

Differentiating the Self: the Kinship Practices of Middle-Aged Gay Men in Manchester

Paul Simpson

Paul.Simpson-2@manchester.ac.uk

Dept of Sociology, Arthur Lewis Building, University of Manchester, Oxford Road,
Manchester M13 9PL.

Word count: 8,202

One table in methods section also already provided in separate file

Keywords: gay ageism, ageing capital, differentiation, technologies of the self, friendship family.

Abstract

Middle-aged gay men in Manchester differentiate themselves through accounts of ‘friendship family’ from relating/kinship associated with heterosexuals and younger gay men. Based on interviews with 27 men aged 39–61, I explore narratives of friendship family. This critical space enables development/mobilisation of the resources of ageing - ‘ageing capital’ – needed to reclaim self-worth in the face of homophobia and gay ageism. It helped men develop the emotional and political resources to question heteronormative family and practice non-monogamy. However, in the struggle for dominance over meaning/representation, generational claims to differentiation could reinforce reverse ageism. Young gay men were constructed as threat, insubstantial or vulnerable, obliging a duty of care to avoid exploiting them. The discursive strategies men deployed could limit/thwart use of ageing capital and undermine men’s claims that ageing involves a linear path towards enhanced awareness of self, other and authoritative knowledge of the relations of gay culture.

Gay men have had to create their own ‘families of choice.’ These friendship-based families have been well documented (see Weeks et al 2001; Weston 1991). But, little attention has been given to how men actually recreate their ‘gay scene’/kinship as they age. These forms of self-remaking are discernible in two major shifts around middle-age; the first away from the family of origin (which reflects the difference of sexuality) and the second away from the gay bar scene towards greater involvement in friendship family (which reflects a difference from younger gay men). Based on interview accounts of 27 men living in Manchester, with its vibrant, differentiated gay culture, I address this gap in scholarship. Specifically, I illuminate the discursive means by which informants’ *differentiate* themselves from heterosexuals and younger gay men - the groups against whom midlife gay men in Manchester most strongly contrasted their relational experience. I argue that in differentiating themselves through accounts of kinship, middle-aged gay men living Manchester draw on: narratives/discourses of ageing that are indicative of forms of ‘ageing capital’ that could be considered part of a ‘generational habitus’ (Edmunds and Turner 2002); and, to a lesser extent, an age-inflected ‘ethics of the self’ (Foucault 1987: 25–31). (These concepts are explained below in the section ‘theoretical framework’). Men’s stories of differentiation variously indicate: gains of ageing (self-esteem); loss of socio-sexual viability; and the ambivalences in informants’ notions of maturity, which can reinforce generational divisions. On the one hand, accounts of differentiation from ways of relating associated with family of origin and younger gay men could be self-empowering. On the other hand, reclaiming value for an ageing gay self in the competition for dominance over representation of a legitimate gay subjectivity and ways of relating were implicated in ageism towards *younger* men. Most commonly, informants drew on narratives/discourse that actually undermined their ability to deploy ageing capital as represented particularly in their claims that ageing involves a linear path towards increased

status, acceptance of self and other and authoritative understanding of the relations of gay culture.

Research context

Manchester is Britain's third most populous city. Since the mid-1990s, its 'gay village' has served as a laboratory for research on the relations of sexual difference. One study concluded that state and public hostility have promoted physical and symbolic violence, which dominate gay men's experiences of social space (Moran et al 2004). Another highlighted how self-entitled gay patrons of the village themselves express a symbolic violence and cultural imperialism in defining themselves against the 'constitutive limit' of working class women whose hen parties are considered to represent an 'excessive' sexuality - habitus out sync in 'cosmopolitan' space (Binnie and Skeggs 2004). Further, the village has been portrayed as a site of class antagonisms *between* gay men where age divisions aggravate effects of capitalist ideology that prioritises youth and marginalises age (Whittle 1994). Although village bars are the most visible aspect of local gay culture, this culture consists of an online gay scene, social/support groups and spaces for recreational sex (saunas, cruising grounds and public toilets) and domestically staged forms of kinship. The latter were spoken of as increasingly important as men grew older and have been overshadowed by research on the more visible village bar scene.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework employed in this study was designed to address the impoverished view of (inter-)subjectivity that suffuses the literature on gay male ageing. When men's

experiences of ageing are not portrayed as blighted by loneliness/exclusion because of gay ageism (Hostetler 2004), ageing gay subjects are depicted as well-connected and possessing the emotional and cognitive resources that equip them for continued participation on the gay scene (Berger 1982) - to 'carry on cruising' for socio-sexual opportunity. This binary of exclusion/mastery over stigma of gay ageing overlooks the ambivalences involved in negotiating 'the gay scene' and the multidirectional character of gay ageism. Middle-aged gay men are recipients of ageism but also express this towards: younger gay men who are held responsible for older men's exclusion/invisibilisation; peer-aged men thought dressing/acting age-inappropriately ('too young?'); and old gay men who represented anxieties about morbidity and mortality, including death of socio-sexual subjectivity.

To address the above-identified problems, my study adopted a 'pick and mix' analytical framework as elaborated by Thomson (2009) that uses tools from constructionism and critical realism. This approach deploys a critical humanism redolent of Foucauldian 'technologies of the self' that involve strenuous thinking on the relationship of the self to the self to enable subjects to avoid unwanted discursive constraints on expression of identity and relating (Thomson 2009: 163). But, these discursive operations are located in Bourdieusian 'fields of existence' (Thomson 2009: 23) with their own distinct norms where, more often, 'ageing capital' or learning from life experience (see examples below) could be deployed. Whilst the possibilities of autonomy arising from ageing capital/technologies of the self sidesteps the notion of habitus (deeply enculturated practice) as bound to repeat itself, grounding these resources of ageing in 'fields of existence' avoids conceptualisation of discourse as ethereal - 'free-floating.' Such a framework recognises the mutability of norms across different spaces and enables consideration of how (inter-)subjectivity results from the dialectic between constraint and choice (Thomson 2009: 2). This approach takes us beyond analysis of

responses to gay ageing/ageism as either conformist or voluntarist *and* opens up examination of ambivalent experiences involving negotiation with these processes. It also enables consideration of how men draw on discourse that, contradictorily, attempts to secure legitimacy for an ageing self but undermines the legitimacy of interviewees' generational perspectives on ageing and relating in gay culture.

The concept of ageing capital is central to my theoretical strategy. I define this concept broadly as an age-inflected variant of cultural capital – embodied knowledge influenced by age, class, gender and sexuality, resulting in habituated practices (Bourdieu 1984). Though several narratives explored indicate how ageing capital (through life experience) might compensate for 'deficits' in formal education. Generally, this formulation allows that actors can mobilise differential combinations of resources across fields/contexts with their own rules of the game. Enmeshments of various capitals – economic, cultural and symbolic (status) - and the in/congruence between habitus and field were visible in accounts of the fit/disjuncture between the older body-self and various 'homospaces.' Falling short of the homonormative, youthful, athletic 'look' risked exclusion from the commercialised gay scene.

More specifically, ageing capital serves as a multivalent, context-dependent concept, suggesting a family of emotional, cognitive and political resources used in response to ageing/gay ageism. It indexed accumulated emotional strength, self-acceptance, age-appropriate bodily display/performance and growing awareness of/competence in managing the relationships that form gay culture and wider society. Such claims/attributes indicate the workings of a 'generational habitus' that is more than simply an age cohort in the population structure (involving individuals moving together through time) and is constituted by a

‘collective consciousness,’ which itself is informed by shared historical experience (Edmunds and Turner 2002: ix: 16). In the case of this present generation of midlife gay men, this consciousness was shaped by thoroughly contradictory experiences, which, as will be seen, includes different experiences of social class but more often transcended it. On the one hand, gay liberation discourses in the 1970s served as resources to convert stigma into pride. On the other hand, study participants witnessed and were obliged to develop resources to deal with the backlash against sexual difference in the 1980s where gay men were represented as guilty victims of HIV/AIDS if not *the* embodiment of the deadly experiment in promiscuity and a threat to heterosexual existence. Indeed, men’s overcoming of this punitive discourse resonates with Edmund’s and Turner’s idea that a more active generational habitus emerges as a collective response to trauma (2002: 12). Latterly, the kind of emotional and political resources gained through past mastery over stigma of sexual difference have been redeployed to negotiate the vicissitudes of gay life as an ageing subject.

Moreover, the thought/practices indicative of ageing capital are mobilised in ways that suggest self-empowerment, constraints and ambivalence concerning expression of midlife identities. Ageing capital was implicated in men’s imaginings of an ‘authentic’ midlife socio-sexual subjectivity, which study participants used to distinguish themselves from the fashionable self-presentation of younger men (and their younger selves). This productive essentialism was visible in the commonly expressed idea of a more ‘natural,’ less sculpted/elaborated, holistic body-self where appearance should be a faithful reflection of a more ‘real’ inner self consisting of values, knowledge and personal qualities. Here, a relational self was prioritised over monadic body projects. Such thinking suggests something valuable about the ageing process and that middle-aged men might be freer from constraints of gay/consumer cultures on self-presentation whilst contradicting stereotypes of them as

desperately hanging onto youth and sexual marketability. This suggests that ageing capital is used in an intergenerational struggle over meaning/representation concerning gay subjectivity and in ways that could resignify and re-aestheticise the midlife/ageing body-self as desirable, creative. But, as will be seen, age-inflected resources could also be deployed in intergenerational conflict over symbolic capital, specifically in the struggle for dominance over authoritative interpretation and representation of legitimate gay subjectivity, relationality and culture. Efforts at self-recuperation through ageing capital were undermined by reverse ageist discourses/narratives that men drew on to assert superiority for their generationally-informed ways of knowing and being.

My theoretical approach also attempts to avoid the heteronormative notion of life stages organised around child-rearing. Instead, I deployed a lifecourse approach, which recognises the interplay between structural, contextual, biographical, historical and discursive influences on ageing (Estes et al 2003). Not only does this flexible formulation accommodate the heterogeneity of social reality, it also allows for differences in ageing experience/key transitions among gay men. This move encourages understanding of midlife/ageing as resulting from the interplay of the passage of time and material bodily experience embedded in social relations (Arber and Attius-Donfut 2000: 3-5). In line with Edmunds' and Turner's idea of generational habitus (2002: 7), a lifecourse approach avoids reifying youth/midlife and gay ageing/ageism and regards these as historically contingent, relational, socially constructed processes – the dynamic accomplishments of interaction shaped through engagement with discourses and social structures.

Methods and men

In-depth interviews with 27 men enabled investigation of social processes (Maxwell 1996: 20) and men's different experiences of ageing. They involved photo-elicitation where informants were encouraged to discuss photographs of themselves when in their twenties/thirties. As only 11 interviewees supplied such photographs, the other 16 men were presented with images of gay men of different ages in various social contexts taken from a local free gay magazine. Photo-elicitation commonly invokes events and relationships beyond interviewees' present selves and experiences (Kuhn 2002: 13–14). One informant's photographs produced vivid (re)contextualisation of the overcoming of his religious upbringing to develop in midlife the emotional resources and political knowledge to allow guilt-free participation in 'recreational' sex.

The sampling strategy was designed to accommodate key dimensions of difference and avoid a homogeneous sample of 'conscience constituents' - white, middle class men open about their sexuality. Project publicity (a leaflet/poster) was designed to attract interest from within personal networks, gay social/support groups (which yielded 60% of informants (n=16)), bars associated with different clientele by age, class and other gay/gay-friendly businesses - a sauna, 'sex shop' and the village barbershop. The sample comprised 14 men (52%) aged 50-61 and 13 men (48%) aged 39-48. Twenty four respondents (89%) described themselves as 'white British,' one respondent self-defined as 'mixed race' another as 'oriental' and another as 'Irish *and* European.' Seventeen respondents (63%) were single and the remainder were partnered and all but two of the 27 informants described involvement in friendship family. None had ever been involved in parenting and only one respondent provided a significant

degree of care for an elderly parent/relative. (The consequences of this are discussed at appropriate junctures below).

Adopting Bourdieu's description (1984), social class was defined in terms of its interrelated socio-economic and cultural dimensions.

Table 1 here

Interviewees were allocated to a socio-economic class category on the basis of employment and income-related data i.e. whether employed full-time, receiving lower levels of pay (connected with part-time work or minimum wage) and offering fewer opportunities for career development. Culturally, class was defined according to Bourdieu's notion of 'cultural capital' - the forms of embodied knowledge required to accomplish cultural pursuits (or occupations). The sample is evenly spread across the two socio-economic classes but less so in terms of the cultural dimensions of class, though nine of the culturally middle class men reported originating from working class backgrounds. The sampling strategy yielded a group of men on lower to modest levels of income, which could set limits on participation in various cultural 'scenes.' The sample appears better resourced in terms of cultural capital. Twenty two respondents spoke of eclectic interests associated with the culturally 'omnivorous,' suggesting an ability to access pursuits from across the cultural spectrum. Differences (of age, class, race and relationship status) were counterbalanced by the similarity of men's continuing involvement in fields that make up Manchester's gay culture, including the village.

Differentiating biological and friendship family: the difference of (homo)sexuality

In the American literature on gay kinship, black and working class lesbian/gay people tend to define family in terms of biological relatedness; this relational configuration serving as a source of mutual practical and emotional support (Lewin 1998: 93). However, and perhaps related to both age and national-cultural differences, the opposite is the case in relation to the present sample. The first major shift in men's relational practices involved (gradual) move away from biological towards friendship family. Lack of significant involvement in the everyday reproduction of biological family meant greater opportunities than those looking after children or elderly/disabled relatives to be involved in friendship family and other 'new relational experiments' (Giddens 1992: 136–8), including non-monogamous ones (discussed below). In consequence, and a major difference between gay male and straight relationships, gay men generally make the transition to domestically-oriented kinship later than heterosexuals (Berger 1992: 222).

Just as significantly, two-thirds of the class and ethnically differentiated sample (n=18) described the heterosexual home as alienating and site of risk (Weeks et al 2001: 77). Because heterosexual family tended to deny or misunderstand what men had embraced as central to their identity, it is not surprising that just over half of informants (n=14) spoke of a gradual diminution of bonds with their family of origin. Ben (50) spoke philosophically of his increasing 'detachment' from his family and reflected what informants saw as a natural development in gay midlife. Informant accounts indicated support for the view that lesbian and gay people distinguish friendship family for its 'ethic of care' from its biological/biolegal variant associated with an 'ethic of obligation' (Weeks et al 2001: 150-2). Typically, Ben (50) explained that he 'cared about' his parents and 'helped out financially' when needed but,

‘mum and dad don’t really understand my life.’ This was contrasted with the understanding and support between himself and the family, which included his partner of 18 years (with whom he had lived for eight years) and an ex-lover. His partner was identified as: ‘the one I rely on emotionally... more than anyone... not just because he knows me better but also we both understand what being gay is about’ and because he understood the workings of homophobia. Coupled relationships/friendship families offered more than consolation for diminution of relations with biological family. Ben’s words suggest that peer-aged friendship family can help middle-aged gay men develop the emotional and political resources – forms of ageing capital - to challenge homophobia and claim validity for their kinship (Weeks et al 2001: 16), though see Pete’s story below. Friendship family might also usefully be conceptualised as integral to the ‘interpretive community’ necessary to develop counter-narratives to homophobia (Plummer 1995: 134). It is not surprising then that relationships with parents/relatives were typically described as perfunctory – often attenuated to obligatory exchange of Christmas greetings and attending family gatherings e.g. weddings and funerals.

However, one informant’s account stood out for its moral, emotional and epistemic claims to difference through participation in familial networks that were defined along lines of difference in terms of age, gender and sexuality as part of a ‘balanced life’ (Pete 52). Indeed, Pete specifically described his network of friends as ‘varied... like a family of choice.’ One of his heterosexual, peer-aged female friends with ‘quite a few lesbian friends’ had suggested ‘setting up a housing co-operative’ (to which Pete was giving serious consideration) ‘involving, different generations... to provide a more supportive environment as you get older.’ It was also noteworthy that Pete’s eighty-year-old father, for whom he was primary carer, was spoken of as part of his friendship family and included as far as possible in Pete’s and his friends’ social activities. He had also learned through involvement in his father’s

circle of friends that ‘there is a sense in which age is irrelevant.’ Whilst Pete considered that: ‘...his father’s needs come first’ he was ‘clear about my own’ and tried ‘to ensure these are met as far as I can.’ The informant benefited occasionally from the support of two lesbian friends who would look after his father if he needed a short break from caring. Later in the same narrative episode, Pete reflexively made a link between a holistic subjectivity and an ethic of relationality when he stated: ‘There’s much more to you than your body... There’s your mind, your personality, your relationships... Overall, I give priority to my relationships.’

Pete’s account is redolent of Pahl’s ‘personal communities,’ ‘not restricted to a particular form of affinity’ and ‘characterised by people who represent different meanings’ to the person concerned (C.f. Smart 2007: 684). Whilst it transcends the notion of intimacies as homosocial in terms of social class, it is worth noting that Pete is a white British, lower middle class man and graduate of an elite university. This minority report provides an edifying case study of an eclectic, non- (or less) compartmentalised kinship that suggests strategising from a social position that reflects both a sense of entitlement and egalitarian sensibilities. It invokes a certain kind of middle class cultural capital/habitus (the ‘housing cooperative’) but whilst working class people do not feature in his story, his account in no way implies claims to superiority. Three years prior to interview, Pete, who could not afford early retirement, gave up a career in a reasonably well-remunerated public service post to become his father’s live-in carer. This decision could be framed within an ‘ethics of the self’ (Foucault 1987: 25-31) that involved careful thinking on the self to establish one’s own rules/goals that avoid unwanted self-governance. This is also evident in Pete’s invocation of the inner qualities of authenticity (‘mind’ and ‘personality’) and his decision to prioritise relationships over homonormative projects of the body/surface self considered obligatory on the youth-oriented, individualised commercial gay scene. We also get a sense of the home as

negotiated, gay-friendly space and the respite care provided by the two lesbian friends is suggestive of everyday communitas. But, whilst Pete's caring role in no way hinders his access to friendship family, the shared home was ambivalent space. He was cognisant of the fact that his father owned the house and that, unlike his married, heterosexual brother, he felt unable to share a bed/have sex with a partner in his bedroom. Discomfort about using the home as a space for gay sex indicates the operation of complex, covert homophobic discourse whose consequences restricted Pete to recreational sexual encounters in saunas. This suggests both limits to Pete's claim that his relationship with his father is organised around respect for each person's different emotional needs and constraints on the ability to put the resources of ageing into practice.

However, it is noteworthy that five of eight informants who 'came out' later (post-thirties) articulated a different relational trajectory and one emphasising continuity rather than (modest) change with age. Their accounts suggested a distinct form of ageing capital if not an alternative generational gay habitus shaped less by class than by growing up in families/communities where homophobia was spoken of as being particularly acute. But, coming out late(r) and involvement in what became a kind of friendship family of supportive, peer-aged, *heterosexual* associates were reclaimed as having advantageous effects on development as a gay subject. Various moral claims were made that involvement in this kind of kinship when younger had prepared men to: withstand gay ageism and its punitive body aesthetics; escape the malign influences of a hypersexual 'gay scene' (characterised by fleeting, 'superficial' relations); and avoid HIV.

Relationship rules: non-monogamy

The gains resulting from resources of ageing capital were particularly discernible in claims to differentiation by informants who were partnered/involved in intimate friendships but who practiced non-monogamy - which further differentiated them from heteronormative family. Such accounts, expressed regardless of class and race, challenge the belief that sexual relations are only legitimate when mutually exclusive. Informants' age-inflected political and epistemic claims concerning sexual ethics question the hegemonic notion that non-monogamy *necessarily* entails an amoral, libertine separation of sex and emotions. Such accounts represent claims concerning rights to sexual pleasure with unknown/barely known others without guilt or fear of being labelled 'superficial,' calculating or promiscuous. They assert non-monogamy as ethical relationality. For instance, Jamie (54) spoke of attending group sex sessions with his 'together apart' partner of 10 years. The strength of their relationship, their interpersonal resources and trust they had developed combined with the situated rules of the game enabled both parties to enjoy this convivial space singly, as part of a 'threesome' (or 'moresome') with/without the partner's co-presence at the actual encounter.

Central to informants' accounts of ethical non-monogamy was the distinction between sexual and *emotional* fidelity (Weeks et al 2001: 150-152). Bill (54) declared that one of the few relationships rules he had developed around midlife concerned the need for honesty between partners about sex outside of any relationship. These arrangements were contrasted with relationships that had gone 'disastrously wrong' in his youth because he 'valued my 'freedom.' But, Bill urged that we, 'don't just do monogamy because it's expected... the convention, an obligation... 'only if it's a genuine desire.' Although emotional honesty is central to Bill's narrative of change in his relational practice, he struck a note of caution in

stating that non-monogamy can be a foil for selfishness, which was associated with a much younger self. His thought-provoking proposition that monogamy should not be taken as the moral default position but itself requires ethical justification in the form of real commitment was more suggestive of an age-and class-inflected ethics of the self. Bill's words indicate that he has forged a way of 'doing' sexual relations consistent with his values, ethical in terms of his treatment of self and others and critical of dominant thinking about legitimate sexual relations.

But, claims concerning non-monogamy could function in more cautious, problematic ways that, again, suggest that men draw on narratives that discursively limit abilities to mobilise ageing capital (and technologies of the self). Despite involvement in group sex with his partner, Jamie adopted a less open 'don't ask, don't tell' stance concerning opportune non-monogamy, which supports Jamieson's (1999: 487) questioning of Giddens' notion of gay people as trailblazers for new reflexive experiments in intimacy whose longevity relies on honest disclosure (1992: 147-9). In addition, Vince (49) explained that an 'ideal relationship' for him given his age and health status, '...is one that is more than friends but less than lovers in a sexual way.' Whilst he desired the constancy that partnership can bring, Vince was prepared to forego sex with a partner given HIV-related health complications that seriously restricted his sexual capacity. Indeed, the informant countenanced 'making allowances for' any partner 'to see other people for sex if he's uncomfortable having it with me' though added, 'but, if there was any emotional involvement, I wouldn't be happy with that.' Although Vince strikes a forbearing note, acceptance of a partner's non-monogamy in return for physical affection and emotional fidelity is highly contingent. Willingness to 'make allowances' indicates that, in the absence of his health problems, monogamy would be the norm. Further, the relational arrangements envisaged would involve the imposition of

constraint on any partner who would be urged to avoid emotional entanglements and thus required to instrumentalise himself *and* any sexual partners. Conspiracies of silence and pragmatic approaches to non-monogamy indicate further evidence of the fragility and contradictory character of interviewees' generationally contingent claims to self-value, knowledge of self and other and to authenticity in how they manage the relations within gay culture.

Exclusions from friendship family

Whether affirmative, ambivalent or constraining, self-scripted friendship family was not equally available for cultural reasons connected with ethnicity and homophobia (Lewin 1998: 93) and socio-economic ones (Carrington 1999: 116). These discursive and structural factors limited/stymied men's ability to mobilise the dividends of ageing. Alec (46) who described himself as 'mixed race' spoke of a 'double life' that involved maintaining a rigid separation between a coterie of peer-aged gay men and heterosexual family/friends from his church and country of origin, though the latter provided a spiritual connection and freedom from racism often lacking in gay culture. Despite being highly educated, Bill (55) described how the economic constraints of dependency on social security benefits and living in tower block housing effectively excluded him from reciprocation within middle class, gay social networks - the affluent, South Manchester, coupled dinner party/barbecue circuit. This denied him access to social, economic, cultural and symbolic capital that might alleviate/compensate for material disadvantage. Bill considered that his socio-economic situation more than his age differentiated him with disadvantageous consequences and was responsible for prolonging his dependence on the village scene for socialising. Experience of material disadvantage

(combined with being single) could then delay the transition towards a more domestically-staged form of kinship.

Differentiating the domestic and bar scenes: the difference of age

The shift in midlife away from heteronormative notions of family and the actual family of origin was paralleled by a move away from the youth-coded village bar scene towards more domestically staged friendship family. Two-thirds of informants (n=17), and reflecting no significant trends along lines of class or race, (which, again, suggests generational habitus) contrasted the overwhelmingly homosocial kinship of their earlier days on the gay scene in their twenties and thirties with their somewhat more varied kinship in the present. This still largely consisted of peer-aged gay men but several informants now counted some biological relatives, women and gay men of different ages among their significant others, though unlike Pete's experience above, these relationships were more kept apart than blended.

This shift in relational practice was narrated largely as response to loss of bodily value (sexual/physical capital) on the commercial gay scene where midlife gay men could feel reduced to their (apparent) age (see also below). But, the development of knowledge and connections in gay domestic spaces was no mere consolation for the lack of value on 'the scene.' Like the transition from the family of origin, the shift from bar scene to domestic spaces was typically understood as a natural development of the ageing process (Berger 1992: 221). For Jamie (working class economically, educationally and culturally) participation 'on the scene' had gradually but significantly diminished in the ten years since he had been with his partner. He declared: 'We've got different interests now,' which included 'dinner parties with our lesbian friends' where '...age fades into the background.'

Experience of this convivial gay space enabled Jamie to ‘care less about how I’m seen on Canal Street’ (the village’s main thoroughfare). In line with the majority of informants, the village bar/club scene was described as something the informant ‘had mainly grown out of.’ Indeed, most men’s use of the village was fitted around other cultural events/activities like going to the cinema or attending a social group. But, as Jamie intimates, relationships on the domestic scene were thought to be based more on mutual value. Indeed, he differentiates the spaces of friendship family morally as less age-conscious and freer from ageist scrutiny compared to the bar scene (Grossman et al 2000: 172). The transition from bar/nightclub scene to home then might represent less withdrawal from social engagement with gay others than ageing capital functioning creatively to extend men’s gay scene/friendship circles to domestic spaces.

Although his circumstances were very different from Jamie’s, Keir (42) also distanced his middle-aged self from his younger self – one that had been involved in dizzying, non-stop partying. He gave up this hedonistic lifestyle at ‘about 35’ when he began to own that he had drifted into alcoholism. Treatment/counselling had enabled Keir to stay sober for the last seven years (prior to interview) and his socialising was now organised around a social group for older gay men some of whom had become central to his kinship group. The social group served as supportive space where the informant had ‘found friends with similar interests,’ which had prompted him to think about ‘how other people have travelled to where they are now.’ Clearly, ‘the past is a different country’ - a distinct field of experience with its own rules now experienced as much less compelling. Not only were Keir’s heavy drinking clubbing/‘scene’ days contrasted with the conviviality of the social group of peer-aged gay men but also his statement concerning the life journeys of men in his social group/circle is strongly suggestive of the development of ‘ageing capital.’ Indeed, Kier spoke of giving up

the bar/club scene, which figured as alienated experience, as enabling him to be more open to empathising with others.’

Furthermore, and regardless of significant differences, four-fifths of the interview sample (n=23) expressed a strong preference in terms of sexual attractiveness and sociability for men over 30 and ideally within about ten years either way of their own age; a parameter that tended to age with them. Preferences for peer-aged significant others suggested differentiation from younger gay men in a way that does not necessarily entail disparagement. Age differences could be understood and calmly accepted as natural, inevitable (Robinson 2008: 174). Central to preferences for friendship and intimacy with men of a similar age was a political and emotional understanding of what it was like to have survived less tolerant times (Nardi 1999: 1). As Jamie declared, and without necessarily implying judgement of younger gay men: ‘People who have similar experiences can identify with what you’ve been through... like when attitudes weren’t as positive.’

Younger men as sources of anxiety: ageing capital undone

However, differentiation from younger gay men through accounts of kinship/relating was much less often benign. This was particularly clear in narratives that constructed younger gay men as source of anxiety in various ways and with different consequences. Despite some instances of empathy concerning the pressures younger men face on the commercial gay scene in terms of drug use and fashionable self-presentation, understanding was overshadowed by expression of reverse ageism that worked independently of any differences between men. More often there was a forgetting of fallibility during one’s youth and in the present. As Sam (45) declared: ‘It’s all youth and worked out bodies [in the village]... and

who needs wisdom when you can get a nice firm pair of buttocks?’ Sam’s narrative seeks to reclaim value for the ageing gay self. He differentiates himself epistemologically from the younger gay male denizens of the village in particular who are seen as culpable of over-relying on the visual as a way of knowing, which is thought to constrain them into seeing subjectivity in objectified, fragmented and reflects their ‘superficial’ ways of relating. Again, such narratives demonstrate how the relations of gay ageing/ageism involve middle-aged gay men drawing upon institutionalised narratives to recuperate ageing identity but simultaneously undermining their generational claims to authoritative knowledge concerning the relations of gay culture. As elaborated below, these discursive operations frustrate deployment of an ageing capital that might enable simultaneous self-recuperation and acceptance of the younger other.

Also, more benign forms of cross-generational reciprocity, transfers of wealth and cultural assets over the lifecourse (from older to younger men) identified in Stacey’s Los Angeles study (2001: chapter 1) were largely absent from and even contested by informants’ accounts. The dominant theme here was habitual social distance, which itself indexes claims to superiority/distinction of the ageing gay self. Commonplace in informants’ claims to difference were concerns about trustworthiness, lack of substance and thus the moral consequences for the older man of younger men’s presumed naivety and vulnerability. The issue of trustworthiness was evident in informants’ suspicions about the pecuniary motives of younger (working class coded) gay men. Generally, informants were suspicious of younger men’s attempts to dissemble, which is indicative of discourse that constructs younger gay men as calculating, manipulative - motivated by self-gain financially and/or emotionally. Indeed, informants were dubious of intergenerational intimacies to the extent that they framed them as a form of prostitution (Steinman 1990: 180). This was embodied in the notion

of the 'sugar daddy' relationship where sex and the erotic appeal of youth are traded for financial and/or emotional support. But, having experienced such a relationship when young, Les, working class economically and culturally, was the only participant critical of such stereotyping discourse, pointing up how the older man's emotional and financial largesse could frustrate/disempower the younger party. Les' reflexivity also exemplifies how ageing capital (garnered from life experience) might compensate for 'deficits' in formal/educational cultural capital.

Even where there was intergenerational parity in terms of economic resources, cultural tastes and sexual interest, social distance registered in anxieties about being 'old enough to be the parent' of any younger man. For Marcus (47), being twice the age of his (former) boyfriend and slightly older than the latter's parents reflected discomfiting concern with broader social disapproval. The idea that he was 'racing around with a lad 21 years my junior' suggests a form of self-display and relating indecorous for a man of 42. Use of the term 'lad' to describe his companion accentuates their age difference, underscores the power of ageism and how it enmeshes with homophobic discourse to construct middle-aged/older gay men as predatory (Pugh 2002: 167). This motivated informants regardless of cultural resources strenuously to distance themselves from this persistent stigma and, again, suggests that men draw on discourse that prevents the deployment of ageing capital and undermines generational claims to the dividends of ageing.

But, Marcus' anxieties about social and familial disapproval indicate how dominant discourse sets up a hierarchy of relationality where gay relationships, especially cross-generational ones, are accorded much less legitimacy either because they breach the natural or else represent a 'less eligible' form of sexuality (Hawkes 196: 135-6). Although deemed more in-

keeping with nature, relations between older heterosexual women and ‘toy boys’ are also problematic. The term ‘cougar’ represents an ambivalent marker of ageing, gendered sexuality and class mobility, suggesting an older, well-presented/preserved and sexually assertive, woman (and one who might have benefited financially from divorce). But, this epithet retains notions of man-eating, rapaciousness that contradict hegemonic discourse that equates femininity with sexual passivity. Working class women might be vulnerable to the more derogatory term ‘pram snatcher,’ which denies the adult status and autonomy of younger (working class) men whose lives they are thought to be stealing/corrupting. In contrast, heterosexual men’s involvement with younger women is more legitimated - naturalised in the media and popular culture (Rosenthal 1990: 1-6) – and scorn is usually reserved for the gold-digging, social climbing ‘bimbo.’ In sum, gay ageism and the greater delegitimation of gay male cross-generational relationships sets limits on ability to deploy ageing capital and the transferability of ageing capital as critical resource (developed within friendship family) can be limited/thwarted by androcentric, heteronormative discourse.

Moreover, when younger gay men were not imagined as threat, their putative lack of substance and life experience were used to discount them as significant others. Fred’s (55) desire for ‘an equal’ involved an epistemic claim for differentiation from younger gay men and the lack of maturity associated with them. Although he entertained the view that some might measure up to this standard, this depended on unusual precocity in terms of tastes, social interests and relational skills – a form of developed, middle class cultural capital. However, maturity was commonly narrated as beginning in the thirties and was evident in the development of the emotional strength and self-knowledge (expressions of ageing capital) that equips men to withstand pressures towards conformity in terms of appearance and behaviour thought to be driven by gay/consumer cultures. This form of differentiation relies

on stereotypes that invoke reverse ageism: it contrasts the intrinsic inauthenticity and gullibility of younger gay men as ‘empty vessels waiting to be filled’ (Chris 48) with the more developed, rounded subjectivity associated with midlife/older gay men.

The flipside of the account of gay youth as gullible, inexperienced is a somewhat more ambivalent story of vulnerability that significantly shaped how middle-aged gay men might manage ‘safer’ sex. Rob (50), and long-term HIV positive, considered: ‘If they’re somebody my age, they should know about HIV by now’ but younger men, even if informed of a person’s HIV positive status, were likely to be ‘less aware of the actual risks than a well-versed forty-year-old.’ Consequently, Rob would ‘not allow them any opportunity to take any risks.’ Clearly, he differentiates himself by invoking the extra care thought necessary in sexual encounters with younger men who are presumed less knowledgeable and risk-aware concerning HIV. Rob’s account suggests another expression of generational habitus (shaped by direct experience of the HIV pandemic) but one that might promote misunderstanding and intergenerational conflict. Indeed, the informant’s thoughts concerning age-inflected cultural resources and his well-meant intentions risk denying younger men’s sexual knowledge and opportunities to practice relational skills, exercise responsibility and assert autonomy. Not all young gay men are lacking in sexual experience/knowledge and Rob’s assumptions about middle-aged gay men are somewhat less ethical when not all of them are confident in their knowledge of HIV transmission/ability to practice safer sex (Grossman 1995).

Given the workings of ageist discourse, presumed differences in epistemology and social distance identified above, it comes as no surprise that informants regarded the differences of age as prohibitive of longer-term partnerships with younger men. Such liaisons were imagined as inherently unstable (Steinman 1990: 180–2) and thus time-limited. Although this

belief was not limited to a particular social class, Chris (48) expressed a strong preference for a partner ‘in his forties’ in middle class terms because both parties would be at the ‘same life stage... with comparable amounts of experience to reflect on’ and ‘likely to have similar life goals.’ Further, Chris urged anyone considering a cross-generational relationship ‘to think ahead, ten, 20 years in the future when... you’re 65 and he’s 35 or whatever’ and whether the relationship could survive changes in interests and the diminution of sex/sexual attraction. But, Chris’ claims overlook the possibility that relationships can be renegotiated and reduce complex cross-generational relations to considerations of physical attraction, which contradicts the more holistic notion of desirability and authenticity that were commonly expressed and central to men’s moral claims to an age-appropriate gay midlife. This indicates the power of gay ageist discourse to produce anxiety in relation to perceived loss of physical capital and viable sexual subjectivity. Besides, what is attractive, desirable and pleasing to us can change over time. Chris’ reasoning also fails to recognise that *peer-aged* relationships can wither due to the diminution of sex and that cross-generational relationships might wither because of disagreement over money, household management or changes in priorities or ‘personality.’ The anxieties implicit in Chris’ statement complicate the equation of ageing with maturity, indicating the power of gay ageist discourse to thwart the deployment of ageing capital among the more culturally resourced. Such discourse also fosters the belief that cross-generational gay relationships can only end in dejection and isolation for the *older* party. It is significant that Chris reconstructs the older man as the stereotypical lonely old queen who is denied the emotional resources - ageing capital - to withstand the dissolution of a relationship.

Informants’ reverse ageism could be part consequence of the lack of involvement in caring responsibilities for or significant relationships with young people. Middle-aged lesbian/gay

parents/grandparents of teenaged children or those more intimately connected with young adults personally and/or professionally might adopt a more empathetic stance towards youth's (presumed) lack of awareness, substance and gullibility. They might be better placed to appreciate the discursive and structural influences shaping young people's thought/practice. Pete, who volunteered at a gay youth project, stood out as particularly understanding in this respect. Besides, men's stories of scepticism about cross-generational relations overlook that some younger gay men might value more enduring connections (Robinson 2008: 142–3). Also, the ethnic/non-British informants from working class backgrounds (who might be predisposed towards empathy given the 'bad press' that youth tends to receive) appeared more open to regarding younger men as equals. Indeed, Marcus spoke of the 'comfort' and knowledge provided by his 21-year-old care assistant partner when his mother had a stroke and had been placed in a nursing home by older siblings without consulting him. His account is suggestive both of men's capacities to work across age differences and a moral claim for recognition of the emotional and practical support younger men can give. It indicates the possibility of more equitable, negotiated arrangements between younger and older partners (Steinman 1990: 205) that transcend the constraints of gay ageism.

Conclusion

I have drawn attention to the value of friendship family as a way of distinguishing and framing middle-aged gay men's relational experiences. This form of kinship does important political and emotional work in empowering middle-aged gay men living in Manchester who generally felt unable to rely on their family of origin or younger gay men for support. Involvement in this expression of kinship is no mere compensation for the losses stemming

from heteronormativity and gay ageism. Rather this highlights the creative reconfiguration of men's gay scenes/cultural lives over time. Friendship family is also characterised by an ethic of care and mutual understanding that enables middle-aged gay to men express their 'authentic' selves. It serves as critical space in which to develop the resources of ageing capital and technologies of the self to contest homophobia, gay ageism and pressures towards monogamy and assert the value of alternative ways of relating.

However, socio-economic factors and cultural ones connected with homophobia hindered access to friendship family. But, just as importantly, men's claims to difference from younger gay men through their accounts of relational practices operated often in less benign ways that can undercut their claims to wisdom, authority and relational authenticity. Friendship family cannot exist in a vacuum and does not provide immunity to social structures and discourses, including (gay) ageism, that impose limits on self-expression/relating. Although some stories of differentiation were classed, generational habitus largely trumped such influences. Intimacies with younger men were rare because the latter were constructed as threat, socially underdeveloped or vulnerable thus imposing a moral duty of care on the older man. Strong dissociation from the stigma of the predatory older gay man indicates the continuing discursive force of homophobic ageism. Also, ageist anxiety was expressed in concerns about the time-limited character of cross-generational relationships, though there were minority reports, indicating the possibility of egalitarian, cross-generational intimacies that transcended gay ageism. Whilst informants' friendship-based kinship and the age-inflected resources of capital and technologies encouraged self-recuperation, some efforts to maintain self-esteem in a culture that devalues the older body-self were implicated in reverse ageism. In turn, this undermines interviewees' capabilities to mobilise ageing capital and generational claims to ageing as linear path to maturity involving greater self-acceptance and openness to

age-inclusive kinship. It was mainly in their stories of social distance from younger men that ageing capital was stymied. Given that ageing capital holds up as critical resource comparatively better in relation to discourses of ‘traditional’ family, urban middle-aged gay men may have developed greater resources to critique/withstand heteronormativity than gay ageism. Any policy-related strategies to support middle-aged/older gay men might need to acknowledge this whilst recognising that these processes can interact/enmesh to compound exclusion.

Acknowledgements

Thanks are offered to Professors Carol Smart and Brian Heaphy, Dr Wendy Bottero and the reviewers whose constructive comments encouraged me to extend and deepen my thinking.

References

Arber S and Attias-Donfut C (2000) *The Myth of Generational Conflict: the Family and State in Ageing Societies*, London: Routledge.

Berger R (1982) *Gay and Gray: the Older Homosexual Man*, Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Berger R (1992) *Research on Older Gay Men: What We Know; What We Need to Know* in Woodman J (ed.) (1992) *Lesbian and Gay Lifestyles: a Guide for Counselling and Education*, New York: Irvington Publications Inc.

Binnie J and Skeggs B (2004) Cosmopolitan Knowledge and the Production and Consumption of Sexualised Space: Manchester's Gay Village, *Sociological Review*, Vol. 18: 39 – 61.

Bourdieu P (1984) *Distinction: a Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, London: Routledge.

Carrington C (1999) *No Place like Home: Relationships and Family Life among Lesbians and Gay Men*, Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Edmunds J and Turner B (2002) *Generations, Culture and Society*, Buckingham: Open University Press.

Estes C, Biggs S and Phillipson C (2003) *Social Theory, Social Policy and Ageing: a Critical Introduction*, Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Foucault M (1987) *The History of Sexuality (Volume Two): the Uses of Pleasure*, (Translated by R Hurley), London: Penguin Books.

Giddens A (1992) *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Grossman A and D'Augelli A and Hershberger S (2000) The Social Support Networks of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Adults Aged 60 and Over, *Journal of Gerontology: Psychological Sciences* Vol. 55B (3): 171 – 179.

Grossman H (1995) At Risk, Infected and Invisible: Older Gay Men and HIV/AIDS, *Journal of the Association of Nurses in HIV/AIDS Care* Vol. 6 (6): 13 – 19.

Hawkes G (1996) *A Sociology of Sex and Sexuality*, Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Heaphy B, Yip A and Thompson D (2004) Ageing in a Non-Heterosexual Context, *Ageing and Society* Vol. 24: 881-902.

Hostetler A (2004) *Old Gay and Alone: the Ecology of Well-Being among Middle-Aged and Older Single Gay Men* in De Vries B and Herdt G (Eds.) (2004) *Gay and Lesbian Aging and Research: Future Directions*, New York: Springer Publishing Co. Inc.

- Jamieson L (1999) *Intimacy Transformed? A Critical Look at the Pure Relationship*, *Sociology* Vol. 33 (3) (August 1999): 477- 494.
- Kuhn A (2002) *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination* (Second Edition), London: Verso Books.
- Lewin E (1998) *Recognizing Ourselves: Ceremonies of Lesbian and Gay Commitment*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Maxwell J (1996) *Qualitative Research Design*, London: Sage Publications.
- Moran L, Skeggs B with Tyrer P and Korteen K (2004) *Sexuality and the Politics of Violence and Safety*, London: Routledge.
- Nardi P (1999) *Gay Men's Friendships: Invincible Communities*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Plummer K (1995) *Telling Sexual Stories: Power Intimacy and Social Worlds*, London: Routledge.
- Pugh S (2002) *The Forgotten: a Community without a Generation – Older Lesbians and Gay Men*, in Richardson D and Seidman S (Eds.) (2002) *The Handbook of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, London: Sage Publications.
- Robinson P (2008) *The Changing World of Gay Men*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Rosenthal E (1990) *Varieties of Ageism* in Rosenthal E (Ed.) *Women, Aging and Ageism*, New York: Haworth Press.
- Smart C (2007) *Same-Sex Couples and Marriage: Negotiating Relational Landscapes with Families and Friends*, *Sociological Review* Vol. 55 (4): 671 – 686.
- Stacey J (2011) *Unhitched: Love Marriage and Family Values from West Hollywood to Western China*, New York: New York University Press.
- Steinman R (1990) *Social Exchanges between Younger and Older Gay Male Partners* in Lee J (Ed.) (1990) *Gay Midlife and Maturity*, New York: Howarth Press.
- Thomson R (2009) *Unfolding Lives: Youth, Gender and Change*, Bristol: Policy Press, Bristol University.
- Weeks J, Heaphy B and Donovan C (2001) *Same Sex Intimacies: Families of Choice and Other Life Experiments*, London: Routledge.
- Weston K (1991) *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinships*, New York: Columbia University Press.

Whittle S (1994) *Consuming Differences: The Collaboration of the Gay Body with the Cultural State* in Whittle S (Ed.) *The Margins of the City: Gay Men's Urban Lives*, Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited.