

## **A Bastard of a Life: Homosexual Desire and Practice among Men in Working-class Milieux**

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### **ABSTRACT**

HIV/AIDS prevention work has been mainly designed by professionals and has reached mainly educationally and economically advantaged groups. This study involved men who have sex with men in working-class milieux, using life-history and action-research methods in two cities. Material drawn from twenty-one case studies is presented. The economic, domestic and educational relationships of the working-class life shape sexual identity and practice. A muted and undifferentiated erotic milieu in childhood is a common starting point for very different trajectories into adult homosexual relationships, though 'beats' are generally important in making connections. A stronger network and sense of community appears in the provincial city than in the metropolis. Economic vulnerability and cultural constraint shape homosexual experience. Sex in long-term (common) and is more likely to involve anal intercourse; process shapes sexual practice as reciprocal or one-way and as more or less skilled. 'Gay identity' is not sought by most of these men, whose personal style more often draws on

conventional working-class masculinities. But contradictions about desire and femininity are simultaneously present and sometimes destabilise masculinity. Responses to the HIV epidemic first involved withdrawal from sexual activity, then growth of activism. A 'barefoot educator' community activism has already emerged and should be a focus of HIV/AIDS prevention strategy.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Sex is commonly thought of as a 'natural' part of life, even as the animal part of human nature. Yet from the origins of modern sexual science its social character has also been recognised, especially its interplay with class. Krafft-Ebing (1886) was acutely aware of the class contexts of sexual activity; mid-Victorian upper-class diarists and moralists in Britain were fascinated by sexual contact across class lines (Marcus, 1966). Twentieth-century radicals such as Reich (1972) and Marcuse (1955), blending Freud and Marx, saw class rule extended as sexual constraint. The Kinsey reports in the United States mapped class differences in the frequency and occasion of orgasm (Kinsey et al., 1948). American urban ethnographers tried to map the heterosexual mores or 'sex codes' of slum dwellers (Whyte, 1943) and working-class couples (Rubin, 1976).

The issue of class and sexuality has been given a new dimension and a new urgency by AIDS. In countries like the United States and Australia the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) spread most extensively among men who had sex with men. Urban gay communities produced a strong response in the form of a Safe Sex strategy and a great deal of community activity in prevention and care (Patton, 1989; Dowsett, 1989). These communities have a definite class character. Surveys among them have regularly found respondents to be highly educated and affluent in comparison with the general population (Research and Decisions Corporation, 1984; Bauman and Siegel, 1987; Connell et al., 1988; Sinnott and Todd, 1988). HIV/AIDS prevention strategies operating within 'gay communities' may therefore never reach a very large proportion of men who have sex with men—those who come from different class backgrounds. The indications of class difference in the research on heterosexuality mentioned above suggest that in any case these strategies might be inappropriate in working-class settings. Yet HIV/AIDS prevention programs have taken little account of this. They are mostly designed by professional people and reflect middle-class experience and assumptions.

The exceptions are certain HIV/AIDS prevention outreach activities such as work at beats (Bennett et al., 1989; Lerro et al., 1989; Dowsett

and Davis, 1992). Such projects are, however, flying blind in the absence of research about class issues. How do the conditions of working-class life affect sexuality? What is the shape of sexual experience and current practice? What is the character of desire and how is it linked to sexual identity? How has the HIV epidemic impacted in working-class settings, and what prevention strategies might work there?

We explored these questions in an action-research project undertaken in two Australian cities in 1989-90.<sup>1</sup> The project was designed to collect evidence from working-class men about male-to-male sexuality and its social context, and to pilot educational strategies with those men as co-workers. Information was gathered by field observation (Hammerstley and Atkinson, 1983) in the relevant social networks, and by theorised life histories (Connell, 1991), an adaptation of classic life-history method emphasising the conceptual framing of content. Life-history interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed, then analysed and written up individually as case studies. The case studies were later combined in groups. This report is based on twenty-one case studies, a series of group discussions around HIV/AIDS education materials, and wider field observation, in two milieux. Eleven of these twenty-one men had been respondents, in two 1986-87 mass survey, the Social Aspects of Prevention of AIDS project, having then volunteered for follow-up interviews. The others were contacted by networking and snowballing in the course of field work.

### THE WORKING-CLASS SETTING

An earlier report from this project (Connell et al., 1991a) discussed the concept of social class itself. We noted the centrality of the labour market, the underlying division between capital and labour, and the complexities on both sides of that division. Among those dependent for their livelihood on a wage (or a wage-substitute like a benefit or pension), there are important divisions of gender, ethnicity, age, and educational background. These divisions are clear in the sociological research of the last decade, which now allows a much fuller, more precise, and less romanticised picture of the Australian working class than was available before. This research includes ethnographic and historical community studies (e.g. Williams, 1981; Mercalf, 1988), economic sociology (e.g. Krieger, 1980; Donaldson, 1991), educational studies (e.g. Connell, Ashenden, Kessler and Dowsett, 1982; J. Walker, 1988), research on ethnicity and gender (e.g. Bottomley and de Lepervanche, 1984; Bottomley et al., 1991), and studies of poverty (Edgar et al., 1989). The following outline draws together the points from this research which are most important in understanding the character of male-to-male sex and the response to HIV/AIDS in this social setting.

Economics is the necessary starting point. To be in the working class is to be in a social group where income comes mostly through an employment relation. Some income comes from self-employment (for instance, Barney Sherman, one of our research participants, is a self-employed electrician), and some comes from pensions or benefits (Andy Wilson lives on sickness benefit). Most comes directly from wages. This means that working-class livelihoods are dependent on hiring by employers. Most employment is with companies or small businesses whose economic logic is the pursuit of profit.

Important consequences flow from this employment relation. Working-class incomes are dependent on a labour market — individual employers do not fix wages individually, they pay the going rate. For unskilled or uncredentialed labour the going rate is low. It is easy for an employer to replace such labour, especially when more workers are looking for work than there are jobs on offer. Those who cannot earn a wage — being unemployed, or dependent on a benefit such as the age pension, sickness or supporting parents' benefit — have lower incomes again. These are the groups most often in severe poverty. Poverty is a scar on experience (cf. Embling, 1986; Wilson and Arnold, 1986) increasingly common for young people.

For many working-class people, then, the realities of life centre on economic vulnerability and constraint. Incomes are the lowest the economy offers; housing is the worst the society provides; the material facilities for bringing up children, for education, for social and cultural life, are the worst. In working-class life there is generally no 'career', in the sense of lifetime advancement familiar to professionals, managers, and some groups of administrative and clerical workers. One's earning capacities (through overtime or piecework) are likely to peak around age twenty-five or thirty. Income may be suddenly cut by a change in corporate strategy (such as BHP's run-down of steelmaking labour), a shift in the economy (such as the current depression), a company failure, an industrial accident.

A good deal of the work done in these economic relationships is 'manual' work — assembling refrigerators, making steel, cleaning floors, serving food, driving trucks, cutting coal, sewing dresses. Class used often to be named by speaking of 'blue-collar' vs. 'white-collar' jobs; opinion polls still often rely on this distinction. 'Pink-collar' jobs for women in service industries (Williams, 1988) need to be included. Such work certainly defines a familiar kind of working-class experience. Among the men in this study, Neil Dayton's father was a storeman, his mother a dressmaker, his two brothers a policeman and a mechanic. Neil distanced himself from the 'rough' suburb where he grew up. Peter Farthing's father was a driver and his brother a fitter and turner. Peter rejected 'grease monkey work' and aimed for a 'collar and tie' job in an office.

The class distinction signalled by this language is, however, blurring. For at least a generation past, routine clerical work has increasingly resembled manual work in every respect except the amount of sweat and dirt involved: timekeepers, check-out operators, site clerks, cashiers, receptionists, salespeople, etc.

Increasingly the key division in the labour market has become that between credentialled and uncredentialled labour. Peter Farthing got a 'collar and tie' job thirty years ago though he left school at the minimum age; he could not do so now. This points to the importance of the education system in shaping modern class relations. Formal schooling is the route to credentials; and as a considerable body of research shows, the schooling system spits out the bulk of working-class students before they get advanced credentials (Keeyes, 1987; Connell et al., 1991b). A famous American study of working-class life spoke of the hidden injuries of class (Sennett and Cobb, 1972). Cultural exclusion through inadequate education is only one of the ways a bourgeois society erodes the self-confidence of working-class people. Disdainful treatment in hospitals, surveillance by welfare agencies, media hostility to strikes and community actions, blocked promotion structures, are all familiar experiences for them.

The damaging relationship between educational authority and working-class families, documented in school ethnographies (notably, L. Walker, 1989), parallels other interactions between working-class people and the state. Policing bears much more heavily on working-class people than on more privileged groups: a simple measure is the fact that the overwhelming majority of prisoners in gaols are working-class men. These interactions are an important site for the shaping of a combative working-class masculinity (Connell, 1989; 1991).

In the face of economic constraint, cultural exclusion and state authority, working-class people have not been passive. Employers' power in workplaces and labour markets has been met with industrial struggle and the creation of unions. From unionism grew a political mobilisation, the historical origin of the Australian Labor Party. The Labor Party, long was, and is still sometimes seen as, the expression of working-class aspirations to use the state to restrain capital and expand welfare measures.

Both unionism and Labor politics drew on, and reinforced, notions of working-class solidarity. They were strongest where working-class people were linked in a closely-knit community and shared a common culture. Dwyer et al. (1984, 48-67) have characterised this culture as emphasising informality (as against the formality of the state and of mainstream schooling); a commitment to productive labour; solidarity and mutual support; and lived experience rather than abstract knowledge. Other studies have emphasised the importance of the family as the central institution in working-class life. Family relationships provide both

economic and emotional support against the pressures of labour market and workplace. For many working-class people the 'family' is the core of what they most value in life; family ideology is very strong. The family-household, as Donaldson (1991) calls it, is traditionally organised around a gender division of labour in which women are responsible for child care and most of the housework, and men are responsible for supporting the household by bringing home a wage. This broad division of labour has survived the return of most married women to the paid workforce. Women's earnings are generally lower than men's, as a result of less training, interrupted employment, part-time employment, discriminatory wage rates, and sexism on the part of employers; they are therefore widely regarded as supplementary to the wage earned by a husband/father.

As these remarks already indicate, the relationships that organise working-class life are far from static. The working class as such came into being less than 200 years ago; it was made, as a social unit, by the responses of working people to the growth of market relations and industrial capitalism (Thompson, 1968). The working class has continued to change. In recent Australian history it has been dramatically re-shaped, first by the rise of heavy industry and the emergence of an industrial as well as a commercial and pastoral labour force; then by massive European labour immigration and ethnic diversity (Connell and Irving, 1992). A fresh round of changes is now occurring as a result of prolonged unemployment, economic restructuring, Asian immigration, and renewed credentialising of labour markets. These developments have been, on the whole, corrosive of working-class solidarity. For good and ill, the traditions of working-class life and labour politics are now very much under challenge: internally from working-class feminism, from the unemployed and from an Aboriginal movement, as well as externally from the New Right and from the state.

### THE SOCIAL FRAMEWORK OF MALE-TO-MALE SEX

In the endless discussion of teenage sex, remarkably little is said about homosexual experience. Researchers, too, have been coy about this issue, partly because of moral panics about 'paedophiles'; Leary's (1992) recent contribution in this journal being a notable exception. Our interviewees reported patterns of childhood or adolescent sexuality in which male-to-male contact was common. Lyle Canham and his teenage mates went off to masturbate together in the sandhills almost every day. Peter Farthing called it 'fiddles'. He recalls that he 'fiddled with' a variety of boys, for instance, being played with by his older brother's mate at the movies while his brother 'had it off' with a girl in the back row.

This 'fiddling' was not socially labelled homosexual or gay. It was, rather, an aspect of a milieu in which erotic experience was easily gained, principally with age-mates of both sexes, and with slightly older boys. Sexual contact, mostly involving mutual masturbation but sometimes penetration, was likely to be unspoken. It was known to be 'naughty', hence concealed from adults, happening in the sandhills, the movies, the vacant blocks. But no extra naughtiness was attributed to relations between boys. In a gender-divided community (many of our interviewees went to single-sex schools), sexual relations with other boys were, indeed, often easier to start and maintain than sexual relations with girls.

This free-form, easy-access, wordless erotic life of peer groups was, for about half our interviewees, the reported occasion of their first homosexual experience. Some aspects of it continued into working life. The monotony of factory work and labouring is countered by ribaldry; smutty jokes, boasting about sexual conquests, innuendo, groping and horseplay. There is a substantial *homeroetic* content to this (in *sex-heterosexual*). Two respondents described ribald initiation rituals when they first went to work, in which the other men grabbed them and painted their genitals with ink or soft soap. (Grease is used for this purpose among miners: Couch, 1991.) Sexual partners were often found at work or in work-related social settings.

We must recognise, then, a continuum of homoerotic experience among working-class men in a number of social settings. At the same time we must acknowledge that this experience is silenced, that the public language of the peer group and the workplace is heterosexist. Moreover, it is often seriously *homophobic*. 'Poofers' are an object of derision, sometimes of hatred. Several of our respondents have been bashed in homophobic attacks, two have been raped (one by police). All found difficulty in 'coming out' to their parents, expecting a hostile response, and often the response was just that. Andy Wilson was thrown out of his church, and verbally abused by his parents, when identified as a sodomite. Josh Foster as a young man attempted suicide, and in hospital was taken in hand by psychiatrists who told his mother he was homosexual and pressed him to accept aversion therapy. The result of this 'treatment' for his homosexual desires was another suicide attempt. Several of our respondents have lost jobs or job opportunities because of discrimination. Almost all find it necessary to be cautious about disclosing their homosexuality, concealing it from neighbours as well as workmates and family.

This widespread homophobia has two key cultural supports. One is a traditional ideology of the family, with a clear gender division of labour and strong links between generations. (We have noted how important this family structure is in working-class responses to economic pressure.) The

other is an ideology of masculinity in which physical prowess and social power are fused with aggressive heterosexuality. 'Poofers' are culturally supposed to be contemptibly inadequate, feminised men. (The true position about gender is much more complicated, as will be seen below, but this is the popular conception; it is reflected in endless 'pooffer' jokes).

Yet this picture has to be qualified in significant ways. Many of the parents did adjust to the news about their sons, some becoming quite supportive. The 'family' may be flexible enough to embrace a male lover, not quite as a wife but still as part of the network (perhaps like a son-in-law or a close family friend). Alongside religious bigotries and hyper-masculinities, working-class traditions include a broad current of sexual explicitness (for instance, the workplace ribaldry mentioned above) and sexual tolerance. This can work to the advantage of homosexual men. Most of our respondents feel secure in their neighbourhoods, and some are 'out' at work. Those who have suffered employment discrimination or aversion therapy were of course encountering the homophobia of employers and doctors, not the working class. We should not neglect the fact that class power means that the homophobia of the privileged impinges on working-class people.

It is still the case that acknowledging a sexual preference for men is likely to be hard, so entry to networks where that sexual preference is easily realised is a major step. This step generally follows a certain amount of sexual activity with men in the undifferentiated milieu of youth eroticism. The commonest occasion for this step in our respondents' life histories was the discovery of 'beats' (public meeting-places for casual sexual encounters) and the possibility of frequent, free sex with a range of partners. For some boys the fact that it was male-to-male sex was probably incidental, and an object-choice crystallised out of the practice; for others a sexual preference was already formed. The beats fitted with working-class traditions in significant ways: informal, egalitarian, self-made, communal (being based on mutual support), anti-authority.

The next most common path of entry was a relationship with an older man who acted as mentor both sexually and socially. This might be a neighbour, a male relative, or a man met at a beat with whom a personal relationship developed. Beyond beats and mentors was a wide variety of entry paths: church youth groups, a choir, seduction at work, advertisements or announcements in newspapers, visits to gay community venues like bars and nightclubs, and so on.

Contact or entry is most often experienced as happenstance, so our respondents' narratives emphasise the accidental character of most of these contacts. But what is chance from the point of view of the individual life may be quite systematic from a social point of view. Homosexual desire is produced systematically in the gender order (Connell, 1987) of this kind of

society, and it is no accident that its realisation takes the social form of the diverse recruitment of individuals into a social network existing on the margins of institutionalised heterosexuality.

The form taken by this social network is, in turn, shaped by class relations. The two settings in which we did our fieldwork have different class histories. 'Nullangardie' is a provincial city with a history of bitter industrial conflict, male working-class militancy, and working-class community solidarity. Now in recession with the decline of its major industry, its mostly Anglo-Australian population sustains a tradition of local and often dissident labour politics. Western and southwestern Sydney<sup>2</sup> by contrast is bigger, newer, more socially and politically diverse. Products of massive postwar urban-fringe expansion, the outer suburbs now hold over a million people from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds. The region is seriously short of public services and social facilities. The dominant political force is right-wing Labor and the level of community mobilisation is extremely low.

Homosexual men in Nullangardie have created a community setting which in obvious ways reflects the character of the regional working class. Key venues for networking are the pubs, whose traditional importance in working-class life is familiar. There is a sense of intimacy and personal knowledge in the moderate numbers involved. Beats in Nullangardie are by no means 'anonymous': one runs into relatives and old friends. Nullangardie men contrast the relaxed, friendly quality of their network with what they see as the cliquy, bitchy scene in Sydney.

Most of our respondents from western and southwestern Sydney lacked this connectedness or sense of community. Some were, indeed, seriously isolated. Their situation was clearly structured by the presence of the inner-city gay community based in the eastern suburbs. The area around Oxford Street in east-central Sydney is the city's gay quarter, with a range of commercial venues, political/cultural institutions, and informal networks making up gay community life. The community is often informally called 'Oxford Street'. Our earlier survey work in this community found a high proportion of professional workers and above-average incomes (Connell et al., 1988). There is room for argument about the extent of working-class participation in this commercial and social scene. There is clearly some, as our interviews document; possibly quite extensive. But the interviews also say something about the terms of this participation. A number of them reveal a strong sense of class distance, an experience of exclusion, whether cultural or economic. Some of our respondents had made efforts to create networks more to their taste in their own suburbs, ranging from dinner parties and dance parties to car clubs and sex clubs. At present the most energetic process of network-making in the region is an attempt to create social clubs explicitly based

on 'gay' identity but attempting to escape the commercialism and impersonality attributed to the inner city.

Intertwoven with the creation of social and sexual networks is an economic strategy. There is not much money around in these milieux. Some of the men we interviewed were poor; few owned a house. Economic survival is a problem. Most homosexual working-class men have work histories little different from heterosexual working-class men. Our respondents included some tickered tradesmen (a boilermaker, an electrician), some men who have worked up to a supervisory position, as well as some who have knocked about picking up whatever wage was going — labouring, clerking, sales, driving, etc. The interchangeability of unskilled jobs is such that Jerry Spencer simply cannot remember what all his jobs were. But openly homosexual men have extra vulnerability, and some therefore gravitate into occupational niches which are recognised as relatively safe. The hotel trade, theatre and entertainment, and health work, are important cases. On occasions groups of homosexual men have set up small businesses together (e.g. a sandwich bar). This is a fragile strategy given the lack of capital that is a defining feature of working-class life.

The theme of economic strategy is surviving rather than getting rich; as we noted before there are few 'careers' in working-class employment. The economic ambition of most of our respondents is to own a home and have a secure income; a good car on top is cream. This suggests a highly realistic appraisal of economic constraints; the International Monetary Fund should be proud of them.

But there is also a darker side, a sense of personal constraint and closed horizons, illustrating Sennett and Cobb's phrase 'the hidden injuries of class'. The sense of cultural exclusion from the Oxford Street quarter is a class injury. Occupational niches may give some protection, but they are niches not breakthroughs; and they, too, are vulnerable to class power. Chris Garwood was employed in a large hotel along with about a dozen other gays. When a new boss came in who was homophobic, Chris found himself back on the street. Andy Wilson, after a terrible struggle to find and hold a job, with ill-health and no credentials, found a niche in theatre. But after a year or two the theatre lost its public funding, and of course it was branches in working-class areas which got the chop. 'I just feel like I must have killed six Chinamen', Andy remarked. But it is a social dynamic that is damaging him; not chance.

A homophobic culture means that the public resources of working-class militancy in unions and labour politics, which counter class put-downs by asserting working-class solidarity and agency, are not available to this part of the working class. A sense of constraint and stress comes through in many of the interviews, even with men who might be seen as having made a resounding success of their sexual and social life. Keith Winter is

one. After telling the story of 'coming out' to his family when his aunty remarked, seeing Keith eating cocktail frankfurts ('little boys') at his father's birthday party, 'Oh, you like little boys', he goes on:

You know, I didn't totally realise what it was to be gay. I mean it's a bastard of a life. If ever I could help someone get out of it, or talk someone out of it, if they were able to be talked, I would... I didn't pick this life. I've always *been* this life.

### SEXUAL PRACTICE

The two main settings of sexual activity are beats and homes, and these correspond to distinct relationships and often distinct erotic practices. Venues (bars, clubs, etc.) are much more a setting for the social pleasures of conversation, joking, and drinking than directly an occasion for sex.

We have noted the beats as a point of entry, and they remain important for a good many men whatever else is going on in their lives. Erotic practice is generally masturbatory or oral-genital, not often anal. As noted already, the beats in Nullangardie especially are not anonymous in the sense made familiar by Humphreys's (1970) study of 'tearooms' in the United States. Friends, acquaintances, relatives may be met there. Men who meet at a beat sometimes go off for a drink together at a pub. Occasionally this develops into a sustained relationship. A thin social milieu thus exists around the beats.

For most of the respondents, beat sex, while pleasurable, is not enough. Much greater value is placed on sex in relationships. Bill Markham puts this concisely: what he wants is a stable couple relationship with 'a wonderful, loving, caring guy' - no matter what he looks like.

Monogamous, stable couples are the *hegemonic* rather than the *normal* thing. Not everyone does it, indeed the majority do not have such relationships; but most admire them and want to be like this. Well-established couple relationships are consummated by living together and buying and doing up a house together. Given such a relationship, other links are a source of jealousy; Bill Markham for instance was 'tormented' when he found his partner secretly going to beats, and this led directly to heterosexual marriage, and there is of course much joking about heterosexual marriage, and there is of course much joking about husbands-and-wives. There is also a more serious romantic ideology about being the only one for your partner; and when an established couple breaks up the emotional consequences are heavy.

Anal-genital practice is much more likely in relationships than at beats. In sharp contrast to folklore about 'fast-lane' sex and the cultural imagery

of the rectum as grave (Bersani, 1987), for these men anal sex is associated with intimacy and trust. It is a vehicle of relatedness. Peter Farthing recalls his early experience of anal sex:

Sort of, I knew that by doing it with him, I still - I had a friend. Whether you'd call it a friend - I had somebody of my own. All I wanted was something of my own. I think that's what I mean about 'mate'.

The *communicative* function of sex that we identified in an earlier report (Connell and Kippax, 1990) is very strong here. This meaning was dramatised by one respondent in the story of a visit to a sauna in the Oxford Street quarter. He saw a man to whom he was attracted walk up to a couple engaged in sex and penetrate one of them; in that moment his attractiveness dissolved. (The point was not the action, but its lack of relational context).

This has important consequences for Safe Sex strategy. To the extent that 'safe' sex is identified with using condoms for anal sex (a very common understanding), and anal sex is identified with intimacy and relationship, then the less intimate sexuality of the beat may seem not to require precautions. On the other hand, sex in relationship being connected with an ideal of monogamy ('being the only one') may be seen as 'safe' because of the *relationship*. Most of the respondents who are currently in couple relationships practise unprotected anal sex with their lovers *whether or not* they are sure their partners have no other sexual contacts. Where the medical definition of prevention conflicts with the social definition of relationships and practices, the social meanings prevail.

Anal sex is more than an expression of relatedness. It is a political arena, in which there is a struggle to define the kind of relationship involved. On the one hand there is an egalitarian relationship emphasising what is common between the partners. Homosexual sex between men inherently allows for reciprocity, since each partner can both penetrate and be penetrated in the same way. Several of our respondents had phrases for this: 'give and take', 'a two-way street', 'tit for tat', 'a ride there for a ride back'. That is to say, the partners took turns at fucking and being fucked, or at least acknowledged a right to do so. Jerry Spencer puts it crisply:

I mean it's a two-way street. I mean, you'll fuck him and he'll fuck you, and it's really the exchange that's good. Whereas you are not so cool about the other guy wanting to fuck you and that's it, or the other guy wanting to be fucked and that's it.

But fucking and being fucked in our heterosexual culture also carries connotations of dominance and submission, active and passive, masculine and feminine; and some of our respondents also acknowledged this. Anal sex allows one to be a 'total man', as Neil Dayton puts it. The commonest imagery for this is the gender imagery of masculine/feminine. Keith Winter

also revealingly uses a class imagery for anal intercourse, speaking of 'doers and do-ees...employers and employees'. The implications of power are unmistakable. Thus two social definitions of anal intercourse, with different political implications, coexist in the milieu. They may even coexist in the same relationship as the framework for day-to-day negotiation.

However, we should not exaggerate the explicitness or formalisation of these meanings. Sex research tends to reify 'behaviours' or 'practices' like 'anal intercourse' and talk as if they were discrete items. The reality is more likely to be a continuous flow of interaction, both verbal and physical, in which erotic experience arises. Andy Wilson, questioned about being fucked, perceptively remarked that 'nine times out of ten it's a thing that follows on from other things, it's not a standard thing'. His small group of friends do not negotiate in advance about anal sex because that is not how sex is organised in their interaction. To the extent that negotiation occurs, it takes the form of directing the flow, indicating what one does or does not want to happen next, giving out cues which the others respect because the flow is in the context of, and instantiates, their friendship. Any discussion of Safe Sex in such a context is necessarily a discussion about redesigning relationships.

Anal intercourse, like other sexual practices, has a technique to be learnt. Among the most interesting parts of the interviews are accounts of how sexual skills were acquired or developed. Generally this happened on the job, so to speak, with sexual skills building up from relationship to relationship. In some cases an older man taught sexual techniques, which include the choreography of approach and courtship as well as the physical techniques of making love. Bill Markham, for instance, was taken in hand by his first lover:

That's where I got most of my education from...He taught me a lot about making love...A lot of older people say that when you get young guys into bed they don't know what they are doing. But there are lots of people who tell me that I know what I'm doing, but that was due to the fact that he'd taught me all this at such a young age...He showed me Oxford Street, we drove up and down Oxford Street, and pointed out a few of the nightclubs sort of thing, and showed me *Campaign* and we read it, and just introduced me to a social life of being gay, that there was a gay community out there.

Sometimes a peer group would set out to acquire knowledge to inform its own practice. Thus Andy Wilson's friends conducted their own consumer research on brands of condoms. Information about HIV/AIDS is often acquired and disseminated in this informal person-to-person way.

Sexual skilling can occur at any age. Among our respondents entry and skilling occurred at two markedly different stages of life, which point to the matrix of childhood or youth peer eroticism makes contact, via beats

or mentors, with substantially homosexual networks. Early on he consolidates an erotic interest in men and a sense of social difference. In the second, a young man emerging from the same matrix settles into heterosexual relationships and marries. Ten to twenty years later, the marriage ends and the husband, generally via beats, enters or re-enters homosexual networks.

On the evidence of our interviews and observation, few adult men sustain both heterosexual and homosexual relations at the same time for long. 'Bisexuality' is not a recognised identity in these milieux. Some of our respondents are actually hostile to men who will not choose to be one thing or the other.

Variations on these careers mainly concern the balance between relationships (ideally monogamous, and generally so in the sense that only one relationship runs at a time) and casual sex at beats or on social occasions. A small number of men become involved in commercial sex; two of our respondents have worked as prostitutes at some stage. There is another 'career' which will not show up in a study like this: young men who work as prostitutes but who regard themselves as heterosexual and may be violently homophobic. For such a case see Wilson and Arnold (1986).

#### DESIRE AND IDENTITY

In an earlier paper we suggested on the basis of survey data that, in the context of working-class life, homosexuality is less separated out from the heterosexual social matrix than it is among more privileged groups (Connell et al., 1991a). At the level of practice this is neatly illustrated by Neil Dayron's introduction to gay social life, which was accomplished by his girl friends; even his first homosexual experience was with a boy friend of a girl friend, in a sleeping bag on the floor. At the level of identity it is confirmed by the reluctance a number of these men have to identify as 'gay'.

There is no explicit alternative, and it is reluctance not refusal; yet one gathers that the term 'gay' is disfavoured because it connotes effeminacy, or class privilege, or both. Those are exactly the connotations of 'poofers', which can be a class insult to office workers as well as a sexual insult. Men like Alan Cunningham have a conventional masculine presence and would heartily dislike any imputation of effeminacy. They can even reinterpret homosexual desire in a framework that affirms masculinity: as Alan puts it, 'man to man' sex is best.

It is still true that in the wider culture the key definition of homosexuality is 'gayness' in the sense of the big-city communities. Since

working-class men, too, are aware of, and sometimes visit and participate in, these communities, this identity is also available to them. A few of our respondents are actively pursuing it and urge it on other men in their networks. Its main consequences seem to be a commitment to organised separatism rather than informal networks alone, and a tendency towards positive relationships with women. This is exceptional, because housemates – are common in most of our respondents' lives. There is an historic trend in working-class life towards breaking down old and deeply entrenched patterns of gender segregation; and the social life of homosexual men is, perhaps unexpectedly, a case in point.

The muted 'gayness' of our respondents seems to correspond to another aspect of their sexual style. Richard Cochrane is very experienced sexually and has a wide repertoire; his favourite sexual fantasy (one of the more adventurous) is being fucked mid-air while parachuting. He has been both 'top' and 'bottom' in a leather scene. But when it comes to the crunch he can let all that go:

I've been there, done that, now it's a case of just get in there and have a good time. Forget the games, you know, gets you nowhere. Waste of time when you could be fucking.

'Forget the games' could be the theme song for most of these narratives. There is a matter-of-fact quality to their discussion and enjoyment of sex, with obvious bases in working-class practicality and ribaldry. There is a lack of the fixation (in the Freudian sense) or fetishism that is familiar in other sexual cultures, a familiar example being the Brown jokes about going into an Oxford Street 'SM bar' – 'SM' meaning 'Same Models', all the inhabitants being young, pretty and this year's style. He likes more of an assortment. This is not to say particular men have no special preferences (they do, including hairy chests, 'European' men, noses of a certain shape). It is to suggest that sexual desire in this milieu is broadly focused, that subcultural sexuality has little grip. Sex as such is treated as an adventure, as always a bit naughty; there is pleasure in its routinely transgressive character.

This throws the emphasis back on gender as such, as the structuring principle in desire; the thing that remains after styles and fixations are gone is the 'homo' in homosexuality. And here the relatively relaxed and unproblematic picture of vanilla sex in the working-class suburb begins to break down. ('Vanilla sex' is the evocative slang for bland, straight-forward sex compared to 'flavoured' sub-cultural sex). We have emphasised the importance of families and the strong sexual division of labour within them. The folk understandings of sex in this milieu are uncompromisingly heterosexual: to be masculine is to fuck women.

It follows from this that to desire a man, and even more strongly to be desired by a man, is very probably to experience oneself at some level as feminine. This is certainly true for the two of our respondents who worked at various times as drag artists. Drag shows rely heavily on double entendres and broad erotic humour. Their popularity with (notionally) heterosexual audiences in working-class venues such as RSL and Leagues Clubs is itself a pointer to the strength of the gender dynamic being tapped here, if we place any credence in Freud's notion that humour is a guide to unconscious conflict.

The sense of difference some boys experience in adolescence on their route towards homosexual identity is often immediately interpreted for them in gender terms. Ed Johnson, for instance, did not like football, did like knitting and cooking, and thereby aroused deep suspicion in his father's mind.

'Coming out', it seems, is not the straightforward acknowledgment of identity that Gay Liberation once thought it. For these men in these milieux, it means, rather, entering a kind of gender reversal, perhaps more exactly a gender split. They are now sustaining masculinity at the level of social interaction and economics, while experiencing an unacknowledged femininity at the level of fantasy and bodily desire.

This contradiction allows various resolutions, and the narratives diverge from the point where this dilemma is confronted. A drastic resolution is to tip completely over into femininity, via drag into transsexual status. Huey Brown went that way, setting up as 'wife' to an aggressively masculine young man, getting breast implants, working in drag as a woman prostitute, stopping just short of the 'operation'. A less drastic resolution in the same direction is to move into gender-structured couple relationships where a masculine/feminine dynamic is played out in the household. Josh Foster went down that track, playing the 'female role' to his lover. He does the housekeeping, and he is the one penetrated in anal intercourse. Though he would prefer 'give and take', he cannot get it: his lover is committed to the enactment of dominance.

As Josh Foster recognises, this is to limit the erotic possibilities of the male body; and that 'role' enactment is anyway under criticism in the culture at large. Another resolution of the gender contradiction is to emphasise maleness, not as one term in a masculine/feminine split, but as the social grounding of all interaction in the milieu. This was thematised in gay communities in pre-AIDS days with the creation of the 'Castro Street Clone' – the San Francisco uniform of jeans, T-shirt, moustache, cropped hair, etc. – as an erotic style. The assertion of 'gay identity' mentioned above seems directed to marking out a male preserve, a world of domestic, social and sexual life in which there are no women and no

assertion of femininity. Some part of this strategy is attractive to most of the men we interviewed. They repeatedly expressed a dislike of queens ('I couldn't cope with queens en masse', says Jack Savers), a dislike of flamboyance and campness. Their desired social style is not hypermasculinity (Lyle Canham on football: a 'mindless, aggressive sort of game') but is comfortably, conventionally masculine.

Yet really constructing a male preserve would cut off supportive relationships with families and women friends, which are often important. It would also make gay networks and households more conspicuous and thus more vulnerable to homophobic attack. So the largest group among our respondents does not go far down that track either. Their sexual identity is, rather, constructed as a series of pragmatic compromises, the terms of which vary from person to person and from time to time, depending on circumstances. Alan Cunningham has disclosed his sexual preference widely, not as a political gesture but because in practical terms he finds living in the closet harder. Lyle Canham, who has worked for the same company for thirty-two years, lived all his life in the same area, and has a low-key involvement in homosexual networks, remarks, 'I'm pretty well adjusted to my maladjustment'. The principle of erotic reciprocity, the 'tit for tat' of anal intercourse, fits well with such a strategy of compromise and adjustment.

### THE HIV EPIDEMIC: IMPACT AND RESPONSE

Cross-sectional social research — whether it uses surveys, participant observation, or other methods — tends to fix a set of relationships in one point of time; this in turn leads to static, functionalist theorising. It is important, then, to register the historicity of the social relations at issue here. This is doubly important in the case of sexuality, since both popular ideology and much sexology tends to 'naturalise' sexuality, to locate it in the realm of the biological (Connell and Dowsett, 1992). The life-history approach is significant methodologically as it constantly calls our attention to the sequencing of events and their location in historical time.

The older respondents (seven are forty-five or older) grew up in the 1940s, 50s and 60s, before there were visible gay politics, gay community, or gay commercial scene. There were beats, and there were subterranean networks which a young man might encounter more or less by accident. Barney Sherman recalls his early sexual encounters being mostly with older men in uniform, which must have been common in the 1940s. He and Jerry Spencer recall the Sydney nightclub scene in the 1950s and 60s, where a thin homosexual milieu existed as an aspect of Kings' Cross bohemia, blurred with heterosexual drag, avant-garde art and literature,

and the sex trade. The double event of the 1970s, the advent of Gay Liberation with its public gay politics and the creation of a specifically gay commercial centre (bars, saunas, hotels, clothes shops, bookshops, etc.), split this older bohemian milieu<sup>3</sup> and profoundly redefined homosexual practice and identity. Yet this redefinition was uneven, given the class composition of the emerging inner-city gay community and the reaction of significant numbers of men *against* the commercial scene, or the new (mainly US-derived) gay styles, or the political mobilisation.

It is important to register this history in appraising the HIV/AIDS crisis. The HIV epidemic did not arrive from outer space to disrupt a settled, static community. It arrived through sexual practices already being reworked, into a set of social relations already in motion, indeed substantially re-shaped in very recent history. The response to HIV/AIDS was therefore likely to be diverse, reflecting the unevenness of the changes and the variety of life situations homosexual men found themselves in. Given this history, the very emphasis on gay community and gay identity, which was the basis of the most successful prevention education work in the 1980s (Dowsett, 1990), could be expected to *increase* divisions on class lines among homosexual men—and thus undermine further prevention work.

As news of the epidemic spread, the first response among our older respondents seems to have been a defensive drawing in behind boundaries. Some gave up the beats, or reduced their use of them. This could imply a withdrawal from sexual activity and social networks altogether, or it could mean a renewed emphasis on couple relationships. Given that this is the most valued sexual practice anyway, such a response can make the epidemic seem almost a blessing:

But AIDS is probably the best thing that ever happened to the gay scene in my view. It's the thing that got the people saying 'Hey, let's stop screwing around, let's get together, let's settle down, let's shack up, or let's curb our thing'. I think it did the best for us. It gave us a lot of hurt and harm, hurt and hassles too. But I think if you look at the last five or six years, just how many people have either been in a relationship, or got one. And 90% of the time stayed in it.

That is Keith Winter's opinion. Richard Cochrane did not get a relationship. He got AIDS. In consequence he has no sex life, and little admiration for the 'gay scene'. He has come home to his family while dying.

In due course another response developed, a renewed attempt at building community in the face of HIV/AIDS. Prevention education, and care of people living with AIDS, became central to the agendas of energetic people in the milieu. To put it another way, local people became HIV/AIDS activists organic to their own communities. The key to this was the articulation of Safe Sex principles in the mid-1980s which, unlike conventional 'health education' models, allowed and even required the empowerment of the affected group.

Working-class communities and households broadly lack access to scientific information and skills in handling it, a significant consequence of their class disadvantage in education. In consequence their HIV/AIDS information is likely to be at best approximate. (For instance, the meanings of 'positive' and 'negative' HIV-antibody test results get reversed; the idea that there are 'safe' partners rather than 'safe' practices is common.) In both Nullangardie and western Sydney certain local men set themselves the task of disseminating HIV/AIDS information and Safe Sex principles, and seeing to it that the principles were followed. Safe Sex became a means by which the individual could be agentive in the face of the epidemic, and a basis on which a collective response could develop.

This goes against the broad trend in HIV/AIDS work towards professionalism: training, certification, action by formally-organised groups. Among the reasons for this trend are the general historical trend towards credentialled labour; the heavy professionalisation of health work in particular; and growing demands for formal 'accountability' from government. These pressures, plus the internal imperatives of running expanding and expensive programs, have transformed the AIDS Councils from loose community-based campaign groups into formal organisations which value expertise.

In working-class contexts this trend gives authority to men like Michael Swanson, a student and part-time health worker, who, while living and gaining his sexual experience in working-class milieu, has maintained a sense of class difference stemming from his family background. He is interested in HIV/AIDS work as a possible occupation, and will be qualified to enter it when he completes his studies. The same set of social relations that authorises Michael Swanson de-authorises Huey Brown. Huey has considerable but uncredentialled expertise as a former sex worker, and has vigorously maintained for years a strict 'safe' sex regime. Huey commented on the amount of 'unsafe' sex he sees at beats. (Asked why he did not apply for a job as an HIV/AIDS outreach educator, he replied that he could not since he was a 'known homosexual' (i.e. known to the police). His reputation would make it impossible for others to trust him enough to appoint him to such a job).

Huey Brown not only has an accurate knowledge of Safe Sex strategy, he already works as an energetic and effective community HIV/AIDS educator. He is one of the 'organic' activists mentioned above. Another side of this informal networking is apparent in a story told by Bill Markham. Growing up in a country town, Bill was taken for a drive by an older acquaintance who had been away for several years.

And all afternoon we just talked about Safe Sex, and he was telling me what to do and what not to do. (Why?) Well that's what I couldn't work out. Like it was just like a normal conversation, but he was so persistent to

talk about this Safe Sex...He really went through everything. Told me the ins and outs. And that was the first lecture I had on Safe Sex.

Bill later heard that this man had AIDS — and later again, that he was dead. These episodes point to an active informal HIV/AIDS education process in which particular men function as 'barefoot doctors', to use the Chinese expression—perhaps better, barefoot educators (see Frowner and Rowlnak, 1989). The occasions of this work are as varied as social and sexual life itself. Peter Farthing and his partner sometimes pick up other men for threesomes; if the pick-ee wants 'unsafe' sex, he gets a good talking-to. Bill Markham went off for a dirty weekend in Sydney and climbed into bed with a nurse, who got ready to be penetrated but had no condom at hand. Bill laughs at the subsequent scene: he stopped the action, got coffee, and delivered a lecture on Safe Sex principles and community resources to the older, professional man.

Here is an educational enterprise that is organic to the milieu, that works through relationships and networks and disregards credentials. The 'barefoot educator' is, we would suggest, the key HIV/AIDS prevention resource for working-class men. This is a means by which a process of collective empowerment can occur in this milieu as it has done in the affluent gay communities. It is a means by which information can get around without the class put-downs and disempowerment that are the usual consequences of professional intervention.

This is not to imply the strategy is problem-free. David Booth, eighteen at the time of interview, shows one. He has been given sexual skilling and lots of Safe Sex advice by his barefoot educators, an older relative and a friend met at a bar. He has high Safe Sex awareness. But when quizzed about the details of Safe Sex he turned out to be dangerously vague about both the practice and the principles on which it is based. It seems that the mentoring has cotton-woolled him; he has not had to take responsibility for the issue himself.

Such problems have solutions; they signal not that the strategy is flawed but that it has to be thought out, developed, and resourced. To develop these possibilities requires an approach which is closer to that of adult literacy work (Lankshear, 1987) than the usual top-down, individualised model of health education and behaviour change. A prize in lives has already been paid for the class selectiveness of prevention strategies. Working-class people deserve something better in future.

## CONCLUSION

The evidence in this paper points to the need to consider the whole social matrix of sexuality, not just its immediate interpersonal context. The structure

of class as a whole means that sexual practice, for men like these, reflects economic vulnerability and social constraint. Yet this pressure does not simply determine the outcome. The contrast between the two cities illustrates the different collective responses that can be made to class constraints.

We see the importance, in both milieux, of the hegemonic construction of masculinity. But working-class masculinity cannot be taken as a fixed social form (cf. Connell, 1991; Donaldson, 1991; Leahy, 1992). It is at issue, under tension, and in some of these lives, directly challenged. Here working-class homosexual men are involved in a wider politics of gender which is still very much unresolved.

Given the need to deal with economic vulnerability, tensions about masculinity, homophobia, and the HIV epidemic itself, it is no wonder that these men place emphasis on the most supportive type of relationship they know, the stable couple. This is, however, a solution not available to all; and for reasons we have noted, provides only an imperfect shelter from the epidemic. The haven in a heartless world is no more storm-proof than the corresponding heterosexual household.

This study also calls for a significant re-thinking of HIV/AIDS prevention strategies. The professionalisation of community-based HIV/AIDS service organisations has been noted overseas (Patton, 1990): a clear local example is Huey Brown's exclusion from working for such organisations. Yet, clearly, many of the men in this study are educators in their own right and have already made a contribution to stopping the HIV epidemic. The task facing gay community HIV/AIDS agencies is to find ways to include such men in their programs; not just as participants or clients, but as staff whether paid or volunteer. These men possess important skills and knowledge, though they certainly require some training, as there are errors of judgement and approximate understandings of HIV/AIDS among them.

An emphasis on younger working-class homosexually active men, who do not claim or want a 'gay' identity, is warranted. Outreach strategies and peer education programs and techniques are needed which rely more on the informal social networks of the men themselves than on abstract social categories such as ethnicity, age, or sexual identity (e.g. bisexual) — the basis of most current programs in operation at present. It is important to take preventative education activities to the places where working-class men are more likely to be found — their workplaces, their local clubs and hotels, and not necessarily 'gay' ones. And certainly programs which assume that attaching these men to existing gay communities is the easy way to increase compliance with Safe Sex, must take into account the very mixed experience the men in the study report in their dealings with gay communities.

We have reported elsewhere on the sense of 'exclusion' from gay community which many of the men in this study carry (Dowsett et al., 1992a), and also their criticisms of many of the educational materials produced by gay community HIV/AIDS service organisations (Dowsett et al., 1992b). Altogether, these findings suggest strongly the need for training programs for professional HIV/AIDS policy makers and educators to re-think in a more sociologically informed way the conceptualisation of homoeroticism, gay community, and of what constitutes 'education' itself, so that working-class men such as these are equally protected from the dangers of the HIV epidemic.

#### NOTES

- 1 We gratefully acknowledge the help of L. Watson (Government, University of Sydney, NSW 2006), D. Baxter and K. Davis (AIDS Council of NSW, PO Box 350, Darlinghurst, NSW 2010), M. O'Brien and Y. Roberts and the original Social Aspects of the Prevention of AIDS team (Macquarie University, NSW 2109). The study could not have happened without the massive contribution of the respondents. The research was funded by a Commonwealth AIDS Research Grant.
- 2 A small number of our interviews came from other parts of Sydney, but do not show substantial differences; the class dynamic seems to operate in much the same way across the metropolis. This was not the only reason for the breakup of the Bohemian milieu, of course. The Vietnam War and the US troops on R. & R. re-structured the sex industry in the 1960s along more commercial lines, under the aegis of the Ashkan government and organised crime.
- 3

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