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Not Str8: the Construction of Queer Male Identity in Sydney, Australia

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Abstract: This study examines the experiences of 14 queer young men in Sydney Australia. Using ethnographic methods, their stories are analyzed to delineate how their experiences “coming out” and coming into a queer male identity represents the acquisition and meaning-making of genuinely local, transgressive knowledges.

Purpose of the Study

Sydney has one of the world largest queer communities, with a great deal of political clout. The annual Lesbian & Gay Mardi Gras parade attracts several hundred thousand spectators each March, and has frequently been televised live on national television. Among numerous non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are various HIV/AIDS and health-focused community based services, including programmes for queer youth as young as age 13—the breadth and depth of services available to queer youth across metropolitan Sydney is unlike any other in the world. And while nearly every major anglophone city in the world, including New York, London, Toronto, San Francisco and Vancouver have seen increases in HIV rates among young queer (gay, bisexual or queer-identified) men over the last five years, Sydney have remained stable (UNAIDS, 2002). For many queer men, “coming out” as queer coincides with becoming an adult. Thus the experiences of younger queer men fomenting queer selves reflects a particular construction of adulthood—one that is local, transgressive and revolutionary.

Theoretical Framework

This study examines the period of “becoming” queer not in terms of any individualized, wholly psychologically-informed process of identity development—though such approaches are of value. Rather becoming queer is viewed here as both the acquisition of knowledges, and the integration and meaning-making between different, often contradictory sets of knowledges. Thus my analysis is informed by post-structural theory, specifically Michel Foucault’s work on knowledge and power (1980), and sexuality (1990). Local knowledges are often “subjugated knowledges” (Foucault, 1980, p. 81), valued only by those excluded or marginalized by society—and often constructed in resistance to mainstream society’s biases. Coming to embrace one’s self as queer often results in encountering (seemingly) contradictory ideas about gender roles, family, safety, sex and community—along with a host of other topics. How do today’s young queer manage experience—and navigate—these differing knowledges? Foucault’s rejection of dichotomous (or linear) notions of how power is exerted in society allows for a complex analysis of how transgressive, often covert paths of resistance are formed by those excluded from mainstream privilege and authority, in this instance young queer men.

Literature review

Research shows that young queer men—particularly under age 26—experience distinct vulnerabilities to HIV infection. Blake et al’s (2001) survey of high school age lesbian/gay/bisexual youth in the US found those whose schools offered safer sex education targeting queer issues were significantly less likely to engage in high risk activities like unprotected anal intercourse (UAI). Seal et al’s (2000) ethnography of 16-25 year-old gay and bisexual men found that HIV prevention programs didn’t reflect their lived experiences as queer youth. In both studies, 30 to 50% of the participants had recently engaged in UAI, despite knowledge of its high risk for HIV transmission and the efficacy of condoms to reduce this risk. Both studies also demonstrate how critical a context-specific understanding of younger

gay/bi/queer-identified men's lives is needed to foment effective and relevant prevention strategies.

Research Design

This study will use ethnographic methods, including participant observation and semi-structured interviews (Bernard, 2000). Men aged 17-24, self-identifying as gay/bi/queer, who are a resident of metropolitan Sydney and who have entered the local gay Scene in the last 24 months were eligible to participate. Detailed field notes were kept during three months of observational field work on Oxford Street, the centre of (visible) queer Sydney Life.

On-the-street observations were conducted in late afternoon (after school hours), early evening and late evening/early morning hours, to identify patterns of visibility of queer youth. Observations were also done in gay bars and nightclubs, at queer youth drop-in and support programs (with both staff and participant approval), at beaches, on university campuses (UNSW, Sydney University and UTS) and in parks/reserves. Fourteen informants were enrolled in the study. Each participated in semi-structured 1-2 hour interviews, using a quasi-life history format. Areas covered included family life, schooling, becoming aware of sexuality issues, questioning one's own sexuality, seeking community, sex-love-dating, and knowledge about HIV/AIDS. Recruitment was through queer youth services and drop-ins, university queer groups and contacts made through an interview I gave to the *Sydney Star Observer* (Sydney's gay news weekly). Interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed verbatim (via a contracted transcriber who was not attached to the queer community) and analyzed using the constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) via Atlas/ti software. Consent procedures for UNSW were followed and ethics forms signed by each participant. Participants were given interview transcripts and encouraged to add to, amend or delete any of their responses.

Findings

Participants ranged in age from 19 to 24. Two were early high school leavers, one has his HSC (grade 12) and worked full-time, 9 were undergraduate university students, and two were graduate students. Ethnic origins included Asian/Middle Eastern (5), Latino (2), and European (7). Two were refugee migrants to Australia as children, one migrated under a general migration scheme, and another had arrived in Australia 2 months prior on a student visa; the remaining nine are Australian born. Twelve had lived in greater Sydney for all or most (more than two-thirds) of their lives. Half still lived with their families of origin; two were in medium term crisis housing, and the rest lived independently, with flat mates in rental housing. Thirteen knew themselves to be HIV negative; one had avoided HIV testing (in fear of a positive result) at the time of interview; he subsequently tested HIV negative. One man identified as queer, with the rest describing themselves as gay. Three areas of knowledge emerged as critical to how they constructed themselves as queer young men: HIV/AIDS, K 12 school experiences, and "the Scene."

HIV/AIDS

The archetype of young men—queer and not—as being foolhardy risk-takers is clearly refuted by these young men with respect to HIV knowledge and sexual risk-taking. Perhaps their positions as *queer young men* accounts for this. Every participant was cognizant of HIV/AIDS, and consistently practiced harm minimization by using condoms for anal intercourse with casual partners, eschewing anal sex, or only engaging in condomless anal intercourse with a committed monogamous partner, where both were known to be HIV negative.

Four participants acknowledged having ever not used condoms for anal intercourse. Two engaged in anal sex for the first time (their débuts) with another anal sex virgin with whom he

had an established friendship: thus, their risk for HIV infection was effectively zero. Another, Jim, “wasn’t really prepared to have [anal] sex with” a guy he met off a phone line, but found it difficult to assert this. Condom use had been discussed prior to meeting in-person, but “in the heat of the moment, things didn’t go to plan.” Afterwards Jim went on Post-Exposure Prophylaxis (PEP), a month-long course of anti-retrovirals, to prevent HIV infection. While this encounter was high risk for HIV, he also took the experiences—particularly the discomforts of PEP and the months of waiting until his HIV tests came back definitively negative—and learned from them. For Jim “from that time on, things have altered slightly. I sort of have been giving myself more time for what I want now. I was too worried about what other people were doing, trying to please people.” Jim’s experiences have made him resolute about using condoms for anal intercourse. Finally one man frequently engaged in unprotected anal intercourse during beat (public park or washroom) sex in his early teens, including some sex trade work. He had avoided testing because of fears of a positive result. He has recently tested HIV negative, having found the courage to be tested after entering a relationship with someone. Like his peers in the cohort, he has “for a long time” always used condoms during anal intercourse regardless of the risks he took more than five years ago. Each of these 4 men found their early experiences with unprotected anal intercourse served to reinforce for them the need to use condoms during anal sex. None of the participants routinely engaged in high-risk sexual activity; in fact, most participants had rather idealized notions about sex and love. Half the sample viewed anal intercourse as an activity only to be done within a relationship, not during casual sex or “hook-ups.” For Terry, anal sex meant “you trust this guy and you’ve been with them for a long time,” not something that happened casually or routinely. For these men, anal sex was most frequently a powerful and meaning-laden activity

School

All 14 men had schooling experiences that ranged from “fairly negative” (Bruce) to “feeling alone” (Eric) to “intimidation” (Tom), due to an oppressively homophobic environment. Antagonistic, bullying behaviour was common, ranging from epithets (name-calling), to destruction of property, to threats of—and actual—physical assault. Ten participants recounted experiences of harassment or violence directed towards them during their primary or secondary schooling. Two of these left school before graduating in year 12 (“getting your HSC” or Higher School Certificate, awarded after writing state-wide exams) significantly due to a lack of safety and the complicity of school staff in perpetuating the hostile environment. Participant believed it necessary to deny or hide their sexuality while in school, though four eventually came out to some extent while in school. For Al “there was a lot of bullying going along early on, and when I was in high school—I got picked on a lot.” “When I was younger,” Walter said “it wasn’t serious, just faggot or whatever.” But his experiences in early adolescence taught him to avoid being perceived as gay—even if there was a price to be paid for his secrecy: loneliness, isolation and depression, even though his parents were supportive of his sexuality. “It’s pretty discouraging,” he said “thinking you’ve reached 18 years without anyone knowing exactly who you are.” Jim, however, wasn’t able to avoid this perception—though he didn’t seriously consider himself as being even possibly queer until he finished his HSC. Jim was full-on bullied for the better part of two years of high school:

Mostly it was just verbal, all sorts of [name-]calling—fag, poof, whatever. But it tended to get more physical as it went on. So on the way home from school people would throw things. I’ve been sort of punched and knocked over, ambushed by guys. Out to have a bit

of fun and making me feel a bit weak. But yeah, I've sort of been through that, even at school sometimes.

Many bullied students seek support from family, particularly parents. But with queer youth, bringing these incidents their parents' attention can be treacherous. In Jim's case, his parents were supportive—to the point of advocating on his behalf with school officials and being willing to pursue matters with the police after a physical assault. But Jim's sense was that to do so would only cause things to escalate; he didn't want to “make the situation any more volatile than what it was.” So he wouldn't go to the police. Eventually, as his tormentors either left school early or graduated ahead of him, the assaults stopped and the harassment also dropped precipitously. In high school, bashings—physical assaults—were a common experience for Karl. Guys would ask him “if I was [gay] or not. And the answer I used to give them was ‘if I said I was, I'd still be bashed, but if I say I'm not I'll be bashed anyway.’ So it was a lose/lose situation for me in high school.” When Karl eventually fought back, he was expelled for being violent. He started coming out to friends and family two weeks later.

The Scene

The Scene”—the clubs and bars that are the transparent and visible representation of queer Sydney—runs along Oxford Street between Hyde Park and Taylor Square, and borders the inner city suburbs (neighbourhoods) of Darlinghurst and Surry Hills. The Scene, at least initially, was iconic for these men: more than half first became aware queer life via television images of the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras parade along Oxford Street. These men's experiences with Oxford Street have been complex and often quite powerful: all have sought “community” there (to varying degrees), experiences that were confusing for most, and frustrating and disappointing for several. Ten found the Scene's emphasis on muscles, dancing and partying (including alcohol and other drugs) alienating. Four men “dabbled” in the Scene for several months, only to withdraw when they “couldn't keep up” physically or financially. Larry's university studies were derailed by Scene-related drug taking; he took time off from university to “get things sorted,” and is now back studying full-time. Tom first spent time exploring Oxford Street as a high school student, when he “just hang out in the streets . . . like in café's and stuff.” Once in university (and of legal age to enter clubs) he rapidly became enmeshed in the Scene, but an negative experience after taking ecstasy (“I got off that after I woke up one morning, ‘what the fuck, I'm in Watson's Bay, how the fuck did I get here?’”), causing him to take a step back from the Scene. More recently he has gone clubbing on occasion, but is “more inclined just to sit in a café having a coffee, having cigarette, things like that.” Just over half the sample (8) continued to attend the Scene on occasion (weekly or monthly or thereabouts). Cory finds the Scene is “huge on body image and drugs and I just found all these people, all they glorify is abs and six packs . . . and I felt like there's also a lot of racism on the Scene,” as someone whose background is Middle Eastern. All the participants at some time participated in university queer social groups or other support groups for young queer men, where they learned about “how to be gay” (as one participant described it) through discussions and guest speakers. But as they begin to establish friendships and romantic relationships with other gay men, the Scene became less important to most, and was no longer synonymous with their conceptions of “the community.” However, Darlinghurst, the suburb in which most of the Oxford Street Scene is located, remains a geographic locus of community, both symbolically and substantively. For Martin “growing up in the Western suburbs, I feel safer and completely myself. I can be myself, or attempt to be truly myself, when I'm in Darlinghurst.”

Implications

As diverse as these men's experiences were, so too were their families' reactions to their coming out. Bruce had a gay uncle whose partner was welcomed into Bruce's extended family. Walter's parents were transparently accepting of him as a gay teen (including purchasing a gay-themed magazine for him, at his request, at age eight) before he actually came out to them. Others experienced violence from family members when their sexuality became known. Al had to leave home as a teen, because of their families' homophobia. Terry's mother threw him out when he was 17. But regardless of familial reactions—and regardless of age, ethnocultural identity, or level of education—every man in this study found the knowledges with which they grew up to be inadequate, as they came to terms with themselves being queer. And each sought new knowledges, in the Scene and in queer youth programmes, when mainstream knowledge failed them. The negative impact of K-12 schooling—of spending much of their adolescence in schools rife with homophobia, perhaps the least challenged “ism” in schools today—cannot be over-estimated, based on these men's accounts. Several left school battle-weary and anxious. Getting more anti-homophobia and gay-affirming curriculums in schooling needs to be a priority.

Thus, they reconstructed themselves based on integration of a newly found, queer local knowledge. None accepted this knowledge uncritically or wholeheartedly: each man examined, tested, and rejected or accepted different aspects of queer knowledge. Their consistent understanding of how HIV infection occurs during sex between men came from participating in queer youth programmes, but also from accessing queer social networks. From the idealized notions of sex, romance, love and dating espoused by several of the most newly out men (and more liberatory views espoused by others), it is clear that archetypes that conflates being queer with promiscuity were rejected by most of the participants.

Yet their knowledges are revolutionary and transgressive, though their revolutionary acts occur at what is perhaps the next sphere of queer social justice activism: the realm of, and notions of, family. These men all have a sense of entitlement (nascent or strong) with regards to themselves as queer men. Most are engaging with their families to assert a place for themselves as queer men. If the last 30 years of queer activism have focused on individual rights, perhaps the next will be about queers asserting their “place at the (familial) table.”

These men understand and manage their vulnerability for HIV infection based on a local knowledge of that risk. Their school experiences demonstrate their understanding that being openly queer can be dangerous. Their experiences on the Scene, and in seeking other queer-specific support services or social groups to facilitate their learning about becoming queer, show how these men have sought out queer-specific, subjugated knowledges to construct positive, affirming identities as queer men. While the acquisition of legal entitlements are of undoubted value, young queer men nonetheless must seek queer and queer-affirming spaces to acquire relevant, affirming knowledges, resulting in a unique and particular construction of the (queer) adult. In homophobic, heterocentric society, the onus remains on these men to find such spaces for themselves—so long as mainstream society remains hostile. To those how are not str8.

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