men (Cooper, 2013:73).

The men considered one of their earliest and most commonly used stigma management strategies to be a strategy of simply *never, ever* talking about it. Simply never raising the subject or topic with anybody. Pretending to the world that such a topic was of no importance to them. A strategy of self-imposed silence. The new 'imperfect self', the 'blemished self' must stay private and hidden at all costs. The men recall how this required and used up a lot of emotional energy, they were always thinking about new creative ways to ensure non-disclosure, and perfecting ways to avoid "tripping up" (Mac).

In contrast to silence, there were times they adopted vocal anti-homosexual postures, distancing themselves from their own homoerotic feelings by attacking and ridiculing known homosexuals (Troiden, 1989:56). While some men avoided women and girls, at other times, respondents adopted a strategy of actually dating girls. The men gave a number of reasons for adopting this strategy. Alfie dated girls as an attempt to "fit-in" and "do the normal thing", but when he started to date men he noticed how it appeared more natural to him:

Later on, like in my late twenties, I started to 'see' fellas. When I kissed women there's nothing there. It's like kissing a piece of wood, it's like I'm supposed to do that but... when I first kissed a man, I was like God, wow, what's going on there.

Finian in Sligo also adopted the strategy of dating girls, and laughs when he says that he became a consummate "*straight actor*" - a description of himself which aptly describes how many of the men who dated girls, felt about their strategy: they felt as if they were 'acting'; and used this public display of heterosexuality as a mechanism to deflect attention, suspicion, intrigue

and gossip from their true private selves. Some of the men also dated girls as a way of ‘testing their own sexuality’ *to themselves*, as illustrated by Luke’s testimony on his experiences as a 20-year old at a Dublin university (in the mid 1980s):

I highly suspected I was gay because I hadn’t had a girlfriend, and so my logical side said, well maybe you think you’re gay but if you have a girlfriend maybe it’ll go away; it was just a case of maybe if I had a girlfriend maybe it’ll all just fall into place, and this phase that the priest said it was, a few years previously, would just pass, so I did date several girls when I was in college but the magic wasn’t there. When the kissing with tongues started I would make excuses [to avoid it]!

In fact, three men, Columba in Ireland and George and Darren in England got married (to women) in their twenties, becoming fathers.

But Troiden also observes that those in *identity confusion* can also adopt a strategy of *acceptance*. This refers to a level of private acceptance to oneself. With self-acceptance, men and women acknowledge that their behaviour, feelings, or fantasies may well be homosexual and they seek out additional sources of information to learn more about their sexual feelings (Troiden, 1989:57). I would argue that information, visibility, positive role models and the support of family and friends are important requisites towards encouraging self-acceptance. Making contact with other gay people is considered important by Troiden and Cass as these new contacts allows the person to realize that homosexuals exist as a *social category* and this can diminish their sense of isolation (Troiden, 1989: 57). To this end, the local LGBT groups and networks provided a number of men in this study with invaluable support.

Some of the younger respondents Tim (Suffolk, age 24), Nathan (Cambridgeshire, age 23), Cillian (County Longford, age 32) and Theo, (Suffolk, age 31) began to self-accept in their late teenage years, with the help of information gleaned online, from media portrayals, and by reading literature on sexuality. Self- acceptance had a liberating effect on Tim:

It was actually really good. Because I’d been worried about it for so long and I’d fallen into complete depression to be honest. Okay, maybe being gay wasn’t the best thing at that time, at least according to the information that I had, but at least I could say yes, I am definitely this. I can stop worrying about what I am, I can start just ... Yeah. Knowing about what I am and accept that this is who I am. I really sort of began to become happier again as soon as I did accept it myself.

Tim, together with Cillian, Nathan, and Theo were going through adolescence during a time of increasing awareness and understanding of gay and lesbian sexuality. They had increasing access to information and crucially had very supportive family and/or friends. For example,

Nathan's mother, a Church of England vicar, had experience of counselling same-sex people at her liberal church. Cillian and Theo were particularly close to their sisters, whom they confided in. For many young gays and lesbians, family support is not so readily available. The experience of rejection by family and peers can have very damaging and long-lasting effects on gay and lesbian adolescents' well-being, their academic life, and their home life (Robertson and Monsen, 2001). Indeed, familial hostility towards sexual minority youth plays a role in homelessness, as evidenced by the Albert Kennedy Trust, which showed that, in 2015, LGBT people made up almost a quarter of the young homeless (Financial Times, 2017).

Aside from the four younger respondents, other men took *longer* to move away from the *identity confusion* stage as illustrated by Eugene (County Donegal) who was in an identity confusion stage until his late thirties (late 1990s).

I think I had so much internalised homophobia going on inside me that was really just, you know, you know, just couldn't allow me to see it [being gay] as good or clean or, you know, was holding me back from ever thinking I was gay or declaring myself as gay.

I am reminded of Cass (1979), who notes that the length of time taken to proceed through the stages in her (similar) model will differ from person to person, and that an individual's age has considerable influence on his/her mode of coping with the developmental process because of the marked contrast between past and present societal attitudes and expectations (Cass, 1979: 220).

The internalised homophobia Eugene refers to occurs when the individual incorporates negative attitudes towards gays and lesbians as part of their own self-image, so much so that the person may perceive that they really are deviant, sick, mentally ill, or emotionally unstable (Robertson and Monsen, 2001). Internalised homophobia was mentioned and acknowledged by quite a number of men during the interviews, and they felt that while internalised homophobia did not stop them from having sex with men, it did prevent a healthy sense of self and any pride in assuming or proclaiming a public identity of 'gay'.

It was during their late teens and early to mid-twenties when most of the men began to have sex with other men. Many men describe these sexual encounters as hidden, random and secretive. For most of the men, high levels of internal homophobia made the very idea of entering into a same-sex relationship unthinkable. To do anything so public was inconceivable. Malachy illustrates this in north-west England in the early 1970s:

Any sexual experiences that I had in my twenties tended to be either somebody who picked me up in the toilets, and sometimes, never in the toilet itself but sometimes, sometimes it, you know, in the bushes in the park, or once or twice I'd bring them back to me digs, you know. Never, never had a long term partner.

Malachy had sex with many men in his twenties and thirties; it was always secretive, and always discrete. He never felt he could enter into a relationship, and he remained 'discreet' for many years. He only began the process of slowly coming out (this would equate to Identity assumption, or stage 3 of Troiden's model) in his forties, spurred on and encouraged by various social, cultural and political changes, and his engagement with LGBT networks.

Cyril remained living in his small home town in County Leitrim, after leaving school. Throughout his twenties, thirties and early forties (1980s and 1990s) he lived a life which followed a similar pattern: in the closet, but having sex with other men. Most of the men he had sex with were married, and Cyril would arrange to meet them in isolated forests and lay-by's. This summed up Cyril's life as a gay man for so many years:

I'd say I realised I was queer [during this time] because that was the only word I knew. Without a doubt, I realised it to myself. Internally it was a persistent battle trying to, I suppose, trying to make sure that nobody else knew. But at the same I was sexually active with [mainly married men], always a very covert type of sex.

At this stage it is worth noting the impact of growing up in the nonmetropolitan space. Seven out of the forty-four men interviewed grew up in urban and metropolitan areas (some of those overseas). For the remaining men, who grew up in rural, and small-town environments, the nonmetropolitan space magnified, or "turbo-charged the dynamics" (Mac, County Roscommon) that contributed to silence and invisibility.

Indeed, Beard and Hissam (2002) suggest that rural gay men go through developmental stages later than others. A number of respondents also commented on how, as adolescents, the intimate space of the rural, where everybody knew everybody else, added a layer of complexity and danger of exposure. For example, Charlie recalls his feeling of fear, when a wave of hysteria engulfed his Norfolk village in the 1970s because "somebody said they had seen a local man have sex with another man" in his house, through the windows. The private space was no protection. The man was referred to in homo-negative and stigmatising narratives for all time thereafter: the local faggot, the local queer, a man to be avoided. This experience has remained with Charlie for many years. He had had a glimpse of how parts of the community might react if they discovered he was gay.

The times through which they lived their adolescence had a big influence on enabling or inhibiting a healthy approach to their sexual identity formation. National cultural narratives swept over *both* rural and urban settings. For example, Dublin may have been the biggest metropolitan space in Ireland but even though it was a metropolitan city it was hardly a gay-friendly space in the 1960s, 70s or 80s (Gay Community News, 2016). I am reminded, of the work by Kuhar and Svab (2014), who make the point that not all cities are havens for sexual minorities, and not all cities have (or had) gay sub-cultures.

My interviews suggest that London was (unlike Dublin) seen by the men as a gay destination, a beacon of social possibilities and opportunities for sexual minorities, with its growing gay scene in the 1970s and 1980s, which is chronicled in the work of Ackroyd (2017). Some of the men lived in London during these decades, and they felt that the city was at the vanguard of gay rights and gay visibility, standing in complete opposition to their rural locales. We see this particularly in the testimonies of Turlough, and Magnus who migrated to work in London in their twenties; Turlough from County Roscommon and Magnus from Norfolk. For these men, living in London meant having access to gay venues, gay groups and queer political movements. This encouraged them to gradually come out to more people and saw them increasingly assume a gay identity. Sadly, Turlough had to ‘go back in the closet’ on his return to family in County Roscommon in the late 1990s.

The testimonies of the men in this study make regular reference to the social, cultural and political backdrops that were prevalent in their adolescent years; a backdrop which invariably kept most of them closeted well into adulthood and for some, middle age. Examining the backdrops also acknowledges and seeks to redress some of the criticism of Kitzinger (1987) and others, mentioned earlier. In looking at the context of the times in which they grew up we are addressing the often ahistorical and apolitical orientation that exists in some of the scholarship.

Growing up gay in a different time: the English men’s experiences

Philip, Oscar, Magnus, George and Malachy grew up in England in the 1950s and 1960s. While they do remember references to homosexuality during their childhood and adolescent years, they also recall how these references were entirely negative and often centred on the sensationalist news stories of that time, for example stories concerning the Lord Montagu trial

and the issue of ‘Gay Spies’, the ‘Cambridge Five Spies’ and so forth. Philip recalls lurid newspaper headlines, which his parents and family would discuss in hushed tones by the fireplace at night:

I remember hearing a lot of conversations at home about the Lord Montagu trial; there was a huge scandal, he was arrested and sent to prison, I remember all that going on and also remember hearing the term ‘brown hatter’ used by my family (Philip).

The trial Philip refers to here, was a high profile criminal case (in 1954) which attracted huge media interest, in which three men, Lord Montagu of Beaulieu, Michael Pitt-Rivers and Peter Wildeblood, were charged with homosexual offences and sent to prison (British Library, 2017b). An alarming feature of the Lord Montagu trial, which provides an insight into the lengths the authorities went to, in order to achieve convictions, was the use of “chain prosecutions”, whereby the police would promise immunity to witnesses if they reported on other homosexuals (Weeks, 2016: 158). This was a particularly bleak time for gay men, with as many as 1,000 men imprisoned every year during the 1950s (Weeks, 2016).

A flavour of the febrile nature of discourse can be gleaned from the statement by the Home Secretary of the time, Sir David Maxwell-Fyfe when he promised an orchestrated drive against male vice that “would rid England of this plague” (British Library, 2017b). Maxwell-Fyfe bluntly underlined his obsessive concern in the House of Commons thus:

Homosexuals, in general, are exhibitionists and proselytisers and a danger to others, especially the young. So long as I hold the office of Home Secretary I shall give no countenance to the view that they should not be prevented from being such a danger (Weeks, 2016: 158).

Britain was not the only western democracy to witness a purge of homosexuals in the 1950s. The United States was in the grip of the McCarthy era, a time when suspected communists were investigated, criminalised and kicked out of government jobs (Weeks, 2016; D’Emilio, 1998). Homosexuals were seen as a ‘security risk’ by reason of their ‘lack of emotional stability’, the ‘weakness of their moral fibre’, their susceptibility to ‘blandishments’ and blackmail (Weeks, 2016: 159).

In his seminal publication, *Coming Out*, Jeffrey Weeks characterises the approach of much of the British media during this period:

Throughout this period, much of the press acted as ‘magnifiers of deviance’. The Sunday Pictorial published a series of articles on homosexuality called ‘Evil men’. The paper said it was an attempt to end the ‘conspiracy of silence’ on the subject and the

articles were ‘a sincere attempt to get to the root of a spreading fungus’ (Weeks, 2016:161).

These were not good days to raise one's head above the parapet as a homosexual/ gay man. For respondents living as adolescents during this period, any notion of embracing a homosexual / gay identity seemed unwise, remote and implausible. Oscar has vivid memories, as a teenager, of the furore over the Cambridge Five Spies, how it disgusted people at home and how the manner of the discourse played out in the media had negative connotations for gay men:

The only gay people I heard of in these times was the Cambridge spies. And it was a big news item in the Sixties, yes, yes. And it was negative. And I think that's effectively negative for gays [at that time] because I think there was gayness [and espionage] involved. There was that sort of case and various other things coming up. Some of these things I was a bit too young to understand all the consequences of what was going on, but I knew they were negative.

The case of the so-called ‘Cambridge Five Spies’, which was mentioned by some of the older English men, involved a number of men recruited by the Soviets at Cambridge university and the eventual disappearance of some of their number, Burgess and MacLean to the USSR (BBC, 2016). In response to such espionage cases, the Sunday Mirror ran a headline in 1963, over a large, looming, dark, threatening and ominous picture of a male spy, “How to Spot a Homo” (LAGNA, 2017) which observed that the gay man constituted a serious security risk to the nation with the reporter insisting that “I wouldn't trust him with *my* secrets”.

Some of the men also felt that there was an underlying, and commonly held belief that homosexuality was seen as a psychiatric disorder. Waters speaks of this “hegemony of psychiatric discourse on homosexuality” in these times before the counter-discourse of the 1960s and the Stonewall riots changed the dominant narratives (2013:211).

Respondents who attended school in the 1950s and 1960s, can remember some of language used to describe homosexuals as perverts, inverts and retrogrades. Oscar attended secondary school in Surrey, in the early 1960s, and recalls the language used to describe a person that he increasingly felt he was:

I can remember we were in religious instruction, we had a bit of what you might call relationship education - I remember particularly their description of inverts – that was the terminology used in those days. But it was sort of yes, yes, I fit that category.

Oscar has been deeply affected by the views espoused on homosexuality he was exposed to during his formative years. He has journeyed through life hiding his sexuality. At the age of

65, he has never had sex, never had a relationship, and never discussed his sexuality until he joined the local LGBT group in Suffolk in 2013.

Philip recalls the complete void of positive language, imagery, discourse or information about same-sex attraction in his youth in 1950s:

Talking about silence, there was just no accessible literature in those days. There wasn't much [information] about it, total silence- except for mimicry and nasty ridicule. I remember my aunt ridiculing some people. The most significant development for me growing up in terms of sexuality development was two guys who did the paper rounds who I knew and they reported seeing these 'physique' magazines and that fascinated me and I made sure I found out where these magazines were stocked...and I trekked around the city finding shops that sold these and that really was my main sexual activity from age fourteen to mid- twenties.

The magazines Philip makes reference to were part of the British physique photography genre, which flourished after the Second World War. Body building magazines such as *Health and Strength* or *Man's World* provided images of muscled men and bodybuilders, often in skimpy shorts and trunks. They could be purchased quite innocently in newsagents. For many gay men, these publications provided homo-erotic material, and they constituted the only available means to access photos of a partially clothed male body (Tate Britain, 2017).

With homosexuality remaining illegal, there could be no public advertisements or positive promotional information for gay men in the press. The 1967 Sexual Offences Act decriminalised homosexual acts and this, at last, allowed gay groups and venues to advertise and appear in the press. However, the act was a partial decriminalisation in that it restricted male same-sex activity to the private space, and to men aged over the age of 21. Furthermore, it only applied to England and Wales and it exempted the Merchant Navy and the Armed Forces (Jeffery-Poulter, 1991). Public lavatories were deemed public spaces, and this continued illegality posed a particular problem for some of the men in my study, because secretive, anonymous sexual encounters in toilets, cars, and outdoor spaces were often the only spaces available to them. Philip speaks of having to use public toilets to meet other men in the 1960s:

Our acting troupe went to London, we did six weeks at the Vaudeville theatre and I stayed at a crummy place as we all did, in Holloway, but there was a cottage there and I did a lot of cottaging there. Cottaging was in darkness so you went into not knowing what to expect so it could be dangerous I suppose, and I was warned once at Earl's Court station by a guy I cruised, he said bugger off in a violent manner. And I was 'done once' by the police. In the early days it was often prison but I got off with a fine. People would be named in the paper though and this could be very damaging.

Eventually when I was in London, I met a guy in a cottage and we formed a relationship!!

In those days, the police sometimes used *agents provocateurs* as a common tool to catch homosexuals, usually in public lavatories (Weeks, 2016:158). The license and vice department of the police, would look into ‘complaints’ of cottage activity. Police in plain clothes would frequent public lavatories, would wait and watch, ostensibly using the facilities, until they identified a man acting ‘suspiciously’ or perhaps masturbating at the urinals. The police would then arrest the man on the charge of ‘importuning for an immoral purpose’. The basis of the charge would be that the man was ‘going to or intended to, commit an immoral act’ (Channel 4, 50 Shades of Gay season). The individual would then appear in court and be given a criminal record. Often the local press would be in attendance and names would be printed in the local newspapers, causing ruination for many people. There were even men who simply weren’t able to deal with the publicity, the humiliation, and wrecked family lives, and killed themselves as a result (The Guardian, 2017b). Such public outings destroyed careers, reputations and families (Weeks, 2016; Bullough, 2002).

The men’s testimonies recall an awareness of a changed mood in the 1970s, post decriminalisation. Being homosexual was no longer a criminal offence. This was the era of the nascent gay rights movement. They also recall seeing more gay characters appearing on TV in the 1970s and 1980s. However, many of the men who were teenagers at this time felt that they could not relate to the camp portrayals on television - Dick Emery, Kenneth Williams and John Inman. They feel that gay was ridiculed, not taken seriously. A figure of fun. This was not a gay identity that appealed to many men.

Many of the men also commented on the persistence of casual, homophobic and derogatory language. Ted worked in the post office for many years straight after school, in the 1970s and 1980s and recalls casual, homophobic language that would be totally inappropriate today. Other men were adamant that, while decriminalisation had been an important landmark, much of society still regarded homosexuality to be a defect, abnormal and/or sinful. Again, the times did not seem particularly welcoming for the young gay men struggling with their identity.

One of the most striking aspects of the men’s testimonies, regardless of generation, was the degree to which the journey through their ‘early years’ was a solitary one. Homosexuality may not have been a crime any more, but the world of adolescents was the world of home and school, and here their testimonies show little support or understanding. They met a wall of

silence on this most important aspect of their emerging identity, the silence only broken by derogatory comments and bullying. Hardly any of the men reported memorable examples of homo-positive or homo-affirming narratives by parents, family, teachers or friends. None of the men remember knowing of any other gay couples locally. Stanley says that he, like so many men in the 1970s and 1980s: “*had occasional random, but quite covert romances. But I never knew any gay couples in Scotland or Suffolk*”.

Stanley comments that the pattern in nonmetropolitan areas was “*of sex, but few if any visible same sex relationships, and thatthere was no gay identity that you could have rallied around, there was no gay identity*”. Gay identities were emerging, but these emerging identities were restricted to the large metropolitan areas, there were urban gay identities but gay people in the rural areas could only observe (and perhaps visit), they were in a sense invisible onlookers.

A number of the men’s testimonies show that the 1980s and 1990s was a challenging time to assume a gay identity because of the twin backdrops of HIV/AIDS and Clause 28. HIV and Aids arrived in the UK in 1982, and the gay male community was the first in which the virus killed in significant numbers and the disease quickly became associated with gay men (British Library, 2017b). The images of gay men sick and dying from a disease in an era of no effective medication haunts a number of the men, some of whom lost friends and lovers. HIV and AIDS were to destroy many lives and transform the lesbian and gay community (Weeks, 2016:231).

Stanley moved from Scotland to Suffolk in the late 1980s to take up a job working as a social worker. He also volunteered at the local Ipswich AIDS Helpline as well as the Suffolk Lesbian and Gay helpline. He feels that the extremely closeted nature of men in places such as Suffolk and Norfolk, had particular salience during the AIDS pandemic:

HIV pandemic, and its effect on people, we’re often told it radicalised some individuals and brought the whole gay issue to the fore to a greater extent. Not in my experience. But here I was dealing with people in East Anglia, the cases I knew- most were not out, and I tend to think that maybe they did not want it to be known in the local hospital, the local clinic, because most were in the closet, they would be seen going into the clinic. A sad aspect of this going to London or multiple places for treatment was they were sometimes put on the wrong combinations because they were getting treatment in different places.

A number of men mentioned Clause 28, as a legislative instrument which emboldened their tormentors. Introduced in 1988 it began when a copy of *Jenny Lives with Eric and George*

(1983) was found in a local authority library in 1986. It caused an outcry. The tabloid newspapers lambasted local councils for promoting homosexuality to children at the tax payer's expense. Government responded by passing Clause 28 of the Local Government Act 1988. The clause stated that the local authorities 'should not intentionally promote homosexuality' or promote the 'acceptability of homosexuality as a pretend family relationship'. It was not rescinded until 2003.

Daniel blames section 28 for the extent of homophobic bullying he experienced in the 1990s:

I went to high school from 1993-1998 in Norfolk. I was bullied quite a lot because of the perception I was gay. There was a lot of homophobic bullying, using gay as an insult, some teachers want to clamp down on it and they could say what the word meant and that using it like this was inappropriate but they couldn't go so far as to say being gay is OK- it's as natural as being straight, because of section 28, they were not allowed to promote homosexuality and because they couldn't say it was 'OK to be it', built up a mentality in me that it was not OK!!!!

Such experiences compounded the private turmoil many adolescents went through; curtailed and restricted the possibilities of adopting positive attitudes towards their sexual identity; and for some, imparted a sense of abandonment by school and State. However, as we will see in chapters five and six, these decades were not entirely negative with regard to LGBT issues. There were promising signs of change emerging, changes which reached into the space of the rural, and in turn had a significant impact for many of the men in this study.

Growing up gay in a different time: the Irish men's experiences

Homosexual acts were criminalised in Ireland until 1993, which meant that all the Irish respondents (even the youngest) spent at least part of their youth growing up in a place and time when it was illegal to engage in same-sex activity. The over-riding theme from the interviews with the Irish men is their memory of Ireland as a place of stultifying and suffocating silence on sexuality in general, and on homosexuality in particular. This silence extends into the written and historical archives as there has been precious little written about the history of Irish sexuality and a trawl through the historical narratives on Ireland highlights a lack of texts which deal with sex and sexuality directly (Inglis, 2005).

Inglis speaks of a 'sexual regime' (which was really an *anti*-sexual regime) having existed in Ireland until relatively recently whereby the Catholic Church and (through clerical influence)

the state, controlled all matters relating to the body and the sexual; from restrictions on sexual practices (ibid: 2), to ensuring that contraception, divorce, and abortion, were made illegal. This *anti*-sexual regime is partially responsible for the absence of any historical discourses that might have challenged the dominant national obsession with purity and piety (Inglis, 2005). We see a culture where sex-talking and writing about sexual practices, feelings, and emotions was actively discouraged and dissuaded.

Inglis reflects on the long history of Irish Catholicism and how Catholic sexual attitudes penetrated more deeply and lasted longer in Ireland, and with fewer challenges or resistance until relatively recently. A number of men in my study expressed an opinion that showing resistance to the Catholic Church was equated with letting the side down. Catholicism thus became the frontline institution standing up for Ireland's culture, religion and nationalism (Reuters, 2010). To challenge the church was seen as a disloyal, and brazen act of ingratitude to holy mother church, her priests and nuns, the very people who had provided succour in the dark, penal days of yore. Here, we get a sense of how religion can intertwine with national identity, a topic McLeod (2015) refers to, and of how post-independence Ireland became a de-facto "Confessional state" (Foster, 1988:534).

In Kieran Rose's (1994) excellent account of the rise of Irish gay and lesbian political movements he notes a pervasive and all-encompassing silence over the issue of homosexuality with little research into Irish lesbian and gay history before the 1970s. The evidence that existed on charting lesbian and gay lives in Ireland, came from those who were seeking to *control* homosexuality: no direct evidence- such as memoirs or diaries - from lesbians and gay men has yet been uncovered (Rose, 1994:24).

Inglis also makes the point that the sexual regime that existed since post-famine Ireland was one of low marriage rates but high birth rates to those that did marry. The 'sexual regime' or code deliberately discouraged a system where marriage might be available for everybody. This was because of the lessons learnt after the famine, which had been exacerbated by high birth rates and the generational practice of tenant farmers sub-dividing the already small farms to ever-increasing numbers of married brothers. From now on, the land would ideally, be given to one son. Excess siblings might choose to migrate, remain unmarried or become priests, or nuns (Deady et al, 2006); this resulted in the unusually high numbers of religious and of spinsters and bachelors in Ireland, especially in rural Ireland. (Inglis, 2005). In such a 'regime', which was as Rose reminds us, embraced and maintained by social institutions, by families,

parents, and schools, the topic of sex was simply taboo. It is important to be aware of these historical contexts because they nourished the anti-sexual regime and provided the foundation for the complete silence that so blighted a number of the men's early lives.

Many of the men recall an Ireland where discussing sex (of any kind) was never done in polite society or in schools or homes. Growing up in 1970s and 1980s County Leitrim, Columba remembers how *any* general discussion on sex and intimacy was frowned upon in his farming family:

Sex and sexuality was never discussed in the house. It was never, it was never an issue, but when I look at it now it was an issue because it wasn't something that could be discussed, nothing could be comfortably discussed. Not even, like I'm not talking about homosexuality, I'm talking about just the intimacy of the reality of human beings being sexual beings. Do you know, there was no normalisation of it, it just wasn't mentioned. And I mean it was until later years that I thought to myself that was strange, the word was never mentioned. If there was any suggestion of anything on the TV it would be turned just like that [clicks fingers], you know, that sort of a way.

Similarly, Dermot cannot remember sexuality being discussed during his teenage years in County Cavan: At home, it was never discussed, it was a topic which would be seen as very embarrassing; if a sexual topic was ever aired on TV or radio (which would have been a rare event before the 1980s/90s) the programme would be switched off by parents.

And with regard to homosexuality: In Ireland, there was nothing. There was no advertising, there was no mention of it. Nobody ever talked about it, you know, other than you would hear the slagging off (Dermot).

Not surprisingly, schools are remembered as sites of 'aggressive silence' on matters sexual. Given that the majority of schools are under the patronage of the Catholic Church (Reuters, 2010), it is not surprising that the Irish men had a catholic education. While recent years have seen a sharp decline in the numbers of priests and religious brothers and sisters (nuns) who are active teachers (Fahey, 1992), most of the Irish men remember been taught by priests, brothers and religious sisters. As such, they received a Catholic understanding of sexuality. In fact, the interview transcripts reveal that the men received little or no sex education as we would conceive of it today.

The Catechism of the Catholic church, while stating that homosexuals should be treated with respect and compassion, sees homosexual acts as "intrinsically disordered; contrary to natural law; they do not proceed from a genuine affective and sexual complementarity; and under no circumstances can they be approved". It goes on to say that homosexuals "do not choose their

condition; for most of them it is a trial” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1994:505) and that, homosexual persons are called to absolute chastity, and with the help of prayer they can hope to achieve Christian perfection. The men in my study were unanimous in their belief that the teachings of the church were hugely powerful influences on the culture and politics of Ireland until relatively recently (1990s), and as gay adolescents growing up in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, the teachings of the church and the manner in which they were unquestionably absorbed by much of the population around them, including family and friends made their position even more fraught and isolating.

The men felt that the rural space was particularly difficult for them as gay adolescents. They inhabited areas where everybody knew everybody else, where social life beat to the rhythm of the ‘Three C’s’ (Christenings, Communions and Confirmations) where almost everybody went to weekly mass (mass attendance in Ireland was the highest in the developed world) and where sexuality was ‘off-bounds’ for debate. This environment did not provide fertile ground for those young men struggling with their emerging sexual identity formation and most assuredly kept them firmly in the identity confusion stage of the Troidens’ model (at best).

A number of respondents recall the fear they felt as adolescents or young adults as they watched, listened and read about the murders of gay men in the 1980s. 1982 saw two horrific murders of gay men in Dublin. Robert Self was stabbed to death in his home whilst Declan Flynn was beaten to death in Fairview Park. These murders are seared into the minds of a number of the Irish respondents who were adolescents at the time.

A number of the men have memories of the murder of Declan Flynn in particular, a 31 year-old man living in a country where homosexuality was illegal and who was not out to his family. He had gone to Fairview Park, Dublin, which was a popular meeting spot for men. One of the gang was used as ‘bait’ and when Flynn sat down next to him on the bench, the other four rushed out from behind the trees. They kicked and beat him with sticks and left him lying on the path. He was discovered by passers-by but died within an hour of admission to hospital (Irish Gay History, 2014).

A number of men also recall media coverage of the protest march organised by the Dublin Gay Collective, and in particular the image splashed across the newspapers of people holding banners which said “Stop Violence against Gays and Women”. This was the first time they recall having noticed the word ‘Gay’ in any media and it resonated with them, as these events

were happening at a time when many of them were coming to the realisation that they were gay.

The onset of the HIV and AIDS crisis in Ireland was also significant for a number of the respondents, but once again, it is significant in that it deepened their sense of fear, and caused them to retrench further away from any acknowledgement of their emerging sexuality. The Irish State's response to the crisis was informed by the fact that homosexuality remained illegal, and HIV and Aids Health information campaigns were compromised because information on gay sexual practices was seen as possibly contrary to the criminal law (Rose, 1994: 22).

Despite the bleak backdrop in Ireland and the sense of a beleaguered Irish gay community, the decade did see the publication of a book entitled *Out for Ourselves: The Lives of Irish Lesbians and Gay Men*. The book was the first in Ireland to deal openly with LGB experience in Ireland, but sadly was ignored by the media and many bookstores refused to stock it (ibid: 21)

Another social development however, saw the increasing availability of British television to more and more households in the Republic of Ireland during the 1980s (Bell and Meehan, 1989). Many of the respondents recall that their first awareness that gay people existed came through British TV, albeit on soap operas (which were hugely popular in Ireland). But these visions of gay characters elicited some negative comments at home. Some of the Irish men were particularly affected by witnessing and hearing disparaging and homophobic language by family members in their homes. Nicholas shares his experiences in his teenage years (1980s) living in Galway city, and in particular a family narrative which ensured he withdrew further into his secret shell:

I remember watching Eastenders; there was a gay character, and I was 18, and this episode had a gay thread. And after watching it we all got up to go out of the room as normal, Dad said to us in a military serious fashion, sit down!!!! if any of YE turn out funny, ye'll never darken my doorstep again.....and I remember feeling completely drained of light or hope....and it stuck with meand I had a sense of just wanting to GET AWAY.....just to move away from here.....

As soon as he was able to, Nicholas did 'get away from here', emigrating to the United States. For those gay men that remained, the 1990s saw developments in Ireland which would herald a new dawn, the emergence of an increasingly tolerant, open and socially progressive country, a country where gay men ceased to be sexual criminals and became constitutional sexual citizens. These developments will be explored in the next chapter.

Conclusion

For the men, in both Britain and Ireland, the act of recalling, recounting and sharing memories of their ‘early years’ was quite painful at times. It reminded them of a time in their lives when they had to cope with their emerging sexual identity, alone and in an often unsupportive and indeed hostile environment. Their feelings had to be kept secret and suppressed. Much emotional energy was deployed and rallied to the fight of keeping these thoughts, questions and emotions from ever becoming public. They feared that such exposure would lead to a form of personal mortification and humiliation; they feared rejection from family and friends; and worried about possibly being ostracized from friends and wider society. These were very real concerns, given the times in which they grew up and (for most) their rural environment.

At school and at home, there were few recognisable or accessible avenues of support. To varying degrees, the men, as children and adolescents, inhabited a social world which contained few, if any gay people known to them. They were few positive role models, there was an absence of information at school and home. In stage two (identity confusion) they needed to hear and see gay lives which were integrated successfully in their communities, which might have provided them with a rational, positive explanation for, and an embracing and understanding of their emerging sexuality.

Instead, they recall a social environment at home and at school which resolutely remained silent, except on those occasions where these institutions randomly chose to toxify, denigrate, ridicule, castigate or pour scorn on gay people. School and home offered no oasis of hope, they colluded with and were part of wider society’s synonymous deathly silence and vocal denigration.

In listening to the men’s account of their early years we can hear internal angst, the eternal (but internal) struggle, the whispered prayers and pleas “for this to go away” (Turlough). It is not an exaggeration to say that for some of the men, they loathed and feared their feelings, they wished them away and hoped for the day that “this would pass” (Mac).

It is instructive to note the words that appear in some of the transcripts. “I knew something *wasn’t right*” (Turlough) and “Everything was OK, no problems, everything was *normal up until*” [he started to become attracted to other men in the changing rooms] (Alfie) or the comments that, “I *suspected* I might be gay” (Luke). Herein, we can discern how internal homophobia can be seen to develop from early within these men’s lives.

On leaving school, some of the men were physically unable to say the word “gay” (and, in fact some still are reluctant to use the word to this day as middle-aged men). As young adults, leaving school and home offered greater opportunities to explore sex with other men, but often this sex had to be arranged using conspiratorial methods, and always exercising discretion, and the sexual encounters were usually followed by guilt and remorse. Many were convinced they would take their problem and secret to the grave. The sense of doom and lack of hope was particularly noticeable among the Irish respondents. For men growing up in England from the 1970s onwards, the criminal aspect of their sexuality had been removed, and they did not have to deal with an all-encompassing religiosity still prevalent in Ireland. Furthermore, they inhabited a country where the large cities were developing visible gay venues and communities; gay politics was becoming vocal and where music and media started to publicise the issues of sexuality to a greater extent (see *World in Action*, 1979). While Britain celebrated twelve years of ‘gay liberation’ in 1979, in Ireland, gay sex remained illegal, and in a huge celebration of Catholic fervour and piety, more than 50% of the entire population of Ireland would attend the huge public masses celebrated by Pope John Paul the second, during a triumphal three day papal visit in September 1979.

In both countries, many of the men said that they found the act of ‘looking back’ therapeutic. It also highlighted the distance they have travelled since then. The stories of their ‘early years’ show many men emerging into the world of early adulthood as silent and oppressed subjects; as marginal or non-citizens. The stories of their subsequent years show how many of them bravely began the long, slow process of ‘coming out’, albeit to varying degrees. A number have become emboldened, vocal and confident, embracing their sexuality, telling stories about it, claiming rights and becoming active in local communities. In the next two chapters we examine the social, political and cultural changes and assess the impact for the men.

Chapter 5. Sexual Criminals to Sexual Citizens: The Law Speaks.

In the past, no one would have said ‘I am gay/lesbian’ as a defining characteristic of personhood and of social involvement and presence. Yet, today, at least in the metropolitan heartlands of western societies, it is commonplace for many previously marginalized people - for example those belonging to sexual minorities - to define themselves both in terms of personal and collective identities by their sexuality, and to claim recognition, rights and respect as a consequence (Weeks, 1998:37).

Introduction

This quote resonates with the journey as described by many of the men in this study. In speaking of “previously marginalized people”, Weeks may as well be speaking about them. From the previous chapter, we are aware that, with the notable exception of five of the younger respondents, the men reached the age of twenty-one as deeply closeted men. Referring to Troiden’s model of gay identity formation, their lives conformed to what might be described as Stage 2, the stage of *identity confusion*, and as such, all the while, they adopted a range of stigma management strategies including outright denial, concealment, avoidance and defection, albeit for some, these strategies were also accompanied by a form of *private* self-acceptance.

But that was not the end of their story. In times past, they might have been destined to live lives of continued, confusion, silence, marginalisation, exclusion and oppression- of the type Altman discussed in his seminal book *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation* (1971). Their reality might have been to inhabit a world where a perpetuating social conspiracy of control, criminality and silence kept their sexuality in perpetual darkness; a society that sought, not only to silence, but to hound out, uncover and unearth the “homosexual”, and present him as barely human; a deviant exhibit to be reviled, and scorned; cast as shadowy figures of disgust and contempt.

But recent decades have seen phenomenal change in attitudes to homosexuality in parts of the world and have been accompanied by a transformation in the legislative landscape, in a number of countries, including Britain (Weeks, 2000, 2007, 2016) and Ireland (Rose, 1994). And the men in this study have changed too, changed in how they see and value themselves, their sexuality and identity. How has this come to be? What has caused it? Why has it happened

now? Through an analysis of their testimonies we can see how the men have *been* transformed by their changing environment.

Through their testimonies we can gain an insight into the many varied and interwoven factors that have interplayed with one another to create a social and cultural eco-system, that has allowed and encouraged them to ‘put their head above the parapet’; to define themselves as gay; to embrace their sexual identity; to evolve and emerge out of the shadows; and in doing so, to publicly claim an end to discrimination, and aspire to a host of legal, political, cultural and social rights. In other words, they correspond to Weeks’ quote at the start of this chapter, in that, “*they have defined themselves by their sexualityto claim recognition, rights and respect as a consequence of*” their sexual identity. Within academia, their journey is reflected in the contemporary debates that have emerged and developed around the concept of *sexual citizenship*, an analytical framework developed by a number of key academic thinkers and theorists (Evans, 1993; Cooper, 1994; Weeks, 1998, 2000, 2016; Richardson, 2000, 2004; Plummer, 2003, 2006).

Therefore, as we continue to journey with these men, we do so through the lens of *sexual citizenship* and whilst such terms as the *sexual citizen* or *sexual citizenship* were not widely recognised by the men, nonetheless, we see in their stories and life histories, themes emerging of them as *sexual citizens* as conceived by the literature. We also see a synergy between the men becoming *sexual citizens* and their progression from stage 2 (*identity confusion*) through to stage 3 of Troiden’s sexual identity formation (*identity assumption*), with most in fact evolving to stage 4 (*identity commitment*) (Troiden, 1989) or *identity pride* (Cass, 1979). In other words, it is difficult to become a *sexual citizen* if you are deeply closeted, as would be the case in the *identity confusion* stage. The ability to be ‘out’ and publicly visible is crucial to the ability to claim rights. If through fear of stigmatization or recrimination, the individual cannot come out, then negotiation of citizenship rights will be seriously restricted (Richardson, 2000: 120).

In short then, the following two chapters revolve around the men whose ‘antennae’ have picked up ‘signals’: legal, social and cultural signals which have changed the environment they inhabit. We explore these signals, the impact on their sexual identity formation, and how their new identity status encourages, extends and drives, further change, and in doing so, promotes deeper forms of sexual citizenship at the local and nonmetropolitan level.

Conceptually, these chapters also acknowledge that stage development theories acting alone, and without context, can be clinical, and restrictive. Therefore, we move towards a consideration of social and cultural milestones as they apply to the individual in his/ her identity formation. A consistent factor in this evolving conception of identity formation has been the influence of the social environment on the process, with changes (in stage development) related to the changing social conditions (Dunlap, 2016:22). The LGB identity development process, including the realization of one's same-sex desires and coming out, needs to be conceptualized as a dynamic process that is mediated by the cultural and historical context in which LGB individuals live (Hammack, 2005). Sexual identity development, including the timing and the meanings ascribed to developmental events such as coming out, is related to the social and cultural context in which individuals develop. Thus, contextual factors need to be considered when studying LGB identity (Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011:331).

As we begin our exploration of these issues as they apply to the men's lives in both Britain, and Ireland, it is timely to take note of the suggestion by Robson and Kessler (2008), that notions of sexual citizenship must be grounded in the *legal* consequences of sexual minorities' access to (and denial of) rights. Failing to address formal legal status, "erases individuals who do not have access to even the most basic rights of citizenship" (ibid: 535) and "trivializes the struggles of people who lack formal citizenship status" (ibid: 571).

With this in mind, what do the findings say about the legal changes in their respective country. Have legal advancements helped the men embrace *identity commitment or identity pride* thereby helping them to become *sexual citizens*?

Becoming sexual citizens: the impact of legislation in Britain and in Ireland.

The men in both countries were convinced and clear in their belief that the raft of anti-discrimination and equality legislation seen in both jurisdictions over recent years, has made a difference. They perceive legislative advances as having succeeded in offering protection where none had previously existed. They acknowledge and welcome the notion of a legislative parity of esteem between sexual orientations, and they note how this has also helped to positively shape new forms of public discourse. Legislation has enshrined their identity, in statute at least, to the extent that they can be seen as equal *constitutional sexual citizens*.

Nonetheless, the interviews reveal some debate as to whether legislation was a *reaction to* social change or an *enabler of it*, or whether both symbiotically helped build and drive sexual citizenship. A general sense picked up from a number of men's testimonies can be summarised by this response:

Yes, the legislation has been wonderful, and welcome and has made a huge difference, but it is the social changes that have made a bigger impact for me. (Fintan, 36, County Longford)

Decriminalisation legislation

My first inkling of this attitude, (the attitude of, 'changes in the law have been great, but that's only part of the picture') came during discussions with the men in England, specifically those who remember the 1967 Sexual Offences Act, which decriminalised male homosexual acts in private for adults over the age of twenty-one. This legislation can be considered relevant to Richardson's (2000) concept of *Conduct-based* rights, by legalising the right to participate in sexual acts. However, the men who recall this landmark legislation were not immediately swept away by powerful feelings of liberation and emancipation. Yes, they sensed it was an important step, indeed a highly significant turning point, but for most, it was not directly responsible for their coming out per se. Philip (72, Norfolk) remembers that whilst the 1967 legislation removed a "layer of fear" around engaging in sexual activity, problems arose in situations where there was "*anybody else in the house, because then the sex act became a crime again*".

Oscar (65, Suffolk) was a university student in 1967, and remembers that it "*caused a stir in the air*", changed the atmosphere and emboldened the on-campus campaign for Homosexual Law Reform, but had the law had its limitations:

[The change in the law] wouldn't actually have applied to me until I was over 21 which wasn't till sort of 1971, I mean, I think these legal changes, I think it changed the atmosphere in some respect. And I suspect in practice if you really had gay sex with somebody else of your own age I doubt whether, towards the end of that period, I doubt whether there would have been a prosecution, but it meant that I didn't put my head above the parapet in joining the campaign for homosexual reform at university as I didn't want to do anything illegal.

Here, through Oscar's testimony, we can see how the legislation failed to protect men under the age of twenty-one, but also how the pale of criminality still clung over homosexuality and discouraged him, and others, from becoming activists on campus. Legislation, whilst signifying

change, was in and of itself, not enough, to remove deeply embedded and entrenched stigma built up over the centuries (Preston & D'Augelli, 2013; Weeks, 2016).

Other men, also emphasised that despite the partial decriminalisation, cruising, or having sex, in what were deemed to be public spaces, was still a crime, and that the atmosphere of police surveillance, entrapment and hostility actually increased in the immediate aftermath of the 1967 legislation. As Weeks reminds us:

In fact, the restrictions under the Sexual Offences Act 1967, were harsh from the start. It applied only to England and Wales, by-passing Scotland and Northern Ireland. It did not apply to the merchant navy, nor to the armed forces. It tightened up the law with regard to offences with 'minors' and to male importuning. And it absurdly restricted the meaning of 'private': for the sake of the Act, 'public' was defined as meaning not only a public lavatory, but anywhere where a third person was likely to be present (Weeks, 2016:175).

The points raised by Weeks are important as they caution that the 1967 legal liberalization should not be interpreted as state recognition of the right to be homosexual, and it also highlights the persistence and insistence on the public/private binary for homosexuals raised by Richardson (2000:110).

Despite this, the men saw some significant developments flow, albeit slowly, from the 1967 act. It removed some of the fear of arrest and conviction, for having sex; it allowed a more open, and honest discussion of homosexuality within society; it energised the gay rights movements; made public information campaigns and media appearances easier; and began to dissolve some of the stigma that had fed off the back of criminalisation.

Philip, 72 (Norfolk) and Mitch, 58 (Essex) recall, that the years immediately after decriminalisation saw the emergence of a newly confident, assertive, and passionate gay rights movement. Philip makes a link between the 1967 legislation and his subsequent involvement in the new gay rights movements. As if decriminalization legitimated, or allowed him, to become involved in gay rights, he remarks that:

Once being told it was OK, I then joined the CHE; and that was a turning point for me, and from there the Albany Trust, and I went to see them, they were helpful in normalising and de-pathologising it.

The CHE that Philip refers to, was the Campaign for Homosexual Equality, which was, by 1972, the largest British gay organisation, with 2,800 members, in sixty local groups (Weeks, 2016: 210). Though small in absolute terms, the CHE provided a voice for further change, and

attracted many people such as Philip through their meetings, leaflets, talks and general campaigns for further legislative progress in the area of gay rights. The Albany Trust developed in this time also, a charity which became an important innovator in the provision of expert counselling and support for people seeking advice on gender, sexuality and same-sex relationships (British Library, 2017b).

While only a few of the respondents in England remembered the 1967 legislation; by contrast, nearly all the men in Ireland, except the very youngest, recall the moment when decriminalisation arrived to the Republic in 1993. Most of the Irish men had lived significant parts of their lives as potential criminals in the eyes of the law. The decriminalization of sex acts between men, in 1993, was a landmark moment in Ireland, and indeed is seen as an important building block in the cultural and social construction of the Republic of Ireland as a tolerant, progressive, and modern society (Cronin, 2004:251). The legislation, which again could be considered an example of Richardson's (2000) *Conduct-based right* was considerably more progressive than the partial decriminalization won in England and Wales in 1967; it contained none of the tedious restrictions mentioned earlier, and importantly, with regard to age of consent, the Irish law made no distinction between heterosexuals and homosexuals (Cronin, 2004: 251).

The spirit within which legislation decriminalising same-sex acts were delivered in both jurisdictions, admittedly in very different times, is also stark. The 1967 Act was delivered through the Westminster parliament with a degree of sufferance, of having to engage with such an objectionable issue; that mercy should be shown to these unfortunates, who deserved pity, and compassion, rather than contempt and criminalisation (Goodall, 2009:211). Some Westminster politicians hoped that, "homosexuals would show their thanks by comporting themselves quietly and with dignity" (Weeks, 206: 175). The situation in Ireland (some twenty-five years later) could not have been more different, as displayed by Maire Geoghan-Quinn, the Minister for Justice at the time, and who had been largely responsible for the new legislation, publicly celebrating the passing of decriminalisation, by shaking hands with LGB activists in a very public display of solidarity (Rose, 1994).

Similarly to the experiences of the English men, though, none of the Irish men came out on the basis of this momentous legislation alone. They were however, in no doubt that decriminalisation was hugely symbolic, and made them feel different about themselves, as expressed by Fintan, 36, (County Longford):

It made me feel that I wasn't a criminal any more, and that I wasn't doing anything wrong if I had sex with another man.

Herein, we can discern the important cultural messaging that decriminalisation brought about; a message of validity, and acceptance, towards same-sex intimacy; and an implicit rejection of historic stigmatisation based on centuries of state and legal condemnation of same-sex acts. Decriminalisation acted as a pre-cursor to more substantial rights around sexual identity. Indeed, many of the *conduct-based* claims to sexual rights also involve, indeed call for, a need for greater civil rights that go well beyond the removal of laws prohibiting certain sexual acts (Richardson, 2000).

Although sex acts between men remained illegal in Ireland until 1993. Mel recalls that:

For me, the big difference, even before decriminalisation was the 'Incitement to Hatred' (Act) in the late 1980s: that made a big impact on me, I could feel safer after that, because in Dublin in those days there was a lot of gay bashing going on. (Mel, 46, County Longford).

For some of the men, this signified the beginnings of a shift from the State as prosecutor of gay people to the State as prosecutor of their would-be assailants; a shift from the Police as inherently hostile agents, to a place where the Police could be *their* protectors. In England, Tim, referring to 2005 legislation, which allowed courts to impose tougher sentences in cases where crimes were motivated or aggravated by sexual orientation (Weeks, 2016: 260) reflected on the impact this had on his ability to express same-sex affection in the public space:

I know it sounds silly but the idea that I can, you know, I can walk down the street and that I managed to hold someone's hand, and I've known that okay, even if you do beat me up, you can be arrested for it now (Tim, 24, Suffolk).

Herein, we see the impact equality legislation has had, on his ability to demonstrate same-sex affection in the public space, to feel empowered that the criminal offence is not his, but rather belongs to any person who would dare provoke, or attack him. Again, a subtle but significant shift in the tenor of state towards its gay citizens; and one which is not lost on the gay men in this study.

Employment and other forms of equality legislation

Another area of enabling equality legislation commented upon by men in both countries, concerned the area of Employment Equality Legislation. In Ireland, the legal framework for

prohibiting discrimination improved significantly for gay people, with the introduction of the Employment Equality Act 1998 and the Equal Status Act 2000 which covered nine grounds, including sexual orientation and gender. This ‘EEA’ legislation aimed to satisfy Article 13 of the Amsterdam Treaty. The Employment Equality Act 1998 and Equal Status Act 2000 were both amended (and improved) by the Equality Act 2004 (CWOI 2009, O’Connell 2008). The United Kingdom, introduced similar legislation in 2003, with the introduction of the Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations. In both countries, it became unlawful, for the *first time*, to discriminate in employment, on grounds of sexual orientation (Colgan, 2011).

There was general agreement by men, in both jurisdictions, that the EEA (Ireland) and the EE (SO) Regulations (UK) had a positive impact on their working lives, in that it required organisations to embed sexual orientation into equality and diversity strategies, policies and practices. As such, a number of men saw examples, often for the first time, of their organisations taking proactive steps in promoting an inclusive culture around sexual orientation. For some, the workplace, became what could be described as a ‘gay-friendly’ environment (Colgan, 2011). At the most basic level, the impact of working in a positive or gay-friendly environment can be to make employees feel happier at work, and facilitate greater openness, with a consequent reduction in the need to adopt guarded and careful strategies around disclosure (Colgan et al, 2007:603).

In this study, many of the men increasingly felt able to ‘come out’ to colleagues at work. Joshua came out at his workplace, a large multinational Insurance firm based in Suffolk:

I must admit, I mean a few years before, I was terrified I might have been outed at work, because a boyfriend I had, kissed me on the cheek in the town centre. I was so terrified of people seeing me, and knowing, but when I came out [after the employment legislation] nobody was bothered. So, yes, it’s interesting that that kind of fear within quite a short number of years had dissipated quite radically.

Joshua, whilst not saying that employment equality legislation was responsible for an immediate transformation of organisation culture, or indeed directly related to his coming out, nonetheless it did prove pivotal in helping embed a new cultural accommodation and climate around sexual orientation in the workplace. Joshua also found support from his organisation’s LGBT employee network. Such groups or networks have been found to provide important mechanisms for visibility and voice for LGBT employees (Colgan and McKearney, 2012: 359).

However, some men cautioned that, in their experience, many work colleagues are uncomfortable with open discussions of sexual orientation in the workplace, and they testify to religious and/or masculinist attitudes, which pose barriers to acceptance, and inclusion. Furthermore, some men remarked that within their organisations, there were often gaps between the rhetoric of equality policy and the realities they experienced on the ground. The existence of an implementation gap, whereby an organisation has written equality and diversity policies which are not meaningfully implemented (Creegan et al 2003) can render employment equality legislation meaningless to LGBT employees and workers. For Graeme, 32 (County Longford), the presence of employment equality legislation, did little to protect him from exclusion and ostracization at his workplace, a dog food factory in rural Ireland:

There would be about 500 people working there and some of them have been there maybe 500 years [laughs] You know, they've been there from the day dot. You know, one guy would have become very good friends with me, but the other guys have been very much, you know, don't talk to him, you know, he's gay. You wouldn't hear them say it, but you just know because [for example] you're in the canteen, the place would be full, and I'd sit on a table and a guy would come in and he would just basically look and see that, shit the only table available is that one there where I am, and so, they would go and sit on the edge of another table sooner than sit beside me.

A number of the older men felt a sense of anger that they had had to endure degrees of homophobia during their working lives prior to legislation. For Magnus, 64 (Norfolk), an ex-member of the military, legislation (enacted in 2000) that lifted the ban on gay personnel serving in the military, was of little benefit to him and threw into sharp relief memories of his experiences of past homophobic and discriminatory behaviours and attitudes. He felt entitled to ask, "What was all that about"? and "Why did I have to endure that"? In less than a decade after the ban was lifted, British servicemen and women were marching at Gay Pride *in military uniform*, and the armed forces had become Stonewall diversity champions. In 2009, General Sir Richard Dannatt, made history when he became the first army chief to address an LGBT conference (Independent, 2009). But, for many of the older men, such as Magnus, protective employment legislation arrived too late to be of benefit to them, in their working lives.

But even today, in Ireland, despite a broad and progressive legislative phalanx, Enda, 48 (County Leitrim) worries, as a teacher, about the specific inclusion of Section 37 in the country's equality legislation. Despite the anti-discrimination protection afforded gay people in Ireland under the 1998, 2000 and 2004 Employment Equality Acts, 'Section 37' allowed religious organizations, medical and educational institutions, an exemption on religious

grounds. As Norman (2004) explains, “Section 37 of the Employment Equality Act (1998), stipulates that such organisations shall not be taken to discriminate” against employees “whom they act against in order to protect the religious *ethos* of the organisation”.

While these exemptions may not be actively used against LGB individuals, research has indicated that it can have a considerable impact on gay employees (Norman, 2004, Walsh et al 2007). For example, religious bodies own and manage the vast majority of primary schools and a significant number of secondary schools in Ireland and also play an important role in the management of a significant number of hospitals and nursing homes. The CWOI report (2009) suggests that this “is an important contributing factor to the institutional invisibility of non-traditional sexual orientations in schools” and other organisations. Enda comments that the trade union, INTO (Irish National Teachers Organisation) has a LGBT network, and he marched under their banner, at a recent Dublin Pride. However, he could not help, but notice, that many of the teachers on the pride march wore sunglasses and hats, in an attempt at some form of disguise. Here we can discern a gap where *conduct-based* legislation does not secure *identity-based* rights – in other words, we may have the right to sexual relations, but for teachers such as Enda, proclaiming a gay identity, to the outside world can remain problematic. Enda’s testimony with some other men (in England) also highlights the importance of LGBT union networks acting as “safe spaces” and allowing the development of group identity and support (Colgan and Ledwith, 2002).

An area of legislation that was seen as having a particularly positive impact on the men’s lives, was that which outlaws discrimination in the provision of goods and services. In Ireland the Equal Status Acts (2000 & 2004) prohibits discrimination in relation to the provision of goods and services (CWOI, 2009). In the United Kingdom, the Equality Act (Sexual Orientation) Regulations, 2007, also makes it unlawful for those concerned with the provision of goods, facilities or services to discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation. This legislation was considered as especially relevant to the men in everyday cases where their sexuality became obvious to service providers, such as hotels, restaurants and gyms. Tim, 24 (Suffolk) makes a point about accommodation providers:

Things like obviously, you know, there was the case with the B&B owners. They lost. It’s good to know that I can book a B&B if I wanted to. You know, I have booked a [double-bed] in Travelodge for us, and it’s been good to know that they have to accept us doing that, even if they don’t want to.

The case Tim refers to, relates to Christian owners of a hotel in Cornwall, who banned a gay couple from staying, arguing that their policy of double bedrooms for heterosexual couples only, was in line with their religious beliefs. They lost their final battle in the British courts and in delivering her judgement at the Supreme Court, Lady Hale remarked that, “sexual orientation is a core component of a person’s identity which requires fulfilment through relationships, with others of the same orientation”. Homosexuals, she added, “were long denied the possibility of fulfilling themselves through relationships with others” adding that “this was an affront to their dignity as human beings which our laws has now (some would say belatedly) recognised” (The Guardian, 2013). Such cases, and the more recent example involving Asher’s bakery in Belfast, who refused to bake a cake with a message supporting gay marriage, reminded the men in this study that their new-found rights are open to challenge and are not supported by all sections of society; but thus far, the courts have supported and upheld the principles of same-sex equality. Again, many men commented on this change, where legislatively, the state has embraced the move from sexual criminal to sexual citizen.

Here, within recent court cases, we can see the relationship between *identity* and *conduct*, in particular “the ways in which a person’s identity may be a mitigating variable in conduct-based claims” (Richardson, 2000:116), thus, for example, owners of such establishments wanting to impose differential access to a person or a couple depending on their sexual orientation. In short, the judgement here was key in ensuring that conduct-based rights were not to be interpreted in ways that would limit identity-based rights. This is instructive in articulating the legitimacy of *identity-based* rights claims. Beyond the right to sexual self-definition, “claims for sexual citizenship include the right to public/social recognition of specific sexual identities” (Richardson, 2000:119).

Civil partnership and equal marriage

An area of legislation most highly valued by the men, in both countries, was the introduction of civil partnership. An example of a *Relationship-based* claim, the right to public validation of various forms of sexual relations, including same-sex marriage (Richardson, 2000: 108) was seen by many as transformational. The introduction of legislation on civil partnership seemed to come as a surprise to many of the men - they were not really expecting it, which interestingly is affirmed in the work of Shipman and Smart (2007) who notes that even some politicians were surprised at its rapid ascent up the political agenda. Nonetheless, 2004 saw the passing

into British law, of what Weeks refers to as “perhaps the most momentous change of all”, the Civil Partnership Act, alongside the Gender Recognition Act (2016:260). In Ireland, the Civil Partnership and Certain Rights and Obligations of Cohabitants Act 2010 paved the way for civil partnership for same-sex couples from 2011, and remained on the statute books until 2015, when it was replaced by the Marriage Act 2015, which allowed for same-sex marriage (Citizens Information, 2016).

For some men the main benefit of civil partnership legislation was the practical benefits it brought to their lives, such as rights as automatic ‘next of kin’ in hospital visits, occupational pension rights, and property inheritance rights. As outlined by Neil:

Civil partnership, it’s great for us; as long as we have rights to leave each other whatever, and that we’re entitled to the pension, that my partner pays a fortune into every month, as long as we have that there then we’re happy, you know, that’s, that a little bit of security for us, that’s enough for us (Neil, 42, County Donegal).

For others, the advent of civil partnership went beyond transactional benefits. It involved an acknowledgement by the State that same-sex couples exist; it provided State recognition of same-sex relationships; and confirmed a change in State ideology and policy, that same-sex couples should be considered equal in all the practical affairs of the law. For many men, it signalled the arrival of an official, ‘parity of esteem’ between straight and gay couples. And for Oscar, 65 (Suffolk), the legislation brought with it, social “respectability”, which was important for him, as he explains:

From my personal point of view it’s slightly odd really, but it was when civil partnership became law, is when it gave gay relationships a respectability if you like, that they didn’t have previously. And it was at that stage I began to start thinking more about exploring my sexuality [after 50 years in the closet].

Here, we see the power of State affirmation, through legislation, which delivers powerful non-stigmatizing cultural messaging, which in turn permits and encourages gay and bisexual people to explore and reconcile their sexual identity within traditionally hostile public, and political spheres. For others though, marriage was problematic, and they echoed the views of those in research by Heaphy et al, who saw same-sex marriage as a form of “triumph” for hetero-patriarchy “where rights and responsibilities are bestowed on same-sex couples on the basis of adopting heterosexual convention” (Heaphy et al, 2013:2).

A small number of respondents had recently celebrated civil partnership ceremonies, in the immediate aftermath of their introduction. The impact of same-sex ceremonies on local rural

communities was seen as ground-breaking and seismic. Eugene, 52 (County Donegal) a member of a popular, local, business family entered into a civil partnership with his long-term partner. For Eugene, the power of his state-sanctioned, state-recognised and state-validated relationship lies in its sheer visibility within the local rural community. He feels that it has helped dispel stereotypes and myths surrounding gay people; counteracts the narrative that gay people don't exist in the rural; or that they are hyper-sexualised creatures; as well as helping to normalize gay lives; and reduce homo-negative discourse:

I know my civil partnership definitely, you know, was a huge move to make, locally, because there's a lot of [straight] families here that would have kids and they're saying oh, my God, what's happening ... but then they're looking at me and they're saying look at him, he's in business and it's not affecting him.

He also feels his partnership demonstrates the possibilities and potentialities of same-sex desire, for other gay or questioning locals. Rather than inhabiting the margins of society, he deliberately inhabits a central place with his partner, he is embedded in the political affairs of the local community; he engages in local conversations, he discusses equal marriage on local radio, and as such, and through his newly recognised status, he educates, and changes the cultural narrative of what it is to be gay in a rural fishing village on the County Donegal coast.

His testimony also highlights the power of the wedding invite within the context of rural Ireland, a place where weddings tend to be important social occasions. Eugene believes that, because of this legislation:

Even the begrudger, you know, even the begrudger has to go to the wedding if he's invited because he might be the next door neighbour or something. And here's Pat, the biggest homophobe on the planet has to go to his next door neighbour's civil partnership. And you know, as well too when I did our civil partnership we had this guy, he's a real stalwart of the GAA, and the other guy who was along with him was played for the county team and you couldn't get more masculine straight guys, you know, and they came to the wedding with their wives. And they didn't go to a key match in Dublin. And the whole joke was, where is Charlie and John, 'Oh, they're away to a gay wedding' and better still they reported that, it was the best wedding we ever attended! It's very educational.

Eugene's testimony illustrates how this legislation has enabled a change in dominant rural cultural narratives about gay people, through shared social experiences at the local level. We can discern a relationship to Weeks' three main themes on the emergence of the sexual citizen and sexual citizenship here. For example, civil partnership legislation can be seen to energise *detraditionalization*; in that it allows for the emergence of new publicly proclaimed patterns of

intimacy, helps change family arrangements, and opens up the possibility of new and diverse types of relationships and families emerging and becoming established, even in the nonmetropolitan and rural environment (1998: 44). It magnifies and makes public *new subjectivities (identities)* and provides a forum for public affirmation, and *voice* and the telling of *new stories* (ibid).

During the latter stages of my fieldwork, legislation in both countries was further enhanced by the introduction of equal marriage. In the U.K, the Coalition government of David Cameron's Conservative party and Nick Clegg's Liberal Democrats, succeeded, in July 2013, in getting legislation through parliament which allowed same-sex marriage. Having been approved by Royal Assent, the first gay marriages in England and Wales, took place on 29th March 2014 (BBC, 2014a). Scotland saw its first same-sex marriages on 31st December 2014 (BBC, 2014b), leaving Northern Ireland as the only part of these islands which does not permit same-sex marriage.

In the Republic of Ireland, the nature of the Irish constitution dictated that same-sex marriage could only be introduced if the population voted in agreement, through a popular referendum. In passing the Marriage Referendum 2015, Ireland became the first country in the world to legalise same-sex marriage through national referendum. Turnout was high (60.52%) and the result decisive, with 62.07% supporting same-sex marriage, illustrating the extent to which Irish public opinion embraced the proposal to adopt marriage equality on a constitutional basis (Murphy, 2016:315). The referendum ensured that the interconnecting issues of sexual orientation, equality and citizenship received much coverage on national and local radio, television, print media as well as online. Issues were debated endlessly and promoted unprecedented levels of voice and discussion around sexuality and equality. It also provided an instructive insight into how far national opinion was prepared to move from a situation of *conduct-based* rights to *relationship-based* rights, which also had implications for enhanced *identity-based* rights.

Men in this study, who were members of the local LGBT groups, campaigned and canvassed throughout the rural region. There were a variety of responses and reactions on the doorstep. While a small number of men reported doors slammed in their faces, others reported receiving enthusiastic support, albeit the general reaction as one of polite disengagement:

People would open the doors, take our leaflets, and say Thank you, and then close the door, not too many wanted to engage in discussion about it with us (Columba, 47, County Longford)

When the votes were counted, results showed a convincing majority in favour of marriage equality at a national level (over 60% in favour), with some of the Dublin constituencies voting over 70% in favour. The results were somewhat different in the interview study area of this thesis, with for example, the constituency of Roscommon-South Leitrim returning the only 'No' vote in the entire country (48.58% in favour, 51.42% against), while other relevant constituencies in this study, recorded very close outcomes; Cavan-Monaghan (50.65% in favour, 49.35% against), Donegal South West (50.1% in favour, 49.9 % against) and Longford-Westmeath (53.6% in favour, 46.4% against) (Murphy, 2016; The Journal, 2015a).

An aspect of the campaign noticed by a number of the Irish men, was that all the main political parties in Ireland seemed to support a Yes vote in the referendum. Yet, the men in this study, discerned a reluctance by many local politicians, such as county councillors, to campaign on the doorsteps on this issue.

Nonetheless, the men expressed a sense of pride that Ireland had travelled far. For many, the success of the equal marriage referendum was the culmination of Ireland's journey from a place where gay people were legal non-citizens, with regard to their sexual identity, to become a country with some of the highest levels of legislative equality in the world. The fact that the marriage referendum had been passed so overwhelmingly, by popular referendum had implication's for the how the men felt about their place within the national imaginary. Not marginal, but very central.

England, Wales, Scotland and the Republic of Ireland join a growing band of jurisdictions delivering *Relationship-based* rights, and thereby allowing rights to freely engage in a relationship, including marriage, and validate the relationship in public space (Richardson, 2000: 108). The legislative landscape has changed dramatically, and within a relatively short space of time, and has succeeded in ensuring that same-sex couples have attained the same immigration rights, pension rights, inheritance rights, next of kin status and tax benefits as those traditionally accorded to married heterosexual couples as listed by Richardson (2000: 127).

2017 was yet another year of profound and symbolic change in Ireland, when an openly gay man, Leo Varadkar, assumed the leadership of the Fine Gael party, becoming the first gay

Taoiseach (prime-minister) of the Republic of Ireland. The men in this study marvelled at this development. Furthermore, in 2017, gay members of the Irish police force (An Garda Síochána) marched, for the first time, with their Northern Ireland counterparts (PSNI), at the Belfast Pride (Irish Times, 2017b).

For many of the men, in both countries, with memories of historic police hostility and activity, including the deliberate targeting, arresting and charging of gay men for gross indecency or for ‘importuning’, the subsequent public humiliation, and suicides of those unable to cope - for these men the sight of police forces with gay networks, and LGBT liaison officers is indeed a radical and seismic shift.

The members of one of the LGBT groups in Norfolk held a public exhibition in July 2017, and, as part of this exhibition, they displayed newspaper clippings which showed the gratuitous reporting of local men, who had been named and shamed in regional newspapers in the 1970s, 1980s, and indeed 1990s. The laws that gave the authorities the power to torment gay men in this way, the old Labouchère offence of gross indecency, as well as the ancient offence of buggery, were swept away and abolished by the 2004 Sexual Offences Act (Weeks, 2016: 260). Not only have pernicious laws, which plagued the lives of gay men, been removed, local members of the LGBT community now perceive the police very differently. That the police seem to ‘go out of their way to support, and protect us now’, was a common refrain. At the local exhibition, in July 2017, Norwich gay bar proprietors in attendance remarked that:

Things have changes so much. For example, after the attacks in Orlando, on a gay club there, the local police visited all the gay bar owners and guided them through security measures, and offered support, and we see them driving around the street and slowing down outside our pub, and the officers looking in at us and giving the thumbs up sign, and asking, is everything OK. That is a big change!

Conclusion

And so, in summary, while some respondents prevaricated about the role of legislation, Ted, 60 (Suffolk) speaks for many when he remarks that:

Regarding legislation, some people say that legislation has had no impact on their life, I say that is poppycock, they may not realise it but it certainly has had an effect, the fact that people can be as open as they can, has been led by the legislation, legislation leads to a change of opinion, leads to people being more accepting, because I think we’ve got to a point now where people are more accepting rather than tolerant and there’s a big difference between the two.

The testimony of these men demonstrates the role legislation has played in transforming the context within which they live. In both countries, it has required that they re-assess the relationship between the state, their sexual orientation, and their sexual identity (Mailiepaard, 2014). The men were enthusiastic about the impact of legislation, but believed it did not operate in isolation, and it does not capture all the reasons why they have progressed from a stage of identity confusion to identity commitment or pride. It is only a part of the picture. In fact, none of the men came out on the basis of new laws and new rights alone. Rather, changes in the legal status of sexual minorities have been seen to work in tandem with, the profound social, cultural and economic developments occurring, developments which have filtered down into their local, rural and nonmetropolitan communities.

Legislation has worked in a symbiotic relationship with Weeks' transformational social forces; it has contributed to, reflects and enhances social and cultural change. Legislation gives these seismic shifts in public attitudes, a home, within the legislature; a judicial home within the constitutional realm.

Equality, and homo-emancipatory legislation has been seen to reflect *detraditionalization*, and to accommodate a general *democratization of relationships*. It appears to validate, facilitate and encourage *new identities*, by naming them within the legislative framework. It encourages *voices, new narratives and stories* through removing archaic restrictions, facilitating anti-discrimination cases to be heard, and burnishing equality groups in their quest for further and sustained social and cultural change.

It would seem, that on paper at least, gay, lesbian and bisexual people living in Britain and Ireland have achieved a full spectrum of rights: conduct-based, identity-based and relationship-based rights. They have seen those who would deny them their rights, fight advancement at every stage, against conduct-based rights becoming identity-based rights (as we saw with section 28) and certainly against relationship-based rights (equal marriage opponents). Legislation provides the men protection in their workplaces as gay employees, and in wider society as consumers, parents, partners, and service users. It has encouraged advocacy, for example, a number of the local LGBT groups and networks were initially supported by local government as part of their duty to embed, and capacity build, equalities in local areas, as a result of equalities legislation; a support that has suffered under policies of austerity (Colgan et al, 2014). The men believe that legislative advances have encouraged greater belonging, participation and involvement in political life. With openly gay people holding high political

office, most notably, Leo Varadkar, the previously unthinkable has become reality. On the surface then, it would seem that the sexual criminal has truly been allowed, to become the sexual citizen. And yet, as highlighted in the literature review, sexual minority citizenship has its critics, as it emanates from neo-liberal, elitist, capitalist and hetero-patriarchal positions (Cossman, 2007; Taylor, 2011). Indeed, in chapter nine we discuss how such notions diminish the truly emancipatory potential of sexual citizenship. For our next chapter though, we turn to the transformational social and cultural changes witnessed in Britain, and Ireland, and explore their impact on the men in the study.

Chapter 6. Role of social change in becoming sexual citizens

Introduction

The men's testimonies support the view that equalities legislation has had a crucial role in changing the nature of the relationship between them, as gay men, and the State: from State as colluder in their marginalisation to State as their supposed guardian and protector. Yet, there was a widespread view that legislation was not the only reason for their transformation from cowed, hidden and closeted men, to become men who are now, for the most part, at ease with their sexual identity, even to the extent of being fully 'out', or at least partially 'out'. To this end, the men spoke of the social, cultural, and economic changes which have dramatically, "changed the dynamics", "altered the environment", and, "made it easier for them to put their heads above the parapet" and come out. These phrases were typically used by many respondents, to describe the impact on them of a changing society, changes which have helped liberate them.

Crucially, they monitor how these changes in attitudes towards sexual minorities, filter down into their local rural communities. They monitor, because they remain cautious about the intersectional difficulties between male homosexuality and the rural space. Fintan, 36 (County Longford) spoke of how he "tested the waters" locally before he came out. Other men used phrases such as "dipping your toes in the water" to "test the temperature" locally (Jerome, 42, County Galway). By this they meant, that they surreptitiously gauged local opinion through a variety of subliminal methods, and in doing so, seeking reassurance that they would not be met with local hostility at the other end of a coming out decision. An example, of surreptitiously, "testing the waters" saw Fintan use a deliberate and well-thought out strategy, of making public comment on newspaper, or media reports of gay celebrities who had just come out, *whilst* in the company of his work colleagues. He then assessed and observed their reactions, and this gave him an insight into their opinions on homosexuality, and possible reactions, if he were to come out to them. Homo-negative comments had the impact of delaying, or suppressing their disclosure, whereas emphatic and supportive comments encouraged moves towards tentative disclosure. In the case of Fintan, he asked his work colleagues, "*what do you make of that fella who came out as gay?*" and he was surprised and relieved that the response from his male, co-

workers in the small factory was “*Live and let live, that’s his business, if that’s he’s gay, he’s gay, he’s dead right to come out, no point in hiding it!*”

Fintan, and other men who used similar tactics took great care in deciding whether the time was right, or whether to hold back, and remain closeted. They were aware that once ‘out’, there would be no going back in the closet, especially if they continued to live in their local, nonmetropolitan communities. The men were aware that although society at large has advanced greatly for sexual minorities, stigma was, and remains a reality and decisions about how open to be, or not to be, about one’s sexuality remain relevant and salient (Solomon et al, 2015).

Impact of social and cultural changes in Ireland

The Irish men felt that their journey, as gay men, had been transformed in recent years, by what was described at a network meeting as nothing short of a *social revolution*. Many identified the 1990s as the decade when they began to notice that real change was afoot, changes that were of clear relevance to them as adolescent and adult gay men (although mostly still deeply closeted). These changes in the social, cultural and economic fabric would be of the utmost significance to these men, setting in train, a trajectory which enabled most of them to begin the process of coming out; publicly identifying as gay men; and changing their life world. They feel that, by and large, the social revolution which they speak of, which has helped lift them out of the shadows, and dark recesses of society, has not been initiated or led by political leaders; but rather has been a bottom up revolution, one which has involved a grassroots critique of traditional norms and moral values.

They have witnessed a Republic which has undergone sweeping changes in the past twenty – five years, notably urbanization, secularization, the decline of traditionalist discourses, the women’s movement, and the growth of an educated urban middle class (Dunphy, 1997:247).

Choice, and the freedom to choose one’s identity now seem to have become treasured national values, in an Ireland which prides itself, as a socially progressive, and liberal, European country (Cronin, 2004). This marks a radical departure from the suffocating conformity of the past; a rapid and dramatic turnaround, from a society that had, for so long, been marked as different, from other late twentieth century developed nations. Shrouded in Catholic national identity,

Ireland remained a country where visible adherence to Catholic moral doctrine on family and sexuality, was pursued energetically and positively by the people (Fahey, 2014: 73).

The Irish men feel that this turn away from tradition has had clear beneficial implications for lesbian, gay and bisexual people, in that it has allowed them to find a home in the new open, diverse and liberal national space. The key social and cultural changes that were considered important by the Irish gay men, in terms of their sexual identity, and sexual citizenship included: the diminishing role and influence of the church; the impact of Ireland's first female presidents; increasing diversity; the 'Celtic Tiger'; the popular media and; the power of celebrities, especially sports stars, who came out in public.

Diminishing role and influence of the church

A key theme to emerge from interviews in Ireland concerns the changing role and power of the Catholic Church. Respondents spoke of a decline in the moral authority of the Church, of diminished Church influence and its reduced power over social life and social policy in Ireland. For many, this fall from grace began in earnest with the widespread publicity of child abuse scandals which have dogged the Irish Church since the mid-1990s. The sexual abuse of children by Catholic clergy has had a profound effect on Irish culture and society. In 1994, the Irish government collapsed when it emerged that the state had failed to extradite from the Republic, a priest who had been found guilty of sex abuse charges to answer similar charges in Northern Ireland. In 2011, following the publication of several government-appointed commission reports into sexual abuse by Catholic clergy, relations between the Catholic church and the Irish state reached a new low (Keenan, 2014:99). The stories of clerical abuse of minors shocked families, friends and communities, the stories received widespread media attention and forced Ireland to reassess its previously unquestioning and acquiescent relationship with the Catholic Church. The failures of the Catholic Church in dealing with the abuse of children seriously undermined its power, authority, and respect, in Ireland (ibid: 100). The church was challenged on numerous fronts, and from many quarters, and for the first time, open criticism became commonplace. This was a very Irish manifestation of a phenomenon in the Western world, namely the radical unsettling of traditional norms and values, which undermine the traditional bastions of legitimate authority, such as the churches (Weeks, 1998: 41). For respondents, the revelations of abuse in the Church neutralised its power to castigate and denigrate gay men as sinners:

The 90s saw the rot happening as far as the church was concerned.....it all started with Bishop Eamonn Casey...and since then it just hasn't stopped....it's been 16 or 17 years of drip, drip, drip.....abuse cases after abuse case...as a result the church has lost a lot of moral credibility....so how can they preach to me about sin and that sort of thing (Jerome, 42, County Galway).

While there was deep sadness and anger at the Church abuse scandals, there was also an acknowledgement that the discomfiture of the institutional church allowed them to publicly rebuke and challenge the church on a whole range of issues, including its teaching on social, sexual and moral issues and the church's continued negative stance on homosexuality. They felt that the Church's teaching and pronouncements on sexual ethics and morals now had few public defenders. Some men commented that it seemed almost as if people were embarrassed to be associated with Church teaching. This was seen as a big change to (recent) past times. Many of the men pointed to what they considered church hypocrisy:

The church is in no position to stand up in the pulpit and lecture me or anybody for that matter on morality...when they were...effectively...raping altar boys and keeping girls and women locked up in the magdalen laundries...and all that kinda stuff...NO ! I just think they should just zip it for now ...and I think they have been zippin it.....by and large (Fintan, 36, County Longford).

At times, it felt as these men were releasing a welter of anger and resentment against an institution which had, for so long, relished in its role as powerful counter-force to their equality and inclusion; an institution which had contributed so much to their alienation and abandonment, and was complicit in their silencing. And now, it seems that Fintan, and others, feel it is time for the Church to be silent, and give space for *New Stories*, which Weeks speaks of (1998:47).

It would be incorrect to regard all the Irish men as anti-Catholic Church or anti-clerical; on the contrary a number maintained a close relationship with the faith of their birth; they were sacramentally observant, attended mass, and interacted with the church at a local level. Two men play the organ in the church, they and others, are on social terms with their local priests. In these cases, the priests are fully aware the men are gay, and that they have been, or are, in same-sex relationships. While the issue of sexuality is rarely mentioned or discussed between the parties, there is no sense of hostility or exclusion in these local interactions.

But overall, the men's testimonies reveal sentiments, which equate past church power as a powerful barrier to their emancipation. To this end, I am reminded of a piece by Fintan O'Toole, which helps to explain an intimate relationship, which has turned sour:

The church formed Irish society, and Irish society loved and obeyed its church. It is one thing to have an invader or external oppressor, a nasty, alien power that can be thrown off in a single act of liberation; it is quite another to have a form of oppression that goes very deep into your own bedroom, your own loves and loyalties, your own notion of that most intimate of all institutions, the family. (Irish Times, 2017a).

This resonates with a belief, which I discern from their stories, that they were ‘let down’ by the church. The church had enveloped their childhood, they had been immersed in the rich tapestry of rituals that denoted their coming of age, through public celebrations of Holy Communion, first confession, and confirmation. But as adolescents and adult gay men, the Church served them a diet, of cold, clinical, theological, and homo-negative language, to describe their sexual orientation; language which accentuated and intensified their turmoil. The terms “intrinsically disordered” and “contrary to natural law” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1994:505) were recalled by a number of men. Bitter terms which cause much hurt and resentment.

The ‘Two Mary’s’

Many of the men in Ireland spoke of the importance of brave radicals and human rights campaigners such as David Norris, a veteran gay rights campaigner, described as a hero by a number of the men, and the presidencies of Mary Robinson (1990-1997) and Mary McAlesse (1997-2012) which they saw as highly significant for LGBT people in Ireland. Mary Robinson, a member of the Irish Labour Party had been a prominent feminist campaigner in Ireland in the 1970s and 1980s, campaigning on issues such as the right to the legal availability of contraception for unmarried people. During this time she was also involved in supporting rights for gay people at a time when same-sex activity between men was still a criminal offence (Rose, 1994). In the context of the times, these feminist campaigns were radical, and her triumph in 1990 (to become the first female president of Ireland) was seen as a major upset for the traditional status quo despite the limited powers of this figurehead role.

When Mary Robinson won that election it was really great for gay people and anybody who was different because she brought a new face, a modern face to the presidency of Ireland...and she actually, you know, invited gay people and campaigners like David Norris into *Áras an Uachtaráin* [presidential residence] that was a complete first, she really gave Ireland a new image. (Mac, 40, County Roscommon)

For many gay people in Ireland, the popular discourse of Ireland as a modern, progressive, liberal society, which embraces and is inclusive of its gay and lesbian citizens owes much to the highly symbolic event by President Mary Robinson, when in 1992 she issued an invitation to a group of lesbian and gay activists to meet her at *Áras an Uachtaráin*, (the presidential

residence). It is remembered as all the more symbolic, occurring as it did, one year *before* the legal decriminalization of homosexuality (Cronin, 2004: 251). Mary Robinson was succeeded as president by Mary McAlesse who continued with a socially liberal agenda, aimed at providing an inclusive presidency.

Presence of other types of diversity

Ireland has seen increasing levels of inward migration, especially so during the ‘Celtic tiger’ years (circa 1996-2008). While the Celtic Tiger has ceased to roar, and some of the immigrants who came to serve it have departed, the rapid growth in diversity has transformed the country in profound ways (Castles, 2016). In 1996, the year the Celtic Tiger boom began, only 2 per cent of the population of the Republic was born outside the British Isles, a figure which rose to 17 per cent by 2017 (Irish Times, 2017c). A society marked by homogeneity has become one marked by diversity. Jerome provides a narrative on the impact of diversity in his rural home community of County Galway:

Diversity, other types of people coming in (to our rural community) has had a big impact.

A big change I can remember was in the mid 90s when a neighbour of ours came back from England with two babies from her relationship with a black man, the relationship had broken down over there and she returned as a single mum....and she moved back in with her parents on the farm, they took her in...which was a big enough thing to do believe me....and eventually she built a house on the land- the girls went to school....and fitted in grand....and my parents and the whole area had to deal with that and I saw them changing their opinions as a result ...and now these two girls are in University...and doing very well for themselves (Jerome, 42, County Galway).

For Jerome, the public acceptance by parents and the rural community of a single mother, a separated woman, and children from a mixed relationship, stands out as a defining moment. He continues:

and now there’s a few single mums around the area with kids in the school...and another example...my mother’s niece coming back from America with an American girlfriend....that was another shocker....and settling down with her partner...building a house on the parents farm...and adopting a child from Singapore...who is now in the local school.

Here, we see an example of parents from traditional rural backgrounds publically having to adapt to, and accept, new forms of living and new types of relationships.

In an excellent narrative on the Irish family, Tony Fahey argues that a powerful mix of “economic catch-up and cultural change has provoked rapid transition in Irish family life”, with Irish families becoming “smaller, more democratic, less rigid in their division of gender roles, more expressive and affectionate” (2014:71). He also highlights trends such as cohabitation becoming an accepted and widely practised form of union, and with marital breakdown and divorce having become an accepted fact of life (divorce was made legal in 1996, following a narrow win in a national referendum). Another highly significant and symbolic indication of social change, and *detraditionalization*, is the growth in children born out of marriage, which in 2015 stood at 36 per cent, up from 5 per cent in the early 1980s (Fahey, 2014; The Irish Times, 2016).

Jerome feels that these changes in the nature of family, have implications for how gay people are seen in the rural context:

The divorce thing....since it came in 15 years ago or whenever....we know some neighbours who have now gotten divorced....and even though my parents and this whole area would have voted NoI heard my mum say the other day about a couple getting divorced...Ah sure maybe it's better, no point in living with somebody just for the sake of it, like in our day....and then there's people living together before they get married...**all these things have softened them up to the gay thing...**in my opinion (Jerome, 42, County Galway).

Within these stories from rural Ireland, we are reminded that of how *detraditionalization* has encouraged the democratization of relationships, and that, as Weeks states, the heteronormative conception of the nuclear family, comprising one man and one woman, and their children is no longer the only manifestation of family:

The family as we came to know it in ideology and practice is no longer what it was; the divorce figures, the incidences of single parenting, the delay of marriage, the rise of cohabitation, rapid rise of single households, the emergence of new patterns of intimacy, for example lesbian and gay ‘families of choice’, all these are indices of profound change” (Weeks, 1998:41).

Celtic Tiger

There was a general consensus that the so-called Celtic Tiger years (late 1990s to c. 2008) may have had a role in fuelling the social and cultural changes responsible for helping create a more tolerant, secular and liberal society (with positive implications for gay people). The Celtic Tiger years were profoundly significant, the speed of transformation was almost without parallel, as Ireland witnessed exponential economic growth (Castles, 2016: xviv). Many of the men felt

that the dramatic improvements in the economic condition of the people may have created a greater sense of individuality and independence. Increases in personal wealth and greater access to money offered new lifestyle choices to many people, and fostered a new sense of personal freedom and individual possibility. Indeed, the conflation of individual freedom, and political freedom with freedom of the market and of trade has long been a cardinal feature of neo-liberal economic policy for many years (Harvey, 2006). John believed that money opened up the possibilities, and exploration, of the world, and the self:

Well, I mean the Celtic tiger.... If you've got a guy living in the backend of beyond [of Leitrim] who suddenly has a little bit more money because of the job he's doing [in the new economy], he's able to go to Dublin, or Amsterdam, for the weekend and he's got the cash to express himself in whatever way he wants, so that was a factor (John Paul, 25, County Leitrim).

Within this quote, I see a relationship with Evans' (1993) concept of sexual citizenship as a form of consumer citizenship, where he acknowledges "the new commercial power of gay men, as productively linked to access to sexual and other forms of citizenship" (Richardson, 2000: 122). John's testimony speaks of rural gay men, newly economically empowered, increasingly able to have a purchase in, utilise, and experience commercially available gay spaces (albeit, in the city).

The men also feel that, in recent years, starting with the Celtic tiger, gay people became attractive as consumers to the corporate world. The 'pink pound' had arrived in Ireland, with a consequent growth of product marketing aimed at the gay 'community'. Here we see the common stereotype of gay consumers, portrayed as being affluent, well educated, and in possession of disposable income, as a lucrative market to be tapped into (Olson and Ro, 2014). Eugene, 52 (County Donegal) speaks of local rural hotels which are now "all of a sudden" advertising and "bending over backwards" to attract the gay market for the newly sanctioned civil partnerships and same-sex weddings. A number of men had noticed examples of previously traditional establishments now touting for gay business, promoting their inclusivity by simply including the term civil partnerships within their commercial marketing materials, showing the creativity but also the caution that marketers demonstrate in negotiating the need, to attract the gay pound but also avoid alienating traditional heterosexual consumers (Nam-Hyun et al, 2015). Herein, we can sense a strong reflection of Evans' (1993) work on gays as consumer-sexual-citizens in an otherwise heteronormative, and heterosexist environment.

The Celtic Tiger years also saw the return of Irish emigrants, to work in the booming Ireland. Many of the returners had spent considerable time overseas, and some of the men noticed that these returning emigrants brought home with them a change in attitudes:

The Irish who emigrated in the 80s and early nineties, a lot of them went to Australia, or New York, or London working in all kinds of industries with all kinds of people and they became so used to being in multi-cultural societies that I think when they all came home ... that that came home with them, and it changed the dynamics a bit and a lot of people that have been away have had more exposure really. They had probably worked with gay people in New York or Sydney or London, or at least been aware of the open attitudes there....and they brought that exposure back to Ireland with them (Eugene, 52, County Donegal).

A number of the men felt it important to emphasise the point that emigrants who returned home to their native rural areas, brought back stories of how they had worked with gay people, without any problems, or had gay people as good neighbours and close friends, while in New York, Boston, Sydney, or London. Such stories can act as a way of humanizing gay people, no longer thinking of them as the “Other” (Howard-Hassmann, 2002), they can help to normalise and de-mystify gay people, for the rural audience back home.

Role of popular media, culture and ‘celebrity’ role models

For many respondents in Ireland, radio, television and other forms of media have made an important contribution in reducing silence and invisibility, in raising awareness, and generally educating and informing a previously uninformed populace on issues around sexual orientation. Historically, there has been profound underrepresentation of, and/or negative representations of gay, lesbian and bisexual individuals in the media. According to Fryberg and Townsend (2008), such underrepresentation, or invisibility, can take two primary forms, absolute invisibility or relative invisibility. Absolute invisibility refers to a total absence of representations of a particular group whereas relative invisibility refers to an absence of rich, positive representations, so that although representations exist, they are stereotypical and narrow (Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011:339). Dunphy (1997) refers to the Irish state broadcaster, RTE, as having a historic reputation for over-zealous self-censorship of any discussion of lesbian and gay issues, and indeed, many of the Irish men recall little gay content on RTE until relatively recent years. In fact, RTE did produce the occasional journalistic investigative report, documentary or interviews with gay people during the late 1970s and 1980s (see RTE, 2003), but for the respondents here, it was the role played by a number of British and American television series’, mainly soap operas, documentaries and programmes that stand out as

positive. British television channels could initially only be received in areas of the republic close to the border with Northern Ireland, as well as Dublin and some parts of the east coast of Ireland (Brennan, 2016). However, reception coverage slowly expanded in the 1980s, to allow areas further away from the border to receive British channels, with further technological developments in the 1990s and 2000s making British television widely available throughout the republic. Those men who were able to receive British television, due to their relative proximity to the border, acknowledged the impact this had on them, as adolescents growing up in rural Ireland in the 1970s and 1980s.

The positive power of television is mentioned here by Fintan, where they have portrayed gay people as ‘real people’ that might live in the community:

All these gay characters in Coronation Street, Hollyoaks, Eastenders, even Emmerdale....most of them are portrayed as ordinary people you might meet down the pub.....and even Graham Norton, you know, has played his part....and then you had Will and Graceand now Modern Families.....these shows get into every house in the country.....and I think they help educate people that gay people are everywhere and in every street and every family (Fintan, 36, County Longford).

I mean, when you see Christian in Eastenders as an openly gay man, he’s got a partner, he’s masculine, you see he’s ‘normal’, he doesn’t go round messing with children, like some people think gay people do.....that got to be a good thing and it educates people (Alfie, 35, County Sligo).

A number of respondents contrasted these broadly positive representations of gay people, with those that they remember from the 1970s and 1980s, where gay men, were typically depicted as the “sissy”- an asexual, effeminate, and often ridiculous character, or alternatively as victims, or as rather sinister characters (Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011:340):

Remember in the Seventies, gay people on television, they were caricatures of gay people. There was John Inman in *Are You Being Served*, there was, Liberace, Kenneth Williams, these people who were gay they were very camp, very outrageous. Very flamboyant people.... But they weren’t the fellow living next door. I mean, they were very different to the people that ordinary folk in Cavan knew...so people like that didn’t exist here... do you know what I mean...so, at least we’re seeing a more honest portrayal of gay men in a lot of the media now. (Phelim, 48, County Cavan).

For men like Phelim, it seemed important that they see gay men portrayed as masculine figures, as regular ‘bloke next door’ types. Phelim and others feel they cannot relate so readily to the flamboyant portrayals, which may find a home in the city but not in the rural. This demonstrates

the persistence of heteronormative conceptions of masculinity for many rural gay men, and the prioritisation of masculinity in the rural context (Annes and Redlin, 2012; Boulden, 2001).

Within the context of growing up in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, a number of the Irish men cited the positive role played by an extremely popular Irish chat show on RTE television. *The Late Late Show*, presented by Gay Byrne, from 1962 until 1999, was a light entertainment show, but developed a reputation for discussing and airing controversial issues and for pushing the boundaries. Its impact was all the more powerful given that it was a home-produced programme. Fintan O'Toole wrote that it traded in "the revelation of intimacies in the glare of the studio lights, the disclosure in public of things that had never been disclosed in private" (Brennan, 2016). It produced a few 'firsts' in opening up debate about homosexuality, including the first ever interview with a lesbian (1980), which was all the more significant in that this young woman was a woman from rural Ireland. Dermot, 43, (County Cavan) recalls, that it was during one of these 'firsts' that he was able to discern what his parents might think about his sexuality, which was still 'undisclosed'. This quote shows the power of positive media discussion on gay issues, but also demonstrates how they can encourage the gay man to pursue his journey of identity formation.

Coming out to my father was made easier by a discussion that had been talked about on the Late Late Show. I had told my mother I was gay some time previously but we just couldn't figure out how to tell Dad...we were too uncomfortable; he was a simple country man who would have had no reference points whatsoever on the topic but the Late, Late Show did that for me actually....it was one of those shows where they brought in lots of gay people into the audience and their parents and all that sort of stuff and just went for it... it was still literally sort of taboo in the main, you know, still, in Ireland at that stage, but my mum and dad were watching of course and she said to him what would you think if one of your sons and daughters was gay. And he said sure, those lads and lassies on the TV look alright to me; sure it would make no difference to me. Which was fantastic (Dermot, 43, County Cavan).

Aside from television and radio, the proliferation of written materials which discussed sexual orientation and appeared in books, magazines, journals, newspapers, and online, were cited as important in helping to educate the general population. Journalistic pieces, often in the form of gay people telling their own stories of exclusion and marginalisation, were seen as vital in helping reduce ignorance, misrepresentation and misconceptions, helping to create a more optimal environment in which to 'come out' and seek acceptance.

Celebrity role models who were 'fully out' were often cited as invaluable in helping to promote an image of gay people which many people in wider society could 'relate to' and 'understand'.

The impact of role models 'coming out' is crucial, not only in educating wider society, but in the role they can have in shaping and encouraging positive gay identity development, higher self-esteem and self-efficacy (Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011:331). The impact of Brian Dowling was mentioned by several of the Irish men:

Brian Dowling who won Big Brother... I think he kind of flew the flag for Ireland and for being gay and being Irish. And I think he grew a lot of respect from people. You know they were seeing things differently and they were, you know, watching this gay character on reality TV every day for weeks on end.....it was like them getting to know a gay guy in their own living rooms every night....and liking him (Cillian, 32, County Longford).

In Brian Dowling, Irish society saw a young man, who could have been their son, brother, cousin, or friend. They 'got to know' a young gay man, which resonates with the work of Kazyak (2011) which argues that rural communities accept gay people best, if they get to know the person first. In the view of the respondents, the impact of high profile, national and international figures, whether they be movie or music celebrities, politicians, people from the world of business or sports, *coming out as gay* cannot be underestimated. They give public manifestation to Weeks' theme of *New Subjectivities*, individuals choosing to articulate new identities, narrative structures, which provide the stimulus and the necessity for experiments in living (1998:46). They provide reference points, and anchors for the ordinary gay man.

Through the global media, Ireland has witnessed many global celebrities 'coming out', but when Irish GAA hurling star Donal Óg Cusack openly disclosed his sexuality and proclaimed his identity as a gay man the impact was truly profound. Since most sports are infused with ideals and practices associated with hegemonic masculinity and heterosexuality, coming out presents some unique challenges for gay sports people. Resistance to homosexuality within sport, especially mainstream sport is well-known. Indeed, a man who is both gay and athletic transgresses pervasive understandings of homosexuality and sport and can provoke much negativity (Gough, 2007:157). As a representative of the GAA, which is generally considered the premier national sporting organisation, and due to its historical genesis, a bulwark of traditional, nationalist, rural and catholic Ireland, Cusack's decision to 'come out', posed a challenge to traditional norms, values and beliefs around sexuality and masculinity. Through his confident, eloquent and articulate narratives about his sexuality, which received widespread media attention; and the largely positive and supportive reaction from the general public, other players, and GAA officials, his 'coming out' was seen as immensely and hugely significant moment by the gay men in Ireland:

Donal Óg Cusack, the hurler from Cork who came out a couple of years ago. I think that was a huge sea-change, a massive sea-change; can't be underestimated, because he is a sporting legend... I think it, it's great to have gay artists, gay politicians, gay journalists, but to have a gay sportsman, a guy who's, you know, big and manly and just, you know, he's, probably he's the best goalkeeper in hurling at the moment and for him to come out and say yeah, I am gay, I think that's huge. Online chat boards from the story also helped facilitate, exchange views and educate and make some people reflect on gay men in rural Ireland (Thomas, 44, County Cavan).

This particular moment, forced many rural people to re-assess and re-evaluate old negative stereotypes of the gay man, as effeminate, weak, sinister, pervert, urban, outsider, coy, sly, hidden and shameful sissy.

Impact of social and cultural changes in Britain: Differences with Ireland

Many of the social and cultural changes that had encouraged Irish respondents to be more open about their sexual identity were also cited as significant factors by the English respondents. There were however, some differences.

To start with, there were differences in the way the Irish and English men responded to questions around social and cultural change. For the Irish respondents these changes were recent, profound, and rapid. As they spoke about the issues, it was almost as if the Irish men could barely comprehend the transformations that had occurred in their country. This should come as no surprise, given the oppressive silence on the subject of homosexuality, a minimal gay scene, and the fact that it wasn't until the late 1980s that the social and cultural changes the republic was experiencing finally allowed a significant (if still very small) lesbian and gay community to publicly emerge (Dunphy, 1997:247). By contrast to the fluidity and easy recollection of the Irish, the English respondents took longer to recount and recall the many social changes. My interpretation of this difference in how the discourse proceeded, was that the dramatic changes occurring in both countries, have been more recent and precipitous in Ireland, the trajectory higher, the distance travelled further given where Irish society started from, as a rural and poor society. The social and cultural changes of industrialisation, urbanization, secularization, women's rights, and democratization of relationships have been occurring in England over a longer period of time, although they are no less significant as a result of that. If we take just two relevant examples: first, divorce in Britain (as we conceive of it today) became legal in stages, notably in 1923, 1937 but most significantly in 1969, with the

Divorce Reform Act, which introduced divorce law as it still largely applies today (Cambridge Family Law Practice, 2012). In Ireland, divorce was banned until a popular referendum, held in 1995, voted to legalise it, albeit with a wafer-thin majority, with 50.28 per cent voting in favour, and 49.72 per cent voting to maintain the ban, on a 62 per cent turnout (Referendum Results, 2013). This is important, and Weeks sees divorce as an important aspect of *detraditionalization*, and in changing inherited patterns of intimate and family life more generally (1998: 42).

Secondly, contraception, widely available in Britain for decades, was not permitted for sale in Ireland, without a prescription until 1985 (but even then could only be purchased in certain prescribed outlets, such as family planning clinics), and it was not until after 1992 that contraception became freely and widely available. For example, as many of the respondents recalled, it was only in the 1990s that condom machines began to appear in public places, such as nightclubs. And, in direct reference to homosexuality, we can interpret the Wolfenden Report of 1957, as an indicator of when modern Britain began to amend its public, cultural understanding of homosexuality; for whilst Wolfenden hardly endorsed homosexuality, it did bring the idea of a distinctive homosexual identity and way of life into the law for the first time, and recognized that for many such an identity was an irrevocable destiny (Weeks, 2007:55). Following publication of the Report, the campaign to implement its recommendations gathered momentum. The Homosexual Law Reform Society was founded in 1958, which sought to coordinate the efforts of gay activists and supporters so as to ensure pressure was maintained on government and that the campaign for legal reform was not allowed to fade away (British Library, 2017b). As such, even as far back as the late 1950s and 1960s, we can compare a Britain where public voice and debate about identity and homosexual law reform were occurring and an Ireland where a cold and unrelenting silence held firm.

The English men's testimonies on growing up in the 1970s and 1980s show men growing up in a country of ethnic diversity, gay rights demonstrations, gay prides, gay nightclubs, and gay magazines, albeit and admittedly much more evident in the urban and metropolitan areas. These were not such a feature of any environment the Irish men inhabited, urban or rural, until recent years. And so, many of the English respondents had, in a sense, grown accustomed to features of *detraditionalization* and greater *democratization of relationships*, earlier in their lives, features which were considered as relatively 'new' by the Irish men.

Another difference in the testimonies of the men was, that while the Irish men spoke extensively about diminishing Catholic Church influence, English respondents did not make this a feature of their narrative. While it loomed large among the Irish men, it did not among the men in England. One man, at an LGBT group meeting I attended in a town on the North Norfolk coast remarked, that ‘*Oh, you have to back a long way before you see that religion had a big impact round here*’, while another commented:

Bottom line, religion wasn’t as dominant here as in Ireland I guess. Also, people round here belong to all different types of churches, you see, Quaker, Church of England (high and low), Methodist, Meeting Houses, Pentecostal, Catholic, you name it, so it’s not like you had one big church dominating everything, like in Ireland.

The Irish men felt that in the past, a past of fresh memory, they had inhabited a type of quasi-theocracy, a confessional state, from which they had only been recently liberated. Of course, Ireland was never a theocratic state, although according to Paul Blanshard in *The Irish and Catholic Power* (1954), it came closer to becoming one than any other Western democracy during the twentieth century. Fanning (2014) argues that there was a sort of unofficial Church-state alliance which permitted “ecclesiastical dictatorship and political democracy to live side by side without any sense of incongruity” (:51). Among the English respondents, any sense of having been set free from a powerful ideological and theological foe, or of a recent emancipation from the vice-like grip of an omnipotent church was largely absent. However, it is important to remind ourselves that all faith groups have found it difficult to cope with the gay revolution, and it is fair to say that even within the traditionally broad Anglican family, there have been splits caused by the issue of gay priests and same-sex marriage (Weeks, 2007:114). And English respondents did raise concerns about the rise and popularity of new evangelical churches that were springing up, they had concerns because of the expressly homophobic rhetoric they often employ, as was witnessed by placard-holding evangelicals during the local Norwich Pride. Interestingly, diverging attitudes towards the intersection between sexuality and religion could be seen in practice, at the Norwich Pride, when in 2017, a local Church of England priest established a gay Christian presence, complete with Rainbow flag, along the parade route.

The key social and cultural changes that were considered important by the English gay men, in terms of an impact on their sexual identity, and sexual citizenship, included; the gay rights movement; development of a ‘gay scene’; music, literature and media; celebrity role models, economic direction, and the impact of section 28.

Gay rights movements:

Quite a number of the men in England, cited the unique importance of the historical gay rights movements, which a number of them saw as a powerful force in changing how they perceived their sexual identity. Men spoke of the street movements in the 1970s, the Gay Prides in the 1980s, and 1990s, the actions of *Outrage* in the 1990s and the role of Stonewall in more recent years. These were perceived as part of the national fabric of life that they grew up with, a backdrop to their own emergence as gay men. Philip, 72 (Norfolk) cites the importance of the early movements, to his subsequent development as an openly gay man in the late 1960s and early 1970s:

By that time Gay News must have been out and published, because that's where I got to hear about the CHE, [the Campaign for Homosexual Equality], and I moved back to the west midlands but for some reason I 'took that the CHE thing up' and really became involved....I was active in the CHE to the extent of marching...we would go on the marches.... And that was a great feeling (he gets emotional)..... I remember when the first marches started up there would be you and two policemen either sidebut that feeling of togetherness and a cause (gets emotional) is incredible.

Philip felt a sense of belonging and inclusion by being part of a movement for change. The marches and demos brought him into contact with other gay people from all types of backgrounds, and allowed close friendships to form. As time passed, Philip began to notice a gradual change in public reactions to them as marchers, from people on the streets:

On the marches I don't remember any great degree of 'agro' but we were surrounded by coppers but I do remember that as the years progressed we got a lot more sympathy and acceptance and support from the streets- we'd pass a building and people would clap etc.....gradually turned from the protest movement to the celebration type marches we see today with pride parties...it was very gradual.

Such observations influenced Philip, and encouraged him in assuming a gay identity. He then became involved in an innovative gay drama group in the later in the 1970s:

Around that time also, there developed gay theatre company- the first one- very simple drama's initially and I joined it, but there would be active discussions after the plays, Drew Griffiths was great in that company ... and through the plays we also helped educate people

The gay theatre referred to by Philip, was a professional, small, gay theatre troupe, 'Gay Sweatshop', set up in 1975, and were "able to take fairly basic gay liberation positions (of coming out, solidarity and support) into various largely gay gatherings, and to encourage a new

type of gay consciousness” (Weeks, 2016:218) This is coincidentally the same group that was heaped with opprobrium by some Irish politicians when it visited Dublin later in the 1970s.

Mitch, 58 (Essex) also recalls the early gay rights movements as pivotal in his awakening as a gay man. In his testimony, he situates the gay rights movements within the broader civil rights movements of the time, such as those advocating rights for women and black people. In particular, he remembers the passion of Malcom X and the Black Panthers. With regard to gay rights, he has particularly strong and fond memories of the Gay Liberation Front with its focus on revolution and self-organisation, a belief that only a revolutionary overthrow of traditional social structures could “truly liberate the homosexual; and that it could only be done by homosexuals themselves, acting openly and together” (Weeks, 2016: 186). He found that their willingness to ‘*upset the apple cart*’ was refreshing and while it did not move him to become involved in the street movements, exposure to their language of empowerment, and resistance changed the way he thought about himself, his sexuality, and the social world and encouraged him to ‘*think and re-evaluate*’ the construction of power and oppression in the world. For Richardson, the emergence of gay liberation movements marked the emergence of groups that demanded not simply the right to engage in same-sex activity but also the right to be open about one’s sexuality, the ability to publicly identify as lesbian or gay and an end to discrimination against people on the basis of a lesbian or gay ‘identity’ (2000: 116). As such, they sought *identity-based* claims or rights.

Weeks considers the public emergence of vocal lesbian and gay movements to be an integral feature of *detraditionalization* and *democratization of relationships*. They have also helped to make *new identities* possible through their collective experiences (1998: 46) and they personify voice, and stories. The *new stories* about sexuality and gender have been possible because of the emergence of these new movements and communities that both give rise to and circulate and rewrite stories which tell of discrimination, prejudice and empowerment (ibid 47).

Development of the ‘gay scene’

For a number of English respondents, the emergence of ever more gay venues, pubs, clubs, and support groups helped them foster *gay assumption*. While Irish men, in the 1970s, even in Dublin, had few if any gay venues or support networks to attend, the scene began to flourish more widely in Britain, mainly in the large metropolitan areas. Ackroyd narrates the “extraordinary growth in nightclubs in London; multi-levelled discotheques with dazzling light and sound; the thumping beat of disco music and the gyrations of scantily clad customers

helped to define a movement of hedonism and consumerism that seemed set to define queer London” (2017:222). While London pulsated, even some provincial towns saw the emergence of gay spaces as Ted, 60 (Suffolk) recalls:

There was a gay pub in Ipswich, called the Olive Leaf, and also a local gay social group in 1974...I went along to the inaugural meeting of the Ipswich Centre Group in 1974....met some people who would become close friends....we then got a gay club in 77...and somebody also use to organise monthly discos....Possibly the influence of the RAF bases - American personnel - I wonder did that have an influence on why this town developed a gay scene.....Anyway, the gay pub was great...and of course, it had the blackened up windows (with no glass) as was the case for many gay pubs in those days....the discos were quite busy. I was out when I was in that pub, but wasn't out in the shop (at work) and, in general I did not volunteer the information, but I [got to the stage where] I didn't deny it.

Herein, we can discern signs of what Troiden refers to as stage 3 of his sexual identity formation model, *identity assumption*. Troiden indicates that men (and women) who progress to *identity assumption* define as homosexual and present as homosexual, at least to other homosexuals. As a young man Ted presents himself as gay to the other men in the bar, within that restricted space of the gay bars, but has not yet progressed to public disclosure. Defining the self as homosexual and presenting the self as homosexual to *other* homosexuals are the first stages in a larger process of identity disclosure, which we know as ‘coming out’ (Troiden, 1989: 59). Plummer (1975) recognises the importance of contact with other gay people in consolidating a homosexual identity; that ‘coming out’ involves self-recognition as homosexual, first and foremost, but also exploration of the gay community (in Eliason, 1996). Ted progressed to identity commitment (becoming more fully out, to heterosexuals) when he moved from his business to the post office, as an employee. He noticed that one of the men who was a regular at the gay bar, also worked there. That was a milestone in his coming out - working with somebody he knew, a friend - who was publically out.

The powerful influence of London was mentioned by a number of English respondents. For Charlie, 48 (Norfolk), Gavin, 56 (Essex) and Magnus, 64 (Norfolk), London offered a tangible escape, the presence of a huge metropolis where “anything went” and where there were greater possibilities to meet other gay men. In London they could visit gay saunas, bars, pubs, cafes, bookshops, meet others in anonymity, in the security that the city was big enough to avoid detection.

Not all men did visit London of course, but given that it could be accessed (at a cost) by train or coach, many did avail. A number had spent time working in London, and the social experiences in the city fomented a growing security in their gay identity. For some men, London was the place where they had first knowingly met another gay man. Here we see the importance of spaces, “sexually dissident spaces” which act as “ephemeral sites of freedom and control” (Hubbard, 2001).

Music, Film, Literature and Media

In chapter four, we heard reference to how many of the men in Britain and Ireland, had taken comfort in the music of the 1980s, from artists such as Bronski Beat, the Communards, Boy George and Erasure. Many men spoke of how, through their lyrics these artists, challenged heteronormativity, traditional gender roles and heterosexism. With the advent of music videos and the MTV culture in the 1980s, the messages and images of non-conformity became even more powerful and accessible. A number of the men at a Norfolk LGBT group spoke of how David Bowie was influential in changing conceptions and conventions around gender presentation, performance and imagery. Other men spoke of how the words from the music of Bronski Beat or Frankie Goes to Hollywood offered subliminal support and encouragement to them in their confused, closeted adolescent years.

And in sentiments that mirror those of the Irish respondents, the English men are in no doubt that positive media representations of gay men have had a huge impact in changing public attitudes. Indeed, recent decades have seen fundamental changes in media representation of homosexuality. Most British soaps now feature a gay person as a regular character whose sexuality is no longer central to storylines (McCormack, 2012) and beyond this, gay people have become more generally visible in the media; the cumulative effect of which is increased visibility, non-stereotyped presentations, all of which help to demystify old clichés, and contribute to the diminution of homophobia (Schallhorn & Hempel, 2017:1189).

Going back to the 1960s, some men had fond memories and recollections of Julian and Sandy, two camp thespians who were the central characters in a BBC radio comedy, *Round the Horne*, which ran from 1965-1968 (British Library, 2017b). They recall the use of Polari, a form of slang widely spoken within the gay community at that time. Other men remember, with a frisson of excitement the unashamedly homo-erotic Channel 4 screening, in the 1980s of the 1976 movie *Sebastiane*, watched in the hidden privacy of the living room when parents had gone to bed. Indeed, Channel 4 was considered by many of the men as an important outlet for

seeing sexuality portrayed, in pre-Internet days, especially with their risqué French, subtitled movies in the 1980s. Another film to make an impact on the English men was *My Beautiful Laundrette*, which tells the story of British Pakistani, Omar (Gordon Warnecke) and his boyfriend Johnny (Daniel Day-Lewis), as they try to make something of themselves in Margaret Thatcher's Britain of the 1980s. A similar themed film, *East is East* (1999) which contained a same-sex relationship theme, also portrayed the complexities and difficulties of parental expectations, diversity, tradition and sexuality. Movies such as *Brokeback Mountain* and *Philadelphia* also resonated with the men through their acknowledgment of the pain gay men have suffered in recent, times past, whether in the context of the rural mid-west of America, in the 1960s or of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s and 1990s. Theo feels that some of the popular, and ground-breaking TV series-that became available in the early 2000s, made an impact on him in his adolescent years in Suffolk:

I think that in the Noughties [I noticed] there was, a bit more confidence about being gay. I suppose it is that kind of Queer as Folk thing where the guy, I can't remember what his name is, he goes out clubbing for the first time and he meets, sort of opens up his world and I think that as a young man roundabout the same age you thought, yeah, you know, I am just stepping into the world. I've got so much that I want to experience and I don't really want to be held back by anything really.

In seeing representations of social life for gay men in television programmes such as *Queer as Folk*, Will is gaining an insight into a world that exists outside Suffolk, a life that is available in the urban metropolis. Theo did eventually leave Suffolk to work in London.

Literature was also seen as significant. The novel, *Oranges are not the only Fruit*, (1985) explored many themes including same-sex relationships, religious fervour, the complex dynamics of family life and the pains of growing up (British Library, 2017b). A number of the men felt they could relate their stories of childhood with that as portrayed by Jeanette Winterson.

For Nathan, 23 (Cambridgeshire), the role of literature was important in allowing him to understand his feelings and frame them as "normal":

Well, when I spoke to the chaplain at my senior school he knew that there was a section, well, not a section of books, they spread them all over the library so that they weren't all together, that were gay fiction books. And he recommended that I read some of those and ... I'm trying to think. There was a very good trilogy of books that I read that was set in America, Alex Sanchez was the author. And it was just kind of, it was about, it was from three different boy's perspectives and just how they developed and then kind of seeing the progression and it wasn't all kind of Disney fairytale, things did go wrong

but they got resolved, you know. It was basically a normal kind of romance story but just with gay characters as the main characters. So that really, that really helped.

English respondents echo the Irish men in identifying the role of public figures coming out publicly as gay. Once again, the impact of a high-profile sportsperson coming out was seen as pivotal. The example of Welsh rugby player, Gareth Thomas was mentioned a number of times. The value and impact of his coming out lies in the fact that he does not inhabit the theatre or arts, where it is more likely for people to be open about their sexuality (Andersen, 2011). Rather by his living example, and through the telling of his story, he corresponds to the importance of Weeks' *new stories*, he disrupts the lazy heteronormative conflation between masculinity, physical strength and sexuality. Such stories surely have a role in changing attitudes. Indeed, British Social Attitudes surveys have shown marked liberalisation in social views on homosexuality in recent decades. For example, in the survey of 1983, 62 per cent of people believed that sexual relations between two adults of the same sex was 'Always wrong', or 'Mostly wrong'- by 2012 this had fallen to 21 per cent. Similarly, the 1983 survey revealed that only 21 per cent of those surveyed believed sexual relations between two adults of the same sex was 'Rarely wrong', or 'Not wrong at all', a figure which jumped to 57 per cent in 2012 (British Attitudes Survey, 2013).

Economic direction

While not wishing to repeat some of the points made by the Irish men concerning economic impact, I would like to highlight a particular theme that emerged from interviews with the men in England. A theme that emerges from comments such as:

If anything -the thing that has made the difference to gays has been economic. Thatcher-the market economy.....as much as I hate the damn thing, it has made a difference- to gay people over the past 20 years ...ability to be accepted through business (and money) (Magnus, 64, Norfolk).

Or through these quips, from men at a group meeting in Norfolk:

To be honest, I think people are more interested in money these days, money is the new religion really

When people see somebody who's a success in business or whatever, locally, or up in the city or wherever, I think it's the fact that he made something of himself, that he's done well, can afford the big house, the flash car, the foreign holidays, that what they see, not the fact that he's gay

The theme that emerges from the men's discussion around success, wealth and sexuality is one which interprets the neo-liberal economic model in Britain, dominant since Thatcher, as a model which valorises individual wealth and that has changed notions of what a 'successful person' might look like.

I am reminded of what Rose (1999) has to say about neo-liberalism that, under its auspices and influences, "individuals become entrepreneurs of themselves, shaping their own lives through the choices they make among the forms of life available to them" (cited in Weeks, 2007:130).

Weeks' model is in no doubt that the economic liberalism that has swept over many Western countries has exalted the individual over the collective, and elevated individual self-expression and material well-being and undermined many of the traditional sources of solidarity such as trade unions and other collective forms (1998:44).

It seems to me that the men believe that the economic direction of recent decades, has helped shape an environment where money, and success in making it, is seen as an esteemed skill, and cultural aspiration. Money as a new religion. Shining temples of capital and wealth rising up from the marshy old docks around Canary Wharf; a world of hedge funds, boutique broker houses and investment banks. Champagne lifestyles. Manhattan style apartments. Of course, this was not the lifestyle experienced by any of my men, but they read about such lifestyles, and they see images of them portrayed in magazines. They see lists of the "10 most powerful LGB CEO's" and such like. They read about Stonewall's diversity champions index- and how top corporations are embracing LGBT people, encouraging gay corporate leaders to 'come out' for the sake of authenticity, and to reflect clients and customers; they pick-up cues that it allegedly, makes no difference what your sexuality is as long as you can produce: to produce and perform seems to be the key signature to success, within the context of an increasingly neo-liberal and market economy.

In this scenario, or so it would seem, sexuality shouldn't matter. Making money does. If you become rich, and better still are able to make other people rich, it matters little what your sexual orientation is. Sexuality is no barrier to making money. Therefore, sexuality is irrelevant. The neo-liberal model subsumes all other considerations. It rewards the risk-taker and worships the wealth creator.

The point here is that while none of the men interviewed lived this lifestyle, a number were working class men, some were public sector workers, some farmers, but they are indirectly commenting on how the (heteronormative and heterosexist) society that surrounds them, can

overcome negative views on homosexuality and instead, view gay people as significant, and successful, and as worthy citizens - through the lens of money, wealth, and success in the corporate world. Their homosexuality takes a 'back-seat' to their newly acknowledged success. Of course, this analysis blissfully, and completely ignores the residual and tenacious homophobia that still lurks within the corridors of corporations, many of which display disconnect between the existence of diversity awareness and anti-discrimination policies at work and homophobic behaviour of employees (Gregory, 2011: 652).

My interpretation of the men's testimonies, takes me back to Weeks (2007) when in paraphrasing Elliot and Lemert (2006), he notes that "this culture of advanced individualism, has generated a world of individual risk-taking, experimentation and self-expression" (2007:131) and that the neo-liberal economic order, substitutes (or prioritises) "self-governance as the principal form of social regulation". Within this, I see new forms of classification and hierarchies; less about church, more about corporations and the global marketplace; and within these shifts, there can be implications for how our society sees sexuality, or indeed the relevance of it, under certain circumstances. Within the ideological mantras of neo-liberalism which bestow ultimate legitimacy to a philosophy of individualism, there can be seen an implicit acceptance of the individual's right to claim to be sexually different, and ergo an acceptance of sexual diversity. However, a number of the men were deeply suspicious of such developments, and remained nostalgic for the more collective, activist inspired, gay liberation movements they remember in the 1970s and 1980s. They were singularly unimpressed by the turn to individualism, which they perceive as a phenomenon that actively diminishes solidarity, and results in passive acquiescence to a new form of social conservatism, of which neo-liberal gays become members of. We explore these concerns for meanings of sexual citizenship point in more detail, in later chapters.

Impact of Clause or 'Section' 28

In Chapter four, we recalled the notorious Clause 28, and the impact it had in creating a depressing backdrop to the 1980s and 1990s. The issue was raised again here, by a number of respondents but this time it was raised as an issue that fuelled a burning sense of injustice, the resentment of which propelled one or two of the men into activism. Richardson argues that the introduction of Section 28 "represented a recognition, as well as a restriction, of the social and civil rights of lesbians and gay men" in that its supporters were alarmed at what they saw as greater public acceptance of homosexuality and, as such wanted to "keep homosexuals in their

proper place, i.e. within their own private spaces and communities” (Richardson, 2000: 119). It was an attempt to restrict *identity-based* rights. While Andrew (27) was in a Norfolk secondary school, he recalls how his anger translated into resolve, resolve to “do something about it”:

Section 28, was still in operation. This would have been about 2002, just before it was repealed. So I was 16, picked up various materials about it from Stonewall and other organisations and I was starting to do some behind the scenes campaigning with the staff at the school. I guess I saw something that was wrong and thought right, need to do something about this. Rather than just ignoring it and letting it carry on, what can we do to put it right. And that’s the sort of thing I’ve tried to work on through the rest of my career so far as well. So I went through sixth form and to some extent the bullying continued but I was getting more effective as using the coping mechanisms and turning it round to them.

Here we can see shades of what Cass (1979) refers to as feelings of anger born of frustration and alienation, which “can energize the individual into action against the established institutions and can create an activist” (Eliason, 1996).

Stonewall, as referred to by Andrew, and which provided him with literature about section 28, was founded in 1989 by Sir Ian McKellan, Lisa Power and Lord Cashman amongst others as a response to Section 28. Through their campaigns for equality, literature, and public information messages, they were cited as an important feature promoting change (British Library, 2017b). One of their earlier campaigns involved efforts to get the issue of the age of consent discussed in the Parliament, and in 1994, this discussion did happen. While the vote did not approve equal age of consent, the very fact that it was discussed, prompted by Stonewall, made an impression of a young Joshua, in Suffolk:

I remember, around 1994, discussion about the age of consent being lowered from 21 to 18. And as I say I was not out at that time to anyone but I remember it being on the television in the room and I was standing out the room listening to it on the television. And my brother and mum were there listening to it on the news and I would have liked to have gone in and ... But I didn’t, so it could have been an opportunity to talk about it but I wasn’t ready. So okay, oh, okay, I wasn’t with any guys for a long time after that but to me it felt great that the age of consent was being brought down, it wasn’t equalised at that point but that was a good advance. (Joshua, 41, Suffolk).

Voices which highlight injustice, inequality and discrimination, from individuals and groups, have “as their corollary, the demand for inclusion, for equal rights under the law” (Weeks, 1998:47). For Joshua, an isolated young man, aware of his sexuality, but living with family,

closeted and with no voice of his own - such voices were an important beacon of hope during his adolescent years.

Conclusion

While the previous chapter acknowledged and discussed the impact of legislative change, this chapter has considered the background conditions to those legal changes, in other words the context which helped shape the legislative advances, and which have brought forth a form of constitutional sexual citizenship for LGBT people. Here, we have reflected on the transformational, social, and cultural changes witnessed in both Britain and Ireland, and assessed the impact of these changes for the men in the study. The men's testimonies confirm and support Weeks' proposition (1998; 2007; 2016) that it has been the social, and cultural changes which have had the most profound effect on gay people, advancing a liberationist trajectory, which has given rise to the so-called sexual citizen.

The background conditions responsible for legislative advancements, as identified by the men in this study, include: a demise in the moral authority of the churches; the feminist and civil rights movements; gay liberation activists; greater diversity within society; economic prosperity and globalisation; and new stories, voices, and representations within the media, literature and theatre. The men's testimonies reveal how these background changes, supported by legislation, have resulted in huge strides in the cultural narrative about what it means to be gay, and the place of sexual minorities within the national imaginary, and cultural affection, of their societies.

In turn, these strides have encouraged the men, for the most part, to slowly and carefully discard their protective closeted cocoons, and emerge, as their social environments appeared to become more open and inclusive; where their oppressors seemed less potent; where homo-negative and stigmatising cultural narratives were increasingly challenged by new stories, and new voices from an assertive gay rights movement; and where there was increasing understanding of their sexuality as innate, and natural as opposed to debauched, and immoral. They saw other men come out, especially public figures, and the more they came out, the greater the impact; for now you are talking about my brother, my uncle, my cousin, or my friend.

They recall how dramatic and recent social changes in attitudes towards gay people, have corresponded to dramatic personal shifts in their own sense of sexual identity. They have, for

the most part, metamorphosed from hidden, and repressed men, to men who are broadly open and comfortable about assuming a sexual identity, an identity as gay men. As reflective agents, they acknowledge the striking alteration in their subjectivity, and in the place of gay people within their societies. In the words of one gay man, who attended a talk which I addressed, on the findings of this study, in Norwich, July, 2017:

When I think that Britain has forty-five openly gay members of parliament, and Ireland has a gay prime-minister, I have to pinch myself that this is actually real; so much of the shame has just evaporated. This new generation will never know how bad it was in the past.

However, a healthy note of caution is required. As the following chapters will illustrate, living in the rural and small-town environment poses unique challenges for gay men, and we see new, fundamental, and worrying challenges arising on a global scale.

Chapter 7. Life in the rural: a bleak house for gay men?

Dissident sexuality is rarer and more closely monitored in small towns and rural areas. Consequently, metropolitan life continually beckons [to those types] who become sexual migrants instead of being isolated and invisible in rural settings. (in Howard, 1999: xiii).

Introduction

In using the above quote as an example, Howard critiques such commonly held views of rural spaces, as places where queer sex was rare. He goes on to discuss how this was not the case in post war Mississippi (Howard, 1999). Indeed, during this study I interviewed a man, Leo, who had held parties for other men in his rural homestead, in rural County Longford for a thirty-year period from the late 1960s. In an era where there were few, if any, official gay venues in Ireland, news spread of these parties on a farm in the rural heart of Ireland, where men could dance, drink and meet others, within an environment of complete seclusion. Within a few years men would travel for hours to attend his twice or thrice yearly weekenders. And so, is living in the nonmetropolitan such a bleak and hostile experience for gay people? Or can gay men form gay identities (as opposed to just having sex) in the rural? Forty-four interviews with gay men in nonmetropolitan Ireland and England have unearthed examples of resilience, fortitude, acceptance and a determination to live within the context of an environment which can and does pose distinct challenges for LGBT people.

Before we hear and reflect on the testimonies of these men and their experiences of living as a gay man in the rural and nonmetropolitan environment, I would like to address some of the reasons these men choose to live here.

Gay Men Living in the Rural: Choice or Circumstance?

When ascertaining why my respondents choose to live in the nonmetropolitan space, it is useful to form three classifications of men which I refer to as ‘The Remainers’ (Twenty men), ‘The Returners’ (Twelve men) and ‘The Incomers’ (Twelve men). ‘The Remainers’ are men who have never left their general locale; ‘The Returners’ are men from the area but who had left, and have now returned back to live; while ‘The Incomers’ are those who had no previous

connection to the area but have migrated in. The majority of the twelve men who had migrated into the locale (i.e., 'Incomers') are to be found in the English study region. Very few men had migrated into the Irish study region. However, a lot of men had migrated out of the Irish region, and had since returned. This was not the case in England. (See appendices 1 and 2 for more details, in respondent profiles).

Remainers

The reasons 'Remainers' had never left included a concern for their ageing parents, a strong personal identification with their locale, having a 'sense of place', leaving as a fear of the unknown, a perception that a better 'quality of life' was more achievable in the rural space, and among some a defiance not to be 'pushed out' by the forces of heteronormativity and a determination to 'make something of this place' and build a rural gay identity.

The issue of ageing parents figured prominently in explaining the 'Remainers' decision to stay. There was a discernible desire to be nearby if and when something went wrong. Many of these men, felt a strong need to be close by, to be available and able to offer support and help. They often felt that as unmarried men with no families, there was an unspoken duty of care expected of them. Siblings who had started their own families were perceived as people busy with their own lives, bringing up children and the next generation. For the childless gay man, the task of looking after parents as they grew old and frail was seen as a way they could contribute to family and the common good. It provided a role as gay uncle and/or carer. Many of the men accepted and indeed were enthusiastic about this role, which they saw as important and worthy.

Men without siblings felt they had no choice but to embrace elder care responsibilities. Ted (60), an only child, never lived away from the family home in Suffolk. Leaving would have left his mother living alone, but he wanted to look after her and support her. He worked in the Royal Mail in the local town for twenty years and was a carer for his mother when she became ill. At the time of the interview his mother had just recently died, and he had inherited the house. During the interview Ted was in reflective mood. Looking back over his life he acknowledged that he had "given the best years of my life to mum", there was no bitterness or resentment; he does not regret his decision. Ted feels he is now too old to leave and start a new life in the city, it would be too daunting and too expensive.

In a similar way, Stuart, 45 (Norfolk), also an only child, continues to live with his mother in the family home. He cannot countenance leaving her alone in the isolated village. He drives

her to hospital appointments, helps with household chores and helps support the household financially.

Some Remainers spoke of having a strong personal identification with their rural area. It was “home”. When they spoke of home they were not necessarily referring to home in the physical (house) sense, rather home means a certain space and place, parish, county. A place where they grew up, where they had been reared and where they had familial and social connections. They speak of the comfort of knowing a place, of knowing its rhythm, its cadence, its people, its systems and networks, of nuances, of having insider knowledge, of how things are done, of local histories, the significance of certain places, houses or family lines. This was particularly the case in Ireland. Confidence, familiarity, pride as natives of the place, of being part of the mosaic, the fabric of the rural.

The work of Kennedy (2010) also found that the rural holds a connection to the land, and for others, provides a mystical and a spiritual connection. Echoes of this could be seen in this study also. For some, the physical environment included a sense of the historical, cultural and spiritual connections of place. Finian 45, lives in a village in County Sligo, close to his parents’ family farm, which has been in the family for generations. He can never envisage leaving to live in a big city. He says that:

Something ties you here. A sense of place. Absolutely yeah. Very much at home as well, yeah. And there’s a landscape out there like that you’re talking 6,000, 7,000 years ago of occupation up there, going back to the Mesolithic. I mean, it’s a huge amount of time, the cultural depth, the sense of the being of the place is important. Absolutely, yeah.

Kennedy’s (2010) study on gay men in rural Ontario recalls men (which he calls natives) expressing being at a loss to move to the urban context as it was just not for them. The rural space was very much part of their identity. Leaving would be too big a shift. It is all they have ever known. For other natives, moving would entail too much effort to leave and they lacked the resources to do so.

The men in this study express similar sentiments. For some men, knowing the familiar was a safe choice when compared with the fear of the unknown. Leaving the safety and familiarity of the known rural space for the city was an unpredictable and risky move especially for those that did not have the educational qualifications to go to university. Those who could go to university made a move to the city inevitable (and a return less likely). On occasions I would

hear people refrain that ‘those who can get out have got out’, Cyril, 49, (County Leitrim) sums up a theme among many of those who never left the rural:

I left school with a very mediocre leaving cert. So I had neither the skills nor the qualifications to go further afield with it. There was a sense of security of where I was. The familiarity of where I was, the security that came along with my parents owning a long standing business in Leitrim. I would have been totally ill prepared to consider ever moving out.

Within Cyril’s testimony, I am reminded that decisions to remain, or return, were also influenced by the intersection with class or financial position. Men from local families with connections to wealth, land, or businesses (which needed a future heir) often had to make, as it were, ‘trade-off’ decisions between leaving, which may be economically precarious, and staying and/or returning to a more financially stable, and prosperous future. For a number of men, therefore, leaving the rural and nonmetropolitan and/or staying away indefinitely meant abandoning the potential of inheriting family businesses or other forms of wealth, such as land or property.

But even those with a university education, who in times past would have left for the city, are now encountering another issue - high rents in the cities and poor job opportunities. Tim, 24 (Suffolk) illustrates this perfectly. Tim lives with his parents in an ancient [mentioned in the doomsday book] and pretty hamlet in rural west Suffolk. It is accessible only by narrow and twisty country lanes. He attended university in the closest city and graduated with a good degree. Thus far, Tim has not been successful in securing full-time employment and like so many of his friends, Tim is disillusioned and frustrated that the neo-liberal economic model, together with government policies of austerity and wider competitive globalisation forces have helped create an insecure and poorly paid labour market, characterised by zero hours contracts and precarious, unreliable work. He laments that there are simply not enough good graduate jobs available, especially outside London and the big metropolitan areas.

I am of the generation struggling with the lingering effects of the recession and broken promises of a ‘university degree will give you a good job and the ability to afford a flat in the city’, that was sold to us...[and so]... I remain here with my parents in the village in Suffolk- I do still occasionally get yearnings to move somewhere busier like London or Manchester as some friends have done post-university, but a lot of us have remained here. It’s pretty disastrous from a dating perspective but that’s how it is.....and as boring as it can be, Suffolk is home and can be the difficult to give up.

In an era of job insecurity and expensive urban living, the rural can become the safest option for some.

For some remainers, the realities of occupation, job and employment is key to their not leaving. Their reality is to have an occupation which is specific to the rural and which cannot be transferred to the urban setting. Mac, 40 (County Roscommon) is a farmer. He inherited the land from his parents (now deceased). He told me:

I know no other life, I'm a dry stock farmer [meaning he specialises in rearing cattle and sheep]. What good is that to me in the city? I would be a fish out of water there. I couldn't be cooped up like a rabbit in some apartment or the like and roaring traffic all around me.

Among some remainers there was a note of defiance on the question of staying or leaving. "This is our space also. It belongs to us too" (Fintan, 36, County Longford).

When I asked Fintan why he did not leave his small village in south County Leitrim to live in Dublin, Belfast, or even London, but rather only moved forty kilometres to live and work in a town within the same rural region, he was indignant at the presumption that such a move is a natural, preferable or inevitable choice for gay men. "Why should I leave" he exclaimed. Looking through my notes, I underlined the word 'I' because of the emphasis he had placed on it during the interview. Fintan displayed a determination to stay, a determination not to 'be pushed out'; not to leave against his will. He enjoyed the local drama club (one of the best in Ireland), he enjoyed watching the local GAA [Gaelic Football] county team at play. Furthermore, he enjoys the friendliness and banter with people in the local community. This defiance to "stay if I want to" was a common theme among those who had decided not to leave and it was accompanied by a determination "to make the place work for them".

Returners

In her research fieldwork results, Kazyak (2011) interviewed people who "choose" to leave and who also "chose" to migrate back. Among those who migrated to cities and then migrated back home, some returned to care for ageing family members while others moved back to the small-town environment to start a business, while others did just not find the idea of living in cities appealing.

In this study, the 'Returners' are men who are natives of the area, had left but had come back. The main reasons for their return were a concern for ageing parents, to escape the 'rat-race' of the city, and to seek out a cheaper, calmer and easier pace of life. Some men also sought an

escape from the gay 'club culture' and the 'urban gay lifestyle', seeking to embrace a rural gay identity rather than the urban one. Concern and worry for parents was also a powerful draw back home. There were many more Returners in Ireland (ten men) when compared with England (two men). Perhaps one reason is a history of emigration from the west and from north-west of Ireland, with some emigrants returning.

Turlough (51) left County Roscommon for London in the late 1980s. He had a secure job in local government (with the GLC) a job which he enjoyed. Living in London was a seminal experience for Turlough. He came out, explored the gay scene, developed relationships, had a busy social life and became actively involved with LGBT groups and trades unions organisations in London. Turlough looks back on these years as some of the best, most fulfilling and liberating of his life.

Turlough's story reminds me of work by Fellows (1996) where he argues that many rural gay men have felt it necessary to abandon their rural origin in order to bring about an authenticity in their lives. During the interview, Turlough reminisced about how in London he "became a different person", "found his true self". Migrating to London brought openness and freedom for Turlough and reminds us that quite often queer migrations constitute migration as emancipation (Fortier, 2000 cited in Greene, 2006).

However, Turlough was torn between 'living his life' and the thoughts of his mother growing old and ill back in rural Ireland.

So, you see the reason I came back from London was mum, she got ill and I thought, Jesus, I'm going to be here in London and...I kind of thought I don't want to be getting a phone call saying my mother died, you know. And I just, so I said look, just go back. It was that, just a selfish thing that I just didn't want to be getting that call (Turlough, 51, County Roscommon).

Turlough's father had died many years previously and he moved back to live with his mother. His care and attention nursed her back to health. That was fifteen years ago. Despite her return to health, Turlough has decided to remain living with his mother in the family home, afraid that she will fall ill again. His many siblings live locally and have young families. He feels there is an expectation on him as a single man with no children, to take on the responsibility of primary carer for his mother. However, returning home has required Turlough to 'go back into the closet'. Oswald (2002) observes that when gays and lesbians who migrated out of rural areas return, they can experience alienation, marginalisation and invisibility, often a self-imposed invisibility (Brown, 1996 cited in Bush). This has been Turlough's story.

Jerome, 42 (County Galway) was a school teacher in Dublin. But he felt guilty that he lived too far away from his parents to be ‘of any help’. As an only son and a single man, he feels it important to be close to his ageing parents, especially because of the farm work involved:

I was living and working in Dublin and my parents were 120 miles away running the farm, and as time went on I could see them get older and more finding it harder to cope, and I kept thinking, well I’m not much good to them in an emergency or to help them fodder the cattle at the weekends or whatever so that was one of the main reasons I applied for a teaching post down the country.

The theme of guilt was a recurring theme, the guilt of allowing parents to fend for themselves while one lived one’s gay life in the city.

Interestingly, while he did return to his native area, he deliberately chose not to live on his parent’s farm or in the nearest village, opting instead to live in a town some twenty-five kilometres away. He did this to avoid the excessive scrutiny that living ‘too close’ would bring but close enough to be able to travel easily out to the farm and visit his parents when the need arose. He had made a deliberate choice of living nearby but with a suitably appropriate distance between them so as to have some privacy. He felt that if he had lived with them he would have “*lost all sense of independent-self as a gay man, I would have no privacy and no opportunities for having people round to the house*”.

In fact, most of the men in this study who remained in or returned to the non-metropolitan space lived independently and separately from parents but within easy driving distance. In returning they were often giving up their individualist, urban gay identity. They subsumed the possibilities of a gay life in the metropolis, and assumed a new identity, often as carer and companion to ageing parents. Herein, we can appreciate the ways in which a number of men had to negotiate family, and navigate elder care (Price, 2011). The ways in which family responsibilities, and especially obligations towards ageing parents, intersect with sexuality are complex and multidimensional, but for the men in this study, the intersections invariably resulted in a negotiation of their sexuality which forced a compromise between a personal desire to be more open, and a need to recognising the limitations that elder care, in the family home, in the rural locale, imposed upon their agency.

While the pull of the parents was a dominant theme in explaining decisions to stay and/or return, for two men (one in Ireland and one in England) who had been married and since divorced, the key reason for staying did not primarily involve parents but rather, to be close to their children as they grew up. These men often had to counteract negative local, and spousal,

attitudes to maintain contact with their children, but they succeeded and were dedicated to the hard work of parenting. Their children attend local schools, and as can be expected in cases of gay parents, especially in small town communities, other children and teenagers attending local schools overwhelmingly come from families with heterosexual parents (Rosenfeld, 2010). Again, these men experienced an intersectional dilemma, whereby they felt the need to negotiate and maintain a non-performative sexual identity, so as not to embarrass, or be the cause of bullying for their teenage children.

Returning home was a strategy used by some when they wanted to get out of the ‘rat-race’ of the city, to re-assess the direction their lives were taking. For example, Theo, 31 (Suffolk) is public school educated, and a university graduate and has returned from London, so that he can freelance in social media management locally. Working full-time in the city in a highly competitive environment within the context of ever growing work intensification has been replaced with a beautiful (and free) flat (above his father’s GP practice) and the ability to attain the work-life balance he has sought for some time. Herein, we see an indication of the intersection of class and sexuality (Taylor, 2011) where Theo is afforded many more opportunities and possibilities than some other men, due to the financial and asset resources of his family.

The theme of returning to the rural as a way to seek a better quality of life, a less frenetic pace of life was important for others too. Cillian (32) trained and worked as a nurse in Dublin. He returned to live in the provincial market town of Longford and has purchased an apartment close to his parents. While uncertain about how the move would turn out, he is content:

Rural life is for me. Because it’s calmer. It’s quieter, it’s more simple, it’s a bit cheaper. You know, it is easier to live. And you can have your dog. Exactly, do you know what I mean, you can have your big dog, you don’t have to be as worried about the neighbour’s whinging. Do you know, it’s less noisy. It’s calmer, it’s more soothing to ... It’s just easier. And I can go for a pint with my dad who lives in town and likes the pub.

Unfulfilled career aspirations and a desire to get one’s life ‘back on track’ was a theme for a number of the respondents who returned home. Dermot, 43 (County Cavan) tells us:

I came back home, to my native part of Cavan to start my own studio, close to my parents place, a small entrepreneurial enterprise; because restaurant management work in Dublin was badly hit by recession and I wanted to make more of my life and I also felt I was getting sucked in by gay scene in Dublin and didn’t want to let my parents down.

Dermot's reference to 'getting sucked in by the gay scene' was a theme reflected by some of the other men who had returned to the nonmetropolitan space in both Ireland and England. These men had grown weary of the gay scene. Some of the men saw it as increasingly vacuous with the potential of luring them into a club-land world of recreational drug use (and more) which they felt was not in their best interests. Returning 'home' to familiar territory, was seen as returning to a safer place, a refuge from the hedonistic temptations of the city. For these men, it was a deliberate act of abandoning a lifestyle which might see them still clubbing in their forties and fifties, still renting, still single. Some of them spoke about the gay scene as something very exciting but it can suck you in and remove you from the real world.

Dermot's and some other testimonies show men who found the efforts involved in maintaining a certain type of metropolitan gay identity quite exhausting - a too monolithic model of gay masculinity, where the cult of body and youth reigned supreme. They felt a pressure to maintain a gym fit appearance, and they grew weary of what they considered to be a focus on sex, and a general perceived need to conform to certain images and ideals of an urban gay male lifestyle. Leaving the metropolitan means leaving these pressures behind, they cease to exist because their environmental context that gives them meaning and substance ceases to exist. Leaving the city and returning to the rural and small town environment means arriving back, to inhabit social and cultural spaces where the masculine conservative "look", which often downplays overt embellishment, and suppresses expressive sexuality, becomes the mainstream norm, an area where the rugged, "cowboy look" (Gibson, 2013:216) can seem more acceptable than the overly groomed metropolitan body, with its designer label tendencies.

Returning to the rural space as a way of seeking and finding solace, physical isolation and space to reflect was important for a number of men, including with Nicholas, 44, one of my longer interviews (almost three hours). Nicholas lives in the remotest location of all my interviewees high up in the hills of Connemara. He lives alone with his three dogs. For Nicholas, the return home was prompted by the need to be with his mother in the last months of a terminal illness, but this also provided him the opportunity to escape a lifestyle he had grown weary of. Nicholas had lived overseas, for almost twenty years. He lived an exciting, high octane, fast paced, 'work hard- play hard' lifestyle. He acknowledged his tendencies towards profligacy, with much money spent on holidays, the gay scene and recreational drugs. Why would he return to live in the most remote of locations?

I returned to be with my terminally ill mother in Galway for her final months and when she died I decided to stay because I felt I was just too old (40) for all that visa, illegal

entry stuff into the USA...and I was now at a time in life where I had had enough excitement and craziness, enough gay scene, drugs, parties. I wanted to slow down, to in a sense, detox from what had been a very exciting and very adrenaline filled life , to smell the fresh air, have some space and SILENCE, and what better place than Connemara for that!

Aside from parental obligations, within Nicholas's interview testimony, it was also possible to discern a theme which seemed to reflect his belief that age was an intersectional factor in his decision to return. We see here, a theme which reflects the high status accorded to youth, and attractiveness (often considered synonymous) within the gay world, with youth often providing a form of social mobility (Brake, 2013:153). With his youth past, Nicholas returned with little in the way of money or asset accumulation. Nonetheless, with the help of family connections he set up a local business in the area.

When reflecting on why gay men would ever decide to remain in, or move to the non-metropolitan and rural space, it can be tempting to make an assumption that they are deliberately and actively seeking the physical isolation, the wide open spaces and freedom of movement that comes with low population density areas. That they are chasing the rural idyll. The peace and tranquillity of the 'countryside'. Indeed, the excellent work by John Edward Greene (2006) on gay men in rural Australia found that many of the respondents stayed in the rural for the physical isolation that came with living in that space. By contrast, this study finds that the reason gay men remain in or move to the non- metropolitan are many and varied with relationships and attention to family ties featuring prominently. In fact, analysis of the interviews indicates that the aforementioned attractions of the rural were not the primary driver for these men, with only a small number identifying 'seeking the rural life' as a *primary* motivation in their decision to live there. Some of these 'rural-seekers', were in the 'Incomers' category.

Incomers

In addition to a small number of dedicated rural-seekers, it was interesting to observe that some men had migrated into the English study region specifically to take up the offer of employment, often in local government or in the energy, chemical and technology sectors. Only one man living in the Irish region had moved there to take up employment - the labour market opportunities in north-west Ireland may compare unfavourably to those in the East of England. Finally, a small number of men in the English study region moved there to follow partners who had moved to take up work and employment in Norfolk (both in the agribusiness sector).

Men who moved as rural-seekers per se, believe that the physical landscape – rolling fields, beaches, forests, hills, fen, moor, rivers and lakes offers psychological and emotional peace. For Harry, 46, the ability to spend his free time birdwatching, on the fens or the north Norfolk coast is priceless. It is an integral part of his life and is one of the main reasons he lives in Norfolk.

For Malachy, 66, the attainment of physical isolation was one of the main reasons for his moving from the industrial north-west of England to rural County Leitrim. Malachy deliberately chose to buy a small farm in one of remotest locations he could find. Not only has he embraced the physical isolation, the physical isolation is the key reason he chooses to live here. Greene (2006) found that the men in his study of rural Australia lived there for the physical environment and not the people. Malachy's small farm is in wild country many miles from the nearest town. The landscape is one of hills, with rushes filling the wet fields, forest plantations (on farms vacated many years ago), derelict houses, moor and mountain in the backdrop with the majesty of Lough Allen in the valley below his cottage. Malachy deliberately sought out this place for the physical isolation it offered; the lack of noise; the lack of people. Living alone, he tends the farm and keeps some cattle and hens. This does not mean that Malachy is living as life devoid of social interaction. On the contrary he sometimes drives long distances to attend the occasional LGBT network meeting and has joined a local photography club, but he does this in the comforting knowledge that he returns to his cottage and his perfect isolation.

During my research I met with a group of people who I will cheekily refer to as the "Country Lifestyle Set". The group of people are actually part of an established gay group in East Anglia. The official group was set up by Harry who had moved to the region from an overseas English-speaking country to join his partner, who works as a local veterinary surgeon. Harry correctly identified a need to establish connections between LGBT people in this large rural area.

The group meets one evening every week in a local, traditional pub in a pretty coastal town. It is a fine market town, with a pier, harbour, and a beach close by. It is a quaint town, with some solid Victorian architecture and becomes quite busy in the summer with tourists exploring the coast and fens. I went along to one of the Wednesday meets on a cold, wet and windy winter's evening. About ten-twelve people, of all genders, attended. During an evening of engaging conversation, I got to know more about these people and how and why they had come to live in this remote but beautiful part of East Anglia. What I found most fascinating was that, with

the exception of two or three local members, the group was primarily comprised of people who had moved from the cities, mainly London.

Why did they move here? The answers became clearer as the evening wore on; they had come here deliberately in search for a slower pace of life, and a place with less traffic, less congestion, less pollution; an environment which cleaner and less stressful. A place where beaches, dunes, forests and fens lay on their doorstep. Most of those who had made this move from urban metropolis to rural, said they 'had had enough' of the stresses and strains of metropolitan life. One man (an early retired school teacher) said that the final straw was a huge new development of hundreds of apartments at the end of his road in London, which had the effect of creating constant congestion and noise. He spoke of the constantly expanding population with pressures on every green space and the loss of independent retailers on his high street often to be replaced with estate agents and coffee chains.

By contrast, this rural town has retained much of its traditional character and engaging with village life was an altogether more 'human experience'; shopkeepers and even the post office staff had time to chat and engage. Most days, he and other 'Incomer's' met on one of the many nearby beaches to walk their dogs, and they also had occasional informal coffee mornings in each other's houses. Kennedy (2010) refers to such people as 'Transplanters', who have made a conscious decision to move to the rural environment, but we can see intersections with class, and mobility (Taylor, 2011) in that their access to previous resources and connections provides them with many more opportunities to enjoy a certain type of rural lifestyle, a lifestyle they have chosen.

I formed an impression that these men were, in some ways, quite different to most of my respondents. They had moved from a life of 'career and city' to a new life of 'country and leisure' because they were able to do so, and at a time in their lives when they wanted to. For the most part their socio-economic position provided them with greater agency and choice. Most were property owning and had sold flats or houses in the city for quite substantial sums thus enabling them to purchase excellent properties in the area, with enough money left over for savings. Some kept small flats in the city and returned there for theatre and other social events. Some had taken early retirement from their careers in London, some were retired or semi-retired; some were able to work freelance. All seemed financially secure and none depended on public transport.

These privileges marked them out as different from many of my interviewees. As discussed earlier, for most men in this study the decision to live in the non-metropolitan space was based on pragmatic, sometimes pressing reasons: concern for ageing parents, economic circumstances, or a need for security, stability and refuge. They have been fully exposed to the challenges of living as a gay man in the non-metropolitan space but remain resilient and determined to make the most of their situation and location. I could not shake off the perception that the “Country Lifestyle Set” were fortunate enough to have the resources to live in the rural on an “à la carte” basis, able to choose their terms, in a position to take full advantage of the good whilst able to avoid much of the ugly that the rurality-sexuality intersection can bring; the daily challenges, humiliations and micro-aggressions (Rollock, 2012) that many of my interviewees have faced over many years working and living in these areas.

Kennedy (2010) also suggests that such “Transplanters” can often be more outspoken, challenging social norms, attempting to bring their sexual identities into the discourse of everyday life, and that this can sometimes bring tensions with the “natives” who may feel more social pressures to conform to heteronormative cultures of the rural. This correlates with my observations of the relationships between the “Incomers” of the East Anglia “Country Lifestyle Set” and the local, ‘native’ gay, bisexual and lesbian population. Local ‘native’ gay people tended not to frequent the newly established LGBT group in their town. It had been set up by outsiders. Perhaps the venue for the weekly meetings, a local pub, did not afford enough privacy. Whatever the reasons, I was told by the group that their perception and understanding was that the local ‘native’ gay population preferred to meet one another in the privacy of their homes, organising house parties and such like. There was a degree of social segregation and separateness with a reluctance of local ‘native’ gay populations to interact with the Incomers.

For Alfie, 35 (County Sligo) who owns a small antique store in a local village, ‘Incomers’ are privileged in that they are able to use their agency to craft a lifestyle for themselves which allows them to “have the best of both worlds”, a foot in the rural and a foot in the metropolitan.

Personally, I don’t think there any advantages for a gay man living here alone but [these older couples from Dublin] can create their own little world ...and that’s why they’re living here because they’ve got [bought and renovated] their own farmhouse or cottage or country house, [often with a little land attached] neighbours can’t see them [total privacy and isolation] and they’ve got the countryside lifestyle, the rural lifestyle.

Alfie has observed quite a number of gay couples who have moved from the cities to rural areas, these couples are usually retired or have jobs that allow them to work remotely. They

often had friends from the city stay with them for the weekends and then they would perhaps go to the local country pubs with their friends to listen to traditional Irish music or whatever. They would go hillwalking and focused their time on their country homes. They would often escape to Dublin or London or overseas on holidays. They resided in the country but seemed apart. They had come to the country for the lifestyle, the scenery, tranquillity, physical isolation and not the local people! There are correlations with the work of Green (2006) in this regard.

However, for the men who took part in the interviews for this study, the majority live here by choice, but it is a choice which is constrained and driven by circumstance.

Life in the rural: benefits for gay men

Despite the perception that the nonmetropolitan can be a hostile and unwelcoming space for gays and lesbians, some studies do show that there can be positives as well as negatives. Quietness, tranquillity, natural beauty, lower cost of living and proximity to family and friends are some of the advantages that have been cited by gay people living in the rural (Cody & Welch, 1997; Oswald and Culton, 2003; Preston & D'Augelli, 2010). Boulden's study of gay men in Wyoming reported the majority as actually being very happy, they appreciated the "relaxed, laid back, slower pace" and as one of Boulden's respondents said, "walking down the street, knowing that when I meet someone, we will make eye contact and say Hi" (2001:65).

A number of respondents in this study referred to the benefits of the rural in having a sense of community. When referring to a 'sense of community' they were insistent that they were not referring to the presence of a 'gay community' but rather 'community in general'. I interpreted their notion of a 'sense of community' to refer to a general sense of continuity (of people) and a sense of people permanence. When you see the same people day in day out, they become familiar faces, it becomes easier to engage in chat and conversation, social situations often throw you together, you become aware of shared acquaintances, and common interests and slowly there develops a chain of social interconnections that helps to construct and bind together a community of people who feel safe in the knowledge that they 'know' others (Boulden, 2001; Preston & D'Augelli, 2013). It was put to me that within this context there is an increased sense of collective identity forged around the locality and its community of people.

While many of the men concurred with this, in general they were ambivalent about the benefits of rural life for them as gay men. This quote is illustrative of a fairly typical answer,

Mmm, let me think, hmm, well to be honest, I don't know that there are many advantages for gay men [per se] except for the non-gay advantages of lifestyle, pace, quality of environment that benefit people in general, but being gay, if being gay is a big part of your life, then the disadvantages outweigh the advantages really. (Gavin, 46, Norfolk)

Throughout the fieldwork, men engaged in a reflective process, a game of cognitive 'ping-pong', weighing up the 'pros and 'cons' for them as gay men of living in the nonmetropolitan space. In many of the interviews, I noticed that the men would engage in a type of self-narrative appearing to attempt to persuade themselves, convince themselves that the rural did add value to their lives and that things weren't "that bad".

Patrick came to live in rural Donegal from a more urban part of southern Ireland, purely because this is where his very attractive and well paid public sector job is located. He envies the cultural activities, diversity and gay infrastructure and romantic possibilities that metropolitan living could bring him. But he also acknowledges some of the advantages that rural living can bring:

I mightn't have Soho but I have Murvagh Strand [Beach] ten minutes from my door to go running on a Saturday morning. (Patrick, 48, Donegal)

Many of the men became quite animated when identifying the significantly reduced living costs, in particular housing costs. Many of the men know people living in the city and were well aware, and often astounded and aghast, at the housing costs in Dublin or London. "I could never have this much living space in the city" was a common refrain. On this point they were clear that living outside of the cities was a clear winner.

Respondents believe that the rising rental and property prices in the large cities is actively changing the long-established pattern of gay people migrating from the rural to the city. In particular, the younger respondents would often muse that a rite of passage which involved a period of city living was becoming increasingly unattainable for their generation. For them the city is a place where they are free to explore gay culture, seek romantic opportunities and where the unexpected can happen. However, prohibitively expensive housing costs are a genuine deterrent. With no end in sight to rising property prices, the hopes of ever being able to buy a flat and make a life in the city as a home owner seem to grow more distant and remote every year. Shut out of living in the metropolitan acts as an incentive to stay local, try to build a life and career closer to home where there is at least some possibilities of home ownership. With increasing numbers now choosing to stay in the nonmetropolitan (a choice often dictated by

circumstance), the issue of gay identity emerges. Surely the metropolitan gay identity does not survive outside the metropolitan bubble, so the question ‘what a rural gay identity look like’ is a moot question indeed and will be addressed later.

On one particular issue there was unanimous agreement, namely that advances in technology and social media were providing new opportunities for rural gay men and reducing the sense of physical isolation from other gay people. The internet has quickly become a vehicle by which rural [gay] men are able to branch out of the local and seek others for socio-sexual connections, Kennedy (2010). For many gay men the Internet has taken on features of the urban gay community in the sense that, men can now congregate via virtual places and events. This brings to mind the work of Mowlabocus who argues that gay male subculture is now both digitally and physically manifested (2010).

For the men in this study the arrival of the internet, broadband technology and smart phones has made living in the rural more tolerable. It is possible to connect with other like -minded people, access LGBT information and meet others for friendship or sex. The point was made that in such circumstances, living in the country had the potential to offer people ‘the best of both worlds’: tranquillity, natural beauty, slower pace of life and access to a gay (online) world.

Life in the rural: challenges for gay men.

The men in this study spoke at length about the challenges rural life posed to them as gay men. Perhaps this should come as no surprise given that the limited research on gays and lesbians in the nonmetropolitan and rural has tended to identify, highlight and confirm the many challenges faced by gay people which can include isolation, loneliness, lack of access to health resources, marginalisation, exclusion and even violence (Bell & Valentine, 1995; Cody & Welch 1997; Fisher et al, 2014; Hardy and Chakraborty, 2015). In their study of gay men in nonmetropolitan areas of the southern USA, Preston & D’Augelli (2013) report that gay men in rural areas experience high levels of stigma with conditions such as social homogeneity, lack of anonymity, rural people’s lack of knowledge about homosexuality, and traditional religious beliefs contributing to this stigmatized environment.

The main disadvantages revolve around the lack of a gay social and cultural infrastructure, difficulties in meeting partners, isolation from other gay people, heteronormative social attitudes, the perceived need to engage in performative masculinity, intense inquisitiveness and

curiosity, objectification, lack of anonymity, and the unpredictable repercussions and consequences of coming out in a rural environment.

“It’s so difficult to meet other gay people”

One of the most oft cited disadvantages was the lack of gay bars and venues. In the Irish study region there was no dedicated gay bar, although there were occasional ‘gay nights’ in some nightclubs and the LGBT group ‘Outwest’ [the first gay support group to establish in rural Ireland] also organised occasional gay social events in the region. In the English study region there are a small number of gay bars in the urban conurbations of Norwich and Ipswich with Norwich perceived as having the slightly better gay scene. For those men who lived in and around these urban conurbations it was quite easy to access these gay venues. However, Norfolk and Suffolk are large rural counties with large geographically disparate communities and for those men living in the rural heartlands of these counties, gaining access to the towns for entertainment or to attend social events, entailed complex negotiations around transport and accommodation. Similarly in Ireland, as Nicholas (44) who lives in remote Connemara points out:

To go into Galway city, to the one gay bar there, means getting a taxi there and a taxi back – that’s 100 euro alone.. Men who live further out might have to book a hotel room in the city for a night.....and to be honest the gay bar is pretty depressing and grim anyway.

In fact, going to a gay venue for the Irish and English respondents often entailed an expensive expedition to either Dublin or London, a cost which was beyond the resources of some. The lack of gay infrastructure, bars and venues is one of the main drawbacks of rural life for these gay men. What they miss is not so much the alcohol (!) but rather the opportunity to share a social space with other gay men (and women), a social space where they can ‘be themselves’; a place where they need not worry about showing same-sex affection in public; a place where they can speak openly about intimate issues without fear of being overheard (and judged); a place where they can flirt and flaunt without fear of heterosexist and homophobic censure.

For the men in this study the lack of gay venues accentuates feelings of isolation and invisibility, it reminds them of the heteronormative cultural hegemony which characterises the rural space and highlights their marginal status as gay men. The lack of gay bars and gay venues denies these gay men and women the opportunity to socialise together collectively in social spaces, free from conformist heteronormative pressures. Heteronormativity can be defined as the institutions, structures, practices, identities, and understanding that legitimize and

hierarchize heterosexuality as the normal, natural, and only socially and morally accepted form of sexuality (Rubin, 1992). The lack of dedicated gay venues forces them into socialising in straight, hetero-dominant and heteronormative spaces which may be safe and accepting only insofar as gay people conceal outward expressions of same sex affection. To do otherwise is to challenge and unsettle tacit heteronormative norms or codes of behaviour which may well carry social penalties such as ridicule, exclusion, harassment or even violent attack. But in complying with such codes and norms, they are in effect, colluding in their own silencing and invisibility.

Many men had previously lived in cities and they spoke of how in the cities, one can escape to the refuge of the gay club, the gay bar, the gay restaurant, the gay café, the gay bookstore. There are few if any such escape routes in the nonmetropolitan space.

Charlie, 48, speaks about his area (North Norfolk) as a “gay desert”:

In the city there are little enclaves and corners and stuff...but here there are no gay pubs so you have to go to regular pubs....and I can think of a couple of pubs that if you were sitting together with somebody and started to have a typical gay kind of banter...you will draw attention to yourself.....you just can't fully relax, be yourself and let loose basically, most definitely not.

On a theoretical and ideological level “sexually dissident spaces” (Hubbard, 2001) are important, what Hubbard calls “ephemeral sites of freedom and control” which means spaces that disrupt dominant geographies of heterosexuality by creating transitory sites for sexual freedom and pleasure where the immoral is moral and the perverse is normal. The lack of a gay scene impedes and restricts opportunities for meeting other gay [sexually dissident] people and reduces the possibility of establishing romantic same-sex relationships.

While gay communities and venues are virtually non-existent in rural areas, connections between gay people, however fragmented, do exist (Preston & D'Augelli, 2013). Meeting partners through a ‘friend of a friend’ is not uncommon, and some men also frequented tourist towns in the region during busy periods in the hope of meeting visiting men. Some of the Irish men mentioned a local small town which had become a very popular venue for stag and hen parties. Every weekend, hundreds of stags and hens converge on the picturesque riverside town from all over Ireland. Some of the participants in this study travel to this town at the weekends when, during peak season, many hundreds of men would be present in the town. With the assistance of gay apps on smart phone, or by just luck, they sometimes chance upon meetings and encounters. This brings to mind the work of Mowlabocus, who refers to “digital cruising”

(2010: 200) highlighting how digital forms of communication are creating “hybrid spaces” that can reconfigure the spaces and places gay men move through and encounter one another (ibid).

‘The rural makes me an object of curiosity’

Living in an environment where there are few openly gay men results in a situation where men who do disclose and who are open about their sexual orientation become ‘noticed’, ‘labelled’, ‘categorised’ and recognised, seen through the prism of their sexuality. They become that rare beast, an openly gay man in a rural or small-town space. As such they can be the subject of intense curiosity.

In Kennedy’s study of gay men in rural Canada we hear of one man describing his rural life as “being watched by many eyes” or being under intense scrutiny in a small town (2010). The men in this study who were ‘not out’ often spoke about how the community can still speculate about you or have their suspicions about your sexuality. It might be that you are not married, or that they have not seen you with girlfriends, or they have observed you having an undue interest in fashion or that you were perceived as urbane and cultured. Whatever the reason, men can become the subject of ‘sexuality speculation’ for a variety of reasons. Darren, 44, lives in a small hamlet in west Norfolk. He moved there with his partner Chad two years ago from a city in the north-east of England. He is not out in his local community, but encounters much intrigue:

The little lady that runs the paper shop is a nice wee thing. I collect all my dog magazines from there. She said to me, ‘Oh, your brother popped in and got them yesterday’ and I knew she was fishing for information because she knows we live together...but I said, Oh OK Thanks and walked out...but you could see that she was waiting with baited breath for how I would respond.

Most of the men in this study cited such examples of intense curiosity and of being asked leading questions by some local people, and they were often unclear as to whether this apparent ‘need to know’ was simply for gossip, intrigue or malice. The social milieu within which these men operate is intimate and close and they interact with the same people over a period of time. Invasive questions can and are asked, and at times it is difficult to interpret whether they are asked with friendly intent or otherwise.

Many of the men who were in relationships spoke of, what I might call, the *power of the stare*, when they were in social settings as a couple. It can be difficult to go unnoticed as a same sex couple. For Kazyak, this visibility occurs and is sustained via the interconnected nature of rural

life and being seen at various places in the town with the same person. This visibility is tied to being seen with your partner rather than hanging a rainbow flag outside (Kazyak, 2011). Nicholas recalls the time when his overseas boyfriend, Carlos, came to live with him in Connemara:

I must admit I was always more comfortable walking into the local pub on my own rather than with Carlos.....because of that stupid thing of, what do other people think ...I know it sounds stupid but when you're walking into the pub on a winters night where there's only locals around- it's the judgement I can't stand, you can see them look up, and they did look up and stare, and the look was disapproving from some, dismissive from others. Some people didn't give a shit, but it's the inquisitiveness...Oh, there's the gay couple.and I remember times when we would go grocery shopping together in the local shop and Carlos might shout over, Do we need bread hunny? And the shop staff would look up at us and at one another.

Put simply, by socialising as a male same-sex couple you attract attention and you are 'othered'. For Gavin (44) and Philip (72), even the simple act of going out as a couple on Saint Valentine's Day to a local restaurant ended up making a statement and attracted curious glances and the occasional snigger. Gavin says that they brace themselves for the first ten minutes because there will be looks and whispers but after that it usually dies down. Most of the gay men in this study recalled similar occasions in social spaces such as shops, pubs, restaurants.

It's not only same sex couples. Even the single gay man can be a subject of curiosity, intrigue and distrust, stereotyped as a sexual predator and a slightly sinister and lonely figure. Preston & D'Augelli (2013) argue that people living in rural communities often only understand LGBT people based on common stereotypes. Often, the single rural gay man is made to feel 'othered' and common to other LGBT people can experience numerous "microaggressions" (Rollock, 2012) as outlined by Nadal (2013).

Charlie, 48 (Norfolk) mentions something that happened to him while he was waiting for me on the evening of our interview [the interview was held at the pub which hosts the local LGBT group]:

For example, when I was waiting for you, I walked up to a young man because I thought he might be you and I said, Oh Are you Aidan? He looked at me with such complete disgust as if I was {coming on to him}...but I just asked a simple question

Examples of small but significant slights such as these abound. Mac (44) lives on the remote family farm in County Roscommon. He lives alone, his parents having died. Mac is most certainly not out but he feels that people in the locality whisper and speculate about his

sexuality. He is unmarried and the community knows he has never had a girlfriend. He feels his life has been lived under their social microscopic lens. He has met men for sex through gay dating sites. His house is located on a narrow (but widely used) country road and he is certain that local people have commented about the “strange cars” parked outside his house at “all hours of the night”. He was seeing a man (Tony) regularly at one period and he told me of people slowing down while driving past his house to “get a good look,” if they could see another man coming or going from the house. He says that it is quite common for local farmer neighbours to stop by and chat about farming, or ask for the lend of machinery and such like, but he has noticed that they will never enter the house to conduct the chat indoors or never enter for a cup of tea – something they would regularly have done while his parents were alive. Local men avoid been seen alone with Mac in case of gossip, or “slagging”, or fearful of “guilt by association” and being tarnished with the same brush of sexual deviance.

The rural does not permit PDA

Many men feel that another disadvantage of living in the non-metropolitan space is that they feel it inhibits public displays of affection. Gay men and lesbians face particular dilemmas regarding public displays of affection (Boulden, 2001; Che et al, 2013; Preston & D’Augelli, 2013) and this can be especially problematic in the nonmetropolitan, small town and rural setting. Rural spaces are highly heteronormative spaces emphasizing nuclear (heterosexual) family lives and stereotypical gender roles and interactions (Annes & Redlin, 2012). Cyril feels that the provincial town culture inhibits casual PDA (public displays of affection):

I will occasionally show my partner signs of affection, I’ll give him a quick kiss, sitting in the car, even on the street in town without thinking about it. But then again, if Finian puts his hands in my pocket, while we are walking down the street, I’ll turn around and say, STOP!!!, do you not know where you are, you’re walking along the street in this town, people don’t need to know this and they don’t want to know this!!!

In particular, Cyril worries that such displays will only draw attention to them as a couple, cause gossip and this might affect Finian’s barber shop business. Preston & D’Augelli (2013) report that gay men who owned businesses worried about keeping their businesses due to social attitudes and reactions.

For them, displays of intimacy in public spaces are not private casual, unthinking affairs; such displays assume political significance that can invite negative reactions. The men spoke of the rural space as having its own unwritten codes of behaviour with same sex intimacy firmly off limits. Many of the men who were ‘out’, have had incidences where they have been jokingly

told by friends and family, for example when attending weddings, and stag parties and such like, “to behave themselves” (Enda, County Leitrim), or “don’t not get carried away” (Graeme, County Longford), and “you’re not going to snog, or dance together, are you?” (Darren, Norfolk).

The men see such supplications as proof that gay men in the rural setting are being offered forms of conditional acceptance, predicated upon not breaching certain codes of behaviour, of not performing or showing any same-sex intimacy or affection. This reminds gay people that they are welcome and included only so far. It also forces them to self-censor so as to avoid unsettling or upsetting the hetero norms and unsettling the delicate peace accord that equality legislation has brought.

There was a consensus among the men in this study that local straight people don’t want to witness PDA. They don’t want to know about same-sex intimacy. They don’t want to see it expressed. Gay men are tolerated and accepted on condition that they de-sexualise the performance of their gay identity. It must appear in word only. Never manifest in a physical, intimate or erotic sense.

Graeme, 32, (County Longford) recalls the time he did kiss a man at a work social event; the reactions of his (mainly female) work colleagues was a mix of voyeurism and disgust. One of the women felt that such a kiss in the public realm was inappropriate. He felt he was “the talk of the town” for weeks later.

Men made clear distinctions between what would be ‘acceptable’ in the metropolitan city against what was impossible in their small town environment

I suppose when I’ve been with blokes in town I wouldn’t walk hand in hand with him, in the main street. I’ve sort of felt uncomfortable about doing that and there were some occasions where some guys were sort of shouting abuse at us and that sort of thing. Whereas you walk through Trafalgar Square or Soho- people don’t seem to mind. (Joshua, 41, Suffolk)

The perceived inability to simply hold hands in public in their own locales irked many men. In their study of handholding by lesbian couples in North America, Che et al (2013) label handholding as a political act whether it was explicitly avoided in public spaces (out of fear) or boldly done as a defiant display. Both are indeed political, with Che et al arguing that one is resignation to subjugation and the other a refutation of such fear. Their study shows that while handholding by lesbian couples in public has become more common in the past twenty-five

years in North America, it still remains an overtly political act or risky behaviour. In this study, none of the men felt it safe or wise to engage in public handholding in their local areas. And yet, for Brown (2007) allowing for expression of sexuality in public spaces rather than just in designated gay urban communities, is a constructive and practical attempt to offer a non-hierarchical, participatory alternative to a gay scene. The nonmetropolitan areas in this study are quite some distance from this, despite the presence of equality legislation and equal marriage at a national level.

But it goes beyond public handholding, testimonies from these men reveal the extent to which they engage in self-censorship in both public and private settings. While there may be greater acceptance, such acceptance as does occur is contingent upon non-performative gay identity; in fact, no expression of intimacy whatsoever.

The rural insists on hegemonic masculinity

Preston & D'Augelli assert that most gay men in rural areas adopt, whether consciously or not, a traditional masculine gender role which facilitates community and family acceptance. In their study exploring gay men's subjectivity in France and the USA Annes & Redlin (2012) refer to this as adopting "hetero-centred ideas about masculinity". They explain that growing up in rural cultures, these men tend to adopt similar hetero-centred ideas, ideas which are coercive and disciplinary as they homogenize rural gay men's discourse and masculine identities. In their study they found that even as rural gay men came together to assert and support their gay identities, being masculine and looking straight were clearly appropriate and desirable features. During my interaction with gay men in the local groups, I observed how masculinity was valorized and prized. A number of men would assert that "people wouldn't know I was gay" or "people say they would never have guessed I was gay because I appear, look and sound macho". In contrast, being effeminate was clearly disparaged.

Masculinity and in particular notions of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995), which limit the possibilities of identity negotiation by gay men, for new intimacies which would unsettle or threaten the existing gender order (Cooper, 2013: 73) are powerful concepts, and they are apparent in this study. The men feel the need to strive to fit a conventional model of masculinity in order to pass as "normal". The men in my study agree that their rural and small-town environments place a premium on displays of masculinity and that they have "picked this up" from an early age; they too strive for and perform masculinity. Many of the men feel that their rural locales may accept their identity as a gay man *if* they are macho and masculine, but to be

effeminate and gay is quite another matter. Here we can see that it is hegemonic notions of masculinity that are important, with images of rural masculinity emphasizing physical strength, hardiness, and individualism (Bell, 2000; Bell 2006 in Preston & D'Augelli, 2013).

Annes and Redlin note that for gay men “masculinity is more problematic than sexuality” (2012:277) an idea which is reinforced by recent work by Silva (2016) on rural straight men who have what he refers to as “bud-sex” (Silva, 2016), where straight rural and married men engage in “bud-sex”, a specific type of male-male sex that reinforced their rural masculinity and heterosexuality. Through complex interpretive processes, Silva’s participants reworked non-normative sexual practices - those usually antithetical to rural masculinities - to construct normative masculinity. Again, we see the prioritisation of masculinity over sexuality.

Boulden (2001) argues that in the rural context certain ‘non-masculine’ behaviours are simply not permissible and are not be tolerated in public. The testimonies of the gay men in this study demonstrate that they see being masculine as a necessary survival strategy and the rural gay men in this study are, as Annes and Redlin also note, vigilant about their lives - their appearance, their behaviour, and their social networks (Annes and Redlin, 2012). Turlough remarks that:

You can come out but don’t come out too far. You know. Or if you’re coming out you’d better not wear that pink t-shirt with the blue hat, you know. There’s a level you will be accepted at here. In London or even Dublin to an extent they wouldn’t care less but do that in the street in Boyle...they will say nasty things about you (that queer boy and stuff like that) (Turlough, 51, County Roscommon)

Most men, in both Ireland and England, agreed that dress code which deviates from the macho norm is a subversive act. To be a non-conformist in such matters was not without consequence. The men in the study are acutely aware of the importance of dress code, of appearing masculine and macho. Graeme, 32 (County Longford) spoke about the dress code among men in the “country” as being “safe” and “not loud”. The stereotype of countrymen was repeated by many respondents who talked about dress code, country men wear clothes that are not too colourful or flamboyant. Here we can see the role that normative hegemonic masculinity plays (Cooper, 2013: 73). Graeme (32, County Longford) says he finds it difficult to live up to such normative conceptions because he likes fine clothes, and is fussy about his appearance; whereas men in the “country” are supposed to be buff, strong, not concerned about their appearance, not shrill or effected, enjoy a pint in the pub (not wine or gin & tonic), be involved in sports, especially GAA, rugby or soccer, not be overly interested in reading novels or in “fancy, city type food”.

In the 2001 study on gay men in Wyoming, Boulden's respondents reflected that "the guys that tend to be more masculine, and less stereotypically gay in appearance tend to survive better. Chances of being happy in a rural area if you're an effeminate male are much less" (Boulden, 2001:67). Sedgwick's (1991) term "effeminophobia" (the fear of effeminacy) is of relevance here, whereby the effeminate man is either, depending upon the context, a figure of fun or a monster to be feared (Richardson, in Annes & Redlin, 2012). Effeminophobia can be particularly pronounced in rural areas where there is an image of rural masculinity emphasizing physical strength, hardiness, and individualism (Bell, 2000; Bell, 2006 in Preston & D'Augelli, 2013).

The rural requires self- monitoring

Men in this study spoke of how they need to engage in self-censorship, the need to continuously check yourself, your mannerisms, language, inflections and behaviours lest they betray your sexuality and/ or betray your lack of masculine capital.

Men self-censor in a whole host of ways, in the way they talk, the way they walk, in things they say, things they don't say. They are always 'on guard', cautious of inadvertently violating the codes, violations that can have implications:

I would never flaunt it in people's faces, there is a code to be adhered to and it does not involve flamboyance, it does not involve demonstrating your relationship through PDA, it does not involve performing in a non-masculine way, and you don't 'push the boat out' too far (Mel, 46, County Longford).

The gay men accepted that they engage in self-censorship - they felt this was a pity but that it was a necessary requirement of living and surviving in the social landscape. Self-censorship was often aimed at avoiding 'trouble at the interface' ...the interface of sexuality and a non-diverse, nonmetropolitan, heteronormative society. They felt these tensions were more profound in rural areas simply because of the lack of diversity, the lack of a visible gay community and the dominance of hetero cultures.

The gay men in this study were all too aware of the stereotypes that abound about gay people and of the specific issues in rural communities where the sheer lack of visible gay people meant that people in the community were simply unaccustomed to examples of gay couples, gay intimacy and gay community. Their testimonies often reveal that they feel the need to negotiate their sexuality, accommodate it, 'water down' its manifestations, and de-sexualise themselves,

their language, homes, and clothes so as to avoid unpleasant reactions, marginalisation and exclusion.

For those gay men who did not migrate overseas or to the big cities, the evidence to date is that they have had to remain largely invisible in order to live in rural communities (Green, 2006). In, *Out Our Way: Gay and Lesbian Lives in the Country*, Riordan concludes gay men living in rural areas of Canada often feel the need to ensure that their lives are sanitised and de-sexualised in order to be tolerated (in Green, 2006).

‘The rural requires vigilance at all times: one wrong move can haunt you forever’

A recurring theme in both the Irish and English interviews was the need for gay men to be vigilant. This aligns with Boulden’s study of gay men in Wyoming where participants described being constantly aware of their surroundings, of being hyper-sensitive or hyper-vigilant, about being on guard and constantly assessing and monitoring their behaviours, the physical environment and the attitudes of people around you. In this study, men spoke of the need to be cautious in public places. Stanley, 65 (Suffolk) frequents the local pub but always ensures that he never gets too inebriated, as to do so might risk him letting his guard down, might tempt him into conversations that he would regret later or that he might get mixed signals and flirt with another man which, he says, could result in a “punch to the face”. In general, men were very circumspect about making suggestive eye contact, what gay men might refer to as cruising a guy in the local public realm. They spoke of feeling free to do this in London or other big cities, but they worry that random cruising or even showing an interest, a smile to a person in the locality could backfire and illicit aggressive rebuke. Furthermore, the offended individual might spread gossip in the locality along the lines of “that queer guy who lives down the street tried it on with me the other day” (Stanley). Such news spreads and can cause further stigmatisation.

In general, there was an underlying apprehension that violence towards LGBT people lay very much under the surface; and that in certain situations and under certain circumstances gay men could easily be the victims of unprovoked attack, verbal or physical. Many of the men spoke of being particularly wary when out in local towns during weekend nights. Young men in groups are to be most avoided and any sign of same sex PDA would almost certainly invite unwanted, and potentially violent reactions. A study on violence against LGBT people in rural areas of Britain suggests that hate crime can be an everyday reality for rural gay people and a perception that they were more likely to be the victim of hate crime if they were noticeably

different, potentially making those in villages particularly vulnerable where difference can stand out more (Hardy and Chakraborty, 2015).

Aside from violence and harassment, gay men can encounter micro-aggressions in everyday encounters. Alfie runs an antique shop in a village in County Sligo and recalls the day a customer, came in to the shop:

A local man came into the shop [got to chatting with me] but then said, 'Oh, I hear you fancy men, do you'? Something like that. I can't remember the exact wording. And I said, 'That depends on who's asking' and he said, 'Well, I am'. I thought about it but said, No I don't. Because the way he said it left me unsure of his reaction. (Alfie, 35, County Sligo)

Aside from the threat of violence, the men are sensitised to the possible social penalties that might befall them if they engaged in conversations about sex or intimacy. Even simple and innocent compliments or remarks about handsome men in the community might be misconstrued and can foster disquiet and insecurity among straight folk. And so, gay men are 'on guard', and exercise particular caution, discretion and self-control lest they were to make any misguided remarks which could be mistakenly interpreted and become the subject of gossip. They feel that in the transient, diverse and open metropolitan city one indiscrete and embarrassing conversation, a social interaction that 'goes wrong', is of little social consequence: you might never see the person again, but in the small town or rural context, that person is still present, it is likely you will need to interact with that person time and time again, the conversation might not be forgotten and might provoke gossip. Gay men in the rural are acutely aware that given the intimate nature of rural communities, one needs to be careful, discrete and silent. In a small-town environment if you alienate this one and that one pretty soon you've got nobody (Kazyak, 2011).

The gay men in this study feel that there is a strong underlying suspicion of them as sexual predators from many fellow rural dwellers, and some people have preconceived notions that gay men might try to recruit their teenage sons or seduce husbands or boyfriends.

Conflation between homosexuality and paedophilia was also mentioned by a number of respondents, particularly in Ireland. Nicholas (44, County Galway) believes that years of publicity around clerical sex abuse, usually involving priests and teenage boys, have hindered the understanding of gay men by many rural folk:

I believe that an awful lot of prejudice towards gay people is, this sense of that if you're gay you're a pervert and you're a child molester and you're all of these things. And I

believe the media has a lot to answer for because they have always associated, you know, paedophiles, a child molester, pervert with gay men. And that would be especially true the whole thing with the priests and the church and all that.

‘The rural makes you reluctant and wary about coming out.’

‘Coming out’ in these nonmetropolitan and rural communities is never seen as a trivial, harmless or private act, instead it is an intensely significant and highly political act. Preston & D’Augelli (2013) refer to the impact of rural social culture where everybody’s business is everybody’s business. This knowledge of others is beyond anything that many urban dwellers might imagine because there is no place to avoid others’ gaze. Disclosing or ‘coming out’ to a few people in the rural invariably means knowledge will spread in what some men referred to a ‘domino effect’. This results in a loss of agency, control and power of who and when to disclose. Apart from the uncertainty of others’ reactions and the ramifications of coming out, becoming known and branded as the ‘local gay’ weighed heavily on the minds of most of the men in my study. Openly gay men are still a rarity and a novelty in these locales.

Malachy (66) lives half way up a mountain in a remote area of County Leitrim. On the few occasions he has arranged to meet people at his home (arranged through social media and only possible if they have a car) he has found it easier to meet them in the local village and then drive them to his house. He recalls the postmistress remarking on the fact that “you had another nice young man visit you last week”. How she knows is a mystery to Malachy but he jokes that “the bush telegraph is strong”.

Malachy wonders that if it became confirmed or known for sure that he was gay, would his neighbours, the lady in the shop, the publican, would they pull back, withdraw from conversation, would they look at him differently, become less friendly, would the men especially behave differently (guilt by association)? These are questions that Malachy ponders and the answers are significant for his life in this community – because they (the neighbours) are going nowhere. It is a permanent community. At the moment by ignoring or dodging the question of his sexuality he gets on well with them, but he is not going to risk damaging these good relationships because he is uncertain of their reaction. And once you confirm it to one person – others will soon know on the bush telegraph.

Men with families in the local area were particularly attuned to the sensitivities around coming out. As was found in Preston & D’Augelli’s study, some of the gay men in this study who live close to family do not want to risk rejection from family members by disclosing their sexual

orientation and so remain closeted and hidden. Some of the men who had been 'out' whilst they lived in metropolitan spaces went back in the closet once they returned to the rural space. Often, they would indicate that they did not want to cause embarrassment to elderly parents.

The men's testimonies display a wariness and cautiousness of their environment, they distrust their locale will offer unconditional support and acceptance. Theo, 31, (Suffolk) provides an excellent illustration of this. Speaking of his experience of living in London for a number of years and his recent return to live back in his native town in Suffolk he says:

In London, you get a sense that even if some people don't like gay people, don't want gay people around them and don't accept gay people - you know that London does; but I'm not so sure Suffolk does.

Thus throughout my study the men question whether the nonmetropolitan wants them. The Irish respondents asked themselves this when the results from the 2015 Referendum on same-sex marriage (which passed nationally) returned a much more ambiguous result in their constituencies with one constituency in the study region (the very rural Roscommon & South Leitrim area) being the only constituency in the State to vote against same sex marriage.

Rural spaces also play a significant role in shaping national identity and imaginary and rural spaces are sources of rural romanticism; they are also highly heteronormative spaces emphasizing nuclear (heterosexual) family lives and stereotypical gender roles and interactions (Annes & Redlin, 2012). In Ireland, respondents would highlight how rural life still beats to the rhythm of children, christenings, communions, confirmation, marriage and death, all supported by the rituals of the church. Myths abound, of rural Ireland as the real Ireland, pure Ireland, where the family and faith are strongest, where the good and wholesome work of the land takes place.

In both study regions gay respondents would privately muse (sometimes on verge of despair) about the lack of critical mass, of other gay people in their areas. They speculated that many people leave at the first opportunity if they can. Many of those who stay behind, are thought to marry and have sex with men 'on the side'. The rural inhibits disclosure and so encourages gay men to hide, to try and pass, cover up and pretend. Mel, 46 (County Longford) wonders how many gay people there are really living in these rural parts, in remote spots, "*up long lonely lanes*".

Magnus, 64, (Norfolk) talks of one such person, a farmer whom he has befriended:

His name is Bill, he is married with a couple of kids, he is not going to ditch all that and move to London...he just wants a quiet life where he can meet people to have sex with, and through him I got to know where the local cruising grounds were. He's a pleasant guy who has no passion for changing things- he just wants an outlet for his sexuality...he's not into the latest fashions or going to the latest clubs or going to Pride events in the city...he would like someone who is in the same situation as himself where he can meet up for sex, then go back to respective partners and that's his quiet life...and not to jeopardise anything.

Men in both study areas feel that there are many in his situation. Many of the respondents have met up with men who are in a heterosexual relationship (often married) on gay dating sites. However, for the gay men in this study who are out or partially out - and who are interested in starting a relationship - closeted and married men are not promising material. The chances of starting a relationship with such a man are small and complicated and hardly desirable if there are wives and children involved. Those men who are closeted and single- or closeted with girlfriends are often no more open to the idea of settling into a same-sex relationship living with someone in the local area for all the reasons outlined earlier. As one Irish respondent puts it:

I think a lot of gay men get out if they can, and those that stay are either deeply closeted and/or are in straight relationships or married because that's kind of what is expected. There are quite a lot of gay men living in these rural parts but they are all either married so damn afraid to come out that the possibility of them settling down with a boyfriend in a public relationship is slim. (Cyril, 49, County Leitrim)

This reminds me of Preston & D'Augelli's (2013) work when they remind us that, perhaps the most difficult thing a rural gay man can do is set up a household with another gay man in a very public way, letting others know that they are a couple.

Despite experiencing intense local curiosity of suspected non-normative sexuality many of the men agreed with Boulden's study (2001) that much of the general population does not want to know if someone is gay or to have their suspicions confirmed because that would force them to take a stance on the issue - it would break the don't ask, don't tell rule and might give some level of legitimacy to a gay identity.

Conclusion:

So, is the rural and small town environment a bleak house for these gay men? One might be tempted to accept the fact that they choose to live in these areas, as indicating that the

intersection between gay male sexual identity and the nonmetropolitan space is benign; and by default that these areas are not hostile, or bleak for the gay man. However, we must acknowledge that the choice to remain in, or return to, the rural locale, is often predicated not by a desire to seek a rural idyll of peace, tranquillity, or to be surrounded by nature; but rather due to a lack of alternative options, such as, lack of skills, education or financial resources; or conversely that there exists significant family resources, such as land, property, and commercial businesses, that make staying, or returning, an economically attractive option. In both scenarios we can discern intersections with class and social mobility (Taylor, 2011). Other reasons which explain why many of the men remain, or return concern family relationships. Perceived caring obligations to elderly parents play a significant role in determining why they should not leave, or why they need to return. Family ties to the rural locale are clearly significant to many men, and these are cited as crucial aspects of their multiple identity, and as important forms of social interaction, inter-dependence and inter-relatedness, from which they do not want to be separate. The intersection between the men, their sexuality, and their biological, heterosexual families however, often requires that they negotiate how they express and perform their sexual identity in the local community.

In fact, the heteronormative cultures of these study areas, requires a continuous negotiation of sexuality, masculinity and identity. The men are aware that gay people can be considered outsiders, because they do not conform to the traditional family values exemplified by heterosexual relationships that produce children (Oswald in Preston & D'Augelli, 2013). They face particular issues due to dominant cultural narratives that privilege hegemonic conceptions of rural masculinity; the absence of homo-intimate-friendly social spaces; the domination of heteronormative, and heterosexist public spaces, which often police and censor any displays of same-sex affection; the lack of visible same-sex relationships; and a perception that they must not be seen to unsettle, or disrupt, cherished cultural norms around family, and community. In this regard, while the rural, and small town environments may not be bleak as physical entities, they can be isolating, lonely and alienating cultural spaces, and embody a set of values, norms, and narratives that compel the gay or bisexual man to subjugate the sexual, intimate and political self; which in turn can lay bare a rather bleak future, in terms of realising a position of identity pride, and the experience of genuine, homo-emancipatory forms of sexual citizenship.

Chapter 8. Coping with life in the rural as a gay man

“When speaking on the question of how gay people cope with living in rural areas: to be honest, the gay people who stay here, mostly cope by staying in the closet, and not coming out; that’s the way they avoid all the problems that might come their way”

Introduction

The above comment was made by a gay man at an informal gathering of one of the rural LGBT networks. The comment invites me to ponder on two issues. Firstly, the comment underscores an emphatic belief among most respondents that, in all probability, a majority of gay men did end up leaving the areas. In other words, coping by getting out. The men offered no evidence for this assertion, although such sentiments chime with well-rehearsed geographical and coming-of-age narratives; a tale of rural-to-urban migration which recounts how “the young gay subject brought up outside LGBTQ communities, in the nonmetropolitan space, one day realizes he is different, and leaves his rural upbringing to head to the big city where he comes out into adult gayness and lives happily ever after, embraced by his urban-based community” (Schweighofer, 2016:227).

Secondly, the men seem convinced that the majority of gay or bisexual men who decide to remain, deal with the troublesome intersection of sexuality and rural, by simply not coming out. The belief is that many hidden men engage in discrete sexual relations, but avoid and resist any public affirmation of a gay identity. The problem with such coping strategies though, is that it copper-fastens the absence of sexual minority subjects from the consciousness of the rural, and contributes to the cultural denial, erasure, or ignorance of lesbians and gay men in the nonmetropolitan space (Brown, 2000; Watkins and Jacoby, 2007; Schweighofer, 2016). For the most part, most of the men in this study, are not now ‘in the closet’, although it must be said that some inconsistencies remain about when and to whom they are ‘out’ to. For example, some are reluctant to come out at work (see appendices for respondent profiles).

The men’s testimonies reveal coping strategies that include: selective engagement with the local community; adopting a Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell approach; frequent escapes; utilising technology to reduce social isolation; and joining a local LGBT group, or another gay social group.

Coping by selective engagement

The men in this study have developed coping strategies to deal with the various challenges that living in the rural and nonmetropolitan space can bring. Many of them spoke of the need to take a pragmatic and philosophical approach to living life as a gay man in the rural, to have a “get on with it attitude” and to try to “make the best of it” (phrases of men at a LGBT group meeting, Ireland). This meant accepting the limitations of the space and trying to deal with the intersections between space and sexuality. For John Paul, 25 (County Leitrim) this is an essential ‘frame of mind’ for surviving in the rural.

I think I have developed a more philosophical general overview on life. What’s meant to be, will be. So I’m not going to pull my hair out searching for something. And I think that you have to be content with your lot there and then. Because if you’re constantly looking for this elusive whatever you’ll be constantly disappointed.

John Paul has accepted that an urban, metropolitan gay lifestyle is simply not feasible nor realistic in rural Ireland. He has also accepted that he must compromise, adapt and amend his life according to his location. He is an only child, lives close to his parents and an array of aunts, uncles and cousins in the locality. He is not out except to some of his university friends in Dublin. To disclose more widely in his Leitrim locale, would subject his family to much scrutiny and intrusive gossip.

John Paul speaks of his ‘selective engagement’ with the local community in Leitrim. He attends family dinners, family events, visits the occasional neighbour, attends some local events (such as the annual music festival) but avoids socialising in many of the local pubs or “hanging out” with locals. John Paul considers many of the locals to be rather ill informed, country folk, with little exposure to diversity and difference. He does not want to be the subject of their gossip and intrigue. Many of the men spoke of deliberate selective engagement and strategic avoidance, carefully choosing where to go, where to avoid, who to avoid, times to avoid, exercising care in having certain types of conversations with certain local people. In following such a path, they exercise control over the level of interaction with the wider community - a strategy that gives protection from the inquisitiveness of others and is linked to their sense of physical and emotional safety and security (Boulden, 2001).

One of the most symbolic examples of withdrawal strategy encountered during the fieldwork was in deepest rural west Norfolk. Darren, 44, lives with his same-sex partner on the edge of a pretty hamlet. They do not frequent the local pub, and they do not engage in any meaningful interaction with the local community. They moved here a few years ago but find the community

quite insular, conservative and inquisitive. They do not know any other gay couple in the area. They feel they are the topic of much intrigue and gossip. Darren dislikes the physical and social isolation of the area, and he feels it is too far from urban centres, but has come here to follow his partner's new job. As new to the area, both men encountered some curiosity, especially as they were two men living together, setting up home together, which Preston & D'Augelli (2013) consider to be a profound, and often brave decision in the context of local rural environments. As people would walk past their bungalow they would often look up towards the house as they were walking by, Darren insists that they were looking if they would see anything salacious! By constructing a new high wall complete with a non-see through gate with intercom system around the circumference of their property, they are in effect, keeping themselves apart from the community. They travel away to socialise (they are heavily involved in national and international dog shows) and they host friends who travel to them from afar. They reside in the rural but they are separate from the community and social culture of the village - by choice.

Many other men said that they avoid community interaction at times. Neil, 42, and his partner do not socialise much in their home town in County Donegal. When they have ventured out locally at weekends, they have experienced occasional verbal abuse in local nightclubs and bars, and while such incidents have been rare, Neil speaks of feeling 'on edge' at times when out in certain environments. Therefore, they prefer to save their money and spend it on overseas holidays.

We do not go out as in socialising in the pub. We like to save our money and we go away two or three times a year. You know we go to Philadelphia, we go to Spain, we go to Brighton or to London specifically to go and see friends we have there but also for the gay scene, the gay nightlife, have our fun. So we don't go out here because we cannot be bothered and because you will still get a little bit of that negative, negative name calling or it's still, it still happens. Yeah, it has happened a few times. And so that had, that kind of makes us a little bit edgy.

Coping by adopting a 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell strategy'

Rural life facilitates both anonymity and visibility, there can be both implicit and explicit recognition of sexual identity, but not one that is necessarily talked about (Kazyak, 2011), and a live and let live attitude and greater interconnectedness. There can be situations where everyone knows you are gay, but where you are not supposed to acknowledge it (Boulden, 2001). Many men in this study avoided the confirmatory, "I am a gay man" conversation, some avoided the sexuality topic in all discussions, never verbally confirming. Even where couples

lived together and were clearly a same-sex couple, there too existed a ‘Don’t ask, Don’t tell strategy’. This may seem bizarre in situations where couples have lived together for many years, and yet the ‘we are a gay couple’ had never entered their neighbourly discourse.

Mel, 46, lives in a provincial Irish town and is certain that the neighbours “know” but they have never asked him whether he is gay. Mel believes that the relationship with his neighbours is best maintained by his not introducing the “controversial topic of him being a gay man”. In particular, he feels the elderly neighbours who have known Mel since he was a child do not want it confirmed. It may be seen as divisive and might force them to take a stance, and place some of the more religious elderly neighbours in a dilemma.

Throughout the interviews, many of the men would say variants of: “I don’t tell, but I wouldn’t deny if asked directly” or “I just let them come to their own conclusions”. This can result in the sexuality of the gay man remaining unspoken and unmentioned for years, and in some cases a lifetime. Gavin, 46, and Philip, 72, live together in a suburban community on the edge of Norwich. They discuss all types of domestic and gardening issues with neighbours, but the issue of their living arrangements and status as a couple are never discussed:

I mean, we’ve never disclosed to our neighbours but then they’ve never asked. So I assume they know, we don’t hide it. But they never asked. So it’s undisclosed. Something which is never brought up. The nature, the exact nature of the relationship is never brought up. (Gavin)

Luke and his partner Adrian have lived together for many years in a pretty, tiny hamlet in the east of England. Luke and Adrian have chosen a strategy of, “Don’t ask, Don’t tell, Don’t deny”. Luke has learnt this response and it is his default ‘put down’ - and he had found it to be very effective. Luke is a confident and articulate man - I wonder how somebody less equipped might cope or respond:

Adrian and I are in the choir and we often wonder how long it will take new members to cop on that we’re a couple...and we asked old members.....and they said 3-4 weeks.....or so. You see we’re a social group, and we would go to coffee together, eat together, we would have them back to our home sometimes, so it becomes a bit obvious we’re a couple after a while and they would cop on at that stage, and they would say , ‘are you related?’ (father and son!!!) you live at the same address.....and very often I would just say, no we’re a couple’, or ‘we live together’ and I let them draw their own conclusions.

Many gay men remain part of their rural communities and self-identify as gay but are circumspect about proclaiming their identities, what Kennedy (2010) calls the don’t ask, don’t

tell folk. These men are resourceful and innovative in their lifestyles but to build a sense of self, rural gay subjects need to negotiate the conservativeness of the social landscape in which they live (Gray, 2009). Simply assuming a role in the community, not advertising or performing visible homosexuality in any shape or form. The testimonies in this study reveal that they feel the need to negotiate their sexuality in a way that accommodated the community at large, to ‘tone down’ their sexuality, to de-sexualise themselves, their language, their homes, their clothes, and so avoid unpredictable and potentially unpleasant reactions, from silence to marginalisation and exclusion. Luke continues:

One time we were in a local drama group and the couple who led it were a very conservative couple...and we thought once they find out about us they will try to kick us out...but they haven’t tried to kick us out!!! Now we wouldn’t never out ourselves but they know we are a couple in that we live together...now we never make our situation obvious no PDA but they would know at this stage for sure but they’ve never asked a question or query. They ignore our relationship status to an extent –treat us like individuals but in a way can this be good, it avoids awkward discussions or us getting to hear their (possible) anti-attitudes?

Here, we see another reason for a Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell strategy- avoiding having to possibly be confronted with and having to deal with homophobic responses and reactions. And yet, Luke and Adrian do not entirely avoid the sexuality debate among local people, they also follow a “don’t deny” path and Luke claims to have used it effectively on a number of occasions in situations where he was challenged by people from a religious perspective:

I can argue my corner if need be....and if I need to debate I can do it very effectively. If I’m in a situation where there is no negotiation, I say ‘look I reconciled this with my god. I know where I stand, I know there is no issue on this, if you think there is an issue- it’s yours ,I’m not going to take your problem on, I’ve resolved this for myself many years ago and I don’t need to re-do it on your account- your issue your problem-go deal with it. (Luke, Cambridgeshire)

Preston & D’Augelli (2013) and Kazyak note the importance of allowing the community get to know the person first. This is important in terms of them accepting the person as gay. If they get to know you as a good person, a helpful person, a friendly person, they will accept you much more easily (Kazyak, 2011). Such sentiments of, “let them get to know you first”, were apparent throughout my conversations with the men in both countries.

Coping by frequent escapes

Many of the gay men cope with the rural by ensuring they escape from it from time to time. In fact, for many respondents, such escapes enable their staying in the rural. Regular breaks away allow them to endure life in the rural for the rest of the year. The strategy of taking breaks away was also highlighted in the work of Preston & D'Augelli (2013) with gay men escaping or taking a break to gay-friendly resort communities, allowing them to get away from the more stifling atmosphere of the rural communities in which they lived. Many of the men in my study choose to take vacations and holidays to gay-friendly beach resorts such as Gran Canaria, Mykonos, and Sitges as well as to large metropolitan areas with established gay scenes such as Barcelona and Amsterdam.

These escapes allow the men to get away from the mundane and sometimes oppressive heteronormative culture of their rural areas, allowed them to meet with other gay people from around the world, to be anonymous and free. They speak of a deep physical and emotional need to escape; to spend time in a place where you can be yourself and meet with other gay people. The men will often plan their annual calendar around these breaks away, eschewing and foregoing excessive spending on going out and socialising in the local rural area, rather preferring to save money and spend it on international trips to gay friendly destinations.

Alfie says that getting away with his partner is a priority for both of them because:

We have been on holiday to Gran Canaria, and San Francisco, we love it because it's so openly gay and on holiday, there's no problem whatsoever if you hold hands and you're not second class citizens. But when we come back here, to Ireland, even at the airport you've got to remember to not to do that [hold hands] again. See. And it's just to get into that habit again [of not displaying affection], it's so hard. (Alfie, 35, County Sligo)

Preston & D'Augelli (2013) observe that gay men in the rural and small-town environment do not see themselves, their lives, or their relationships reflected in their communities and they must often travel to other areas for recreational and social purposes. Aside from overseas vacations and holidays, all of the men in this study value the role of Dublin and London as places where they can make a quick dash when needing to escape their rural locales. Dublin was between one and three quarter and three hours from most of the Irish respondents with London a similar distance for the English respondents. Frequent escapes to Dublin and London can be a weekend or for some can be a day trip. For these men the metropolitan is an oasis and a refuge. Some of the men in England spoke of planning a trip to the city where they would get

the early morning train, have lunch in Soho, people watch, perhaps go to a gay bookshop, gay café, gay sauna, bars and return home late that night. They would often engage in conversation, maybe meet somebody and swap numbers. They spoke of the opportunities that the cities can offer. The sense of the unexpected. An opportunity too for some gay men to explore their sexuality. The city also offers some specialist groups, for example for George (56) who travels to a monthly “Gay Dads” event in London where he can meet other gay fathers, something he would not be able to do in his rural locale.

For most of these gay men the role of escape on holidays and breaks away cannot be underestimated. It was a continuous and common theme throughout the interviews. It acts as a safety valve, an outlet for the frustrations and oppressions of living in an intensely heteronormative environment.

However, for some of the men, the issue of expense was a limiting factor. For Tim, 24 (Suffolk), escaping to the city for a break on a frequent basis was an unrealistic expectation due to expensive train fares and also the cost of overnight accommodation. And so, the men are differentiated along socio-economic lines, and these intersections impact their ability to access and enjoy periods of escape.

Coping by using technology

A key theme to emerge from the interviews with men in both countries, was the impact of the rapid advancements in the areas of communications technology. The modernization and commercial availability of the Internet in the twenty-first century has revolutionised the ways gay and bisexual men have fostered community as well as making connections with other gay and bisexual men (Groves et al, 2014). These developments facilitate connectivity, interaction and networking possibilities with other gay people locally, nationally and globally. Respondents were unequivocal about the impact on their lives. In the early days, slow speeds over dial up (i.e., telephone line) modems made it impossible for users to engage in face-to-face video chatting, as is common today (Groves et al, 2014), although Malachy recalls how, even back then, it played an instrumental role in prompting him to ‘come out’, which seemed easier to do online, rather than face-to-face:

You want the biggest turning point: the internet, the internet. I wasn’t really ‘out’ until the late Nineties, I started coming out. And the first coming out would have been internet related. Yeah. I joined ‘Ireland Online’, an internet service provider, in 1996. I would chat privately, with people in the channel you know, and a few people said are you actually gay? And, well, that was probably the first time I ever admitted, it wasn’t

face-to-face at the time, but admitted to being gay rather than bisexual, you know. And then occasionally they'd organise let's all meet up in Dublin one Saturday afternoon, you know, so I had to meet face-to-face with people that knew I was gay, yeah. (Malachy, 66, County Leitrim)

Malachy's testimony illustrates the relative anonymity of the internet, the fact that conversations can happen between people in different locations, and even countries, from the relative safety and privacy of one's home. These aspects of internet assisted communication allow people to create new ways, perhaps less intimidating ways of coming out to others. For Malachy, coming out to another man, who lives hundreds of miles away seems safer than coming out locally face-to-face.

For many interviewees, the Internet also served to open up a world of opportunities allowing them to make contact with and meet other gay people in different locations and in different life situations; this interaction helped many respondents to reflect, compare and benchmark their position and situation with others. Research has demonstrated that gay men use the Internet as a tool to form social and romantic relationships. This is of particular benefit given that many communities especially in rural areas still hold negative stereotypes and beliefs surrounding gay male relationships, which can make it more difficult to find potential friends and partners (Gray, 2009 in McKie et al, 2015:21) as Phelim testifies:

I was living at home and working in the chipper in our wee village, pretty isolated but then the internet came along, it was brilliant, and especially when the gay sites came along; you could meet people on it, meeting people in your own county and not having to travel to Dublin, that was a big change. It was huge. All of a sudden you could just look the stuff up, do you know what I mean. And through the internet, I ended up in a relationship with a fellow in Amsterdam. I used to go and see him three or four times a year, or five times a year or that kind of thing. That wasn't really a relationship...but it helped me see how others lived open gay lives in Amsterdam, and that helped secure me to be 'OK' with a picking up and running with a gay identity. (Phelim, 48, County Cavan)

Phelim's story brings to mind the assertion by Troiden that "personally meaningful contacts with other homosexuals" allows contacts with socially organized groups to occur, and "diminishes feelings of solitude and alienation", and encourages coming out, or *gay assumption* (Troiden, 1989: 61).

Most men, in both countries, used apps such as 'Scruff', 'Grindr' and 'Growler'. Smartphones now provide a convenient platform for men who have sex with men (MSM) to connect with others. Leveraging the Internet and the built-in global positioning system of smartphones,

various location-based apps for dating have been developed specifically for the MSM community (Lik Sam Chan, 2017:622). These apps allow users to locate other men who are physically nearby, thus turning the “invisible” community visible to users (Gudelunas, 2012 cited in Lik Sam Chan, 2017), and in many ways can be considered “an ad hoc social space” (ibid: 622). Technology can therefore be used to help construct parallel worlds, where people can construct themselves in flexible and unspecified ways (Tattelman, 2000). These apps were very popular amongst the men, in particular the younger and middle-aged men. They were seen as universally welcome within the nonmetropolitan context (modern day, virtual gay bars as one man referred to them) opening up opportunity and possibilities, although for some it helped to highlight the lack of gay men in the immediate area:

When I am in Dublin, I can check my phone and there are 100 gay men within 5 kilometres, and I’m getting lots of pings and messages, but here there may be only 10 guys appearing within 20 kilometres, and only a few new guys appearing, you tend see the same guys on the App. the whole time. So, in a way, it can just highlight how few of you there down the country. (Fintan, 36, County Longford)

Apps can clearly facilitate meeting with other gay people, and can therefore help, one could argue, help closeted gay men towards *gay assumption*, just as gay bars provided meeting spaces, although the power of the collective nature of meeting in bars and within social groups is absent in individual meets, and the quality of these meets is also crucial.

Aside from facilitating meeting up scenarios, many respondents also reflected on the power of the internet in enabling gay men to access a range of educational, personal development and health information in a discreet, safe and non-judgemental manner. Online, gay men can connect to social networks they may not have access to in their communities and a wealth of sexual and other health resources. (Ross, 2005).

Men spoke of the Internet and World Wide Web, as a huge leap forward for rural gay men, and offered a great repository of relationship guidance, health information, identity knowledge and links to support. They remarked that it provided information on gay life, not only nationally but also globally, which enabled one to compare gay life in rural Ireland with gay life in other locations. As such the Internet can be a remote yet vibrant tool for gay and bisexual men to engage in political discussion as well as social support (Groves et al., 2014:1).

For others though, discovering websites, for example the International Gay and Lesbian Association (ILGA) website allowed them to contextualise and understand their own situation favourably, when compared with examples of overt persecution and oppression faced by many

gay men in many overseas locations. Exposure to such information often had the impact of making some respondents more likely to be vocal and assertive in supporting gay rights movements.

Technology and the Internet digital revolution can be considered as important enablers, of Weeks' *Voice and New stories*; and as a feature of, having a role in, the formation of *new subjectivities (identities)*. Information technologies have led to a new sense of the self - the cyborg, the body without limbs - communicating with other cyborgs through the virtual community of the Internet (1998: 46). Ross (2005) argues that the Internet can lead to positive affirmation, and a decrease in invalidating thoughts, due to positive images, stories, and support users receive online (Ross, 2005 in McKie et al., 2015:21).

A hugely important caveat to the benefits of the web, however, was the sheer amount of vitriolic homophobic commentary that men reported reading online. Many men spoke of seeing comments posted online which acted as "reality check" or "wake up call", evidence that prejudice still exists. Sports anti-homophobia campaigns online for example, received particularly homophobic reactions, as did posts online concerning equal marriage or gay rights overseas. These will be covered in more detail in the next chapter as we attempt to assess and critique the depth, and meaningfulness of sexual citizenship that emerges from this study.

Coping by joining a local LGBT group or network

Although common in major metropolitan areas, LGBTQ organisations are less likely to exist in nonmetropolitan communities. But they are highly important. Minority stress theory (Meyer, 2003) suggests that individuals from stigmatized groups face added stressors (for example stigma, discrimination and violence) due to their marginalized identities (Preston & D'Augelli, 2013). These may lead people to seek identity affirming resources as a way to cope.

There were a number of LGBT groups in both the English and the Irish nonmetropolitan study areas. These included Longford LGBT and Cavan LGBT (in Ireland) and Norwich Mature Gay Community, North Norfolk Pride and Suffolk LGBT (In England). A number of respondents had joined these groups and those that did were unequivocal about the impact of these groups for them, as gay men, in these rural, nonmetropolitan settings. These groups had made a real difference for many individual lives. Many gay men travel quite long distances to attend these meetings. For 48 year old Turlough, the 100 kilometre round-trip every Thursday evening pays dividends. Turlough had lived in London for a number of years, had come out and embraced his gay identity but on returning to live near to his family in rural Ireland, had felt the need to

go back in the closet. He joined the newly established group in Longford and meeting other gay men allows him to cope with rural life:

The group in Longford has been a huge thing for me. The only way I could explain it is that it's been like someone just taken me by the hand and just guiding me along. I have lived in the closet since I returned from London 18 years ago, I have been in a very dark and very lonely place...and the first time I went to the group meet...that night when I arrived home (gets emotional) was the first good night's sleep in 18 years. Oh, Yeah the impact has been huge. Because you just go in and you meet others who are living and working in the same area with same types of issues...and it helps get me through the week...I am not out at work, not out at home so this weekly get together is a life line for me. (Turlough, County Roscommon)

In these areas, the local LGBT group was often the only visible and tangible gay infrastructure that exists. Some of the men had never met another local gay person before joining the group. The local groups have attracted people from a wide variety of ages, some of them older men. One respondent reflected on the impact of the group that he observed, on one local farmer in his sixties:

I see the absolute hands-on difference we make. One of our oldest members for example when he first came to the meeting, every time the word gay was mentioned he sort of ducked his head almost in a sort of shame thing, you know. And it was visible, you could see it, and you could perceive his closing in. And at the last disco we held, he came along and actually asked me for more cards because he'd handed all the ones he'd had out. So I just thought to myself, that's just amazing, you know. He hadn't handed them out to the public but he'd given them to people that he knew andthat is the sort of way we feel we're definitely making a real difference to real peoples' lives. (Dermot, 43, County Cavan)

The groups offer a life-line to people. New friendships are formed. Meetings are held in safe, secure premises. Conversations can be had. Social events and outings are arranged. People go on holiday together. They arrange weekly coffee mornings in cafes and hotels. One particular group, established for mature men in Norfolk, has helped to reduce the isolation of older gay men in the area. Examples of support include arranging hospital and home visits to group members who fall ill, offering a particularly valuable support for older men who had few or no biological family support. They also arrange away days, trips to National Trust properties, and weekly coffee mornings in local establishments. In fact, this group was one of the most energetic and active groups in the region and herein we can see it effectively responding to some of the specific concerns and needs of older gay men such as help with health care access (Gardner et al, 2014) and isolation and loneliness (Cody &

Welch, 1997). Indeed, the cohesion and collective support offered by this group could well show how the rural space can help older LGBT people develop deeper relationships and friendships in small communities (McLaren, 2015:475).

However, many of the other LGBT groups also mused about why there are not higher numbers. A turnout of ten to twelve was the best norm for the weekly events. Where are all the other gay, bisexual, MSM, and questioning men? There was a suspicion that many local gays were simply too closeted and too afraid to join the group and attend meetings. To engage with the group would raise the spectre of visibility, and the possibility that they would have to acknowledge a member of the group when out in public which would be problematic if that member was 'known' to be gay by the local community.

Groups going beyond coping

While helping people cope with the social isolation their surroundings can entail, this study believes that local LGBT groups go beyond coping support, and act as strategic, developmental change agents; building identity, sexual citizens, and sexual citizenship in the space of the rural.

The men who were members of a local LGBT group considered their joining to be a pivotal moment, and a critical turning point in their sexual identity formation. The groups were considered radical, by virtue of their very presence in the rural and small-town environment, and as such were seen as by many as 'active change agents' in promoting LGBT visibility and inclusion within the wider community. The first LGBT group to establish in the Irish study region was *Outwest*. Established in 1997, in the aftermath of decriminalisation, this group was, for many years the only social and support group for LGBT people throughout the entire west of Ireland region. A number of the men interviewed considered *Outwest* to be a highly important resource which had offered free help, advice and support to them at a time when such services were still uncommon. For Columba, the presence of *Outwest* was invaluable, and attending the group's meetings marked the first time he had knowingly spoken with other gay men:

Oh well, I mean, they were lifesavers at the time because it was my first, it was my first experience of being in the company of, of being knowingly in the company of gay and lesbian people. And that it's okay to be who I am. And there's no fear to be who I am, or no shame to be who I am. Absolutely, *Outwest* have saved my life, there's no doubt about it. I was lonely, isolated and desperate. *Outwest* was my only refuge. They were

the only visible gay group in this entire, region throughout the 1990s and early 2000s (Columba, 47, County Longford)

In a similar vein, Finian, 45 (County Sligo) cited his experience with *Outwest* as life changing; and he is in no doubt that the group was a crucial component in his journey of sexual identity formation; initially coming out only to other gay people, a feature of *gay assumption*. In the following segment of text, taken from his interview transcript, we can see Finian illustrate how the gay group was instrumental in his identity development, which is so crucial in the building blocks for the emergence of the sexual citizen:

It was 1998 and I was 30 and I felt, 'It's time to do something. I had read about 'Outwest' in the local provincial paper... so I put my toe in the water and started ringing their helpline, spoke to my first openly gay person, took the courage to go to Galway to a meet (150 kilometres away). Then from that to go to their disco....it was like, it was like a flower blossoming really because you created a network of friends, you created a structure around yourself, you went on to be having your first boyfriend.I was changing, I was changing as a person and I was actually evolving in front of people's eyes and they weren't sure what they were seeing but they were seeing I was a lot happier, that I was a lot more content.

For Eugene, living in an area of County Donegal, almost three hundred kilometres from Dublin, the establishment of a small local group, in the 1990s, just eighty kilometres away, in Derry City, was pivotal in helping him develop positive feelings about his sexuality, and towards assuming a gay identity:

I decided to go into Derry and somewhere along the line there was a (tiny) Gay Pride and they had a workshop for gay men, Pride, and I went to that workshop and met, got introduced to the group Cara-Friend, and started going to that and started to enjoy the meetings and social interactions, the education workshops.... and started to feel very positive about being gay and that, you know...started my journey as a gay man (Eugene, 52, County Donegal).

Eugene's testimony highlights an important facet within the *gay assumption* stage, namely that although homosexual identities are assumed at this stage, they are tolerated initially rather than accepted. The quality of a person's initial contacts with other LGBT people is extremely important (Cass, 1979). Troiden agrees that positive and favourable contacts with other gay people are crucial in that they provide the opportunity to obtain information and gain exposure which is then used as a basis for re-examining and re-evaluating their own ideas about homosexuality, in a more favourable direction (Troiden, 1989:60). The crucial role in helping these men to begin the process of coming out cannot be underestimated, and coming out is a

necessary prelude to the emergence of the reflexive agent - the sexual citizen (Weeks, 1998; Richardson, 2004; Plummer, 2003).

In Norfolk, Harry, the chair of a new LGBT group, feels that the local group helps develop confidence, and pride in sexual identity for local LGBT people. He observes that some newcomers can be very shy, inhibited, and reluctant to divulge too much about themselves, but that he has seen these same people evolve and “emerge out of their shell” due to their interaction with others at the group meetings:

There are definitely people who have joined the group and have become more confident and more comfortable in their sexuality and in their acceptance of it. Whether that's only within the group I don't know. But I can certainly point to people who would have sat a table away from us in the beginning, [looking on] and now kind of, you know, they are there waiting half an hour before we even start.

Similarly, Brandon, from another LGBT group in East Anglia, which meets regularly, at a dedicated LGBT centre and space in the local town, cites the example of a new man who has started to attend the group and has “changed before his eyes” in recent times:

This guy, he'd been so crippled by fear, an older man, who has never had sexual relations with another man. He's come along to every meeting since and he's blossoming. And he's sitting on that sofa next to you and when he first arrived he was sort of very formal and ... It was jacket and tie, very formal. And very precise in his speech. Yesterday he was lying back like this, legs apart, utterly relaxed. And I thought that's what it's all about.

Local LGBT groups allow men to meet other local men, men like themselves. During my observation at the group meetings in both countries, I met gay men who were business people, teachers, labourers, health workers, IT professionals, writers, social workers, farmers, construction workers, and even an Anglican priest; people from all walks of life and backgrounds. Friendships are made, and new networks develop. Such gatherings provide evidence of the existence of a gay rural community and begin the process of building gay rural identities, changing the cultural narrative of what it means to be gay. They stake a claim on the social and cultural space of the rural.

Furthermore, some seem committed to inform the general public about LGBT issues through education and to affirm that gay is good (Troiden, 1989). In this regard, the local groups in both countries have provided journalistic pieces in local newspapers, have organised group dinners in local restaurants, had occasional discos in local bars, and held fundraising events in local premises. They have taken part in discussions and debates on local radio. They have set-

up information stalls in local libraries during community citizen's week. Their weekly meetings are often followed by an informal drink in local pubs.

One of the groups in Ireland recall that their arrival *en masse* was met with curious glances at first, and there was one occasion where the bar man asked a gay couple to stop snogging. But overall the pub owners and staff have been supportive and welcoming on the unspoken condition that they not display overt intimacy. The group have held a fund-raising event in the pub with a rainbow flag on a table. Some other customers, asked what does LGBT stand for? To which Fintan, one of the organisers replied "Life Gets Better Today". He replied in this way, out of a sense of caution, we can see here that the group's interaction with the locals is not frictionless, and that a tacit negotiation of sorts takes place. Locals seem to follow a policy of passive acquiescence, which permits the gay group to visit the heterosexual space, on condition that they do not display their sexuality in the same way as heterosexuals might be expected to do, without a thought. These issues point to a less than equal form of sexual citizenship in this nonmetropolitan space and will be explored in greater detail and depth in the next chapter.

An interesting dimension to the role of the groups was their potential in bringing people from different socio-economic backgrounds together. Social class is socially constructed, and is firmly situated within a neo-liberal context that advantages some and further disadvantages others (Keogh, 2008) but I witnessed examples where a number of men attained a degree of social mobility due to connections made with more economically privileged men within the groups and networks. The groups also provided an element of collective solidarity and in a highly unusual turn (which attracted national television coverage) the Longford LGBT group took part in the annual local Saint Patrick's Day parade, marching behind a rainbow flag:

Our very existence, our very presence tells the local people that there are LGBT people living and working here, amongst them...that we are not some strange species up in Dublin....and that we are not going to hide ourselves away in a corner, that we can hold our fundraiser table quiz in a local pub and not hidden away in our premises; and that we can go out to the local disco or the local restaurant as a group.....I think that tells people we are not afraid and ashamed....the group offers that power in numbers; safety in numbers feeling. (Fintan, 36, County Longford)

As such, we can see the value of such local groups in helping to challenge the heteronormative construction of space; end silence, increase voice, and visibility, and assert the right of sexual minorities to openly, exist, live, and interact in the public sphere.

In Ireland, some members of both the Cavan and Longford groups, helped canvas locally in the 2015 marriage referendum in their rural constituencies. They replaced defaced or destroyed Yes campaign posters. The Longford group has helped to publicise and challenge homophobia when they encounter it for example, when comments were made by a priest, during a homily at mass, in which it was alleged he said that the same-sex marriage referendum was influenced by the Devil (The Journal, 2015b). Even the congregation were reportedly shocked at such comments. The LGBT group raised the matter publicly with the bishop, and wrote letters condemning the incident to the local newspaper.

Throughout all their efforts, they are truly changing the cultural narrative of what it means to be gay, in this rural community (Kazyak, 2011). But, as mentioned earlier, they struggle to get new members. The members often ask, where are all the gays up those long lonely country lanes? What more can we do to encourage more people to join us? And they have not been immune to abuse, online and in person, with one member having to involve the police, as a result of his being threatened in the street by a man who said, “In my country you would be dead”.

Taking it home

From the perspective of embedding and weaving openly gay identities, and sexual minority citizenship into the fabric of the nonmetropolitan community, perhaps the greatest impact is when a local man ‘comes out’ publicly within the community. This takes it to where it matters: the local micro-environment. One story illustrates this perfectly.

The text used here is taken from the testimony of Finian, 45, who is originally from a tiny village, in County Sligo. Living in Sligo town, some thirty-five kilometres away from the village, closeted and unhappy, he felt that as a man in his thirties, he had had enough of living in *identity confusion*, utilising his energies in stigma management strategies. He had reached a point (in the 1990s) where he felt that making contact with other gay people was necessary and pressing if he was to emerge from his closet, develop and learn to embrace his identity. It was simply something that had to be done (Cass, 1979). After much deliberation, and procrastination, he summoned the courage to attend the regional LGBT network, *Outwest*, and in doing so began the process of coming out, of assuming a same-sex sexual identity, limited initially to other LGBT people only.

Growing in confidence, and with a new circle of friends, he says he then “took it to the next level”. With great trepidation, but bolstered by the support from his new associates, he formally

came out to his friends, and farming family. The LGBT group had facilitated greater self-acceptance and comfort with his sexual identity, and confirmed it as a valid, and natural identity (Troiden, 1989). Family reaction was muted, unenthusiastic and laced with worry about what neighbours, friends and the priest might say, but broadly accepting of “the situation” nonetheless.

Shortly afterwards, and just before Christmas, Finian received a telephone call from a friend who wanted to forewarn him, before he returned home to spend Christmas in his family home village:

“I would be no friend of yours if I didn’t tell you that you’re the talk of the village, he says, everybody is talking about you being gay”.

Finian continues:

And it was literally Christmas Eve he rang me. And I literally knew I was going up home for Christmas and that I was going to go to the local pub that evening, and I remember walking in and I had to walk the length of the pub and I felt like the whole place was looking at me and talking about me. And I remember I walked to the far end of it and the local county footballer, who was drop dead gorgeous, was standing at the end of the room and he just put his two arms around me and he gave me a big hug and he says, I said to him, ‘They’ll think you are as well.’ ‘Sure, fecking well let them think’, he says. He says, ‘I’m delighted for you’. And I never will forget that to this day. It was his affirmation to me that kind of saved me. That public display of support, and from somebody who was held in the highest esteem by the locals. County GAA start, doesn’t get much higher than that at a local level.

Here, we witness the role of the local hero, the football star. As the locals look on, and observe, his supportive reaction, surely, they must reflect that if their local hero, virtue of masculine prowess, is willing to embrace Finian and by implication, his sexual orientation, then we can also respond accordingly.

Finian continues, that after his very public coming out, and having observed that he had not been castigated, reviled, and abandoned by locals, “did not leave it there”:

I took it to the next level again because I was, I’m always going for pushing the agenda that little bit further, especially when it comes to the local village. And so, the regional LGBT group, Outwest hold a Christmas dinner every year and about forty guys would usually go to Westport or Galway or somewhere like that. That year I put my hand up and I said I want you to come to my home village this year. I wanted to add fuel to the fire, the publican was a very good friend of mine, and he organised that there would be a drag queen there doing her show for the night. So we really ramped up the thing. The guys to this day still talk about the great night they had in this rural village and the

whole village was looking at what was going on and everything else. That was one thing I shall always remember.

Here, we see Finian 'bringing it home', he brings his gay friends into the heart of this very rural gay community. The gay people he is taking to his village pub, the hub of village life, are not urban LGBT people: they are rural LGBT people. And so, when they descended on, and momentarily colonise the rural, heterosexual, and heteronormative space, Finian remarks, the *locals got their eyes opened*. Many may never have knowingly seen or met LGBT people before. And here, they see, meet, and interact with people, no different to their own friends and family. Irish and rural.

But again, Finian, was not intent on drawing the line here. Now in a relationship, and to celebrate his fortieth birthday in 2008, he returned to the same village pub:

I had my 40th nearly five years ago and that was the first time really my partner was introduced to an awful lot of my friends, and to my mother and different people like that. But this time we got to the stage where a number of my gay friends who came to the party were quite happy to go out and slow dance with each other and then the straight husbands were quite happy to dance with the gay guys on the floor. Absolutely. Even the publican came to me and he said to me when I thought, he said, you couldn't break anymore taboos in this pub, he says yet again you've done it tonight [laughs] with your friends.

Here, we can trace Finian's journey from his starting to attend the LGBT group, his coming out to other gay people, *identity assumption*, going public *identity commitment*, and in doing so, he becomes a *sexual citizen* and a vehicle for cultural, and emotional *sexual citizenship* within the local area. He has since been approached by men, from his area, who while not out, have engaged him in conversations, using him as a 'sounding board', which indicate to him that they may be gay or at least questioning. The story also illustrates how, in the right circumstances, and within the right context, the local, *out*, gay man can be a beacon of change, and can help change attitudes.

We finish with a quote from another out, gay man, Phelim, 48 in a village in County Cavan. Phelim came out, after entering into a same-sex relationship. Phelim runs the family pub. He is the only known 'out' gay man in the village, and recalls one social interaction which illustrates how the local 'out' gay man, can become our hero, the sexual citizen (Weeks, 1998; Bell and Binnie, 2000) altering and disrupting previously held stereotypes:

There's another publican up the street. He was in my bar one day, he comes into my pub sometimes, and he was in the bar when me and Dirk were living together. He came

in and he said, ‘I never liked gay people, I never had anything but bad things to say about them, he said. But, I know you all my life, and I’m getting to know Dirk now. And the more I get to know about it all, he says, if one of my children came to me now and told me that they were gay, he said I would be quite happy for it, whereas before I wouldn’t, in any shape or form, whatsoever.

Conclusion

The gay men in this study have developed deliberately sophisticated coping strategies to allow them to survive the intersection between sexuality and the rural space. They often feel the need to engage in self-censorship, self-monitoring, selective engagement with community, and adopting a Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell approach to others. Many escape their locales on frequent trips and holidays, to large gay-friendly cities, or to resorts abroad, although this foregrounds intersections with class, and financial resources (Taylor, 2011). The men consider these strategies as a natural and integral part of their lives, which illustrates the way that continuous exposure to a heterosexist environment and social exchange can determine how a gay person views and experiences the world (Boulden, 2001; Preston & D’Augelli, 2013).

Adhering to traditional codes of rural masculinity is very important to these men, and this involves complying with, and internalising effeminophobic cultural narratives about what it means to be a rural man (Annes & Redlin, 2012). There is a need to eschew overt public displays or affections for same-sex eroticisation, or homo-sexualisation of body and imagery; and this can also extend to their homes, and therefore completes the desexualisation of both the public and private realms. They learn to avoid narratives, or performances that may bring them unwelcome attention or notoriety. Many feel the need to put their rural identity before their gay identity, so as to blend-in, thereby avoiding potential exclusionary reactions from neighbours or family. Despite this, most men conclude that rural society is increasingly accepting of same-sex identities, and relationships, but that it is important to be seen as a ‘good person’ first (Kazyak, 2011). This has implications for the nature and type of gay identity which will be accepted, and the nature of their sexual citizenship, predicated as it often is, on conforming to the ‘good gay’ typology, and proving yourself to be a compliant citizen (Seidman, 2002; Stychin, 1998).

Beyond helping to cope, local LGBT groups make a real difference in providing both social and strategic support to the individual and workplace. Simply put, the local groups make visible new patterns of intimate lives in the rural, supporting moves towards *detraditionalization*; they

make visible *new identities*, previously hidden; and enable *voice and the telling of new stories*, at the local level (Weeks, 1998). Crucial to their impact is the collective nature of groups which can develop confidence to the isolated rural gay man, and provides the wider community with evidence of the previously marginalised, coalescing with one another to claim their place, by right, within the social and cultural space of the rural.

Chapter 9. Conclusion: Assessing gay men as sexual citizens in the nonmetropolitan space.

Introduction

The granting of new rights, and personal freedom, to lesbian, gay, and bisexual people in Great Britain and Ireland in recent years is seen by the men in this study as momentous. The speed of the transformation from sexual criminal to sexual citizen was considered to be truly astounding; as one Irish respondent commented, “*Ireland has moved three hundred years in the space of just thirty years*”. Many recall a history where, from the criminalization of gay sexuality to the legal condoning of discrimination, lesbians and gay men were enthusiastically denied genuine civil, political, social, and cultural membership (Cossman, 2007; Phelan, 2001; Richardson, 2000) with justifications ranging from sinful behaviour to mental illness, to political declarations of gay men constituting a risk to national security (Wilton, 2000 in Colcannon, 2008: 327). Most men in this study have lived through this transition from sexual outcast to sexual citizen.

Without doubt, the importance of the great sweeps of social, and cultural change, as outlined and discussed in great detail by Weeks (1998, 2000, 2007, 2016), is confirmed by this study. The men are unanimous in agreeing that the seismic changes identified by Weeks, such as the general democratization of relationships, the emergence of new subjectivities (identities) and the development of new narratives (stories) (1998: 39), have been crucial in underpinning the conditions necessary for positive changes in social attitudes towards homosexuality (British Social Attitudes Survey, 2013) and in turn, have facilitated many of them to come out and publicly embrace a sexual minority identity. In doing so, they are in a sense, forfeiting a privileged citizenship status that favours heterosexual (or assumed heterosexual) men, and instead embrace sexual minority citizenship, as gay men, in the public sphere.

Sexual citizenship is then, unsurprisingly, important to these men. It is a political articulation of new belonging (Reynolds, 2016) and promises even greater equality, inclusivity, and parity of esteem. It has delivered much of what it promises, rights of all types including, conduct-based rights; identity-based rights and relationship-based rights (Richardson, 2000). As equal sexual citizens under law, gay people in the Republic of Ireland and Great Britain, can now

marry, inherit property on the basis of their state sanctioned relationships, adopt children, receive state benefits, and be protected from discrimination in all aspects of life, whether as employees, as consumers, or as individuals in the wider social context.

Constitutional sexual citizens

The recent constitutional and legal changes have also helped to fracture the long-standing and historical relationship between citizenship and heterosexuality; an association which saw sexual citizenship and heterosexuality as natural bedfellows, a scenario where the sexual citizen was always a heterosexual citizen. As Weeks (1998) and Richardson (2000) remind us, in the recent past all citizens were sexual citizens but not all sexual citizens were equal.

Yet, despite the huge strides and many advancements, inconsistencies remain, such as lack of unequivocal political support, continuing heteronormative dominance, everyday homophobia, hate speech, online vitriol, and increasing oppression of gay people in many countries, often motivated by religious extremism, right-wing nationalism and totalitarian regimes. And so, while the gains need to be acknowledged and celebrated, the fact that prejudice and bigotry continues to exist, must also be acknowledged (Cossman, 2007:335).

Furthermore, in assessing the potency and transformative power of their newly acquired sexual citizenship rights, some questions emerge. Are the roots of sexual citizenship shallow in the rural and nonmetropolitan space? If legislation has transformed the landscape for gay men and women, have local hearts and minds followed? Does sexuality intersect with the space of the nonmetropolitan and rural, in ways that require the men to adopt coping strategies for survival? Has the turn to a model of sexual citizenship delivered for these men? Are we there yet? And has the journey ended?

Interrogating the nature, depth, and scope of their sexual citizenship has brought me to conclude that these men can be conceptualised as newly liberated, *constitutional citizens*. However, I also see them as *constrained citizens*, *cautious citizens*, *conspicuous citizens*, and *concerned citizens*, who face the legacy of what I might refer to as ‘old homophobia’ as well as new, ‘downward pressures’ to be *conforming and compliant sexual citizens* so as to ‘fit’ the normative, and conservative mould implicit within the citizenship model.

Constrained sexual citizens:

In the early stages of our interview, Cyril, 49 (County Leitrim) asserted his belief that, as an openly gay man living and working in nonmetropolitan Ireland, he was treated no differently from others:

They can't treat us differently now, because of the laws. The laws, are there, and [we] cannot be discriminated against. You know. Absolutely not. All my colleagues know I'm gay. At work, absolutely. I've never heard any derogatory remark. They'd know better, you know. Basically as simple as that.

Cyril's statement perfectly describes his sense of new found confidence and empowerment as a *constitutional sexual citizen* of Ireland, and he implicitly makes a connection between his equalised legal status and his positive experiences in the workplace and within wider society. On the basis of such sentiments, we could be tempted to conclude that the journey has ended; that we have arrived at 'destination equality' where all sexual citizens are now equal and where diverse sexual identities are held within the same parity of esteem. Nonetheless, as Cyril's interview progressed, a more nuanced and accurate assessment of the nature of his sexual citizenship emerges. In common with most of the interviews, a picture develops of a sexuality which 'cuts across the political and the personal', in complex, inconsistent, and multidimensional ways. There is an intersection with the nonmetropolitan space - a key feature of this inquiry - in ways which often produce less authentic and less encompassing sexual citizenship outcomes than may be initially presumed.

Throughout the men's narratives, I discern signs and signals which point to men who are, in fact highly *constrained sexual citizens*. By conceptualising the men as *constrained* citizens, I see them as not entirely free to express their sexual identity; they often feel compelled to curtail and amend, to self-censor, to avoid open and honest conversations about their intimate same-sex feelings and desires, and to de-sexualise language and performances. The men are aware that neighbours, work colleagues, friends and family can become easily embarrassed, uneasy, and uncomfortable when confronted by the topic and reality of homosexuality. Most of the men cited numerous and frequent examples of hetero-embarrassment, hetero-unease and hetero-discomfiture when they brought up the issue of homosexuality and gay issues.

The men interpret displays of unease and awkwardness as proof of a lingering stigmatization that surrounds gay male sexuality within contemporary society (Nadal, 2013; Preston & D'Augelli, 2013). The men often feel compelled to avoid, and therefore *not* discuss their sexual orientation, or indeed not discuss LGBT sexual rights issues at all, in certain settings and

contexts. This can feel like a form of collusion in the silencing of their personhood and sexual identity, and as a form of betrayal to the issues that concern them and the wider LGBT community. This calls to mind the work of Bowen & Blackmon (2003) who use Noelle-Neumann's 'spiral of silence' to demonstrate how dominant majority opinion can weaken and suppress open, honest discussions, of particular resonance for gay and lesbian people who may fear negative reactions and isolation (:1393).

With many men perceiving pressures to avoid in-depth conversation on gay related issues, it begs the question, has the shame gone away? Seemingly not, as there were numerous examples, where the men were told, even by friends and family, not to discuss or mention the word "gay" around teenagers and children, in particular. Most men cited examples of being compelled to constrain themselves in speech, but also to curtail themselves in behaviours, as highlighted by Darren, 44 (Norfolk):

Grace and Tony had a big society wedding two years ago and we were invited but on condition that, 'you guys are going to behave yourselves, no kissing or holding hands or anything like that'.

As these testimonies reveal, and as chapter seven demonstrates, the rural imposes a requirement that gay men should eschew same-sex affection and intimacy in the public space; that they should engage in self-censorship and self-monitoring; and that they conform to a hegemonic performance of masculinity. Remarks made to men in this study, on hand-holding, reinforce this message:

We were walking past the Conservative Club, in the local town as it happens, early on in our relationship holding hands, and a woman was walking on the opposite side of the street and in a stage whisper she suggested that we shouldn't be holding hands because it's, other people might not like it. (Harry, 46, Norfolk)

As *constrained citizens*, I consider these men as being denied the automatic privilege available to heterosexual citizens. The gay men in this study do not feel they can be carefree, expressive, or proclaim their sexual identity without hindrance or censure, or to be 'loud and proud' without consequence. All too often, the rural represses same-sex identity performances of these men. Their locales remain, for the most part, distinctly ill-at-ease with public displays of gay, male, sexuality, and provide few avenues for free expression, or spaces where they can get respite from oppressive heteronormativity; where one can 'be free to be oneself':

There's no question you do miss the easiness of, you know, even of being able to go into a café in the afternoon with two gay friends, maybe one camp loud person, you like

as he might be, and having that freedom. You can roar laughing, scream your head off, be as camp as you like. You can't do that with the same freedom in Cavan, you just can't. If I'm realistic you're self-censoring a lot of the time, you know. Like even when we're out as a group I suppose socially. It's not that we curtail ourselves excessively but there would be an amount of, you know, maybe just not being completely over the top, you know. (Dermot, 43, County Cavan)

In discussing how the nonmetropolitan environment imposes constraints on their personal behaviours, conversations, interactions, performances, and political identification (such as *not* displaying the rainbow flag at local network meetings), I consider the men to be deprived of some of the cultural and emotional privileges implicit within the promises of sexual citizenship. Richardson argues that the civil rights claim of self-realization - the realization of your chosen sexual identity - may 'include the right to develop diverse sexual identities in an unhindered if not state-assisted manner' (Richardson, 2001: 121 cited in Maliepaard, 2014: 383). While the state, through its liberating legislative framework has removed state-imposed restrictions on conduct, identity and relationship rights, and other personal freedoms, the continuing legacy of stigmatization, hegemonic masculinity and heteronormative domination most certainly does hinder the men's right to express their sexuality, freely, openly and locally.

These cultural legacies encourage a social regulation and policing of non-normative sexualities, and identities; and dissuade public displays of same-sex affection.

State articulations of citizenship, accompanied by progressive equality legislation, have released these men from the criminal charge of same-sex activity, protect them from harassment and discrimination and affords them the promise of inclusion and membership. Despite this, I find Chantal Mouffe's idea of radical democratic citizenship appealing as it reminds us that further progress requires more than state intervention. Mouffe decentres (note: does *not* remove) the state, but rather views citizenship as a process (rather than an end product); a process which is conceptualised as the "struggle to force liberal society to live up to its promise" (in Robson and Kessler, 2008: 541). I feel that the promise of true liberation for the gay men in this study requires an assault on the conditions that curtail and constrain their ability to publicly proclaim and self-realize as intimate, romantic and sexual persons in the nonmetropolitan and rural space.

Cautious sexual citizens

Within the men's testimonies, I also discern a strong tendency to be *cautious citizens*. By conceptualising the men as *cautious*, I see their sexuality cutting across the personal and the political in ways that require them to be careful, wary, attentive and vigilant, on the watch for potential dangers, problems or difficulties.

Previous chapters have highlighted how the rural requires vigilance; how one wrong move, or cruising the wrong person can haunt you forever, provoke attack or foment gossip, which in turn can have a destructive effect on the men's relationships locally. Aside from ill-judged cruising, the men are acutely aware that their locales contain many people who revile homosexuality, and as such may hold hostile and antagonistic opinions towards gay people. Not all hearts and minds have followed in the example of legislative liberalisation. Consequently, the men need do very little to provoke homophobic outbursts and incidences. Indeed, the simple act of living together as a same-sex couple, runs the risk of potential harassment and attack. Finian lives with his partner Rory, in a small-scale development of houses, on the edge of a small village in County Sligo. However, a small group of youths have recently begun to make unwelcome comments which have caused the couple some hurt and concern:

One night there recently, we were just turning off the lights, going to bed, and somebody shouted 'faggots' up in the direction of our bedroom. Some young lad sitting out on the wall and decided to show off to his friends.

During the interview, Finian shrugged this incident off as "no big deal in the greater scheme of things" and something which was an aberration. However, it does illustrate how the private and the domestic sphere can also become a site of public interest, invasion and assault. In a similar vein, Daniel, 32, also lives with his partner, in a small post-war, two-bedroom apartment in a housing estate in a town in the East of England. His partner is thirty years older than Daniel. Concerned about inviting or provoking homophobic remarks, gossip, assaults or attack if it became known that they were lovers, the couple have made a conscious decision to pretend to be father and son, as he testifies:

We are hesitant. Because of the age difference people assume we are father and son and with most people we don't challenge that assumption...we feel safer just allowing them to think we are father and son, it's just easier; there are certain people who I would be OK knowing but then you lose control of the information and who will they tell. I think there could be the possibility of negative reaction and behaviours, from people who live

there and their visitors and people who ‘hang around’...It just opens the possibility of attacks: verbal and physical, you just never know.

These, and many other testimonies, reveal a general level of worry and concern about the potential for (as opposed to the possibility of) problems with neighbours. Some of the men were especially ‘on alert’ when they moved into a new neighbourhood, or when new neighbours moved close by them. As a single, middle aged man, Mitch says that he feels the need to be discreet, circumspect and guarded because of his sexuality:

I would be sensible. There’s a new family after moving in across the road ...kinda chavs, bit rowdy, maybe I’m not sure about them. I’d be wary. Keep my distance. I don’t want to raise my profile, I wouldn’t want kids making graffiti. I keep a quiet life. (Mitch, 58, Essex)

Mitch is particularly cautious over talking to, and interacting with, children. He reflects on how in ‘days gone by’, older residents would sometimes stop and chat to children, but he feels that the conflation of male homosexuality and paedophilia (Freund et al, 2008) is such that it is risky for him, as a single, older, gay man to engage in conversation with neighbours’ children. He simply “keeps his head down” and “keeps himself apart”. This self-imposed detachment is a risk-management response to how he considers his local neighbourhood may perceive the intersection of male homosexuals, especially older, single men, with paedophilia. However, in turn this discourages the types of integration, inclusion and belonging so often promised by sexual citizenship (Richardson, 2000; 2004).

As such, we see men who fear the *potential* for danger, and distress, in their interactions with the heterosexual majority. Their narratives display an awareness that homophobia remains embedded within the cultures of their locales, despite their status as *constitutional sexual citizens*. Homophobia may appear diminished, and hidden, but many of the men see it as “lurking just under the surface” and they believe that, “you don’t have to scratch very far to find it” (Mel, 46, County Longford).

Some men had experienced physical assaults, and as a result had made themselves less visible, both in attire and in behavioural and vocal performances, as to avoid future risk in the public space. In developing these strategies, we see an example of how gay men often feel compelled to negotiate their visual identities to avoid looking “too gay” in response to dominant masculinist and heteronormative pressures (Clarke and Smith, 2015). Here we can discern the power and potency of dominant forms of hegemonic masculinity and how they shape and restrict the performance of gay male identities (Cooper, 2013:72).

The men's narratives demonstrate a reluctance to completely 'let their guard down'. As yet, they do not possess complete confidence that their safety is assured. They worry about local reactions, attitudes and responses to their sexual orientation. They worry about potential impact for their jobs, their businesses, and about the potential for drunken abuse causing them social embarrassment in local public settings. They question the true extent of social acceptance of gay men, and they are unsure whether their locales embrace them wholeheartedly. This feeling was exacerbated for a number of the Irish men, when after the euphoria of the recent marriage referendum, they reflected on the fact that approximately fifty per cent of people in their rural electoral constituencies rejected same-sex or equal marriage (Murphy, 2016).

The men's sense of vulnerability and insecurity can be heightened when local homophobic incidences occur and are reported, such as the sustained violent attack, by up to eight men, in August 2017, on a young gay couple who had exchanged a kiss in a Sligo pub (Advocate, 2017) or the brutal assault by up to fifteen men on Norwich gay pub landlords Jesse Charlebois and David Hayes, in 2013 (Eastern Daily Press, 2013). Both of these assaults occurred during the fieldwork for this study and they engendered worry and concern among the men; they also acted as a salutary reminder that despite their newly won rights, gay citizens remain legitimate targets for attack, on account of their sexual orientation. Their constitutional citizenship is undermined by the persistence of such homophobic hatred, which can be awakened into violence, in multiple and unpredictable ways. Many men perceive their sexual citizenship to have "shallow roots" within the small town, rural and indeed national space, and as a result, they are not prepared to "throw caution to the wind - just yet" (Mel, 46, County Longford).

The rhetoric of citizenship proclaims, "the many protections and respect citizens can expect"; it promises "a recognition to symbolic presence and visibility" (Kitchin & Lysaght, 2004: 83); it speaks of security and safety, and "the right to be different" (without rebuke) (ibid: 84); and the ability to "embrace openly and legitimately, hitherto marginalised lifestyles and to propagate them without hindrance" (Pakulski, 1997:83 cited in Maliepaard, 2014:383). Despite the rhetorical optimism of citizenship, the men in this study, remain emphatically *cautious sexual citizens*. Liberating legislation and huge changes in social attitudes towards same-sex identities, with for example, Ireland being considered one of the most gay-friendly nations in the world (Gay Community News, 2015) have delivered much, but have not yet dispelled or eradicated the deep veins of homophobia, and stigma that run throughout our society. The men retain a pragmatic wariness, and yes, in some cases an absolute distrust of society, a distrust which one man said was, "*buried deep inside me, like in my DNA*" (Mac, 40, County

Roscommon). This is the dividend of centuries of oppression, marginalization and ostracization. New freedoms have arrived, but old memories and contemporary suspicions linger; the past continues to cast a shadow over contemporary imaginations and realities (Weeks, 2016).

Conspicuous sexual citizens

As sexual citizens, the gay men in this study acknowledge that *their* sexual citizenship, while fully confirmed and codified in the legal and constitutional sense, is a new social and cultural phenomenon and they believe that their *homo*-sexual identity is still seen by many, as non-normative. As non-normative sexual citizens, within a society marked by compulsory heterosexuality (Whitehead, 2002) they often attract public notice and attention, appear eye-catching and rare, and the reactions of others can cause them to be seen as distinguishable from ‘the norm’.

In conceptualising the men as conspicuous sexual citizens, I see them as conspicuous both in the way their sexuality interacts with (or plays out in) the local and public realm, and in the way gay men are often absent from, and therefore ignored by local consciousness. In other words, gay men in nonmetropolitan areas can be conspicuous by their very presence (the ‘only gay in the village’) as well as being conspicuous by their very absence (‘there are no gays in these parts’). Both have implications, as to how their constitutional citizenship is transfigured into local realities.

Conspicuous by their presence

As chapter three highlighted, gay men who are ‘out’ within the local community are assured of a reaction. Reactions may vary from embrace, inclusion, and belonging, to hostility, exclusion, and marginalisation, but one thing is certain, there will be a reaction. Therefore, disclosure of their sexual identity is a decision which is not taken lightly and “once out there” (Columba, 47, County Longford) it is difficult to undo the disclosure. Revealing a gay male sexual identity in the local community is far from an inconsequential act. It is highly political, highly significant, and the journey thereafter can have unexpected repercussions. The interaction of gay, male, sexuality and nonmetropolitan environment can be problematic; a seamless integration between sexuality and his local space cannot be guaranteed.

The men in this study who do come out, while often encountering positive reactions, and acts of inclusion and recognition, also detect an intense interest in them as *homo*-sexual citizens;

they are recognizable because of their rarity in the local community; they become objects of curiosity; and are seen through the prism of their sexuality; in other words, as ‘the local gay guy’. Many of them believe that establishing rural gay identities is a very new form of identity-making, and that old stereotypes which primarily conceptualise gay as purely about sex acts linger. A number of men believe that there exists a powerful heterosexual and hegemonic masculinist obsession with phallogentric sexuality, and a rhetorical revulsion by men especially (for public consumption at least) for male-to-male penetrative sex. However, many of the out men reported having been asked with friendly curiosity (mainly by women friends) what sexual role they assumed with other men (Moskowitz, 2007).

The local ‘out’ gay man often pays a price for his right to be ‘out’ and proud, the price is a level of attention, prominence and objectification that can be tedious and tiring and which some see as a form of ‘othering’. Examples are legion, with men being made to feel “like fish out of water”, “unwelcome”, “different” or “odd” in numerous everyday social interactions and settings:

Walking into the village pub [as a same-sex couple] and the pub going quiet [as soon as we walked in] might have just been an accident but it happened more than once, and that certainly did feel very uncomfortable and so we stopped going to the pub. (Harry, 46, Norfolk)

You know if I get involved [in village life], you’ll have the questions- you know- and I think well, I don’t really want to explain myself to ya, and then not know what their reaction will be ...and of course, if they’re asking those questions with couple kids taggin along- what do I say then- is it appropriate? And it’s not like in the city where you might never see them again- you’re gonna be bumping into them the whole time. (Darren, 44, Norfolk)

The results of these interactions are inevitably emotionally exhausting for the gay men, an exhaustion which can lead to their withdrawal from community life. As open and ‘out’ gay men, they are rare representations of an ‘*other*’ sexuality and become (unlike their fellow *hetero*-sexual citizens) *conspicuous citizens*, as a result of this ‘known otherness’, they attract an array of reactions, some of which act to de-legitimize their status as equal citizens and remind them of their ‘difference’. This calls to mind the work of Shane Phelan, an American political scientist who uses the term “stranger” to illustrate the way in which sexual minorities are, she says, seen as neither enemies nor friends, “they may be neighbours, ‘but they’re not like us’” (Phelan, 2001, 29, quoting Beck, 1996, 382 in Cossman, 2007).

While the reach of sexual citizenship has recently been extended to embrace gay and lesbian sexuality, this historical exclusion, this strangeness hasn't gone away. The homosexual stranger remains a cultural "figure of ambivalence who troubles the border between us and them" (Phelan, 2001:5). I see much resonance between Phelan's concept of the stranger and the men's position and situation in their rural and small-town locales.

It is also important to mention how the intersection with disability can further compound conspicuousness. A small number of men reported that they lived with conditions which are covered by the Disability Discrimination Act. For example, one man was receiving treatment for prostate cancer, another had intermittent mental health issues, one confirmed as living with HIV, and on treatment, while one man was encountering decreasing mobility, due to a complex array of medical conditions. This man uses a wheelchair, and therefore unlike the other men, was conspicuous in his limited mobility. He is publicly out, older, and lived in sheltered housing at the time of the interview. He reported suffering both homophobic and disablist verbal abuse, from other residents and from housing staff, who were accusing him of "faking it" for attention and welfare benefits. This is a timely reminder that the concept of heteronormativity is very much interwoven with "compulsory able-bodiedness"; they are both connected to neo-liberal ideas of the individual as responsible for their own welfare; and together they can also produce normative sexual discourses which consider those with disabilities as sexually useless, "asexual, or at best sexually inadequate" (Chappell, 2015:57).

Conspicuous by their absence:

During the interviews, but more especially during my visits to, and observations of, the local LGBT network meetings, I would often hear men muse and ponder out loud, 'where are all the other gay people?' The local groups often had up to one hundred people as online members, but most of this number were anonymous, and had never attended any of the group meetings. Whether in Suffolk, Norfolk, Longford or Cavan, the groups reported the same trend - many showed a fleeting (online) interest but the weekly meetings and social events attracted the same, regular ten or twenty people. This left the men feeling bemused and frustrated. The group members who attend the meetings are firm in their opinion that many hundreds if not thousands of gay men in their regions are in hiding, afraid to emerge; they are in effect, submerged sexual citizens; sexual citizens in waiting. Their invisibility diminishes their ability to become sexual citizens and denies them the potentialities of sexual citizenship. A number of the men who were 'not out' argued whether 'coming out' on the public stage is the only way to 'become

yourself'? However, most men believed that one has to 'come out' to attain the full benefits of sexual citizenship rights (Weeks, 1998; Richardson, 2004). They believe that while gay people may be political citizens to a greater degree than ever before, and that legislation can help people feel like citizens, they wonder what this legislation (bestowing citizenship rights) means, in practical terms, for those who do not feel sufficiently safe, secure or empowered to be 'out'.

Through the absence of large numbers of out, gay men in the nonmetropolitan context, I see a continuation of the virtual exclusion of lesbians and gay men from local cultural representations, an exclusion which Cossman, 2007, and Richardson, 2000 saw (while writing more widely) as a denial of cultural citizenship. The lack of a critical mass of out and open gay people, also has implications for those few men who are 'out', it accentuates their isolation, they can appear and feel like beleaguered sexual *minority* citizens marooned in an ocean of sexual *majority* citizens. Their sense of minority status has been fuelled by some recent surveys, such as that released by the Office of National Statistics in October 2016, which calculated that only 1.7 per cent of the population identified as lesbian, gay or bisexual, based on a survey of 238,000 people; and showing that rural areas had even lower percentages, for example, Devon at 1.3 per cent and Norfolk at 0.9 per cent (Menhinnitt, 2017). Whether through surveys of this nature, or by observing the numbers who turn out regularly to weekly meetings, self-identifying gay men in many parts of these study regions are often conspicuous by their very absence and this completes and reinforces their status as 'outsiders', 'strangers' and 'other'.

Concerned sexual citizens

A theme which emerged during the study was a growing awareness by the men that sexuality has gone global. Discussion around sexuality is no longer as silent as in the past (Sullivan, 1996; Plummer, 2003) the visibility and voice provided by globalisation, facilitated by advances in communications technology, results in debate and argument on a global scale (Grove et al, 2014). Through television, newspaper reports, online videos, and social media, the men in this study have become increasingly attuned not only to positive developments globally (for example, the growing number of countries permitting same-sex marriage), but also to numerous examples of harassment, discrimination and violence against gay people in many parts of the world. In fact, the men are of the opinion that anti-gay rhetoric, oppression and persecution seem to be on the rise, globally, and they are very aware that some of the recent

developments in the wake of the globalization of sexualities are a cause of deep concern. Many of them see in such developments, evidence of a backlash against increasing tolerance, equality and rights for LGBT people (Encarnacion, 2017).

In conceptualising the men as *concerned sexual citizens*, I see them as perturbed, distressed and apprehensive about the increase in global hostility towards fellow gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people and the possible implications for *their* newly won rights and *their* new status as constitutional citizens in Britain and Ireland.

The men are witness to ever more concerning media reports, bringing news of a whole network of human sexual rights violations across the globe. Of particular concern for the men, is a trend towards what they perceive as ‘state acquiescence’ in or even ‘state assisted’ harassment, oppression and persecution of gay people. They cited numerous examples of regimes using anti-LGBT discourse and rhetoric which unleashes anti-gay populist hysteria. Reports from Chechnya, in summer 2017, that several hundred gay men were feared to have been rounded up and some killed (The Guardian, 2017a), and where Amnesty International were quoted as warning that those deemed “undesirable” by the authorities were being subjected to “preventive mopping up”, followed by arbitrary detention, torture and, in some cases, death at the hands of the police (Independent, 2017a), caused consternation and bewilderment amongst the local Irish and English men.

Developments in the United States, also caused distinct unease. They cited recent political pronouncements in which they detect a renewed commitment to satisfying the religious-right, and reemphasising the importance of religious rights, at the possible expense of LGBT rights. The reported decision in March 2017, by South Dakota, planning to sign into law LGBT hostile legislation which allows taxpayer-funded agencies to refuse to provide any service, on the basis of the agency’s religious or moral convictions (Towerload, 2017) was a rude awakening for men who had thought that “the fight was over” (Gavin, 46, Norfolk). In these developments they detect attempts to throw gay people out onto the margins of society again.

In the United Kingdom, the men believed that political rhetoric, such as that used by the new leader of the United Kingdom Independence Party, where he (allegedly) said, that gay rights “had gone too far” (Independent, 2017b), highlighted dangers closer to home. It demonstrates that there exist those, at a national level, who wish to “draw the line” on LGBT equality. As such, they believe that, “*We need to be vigilant, we can lose rights which we have*

gained....that's why it's important to keep up visibility of groups like Pride...because the job isn't done yet (Daniel, 32, Norfolk).

In this quote and through my interactions with the men in their networks and groups, I detect an anxiety that, however implausible, the rights won in both Britain and Ireland, could be reversed or eroded. The local men, whether in Sligo or Norfolk, perceive themselves to be part of a wider, virtual, 'community of concern' to global sexual human rights violations and state sponsored oppression. A large survey, the results of which were released in October 2017, provide ample evidence that global sexual citizenship for gay people is a distant dream; and that there exists a significant body of opinion which seeks to enforce criminalisation more severely and/or re-criminalise gay men and women (ILGA, 2017). It is a salutary reminder that the roots are shallow, and that both vigilance at home, and solidarity and activism abroad is required:

All the things that are happening makes you think, could it happen here, I don't think so, but nevertheless, you can't be certain, and that's why we shouldn't give up the activism. (Philip, 72, at a group meeting)

As the global world and the local world fuse, I ponder whether this could help create 'a GLocal' sexual citizen, who is aware of the disparities that exist, makes collective cause with fellow LGBT people globally, nationally and locally. Either way, the journey still to be travelled becomes abundantly clear. Sexual citizenship: are we there yet? Clearly not. In fact, a question arises, might we see reversals in LGBT rights and personal freedoms?

Conformist sexual citizens

In conceptualising the men as conformist sexual citizens, I see them as men who increasingly feel compelled to accept and adhere to, established behaviours and norms around sexuality and sexual identity, norms which are inherently conservative and traditional.

Academic contributors such as Richardson (2000, 2004), Cossman (2002, 2007) and Plummer (2003) among others, caution that modern models of citizenship (such as developed by Marshall in the 1950s) are largely built on around Western notions of individual rights, capitalist and neo-liberal economics, and are also inherently heterosexist, gendered and racialized. Therefore, seductive as the sentiment towards citizenship may be, for gay, bisexual and lesbian people claiming rights based on such models of citizenship may find that they require a certain negotiation of belonging (Cram, 2016) which forces potential compromises

around the nature of identity; an accommodation to heterosexual standards; and the loss of distinctive ways of being (Taylor, 2011:583).

There were many examples of men in this study who felt the need to verbally reject any such notions of assimilation, normalisation, or an implied acceptance of heterosexual norms and obligations. Mitch speaks for a number of the men when he reflects on legalisation permitting same-sex marriage:

On gay marriage: I acknowledge the upside to this – people saying that’s it’s OK for gay people to marry indicates a change in society’s attitudes, but when you assimilate completely you lose something, people buy into a new ‘me story’, there’s less friction, less debate, and less energy. (Mitch, 58, Essex)

There was a perceptible difference in views among older and younger respondents, with some older men exhibiting a frustration that people are now “*blindly following the mainstream- into oblivion*” (Gay group meeting). During a talk I gave to the group, in July 2017 at a long established Norwich gay bar, the immediate concern of the gay landlords, which may seem perfunctory, was that they would go out of business, because “*the young ones don’t feel the need to go to gay bars any more, they are hanging out with their friends in straight bars, and cafes, and online, what with the advent of dating apps, they’re just not frequenting the gay bars, no matter what we do to attract them in; and I worry we [gay bars] will disappear. That will be a whole history and whole identity of Norfolk LGBT gone*” (Pat)

During this meeting, there were concerns that gays were unwittingly colluding in the destruction of a distinctive identity, and by engaging a form of ‘identity abandonment’, they were gifting the conservative, heterosexual lobby what they want, namely the increasing invisibility of queer, sexualised, collective and campaigning homosexuality. I am minded by the arguments of Edelberg (2014) that liberation and normalization have become “two sides of the same coin” (:71), and that with “equal rights and inclusion into mainstream society”, some parts of lesbian and gay culture have begun to disappear (ibid). A number of them saw that increasing integration, and assimilation into heterosexual social spaces involves accepting a condition implicitly imposed upon homo-sexual citizens where “sexual subjects are privatized, de-eroticized and depoliticized” (Cossman, 2002: 483). Despite this awareness of the dangers of normalisation, most felt that they were being swept along by a very powerful tide, which I likened to a tyranny of normalisation - an overpowering and yes, oppressive force.

Quite a number of men spoke ironically that, just when gay people are granted greater citizenship rights (emancipation), at the same time there seems to be a parallel pressure towards

greater conformity to a heterosexual ideal of sexual citizenship. An element of this conformity involves a greater push for the privatization of sex and sexuality. Men spoke of the demise of public toilets, which were used as ‘cottages’, as well as recent local “clampdowns” on long established and popular cruising and meeting spots in forests, lay-bys, and beaches. The men of Norfolk were particularly incensed about restrictions imposed at the naturist beach at Holkam Bay, a secluded, wide and extensive beach backed by pine forests and dunes. The beach had an unofficial gay section, but was closed to nude bathing because of complaints received about alleged open-air sex activities in the dunes. Chains padlocking toilets, barricades preventing entry to lay-bys, community welfare folk (good citizens) with torches in cruising grounds, symbolise a new hostility to sex; sex has become delicate, there is a fear of seeing or talking about sex and the return of polite society and prudishness about sex (and especially same-sex) practices. Many men remarked that even gay bars (where they still exist) had become increasingly sanctimonious about intimacy if it gets, as it were, too overt, and of getting disapproving glances if they started kissing too much. It seems that many in the gay community have absorbed and accepted that “normalisation renounces sex” (Cossman, 2002).

This cautiousness around sex, and intimacy in the public realm also seems to infect the personal home space of many of the men. Their testimonies betray efforts at de-eroticization of their living spaces. Greater tolerance and acceptance is conjoined with the need to respect and honour heterosexual sensibilities towards displays of the homo-erotic, and queer. Images of naked men are placed in inconspicuous places, discreetly out of sight of unexpected, and random visitors, or neighbours and family. During my interview with Jerome, 42, and a secondary school teacher in rural County Galway, he points out his pride and joy- the Tom of Finland book on his coffee table - but he ensures that:

any gay books, especially those with graphic art like my Tom of Finland, are put into the drawer when I’m expecting visitors, and if I hear the bell unexpectedly, then I hide it under the coffee table or cover it with the Sunday newspapers.

Even men, like Jerome, who were ostensibly “*not in the closet*” (open to interpretation) or men like George, 56, a business man in the East of England, who is “*mostly out*” would engage in this unquestioning form of erasing and self-cleansing, willingly acquiescing in the sanitisation (and sanctification) of their private domestic spaces for public consumption. The de-eroticization of home, body and language was entered into, perhaps unconsciously, as part of their obligations towards sexual citizenship. The new fear is not of criminalisation, but of contravening what they perceive as local, culturally conservative, heteronormative conceptions

of morality. In this, we can discern an inclusion in community that comes at a cost: respectability, at the expense of transgression and subversion; sexual citizenship as a disciplining and normalizing discourse” (Cossman, 2002: 486).

A number of the men agreed that they put much effort and energy into doing what is deemed acceptable and discarding what is considered unacceptable, in a bid to become normal (Maliepaard, 2014). Turlough, 51 (County Roscommon) talks about the need to “*play the ‘decent guy’ and ‘good citizen’ game*”. He organises and takes part in community games, sports, family fun event days, GAA, hurling, and charity swims on Christmas day. He is ‘out’ locally, and indeed it is common knowledge that he is a single, gay man. He is a community figure, but in order to blend in seamlessly (assimilate), he avoids discussion around same-sex intimacy with the straight community, he denies the need to speak of such intimacy and desire (with them), pretending to be “*not that interested in all the sex part of being gay*”. Despite the fact that this is not the case (he admits the need to speak openly at the local LGBT network meetings), he finds that de-sexualisation of his personhood is helpful or even necessary to fit in, to avoid friction and tension; de-sexualising the self, comforts and calms local heteronormative concerns, concerns which are rarely voiced openly, but which are ever-present. Turlough knows too well that, “lesbians and gay men continue to be positioned as threats to the sanctity of the heterosexual order and must complexly situate their citizenship struggles within this position” (Taylor, 2011:587). As one man quipped at a network meeting:

you have to be very careful how to present yourself, yourself as a project....you have to be very careful as it can backfire if you don’t fit the mould (LGBT group meeting, Ireland).

De-politicization is another desirable outcome of being an “acceptable citizen” (Bell and Binnie, 2000). There were signs of de-politicization among the men and the LGBT groups. Clear divisions emerged between what I might call the ‘blenders’ and the ‘radicals’ in one English group. Divisions came to a head over the annual regional Gay Pride. The ‘blenders’ (who dominated the committee), wanted a ‘family-friendly’ event, which would be ‘open to all’, a ‘community event’ with an emphasis on diversity and harmony. The ‘radicals’ did not object to this per se, but became quite agitated when proposals were made to erase the word gay, from gay pride. This move followed a pattern where the term *Gay Pride* has been replaced with a more ambiguous term: name of a city followed by Pride (*City Pride*) or simply *Pride*. In the end, the ‘blenders’ won, and although the word Gay was expunged from the title of the Pride event, the LGBTQI dimensions were clear to all who browsed the website and partook

in the event in the day. Nonetheless, for ‘radicals’, the erasing and removal and de-coupling of *Gay* from *Pride*, symbolises the de-identification and de-politicization of the events nationally. They see *Pride* becoming less gay, less political, and more carnival; promoted and marketed as a ‘party’ which celebrates generic diversity and community. In these developments, a number of the men discern a subtle *re-silencing* of gay sexuality, certainly in so far as it alludes to an active, subversive and questioning sexual identity, which seeks to interrogate, and problematize patriarchal, masculinist, heterosexist norms and highlight the continuing dominance of heteronormativity within society. These men would like to see a pause in the enthusiastic embrace of sexual citizenship as it is currently positioned, and a consummate commitment to critique political parties, and the corporate world: all of which are historically heteronormative and whose embrace of gay sexual citizenship may be partial, or rhetorical.

Perhaps one of the most publicised and celebrated legislative advances in both countries was the introduction of same-sex or equal marriage. There was a broad welcome among the men for this most symbolic and practical measure; their welcome would correspond to Agigian (2004) who highlights the many benefits that marriage can bring to same-sex couples, including opening the door to reproductive possibilities. However, some men saw it as an unnecessary aping or copying of heterosexual institutions and traditions, while others saw it as a possible ‘Trojan Horse’ which could usher in further dissipation of gay identity, and a vehicle for further normalisation. Turlough (51, County Roscommon) is emphatic in his views:

I’m not sure about the marriage thing. I don’t like the wording, I’m kind of like on Peter Tatchell on that. I just don’t like that. I don’t like this fucking thing of marriage. I just don’t like it. Leave it as civil partnership but put the rights onto it. I don’t like this marriage thing at all and that’s probably not a good thing to be saying.

Turlough acknowledges that to problematize and critique same-sex marriage may seem churlish, in the face of apparent widespread enthusiasm for it among gay communities, but he was not alone as Joshua, 41 (Suffolk) testifies:

Gay people do not get married. We have something called civil partnerships. I still stand by that, I don’t like the phrase, and I don’t like the phrase my husband, that’s straight terminology. Why should we as gay people embrace straight terminology.

Joshua continues that marriage may lead to other ‘normalisation and conformist pressures’, such as children:

I don’t want to parent. Getting married, then adopting children, no! I don’t have those parental instincts. Fine if you want to do that. That is fine but you can’t force someone

to do something they don't want to do if it's not within their nature. So for me, no paternal instincts at all. I can't stand babies so don't bring it round to me.

Joshua's testimony on the pressures towards marriage and parenting remind me of the words of Cossman, when she states that "lesbians and gay men are being brought into the folds of, and reconstituted, in the discourse of the new familialized citizen" (2002: 484).

Despite such reservations, deeply held by some men, others had embraced this new "recognition based right" (Richardson, 2000) and had married towards the end of the study. Studying the glossy photos of the weddings, I was struck by how familiar the act of marriage seemed. With the notable exception of the (lack of a) church setting, many other elements seemed eerily similar to the many heterosexual weddings I had attended down through the years. Images of smiling, family and friends, hotel, champagne, banquet, wedding cake, music, dancing and celebration. The "only" difference was the central image of two cis men, rather than one cis woman and one cis man. Of course, needless to say, this is a fundamentally historic and significant difference, but all seemed so ordinary. But, can we be so flippant about the victory to be ordinary? Surely we cannot forget the words of Weeks, when he reminds us that we should never underestimate the power of being ordinary, it has helped transform the LGBT, and wider world (Weeks, 2007). Indeed, the transgressive era, the era of the queer and gay radicals shouting from outside the walls, demanding equality seems to be over; gay people have been let in, and we now inhabit and colonise those same institutions and structures which we were denied membership of for so long. Our moment of citizenship seems to have arrived (Weeks, 1998). At face value, this can be seen as a decisively transformative (and radical) moment. Indeed, some of the men felt that as 'insiders', LGBT couples might "*teach the straights a thing or two*" (Eugene, 52, County Donegal) as he remarks:

I mean, the gay life, I mean, I have debates with friends of mine who are in heterosexual marriages...and they are concerned about monogamy.....and I talk about gay couples in open relationships, who are sticking together. You've got to make an equal play and say well, this is what I want to do, you can do it too, you know, we'll stick together as a couple. So I think what will happen is that, you know, the gay marriage model might influence the heterosexual model and might iron out some of the problems there.... co-parenting agreements for example...potential for bucking the system and drawing up their own approaches.

We see here, a belief that allowing gay people into the institution of marriage may have the impact of bringing new, more equitable, cooperative arrangements to a historically traditional,

patriarchal, and unequal mechanism of social control, and perhaps facilitating greater democratization of relationships (Weeks, 1998).

Nonetheless, despite these optimistic possibilities, we cannot ignore the work of Carl Stychin, who reflects on other possible outcomes of sexual citizenship. That the inherent pressures towards normalisation and assimilation produce binaries – namely the “good gay” on one end of the spectrum and the “bad gay” on the other. Stychin sees sexual citizenship as highly circumscribed. Yes, gays and lesbians are recognised as subjects in law *but* only so long as they “embrace an ideal of ‘respectability’, a construction that perpetuates a division between the ‘good gays’ and (disreputable) ‘bad queers’” (1998).

In attempting to apply Stychin’s typology to the men in this study, I can see many “good gays” and some that would be considered “bad gays”. Graeme (32) lives in rural Ireland and recently married Toby. The wedding was held in one of the premier hotels in the region. The event itself was lavish, with over two hundred people in attendance (majority heterosexual family, and friends). The entire day was videoed and no expense was spared. Graeme and Toby went on honeymoon, and shared photos on social media. They personified a happy couple, proudly displaying their engagement and wedding rings, and sipping cocktails in luxurious settings. They returned to Ireland, where they now live together in their own occupied, and very comfortable, house. They dress in a manner which could be considered ‘preppy’; always smart casual. Toby works locally, in a very well-paid profession, while Graeme has chosen to work part-time. Graeme relishes his role as home-maker, and house-husband, and they are investigating the legal options of becoming parents through adoption or surrogacy or such like. Their social media sites show a permanent performance of coupledness, and a hectic social life of overseas trips and family days out. They have ceased to attend the local LGBT group meetings (too busy with married life), they are frequent users of social media, but rarely, if ever, post any topics which concern gay rights, or gay politics. Indeed, they show very little interest in engaging with controversial topics *per se*. They have recently purchased an expensive rare breed dog, and together they post photos of shopping expeditions with the dog, quite often on day trips to Dublin or Belfast. Graeme and Toby, are a friendly, welcoming, hospitable and engaging couple, but I can’t help viewing them through the lens of Stychin’s “good gays”. Graeme and Toby are exemplar “good gays” - they do nothing to unsettle traditional, hetero inspired norms and values. They embrace, and are included in, the institutions of family, gender, work and nation. They appear to be *homo*-sexual citizens embracing *hetero*-sexual citizens’ relationship traditions, patterns and practices. I see herein an

example of a gay couple following a path of normalisation – “a strategy which neutralises the significance of sexual differences and sexual identity, becoming in every other way the ideal of a national citizen” (Seidman, 2001: 324) – the perfect citizen: individuals who embrace hard work, are self-reliant, consumer oriented, committed to family, politically non-contentious, non-radicals who proclaim monogamy and aspire to parenting. And yet, they are performing an immensely radical act by *simply* living as an incredibly open gay couple in rural Ireland; such are the complexities and contradictions of sexual citizenship.

Stychin’s understanding of how sexual citizenship can collude with heteronormative hostility and thereby create disreputable, “bad gays” brings to mind Ben, a retired, single man, aged 58, living on the outskirts of a sizeable town in the East Anglia. He has had multiple relationships in the past, does not believe in the necessity of monogamy, likes leather, has an interest in S&M, has a dungeon in the basement of his house, offers Airbnb to men who like to partake in S&M (which has garnered a certain amount of displeasure from one or two of his neighbours). He visits saunas, sex clubs and darkrooms in London, and is currently engaging in some personal research on men’s cruising activities - an interest he publicised on the local gay network Facebook page, and to which he received a number of replies (from gay men) such as “*this sounds sleazy to me*” or “*all a bit pervy, if you ask me*” and “*is this for your own self-gratification or is it serious research?*” which recalls our earlier discussion on how normalisation renounces sex. But Ben refuses to curtail and deny aspects of his sexualised identity. He has firm views on the dangers of abandoning a queer philosophy and is perceived as a ‘thorn in the side’ of the *Pride* committees due to his vocal contributions on the need to continue to fight against injustice (the gay events committees find that an emphasis on ‘fighting’ for rights might dampen the party and carnival atmosphere they are trying to create for Pride). Ben might fit with Stychin’s description of a disreputable queer, or a “bad gay”, due to his non-conformist stance, and rejection of normalisation and assimilation. He annoyingly and resolutely refuses to erase radical agitation from his lexicon, or to abandon his views that there are “different ways of living and loving” (Taylor, 2011:586) and he is defiantly determined not to be repackaged and reconstituted as a socially homogenised and pasteurised homo-sexual citizen.

Sexual citizenship, and the trend toward de-sexualisation, normalisation and assimilation also act to change attitudes and behaviours of gay men *towards* other gay men. A number of respondents expressed alarm that some gay men had come to ‘own’ and ‘display’ heteronormative attitudes towards relationships, sex, and sexuality. In doing so they

appropriate demeaning and oppressive narratives of the past. Harry (46, Norfolk) discusses Richard and Bryan:

Well, it's illustrated by a conversation that I had with a very close friend, Richard. He and his partner, Bryan, met in, at a party, you know, lots of sex and drugs and all sorts of stuff. They had an open relationship. And about two years ago, three years ago maybe we were having a meal and Richard said something along the lines of 'Well, now that we can get married ...[civil partnership], 'Now that we can get married I do hope that gays will start to behave themselves and we can stop all this cottaging stuff.' And I must admit at that point I did feel that was rather inappropriate. They had met through an open relationship. And their entire lives, their entire culture, was defined by that sort of environment. And by taking on a, I don't know if I use the word correctly, a bourgeois-y middle class attitude suddenly, not only was it hypocritical but it was also denying a very large and important part of their own lifestyle.

This encounter has caused Harry to reflect on whether we have been sold and enthusiastically bought into a concept (sexual citizenship) which is not truly liberating, but rather contains and encourages new forms of oppression, through a tyranny of normalisation and assimilation. A conservative creation, which provides a form of homo-sexual citizenship located within, and subservient to hetero-sexual conceptions of sexual citizenship.

Final remarks

During the course of this study, I have attempted to understand the lives and life world of these men, and assess the nature, scope, and breadth, of their sexual citizenship as they live their lives in the nonmetropolitan space. During this time, whether through conversations, one-to-one interviews or participation in local network meetings, an overriding reaction among the men has been sheer wonderment and amazement at the journey travelled during their lifetime—a journey which has seen their sexual identity move from a position of marginalisation, castigation and revilement to one where they are embraced, included and welcomed *as gay men* in the national, political, and civil sphere. From a legislative perspective, sexual citizenship has truly delivered in both jurisdictions. The men emphasised the significance of their new constitutional status which, alongside dramatic shifts in social and cultural attitudes, has brought them in from the cold recesses of society, recognises the validity of their sexual identity, protects them, and promises a share of the social and cultural affections of the state. They refuse to underestimate the impact these developments have had on their confidence, as gay men, feelings of self-worth, inclusion and respect. They have moved from the margins to

a place of centrality, in the national context. This was personified towards the end of the study, with the emergence of an openly gay man, as prime-minister of the Republic of Ireland, just over twenty years after decriminalisation. The Irish men feel that the scale and speed of changes and attitudes towards LGBT people in Ireland have been dramatic and profound, and for the most part, they consider modern Ireland as having moved away from the historical stereotype of a socially conservative, highly religious and illiberal country. As the gaps in economic wealth between the two countries have closed, as cultural links have increased, and other forms of harmonisation occur due to factors such as globalisation, the men in both countries see their respective rural contexts as sharing many common life world features, which shape their experiences as gay men in two LGBT progressive countries.

While all the men recognise and celebrate the end of, the old tyranny of criminalization, some also recognise the emergence of a new tyranny - of normalisation and assimilation where the requirement to suppress the sexual self in the public space; to be circumspect and eschew non-masculinist, and non-traditional codes can be overpowering. A number of the men in both countries ask, is this a true and authentic form of liberation?

The men feel that the nonmetropolitan and rural environment places particular burdens on the obligation to conform, blend and assimilate. A number of the Irish men, in particular, commented on how their rural environment places notions of traditional, hetero-nuclear family on a pedestal. Most of the gay men in this environment feel a need to avoid 'unsettling' these traditional rural values, and to negotiate their gay identity within the context of rural culture.

For the gay men in this study, in both countries, there is no doubt that the nonmetropolitan space does have an impact on how they live their lives. The centrality of heterosexuality, and hegemonic masculinity to normative conceptions of rural sexuality, gender relations and rural masculinity is apparent throughout. Heteronormative dominance can blight social transactions at times. Nonetheless, many of the men are slowly and quietly asserting their right to be, to live and work in these rural communities, and are changing the cultural narrative about what it is to be a gay man in the rural context. In attempting to understand the men's journey as new sexual citizens in the nonmetropolitan space, I found much value in the work of Phelan (2001), when she observes that the process of citizenship, of becoming equal sexual citizens, is still in its infancy. The idea of a journey, not yet complete appeals to the findings of this study: the political journey has been made, but the journey of hearts and minds, and of cultural affection still has a way to go. Robson and Kessler speak seductively of the need to place social and

cultural embrace at the “heart of citizenship” (2008: 543), while Cossman (2002; 2007) and Turner (2000) emphasise the need to move beyond legal recognition and embark on a journey towards greater social and cultural recognition. I feel this is important- too many men in this study experience subtle forms of exclusion, and ostracization from friends, neighbours and work colleagues; the rural can be an alienating, isolating and lonely environment for these men. The emphasis on placing a cultural embrace at the heart of sexual citizenship may also help avoid gay people becoming, ‘empty shell citizens’ where the rhetoric of citizenship does not trickle down into the attitudes, embraces and affections of communities and localities. This is a long-term and ongoing project, and it involves the presence of brave gay people and their allies acting in communion, and acts of solidarity. It requires acts of recognition, and support. Often this does not happen, and alienating micro-aggressions (Nadal, 2014) occur frequently.

Clearly, to return to the main focus of this chapter, we are *not* there yet; we have *not* arrived at ‘destination equality’; and our journey has *not* ended. If this is the case, we may well ask, where are we going? And what is the future direction of travel? The study points to a future where there are no inevitabilities, and no certainties; it is not inevitable that progress will continue on a path of ever increasing enlightenment, nor is it inevitable (or even likely) that Britain and Ireland will regress to the oppression of the past. In that sense, history does not end. The weakness may be to believe that this point (2017) *is* the end of history; that we have arrived at ‘destination equality’ on foot of our becoming *constitutional sexual citizens*. This is not the end and so, we need to avoid complacency. As Jeffrey Weeks reminds us, our current identities are not unique to us and they are shaped by time, history, place and context (British Library Event, 2017a).

The everyday acts of locals in the rural space can be considered new forms of organic activism in our times. A quiet revolution is fostering change at the local level. The quiet revolution of ten gay men walking behind a rainbow flag in the local St. Patrick’s Day parade in Longford town. This study shows that there are such men today, who through their daily lives, are engaging in this quiet revolution, making changes for themselves and for others. Through the simple act of living as (often the only) gay couple in a locality, or as forming a local LGBT group, contributing to newspapers, speaking at meetings, marching in local community festivals; in these activities I see a new radicalism - local radicalism. In the everyday acts of standing up, coming out, educating, telling stories; by their numerous actions, demanding (by these brave but quiet acts) their rightful inclusion in the cultural and social affection of their specific geographic context (Bell and Binnie, 2000; Delamore, 2013; Weeks, 1998).

To this end, the study is testimony to the power of everyday acts of coming out, telling stories, and changing the cultural narratives about what it means to be gay. Whether they realise it or not, these men are truly pioneers, pioneering new identities in the space of the rural.

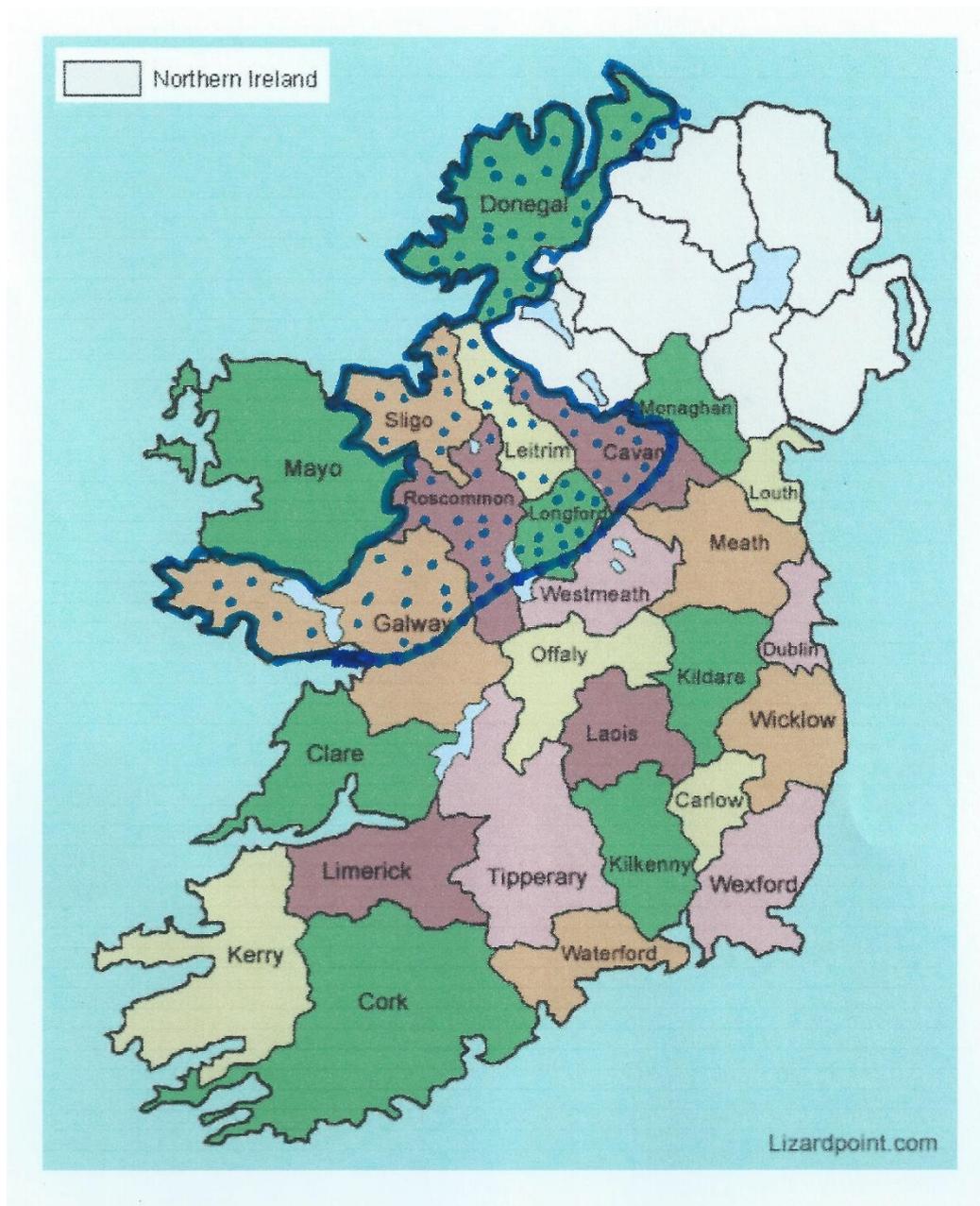
Original contribution to knowledge

This study makes original contributions to knowledge in a number of ways. Firstly, by researching the lives of gay men in rural and small-town environments, it helps address a general metrocentric bias in research on sexual minorities. Secondly, by locating the study in nonmetropolitan regions of Ireland and England, it answers a need for more empirical data from rural areas in both countries, in particular from Ireland, where academic inquiry on the lives of rural gay men has been sorely lacking. Thirdly, by applying theoretical principles and models, most notably models of sexual identity formation (Troiden, 1989) and sexual citizenship (Weeks, 1998), the study re-contextualises existing models by showing their applicability in a specific historical, geographical and spatial context. In adopting this approach, the study offers valuable insights on the role of social and legal change in the emergence of the gay man as a sexual citizen in Ireland and Britain. Fourthly, the research demonstrates the powerful influence of the nonmetropolitan context, and how shared experiences of men in both countries accrue due to their nonmetropolitan environment. The study also demonstrates the specificities of gay life in the space of the rural, and how this problematizes and complicates our understanding of the nature of sexual citizenship. Finally, the study highlights the potential of sexual citizenship and the emergence of local forms of rural, gay resistance and radicalism, as well as some of the limitations of sexual citizenship, as seen by local pressures to normalization.

Appendix 1.

Map of the study region in Ireland

Interviews were held within the shaded areas



Source: <https://lizardpoint.com/geography/images/maps/ireland-labeled.gif>

Appendix 2.

Map of the study region in England

Interviews held within the shaded areas



Source: <http://www.picturesofengland.com/images/mapofengland/east-anglia-map.gif>

Appendix 3.

Profile of study participants in England

The information provided below was accurate at the time of interview

Name	Age	County of residence	Occupation or Sector	Higher Education
Andrew (Remainer)	27	Norfolk	IT Project Manager. Public sector.	Yes
<p>Comments: Andrew lives with his mother, and is single. He is out at work, but is reluctant to come out among family, and village neighbours, mainly due to his mothers' rather conservative social views, and not wanting to "embarrass" her. He works thirty miles away from where he lives. He is politically aware, and is engaged with LGBT issues locally through the LGBT networks.</p>				
Brandon (Incomer)	53	Suffolk	Retired academic	Yes
<p>Comments: Brandon lives alone, and is single. He is originally from Australia and came out many years ago, whilst at university in Canberra. He left Australia in his late thirties to take up an academic post in the UK. After a number of years in UK academia, he has now decided on a 'change of lifestyle' due to increasing stress within his job. He has chosen to live on the Suffolk coast, where he sails, and writes. He is quite active in the local LGBT network.</p>				
Charlie (Remainer)	48	Norfolk	Part-time writer and amateur Astrologer	No
<p>Comments: Charlie is single and lives with his mother. He is not out to family, friends or community. However he has recently started to attend the recently established local LGBT group. He is particularly frustrated that he cannot meet a partner locally and hopes the group will introduce him to new contacts. He does not have access to resources to allow him escape on holidays as much as he would like.</p>				
Daniel (Remainer)	32	Norfolk	Musician & Sketch Artist	No
<p>Daniel lives with his partner. While he is out to family, and LGBT people locally, and is a member of the local network; he maintains a non-disclosure policy with neighbours. His partner is much older than him, and many neighbours assume they are father and son or uncle and nephew. He is content to allow this assumption to go unchallenged.</p>				
Darren (Incomer, from a large city in England: to join partner who had found work in the area)	44	Norfolk	Hairdresser and Dog Breeder (works from home)	No
<p>Darren was married for a number of years. He has one teenage child from this marriage. He is now divorced. His wife is now also in a same-sex relationship in the NE of England. Darren lives with his partner. He dislikes the rural area he has moved into as he finds it too remote and the natives a bit "churchey". As a couple they are highly selective in who they disclose to; especially among neighbours and local village community.</p>				
Derek	40	Norfolk	Office employee. (Local government)	No

(Incomer, from English midlands: for work reasons)				
<p>Comments: Derek is in a relationship and lives with Stuart (see below). He is now out. He works in local government and his work environment, with LGBT employee network, has helped facilitate his gradual disclosure.</p>				
Gavin (Incomer from a small city in England: for work reasons)	46	Norfolk	Accountant	Yes
<p>Comments: Gavin lives with his partner of many years (see Philip below). As a couple they are out. Gavin is active in local LGBT politics and community issues. Passionate about the need to maintain local LGBT social venues, such as local gay pubs.</p>				
George (Remainer)	56	Essex	Self-employed (family owned retail)	No
<p>Comments: George lives in a large house, and rents out rooms, so that he does not have to live alone. He was married for many years; was outed and is now divorced. He faced much local hostility following the very public breakdown of his marriage. He has teenage children, who live locally, with their mother. He maintains a close relationship with his children; but they have had endured some bullying from other kids on account of their “gay dad”.</p>				
Harry (Incomer, from Southern Hemisphere: to join partner)	46	Norfolk	Self-employed (publishing firm)	Yes
<p>Harry is in a relationship with a man who also lives locally. They live in separate houses by choice. He came out, slowly and erratically in his thirties. He loves the Norfolk fens, and is a keen bird watcher. He is now active in local LGBT activities.</p>				
Joshua (Remainer)	41	Suffolk	Manager, MNC Insurance firm	No
<p>Joshua is single and lives alone. He sees Christianity as an important part of his identity. He has arrived at an understanding where he sees no contradiction between faith and homosexuality. He has been influenced by his workplace’s progressive equality stance. He came out, at work at c. thirty years of age.</p>				
Luke (Incomer, from Ireland: for work reasons)	45	Cambridgeshire	Digital Analyst. MNC firm.	Yes
<p>Luke lives with his civil partner. They are out; but maintain a selective engagement with immediate neighbours. They adopt a Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell approach to those in the</p>				

village. They are more open with friends in the city; and at work. Luke had fleeting relationships with women many years ago.				
Magnus (Returner, from London)	64	Norfolk	Retired ex-military & RAF, and latterly homeless support worker.	No
Magnus lives alone, with his dog. He spent many years working overseas and also in London, but then returned to Norfolk to spend many years devoted to the care of his disabled mother. She died some years ago. He has been out for many years, having come out whilst in London. He lost two partners to HIV/AIDS in the 1980s, and 1990s. He is single, in poor health, and has suffered abuse in the community due to his recently acquired physical disability, and his sexuality.				
Malcolm (Remainer)	37	Norfolk	Garden centre employee	No
Malcolm lives with his parents, and is out. He is single. He has suffered some psychological health problems. He has had occasional male and female relationships, but considers himself gay. His parents are cautiously supportive, but are worried for his future as a gay man with health issues.				
Mitch (Incomer, from London: for quality of life reasons)	58	Essex	Retired office worker and librarian	Yes
Mitch is single and now lives alone, following the recent death of his mother. He moved to the Essex-Suffolk borders, from London, some years ago, with his mother, to provide her with a better quality of life. He is currently undergoing treatment for cancer. He is out among certain audiences, but is highly cautious around neighbours; and follows a policy of non-disclosure with them.				
Nathan (Remainer)	23	Cambridgeshire	Student	Pursuing
Nathan lives with his parents, and is single. He came out in his final years at secondary school. He dislikes the emphasis on sex, which he says is a part of the “gay scene”. His parents have been very supportive of his sexuality.				
Oscar (Incomer, from SE England: for employment reasons, but over twenty years ago)	65	Norfolk	Retired Nuclear Engineer	Yes
Oscar lives alone, and is single. He has never had sexual relations of any sort. He is retired and enjoys walking in the countryside. He is not out, but has started to attend the local LGBT network.				
Philip (Incomer, from a small city in England: to join partner)	72	Norfolk	Retired actor and community activist	No
Philip lives with his partner of many years (see Gavin above). They are out. Active in LGBT local activism. Regrets the turn to individualism and nostalgic for the earlier gay liberation movements.				

Stanley (Incomer, from Scotland, for work reasons, over thirty years ago)	65	Suffolk	Retired Social Worker	Yes
Stanley lives alone, and is single. While has been out for many years and was heavily involved in sexual health initiatives in the 1980s, and 1990s; he maintains a cautious strategy of selective (tending towards non-)disclosure among immediate neighbours, and locals at social events.				
Stuart (Remainer)	45	Norfolk	Senior Executive. Public sector	Yes
Stuart lives with his elderly mother, and is her primary carer. He is in a relationship with Derek (see above). They live together, with his mother. They are out, but remain a deliberate strategy of not inviting conversation/declarations about their sexuality locally.				
Ted (Remainer)	58	Suffolk	Retired Royal Mail (postal service) employee	No
Ted now lives alone following the recent death of his mother. He is single. He has been out for many years, but is terribly lonely. He has recently joined the local LGBT group in the hope it will alleviate his social isolation.				
Theo (Returner, from London)	31	Suffolk	Freelance Social Media Management	Yes
Theo lives alone, and is single. He came out, initially to friends only, towards the end of his secondary school years. He is now out, although his parents prefer not to talk about it with him, and they regret that the family name will not pass on through Theo, an only son.				
Tim (Remainer)	24	Suffolk	Job Hunting	No
Tim is single, and lives with his parents and siblings. He began the process of coming out shortly after leaving school, while in FE college. He has recently come out to his parents. He often considers moving to a city, but feels connected to the local networks of family and friends.				

Appendix 4.

Profiles of study participants in Ireland

The information provided below was accurate at time of interview

Name	Age	County of residence	Occupation or sector	Higher Education
Alfie (Remainer)	35	Sligo	Small independent retailer	No
Alfie lives alone, but is in a same-sex relationship with a man who lives eighty kilometres away. He recently began to disclose to carefully selected family and friends. He remains in the closet to the wider community, and to customers. He has had sexual relations with women in the past.				
Cillian (Returner, from Dublin)	32	Longford	Nurse	Yes
Cillian is in a relationship with Alfie (above). He has been out since eighteen years of age, and he has encouraged Alfie to disclose. He lives alone, but close to his parents.				
Columba (Remainer)	47	Longford	Construction and Trucker	No
Columba is single. He was previously married, but was publically outed, in traumatic circumstances. He is now divorced. He has teenage children, who live in a neighbouring county with their mother but with whom he maintains a close relationship. He has become a local LGBT activist. He lives alone				
Cyril (Remainer)	49	Leitrim & Longford	Health sector	No
Cyril is in a relationship (see Fintan below) and he has slowly come out in recent years, mainly as a result of entering into this relationship. He lives with his partner. His parents are dead, but he keeps in close contact with local aunts and uncles. He is very interested in local history and genealogy, and is proud of his family's historic and high profile connections with the area.				
Dermot (Returner, from Dublin)	43	Cavan	Self-employed creative arts	Yes
Dermot is single, and came out in his late twenties. He left Dublin for solace back in Cavan, and to re-calibrate his life. He has been active in the LGBT network at a local level. He lives with his elderly parents on their farm.				
Enda (Returner then Remainer but subsequent leaver)	45	Leitrim & Dublin	Primary school teacher	Yes
Enda is single, and he is out, but has had a difficult time as a teacher in the local school and has left to work in Dublin. His parents are in poor health but he simply cannot bear to continue living at home and within the local community, which he finds completely alienating. Much of his difficulty at school was due to mimicry of his theatrical and expressive mannerisms.				
Eugene (Returner, from overseas)	52	Donegal	Hotel Manager (family owned)	No
After many years in the closet, and having had relationships with women in the past; Eugene is now out, and in a civil partnership. He is from a well-known business family and has become quite active in local LGBT issues.				
Finian (Remainer)	45	Sligo	Facilities Manager	Yes
Finian is in a relationship. He lives with his partner and he is out. His journey towards family acceptance of his sexuality was historically traumatic. His parents live on their farm thirty km away and he travels to help out when needed.				

Fintan (Remainer)	36	Longford	Self-employed Barber	No
Fintan is in a relationship with Cyril (above). He came out slowly in his mid-twenties, while still single. He has been pivotal in Cyril's progress towards disclosure. His parents live forty kms away. He is active with the local LGBT group and local drama.				
Graeme (Remainer)	32	Longford	Factory worker	No
Graeme is single, but has had same-sex relationships. He suffered continuous bullying in school, due to perceived effeminacy. These memories remain painful. He came out in his twenties. He lives with his parents, and sister, with whom he is very close.				
Jerome (Returner, from Dublin)	42	Galway	Secondary school teacher	Yes
Jerome is single, and lives alone. He does not disclose locally preferring to follow a policy of Don't Ask, Don't Tell. He lives close to his parent's farm and helps out regularly with farm work. He does have gay friends in other areas of the country but does not encourage local conversations about sexuality, and avoids the topic. He travels to gay resorts overseas in the summer holidays.				
John Paul (Returner, from Dublin)	25	Leitrim	Retail Banking	Yes
John Paul does not disclose locally. He lives with his parents. He suspects his mother knows about his sexuality but there is tacit agreement of Don't Ask, Don't Tell. He has gay friends in Dublin and London, and escapes there often.				
Leo (Remainer)	80	Longford	Farmer	No
Leo is, and always has been, single. Even though he was not out, he organised parties at his farm for gay, bisexual, and MSM men in the 1960s, 70s and 80s. After living alone since the death of his mother over forty years, he now shares his house with a gay companion; who was recently outed, and is now separated from his wife.				
Mac (Remainer)	40	Roscommon	Farmer	No
Mac is single, and lives alone. His parents are both deceased, and he has inherited the family farm from them. He is in the closet. He meets men online, and sometimes invites them to his farmhouse for intimate encounters. He considers it completely impossible to come out within his farming neighbourhood.				
Malachy (Incomer, from England)	66	Leitrim	Retired teacher. Small- hold farmer.	Yes
Malachy lives alone, and is single. In the past he had some relationships with women. He came out very slowly, over a long periods of years, but never came out to his mother. Whilst out, he prefers a Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy among his farming neighbours. He avoids conversations about intimacy with immediate neighbours. He has many LGBT contacts elsewhere in Ireland though.				
Mel (Remainer)	46	Longford	Self-employed Psychotherapist	Yes
Mel lives with his partner. He has slowly come out over many years, albeit in a quiet and unassuming way. He lives in the house he was born in; his parents have died, and he was an only child. His neighbours know him as a good and trustworthy neighbour. As a couple they assume people know they are a gay couple, but the word gay is never mentioned.				
Neil (Returner, from overseas)	42	Donegal	Chef	Pursuing
Neil lives with his partner. He spent time overseas, where he came out. Since his return to Ireland in recent years he has slowly come out to work colleagues and friends. He maintains a general				

policy of Don't Ask, Don't Tell with neighbours and his town. He escapes the area as often as possible.				
Nicholas (Returner, from overseas)	44	Galway	Self-employed Restauranteur	No
Nicholas lives alone, having recently emerged out of a same-sex relationship. He spent many years overseas, and had significant sexual relationships with women. However, he eventually came out (overseas). He has not returned to the closet since his recent return to Ireland. He deliberately has chosen to live in a remote mountainous area far from any neighbours, for silence and tranquility.				
Patrick (Incomer, from a city in Ireland)	46	Donegal	Academic	Yes
Patrick lives alone, having recently become single. He came from a more urbanised part of Ireland. He has come out, albeit in slow and selective ways, in recent years.				
Phelim (Returner, from overseas)	48	Cavan	Pub landlord (family owned)	No
Phelim lives alone, but has a boyfriend overseas. He came out in his thirties, after a period working overseas. He returned to Ireland to take over the running of the family pub. His parents are dead. He is known as the only out gay person for many miles around. He is now quite active with LGBT issues locally.				
Thomas (Remainer)	44	Cavan	Civil service	Yes
Thomas lives with his ill mother, and is her primary carer. He has been out for a number of years. He is single, and lives a quiet life devoted to mother. He does not socialise locally much and makes prefers to make frequent trips to Dublin for leisure.				
Turlough (Returner, from London)	51	Roscommon	Civil service	No
Turlough lives with his ageing mother. He is single. He spent a number of years in London, where he came out, in his late twenties. On his return to Ireland, to care for his mother, he returned to a "hard closet". However, he has recently begun to partially disclose due to his engagement with a regional LGBT group.				

Appendix 5. Seeking access

From: Aidan McKearney <a.mckearney@londonmet.ac.uk>
Date: 9 July 2013 at 09:34
Subject: Help with accessing Gay Men for Interview, Research project
To: Name of LGBT group in Norfolk

Dear X,

I hope you don't mind me emailing you. My name is Aidan McKearney from London Metropolitan Business School & University. I was given your name by a friend and ex-research colleague CONTACT A.

I am currently engaged in research interviewing 20 gay men living and working in the East Anglia region and 20 in NW Ireland (both rural areas) (cross country comparative study).

Thus far, I have interviewed quite a number of the men in rural Ireland and I have also managed to interview some men in the Suffolk region, with the fantastic help of Suffolk LGBT.

However, I have few (none actually) contacts in Norfolk and am therefore finding it difficult to recruit my sample from that county.

With this in mind, I had a conversation with CONTACT A and s/he mentioned your name in relation to the Group. Is there any way I could 'make a call' for volunteers' through the website? Could I visit the weekly meetings of the LGBT group? I'm really eager to get 8-10 men from the Norfolk area.

I would be delighted (over the moon actually!) to meet individual gay men living and working in the Norfolk region, for a one-hour interview at a time and place of their convenience and in total confidentiality. The interview follows a 'life history storytelling' approach...with the interviewee asked about a number of key themes in his life, revolving around (1) the individual- his background and realisation of his sexual orientation; (2) disclosure/non-disclosure patterns (out or not out), reasons for choice of disclosure/non-disclosure; (3) key influences on his life as a 'sexual citizen'; his views on gay rights/citizenship; (4) reasons for living in a non-metropolitan area; (5) experiences of living within this region- within the community and at work; (6) advantages and disadvantages of living as a gay man in this region/environment. Needless to say, I travel to Norfolk for the interviews.

The setting and the approach of the interview is relaxed and informal.

Would be thrilled to get some guidance from you as to how I could be 'put in contact' with some people who may then volunteer for an interview. I am aware that NAME OF GROUP may have some 'drop-in' sessions, or other activities arranged where I could come visit (if allowed ?), or a message maybe could be sent to any mailing list. Really, any type of help in publicising this research would be very much appreciated.

I attach some more relevant information about the research and myself.

I know you are extremely busy but if you have any suggestions then I would be delighted. I'm ready to travel to Norfolk at any time.

In hopeful anticipation of hearing from you,

Kind Regards

Appendix 6: Publicising the research

ARE YOU A GAY MAN LIVING IN EAST ANGLIA?

WOULD YOU BE WILLING TO BE INTERVIEWED FOR A RESEARCH PROJECT?

IF SO, THEN I WOULD REALLY LOVE TO MAKE CONTACT WITH YOU.

aidan.mckearney@londonmet.ac.uk

I AM CONDUCTING RESEARCH ON 'GAY MEN AS CITIZENS IN RURAL, NON-METROPOLITAN AREAS.'

THE INTERVIEW WILL:

- LAST ONE HOUR.
- BE AT A LOCATION AND TIME ENTIRELY OF YOUR CHOICE.
- BE COMPLETELY CONFIDENTIAL AND PRIVATE.
- BE CONDUCTED BY AN EXPERIENCED RESEARCHER.

The interview follows a 'life history storytelling' approach. The study is interested in hearing your life story, covering themes around:

(1) YOU-your background, growing up and realisation of your sexual orientation

(2) OUT or NOT OUT? : Disclosure / non-disclosure; reasons for choice of disclosure/non-disclosure.

(3) KEY INFLUENCES on your life as a 'sexual citizen'; your views on gay rights/citizenship (is it rhetoric or reality for you?)

(4) REASONS FOR LIVING IN A NON-METROPOLITAN AREA.

(5)WHAT 'IS IT LIKE' LIVING IN THIS AREA/REGION AS A GAY MAN?

The setting and the approach of the interview is relaxed and informal.

I would be thrilled for an opportunity to talk with you.

I attach some information about myself (See Staff Profile).

In hopeful anticipation of hearing from you,

Aidan McKearney

Appendix 7: Interview guide:

The *sexual citizenship* model acts as a frame for my interview guide in analysing gay men as sexual citizens. I am aware that for some (Richardson; Bell and Binnie; Taylor) there exists a number of conceptual ‘blind spots’ of the sexual citizenship model and these need to be acknowledged and incorporated in to my fieldwork interviews and conversations (see point 12 of the interview guide).

The Interview guide contains twelve non-sequential topical areas of inquiry:

- 1. Growing up: Family, background, education, community, key influences.
- 2. Identity: Awareness of being or feeling different from other males.
- 3. Identity: Awareness, realisation and acknowledgement (to one’s self) of being ‘gay’.
- 4. Disclosure, Non-Disclosure: ‘coming out’ process.
- 5. Telling stories; silence or voice; reactions and attitudes of others.
- 6. Discussion around the wider social, economic, technological, political and social changes you have noticed and impact on you, your identity and how you live your life (*relates directly to Weeks’ first theme ‘de-traditionalisation’ and ‘democratization of relationships’*).
- 7. Reasons for living and working in a rural/non-metropolitan area?
- 8. Positives and Negatives of living and working in a rural, non-metropolitan area. *The intersection of the rural and the sexual; the sexual citizen often is compelled to live in a way dictated by location, environment and geography (rural and national space)*
- 9. Inclusion, Belonging, ‘Parity of esteem’ **and/or** Marginalisation, Exclusion, Harassment: experiences at a social and workplace level (social, cultural, and economic citizenship). Are we ‘strangers’, seen as ‘other’ or are we fully validated and valued by community? How are gay men seen or perceived by people in this community?
- 10. Impact of Equalities legislation on your life. Political citizenship (rights)?
- 11. What would make a positive difference to your life (as a gay man) living and working in this area?
- 12. Pressures towards Conformity, Normalisation, Sameness, Good Gay v Bad Gay. The Private becoming Public requirement of sexual citizenship; *the public obligations and behaviours of a ‘good citizen’*.

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