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Coming Out of the Closet : Young Gay Men's Experiences in the Process of Coming Out

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COMING OUT OF THE CLOSET
YOUNG GAY MEN'S EXPERIENCES IN THE
PROCESS OF COMING OUT

by

Ronald Macdonald

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Award of Bachelor of

Social Science (Youth Work) Honours

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USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.

ABSTRACT

Coming out of the closet is a decision that all young gay men consider, however there has been little recent research undertaken which investigates this phenomenon.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to provide an account of young men's experiences in the process of coming out and a critical analysis of the influences of cultural, political and social factors which impinge on the process. A phenomenological method (utilising Colaizzi's procedural steps) will be employed to collect data and to extrapolate common themes and meanings. A purposeful sample of seven young gay men were interviewed. Data was collected from taped interviews and the researcher's field notes. The research findings will add new knowledge to youth studies research as well as providing a basis for ongoing research in the area of gay studies.

Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signature

Date.....3/12/96.....

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The struggle to come out of the closet and be openly and equally accepted as a gay person by the mainstream culture is a fight that has been undertaken by gays and lesbians in succeeding generations. The Stonewall riots in New York in late sixties signified the emergence of an active gay political consciousness directed towards social change and reform.

The formation of the gay liberation movement during this time was an important event in gay history, because it was through the encouragement of gays and lesbians to self identify themselves as gay and unite as a community, that the concept of “coming out of the closet” was first realised. Central to gay liberation was the rejection of the pathologised medical label of homosexual and the assertion of self worth as well as the right of free expression both in public and in private life. D’Emilio elaborates that “Gay liberation transformed homosexuality from a stigma that one kept carefully hidden into an identity that signified membership in a community organising for freedom” (1983, p. 247).

Coming out can be defined as “the developmental process through which gay people recognise their sexual preferences and choose to integrate this knowledge into their personal and social lives” (Schneider, 1989, p. 115). Coming out operates on three levels. Firstly, coming out by acknowledging one’s own sexual feelings and personally identifying as gay;

secondly, coming out to other gay identified people and exploring gay cultural life; and thirdly, coming out within mainstream heterosexual culture by disclosing to family, friends and significant others. Weeks (1991) notes that for the sexually marginalised, identity is a fundamental concept in establishing a sense of “self”, and implies taking a specific stance in relation to dominant sexual codes considered as the “normal” means of expression.

Gay liberation and other gay aligned movements since, have often constituted a threat to the dominant culture because of their focus on gaining acceptance and equality for gay people through the structural change of society rather than simply focussing on gaining social tolerance (social tolerance is a viewpoint still forwarded by many liberalist heterosexuals). As Baguley (1985) elucidates, tolerance does not imply acceptance. Attempts by gay lobby groups and individuals to bring about structural social change have met with opposition from dominant social and political factions intent on exerting social control over the lives of gay and lesbian people. This is particularly evident in the continued regulation of sexual preference through inequalities in the legal age of consent between young gay men and their heterosexual counterparts. Amendments to the Western Australian legal code were prefaced by a preamble that stated “...the Parliament disapproves of sexual relations between persons of the same sex [and that]....the Parliament does not by it’s action in removing any criminal penalty for sexual acts in private between persons of the same sex wish to create a change in community attitudes to homosexual behaviour (The United Nations Human Rights Committee findings and the implications for anti-gay laws in Western Australia, 1994). The implications of continued attempts to regulate and control the expression of gay sexuality holds particular relevance for the current generation of young people who either perceive

themselves to be gay or are questioning their own sexuality. For example, the decriminalisation of same sex relationships for adults has not prevented young adult men from experiencing social stigma and marginalisation.

There has been speculation and concern in Australia that the suicide rate (particularly for the current generation of young gay men), may be up to three times higher than for their heterosexual counterparts, and this can be linked to the societal pressures and personal difficulties they are experiencing as a result of sexuality issues (Penly, 1993; Select Committee On Youth Affairs Interim Report, 1991).

In this thesis, it is suggested that since Stonewall there have been changes within the social, cultural, political and economic fabric of society which have had an impact on the conceptualisation of identity and the process of coming out. The emergence of AIDS is an example of a generational change that has impacted on gay and straight communities world wide. The impact of the virus has caused a reappraisal of many of the attitudes and behaviours endemic to the more “permissive” sixties and seventies. The reconceptualisation and construction of gender and masculinity has subsequently led to an increased variation in possible masculine identities and sexual expression. These developments however, cannot be understood without also taking into account the changes that have occurred over time in the meanings attributed to being “gay” or of the contexts in which coming out and identifying as gay have been constructed. In terms of the current thesis, the process of coming out can be understood as a framework for investigating the lived experiences of a group of young men who identify as being gay.

The Background to the Study

Coming out and declaring one's sexual identity to others is something that at some point all young gay men will consider. It is not usually a spontaneous occurrence, however the decision to disclose (or not to disclose) at a particular moment may be influenced by a variety of emotional and social factors (Plummer, 1989; Greenberg, 1988).

For many young gay people coming out can be accompanied by feelings of guilt, trauma and anxiety, while for others it can be a natural step in affirming and validating their sexual identity. Fear of persecution and discrimination are often issues that a young gay person has to face when considering coming out. Compulsory heterosexuality - the cultural assumption that everyone is heterosexual - can place pressure on a young person to stay "closeted" and avoid possible recriminations and oppression. Plummer (1989), discusses how compulsory heterosexuality creates a sexual stigma, leading to a devaluing of same-sex relationships, which in turn forms the basis for homophobic attitudes and assumptions. The "invisibility" of gay young people (and thereby the visibility of young heterosexuals), reinforces the belief that heterosexuality is the "normal" sexual orientation for all young people. Compulsory heterosexuality, then, becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The decision to disclose sexual identity can involve the risk of rejection and alienation from family, friends, peers, as well as discrimination in the workplace. The risk of rejection and alienation, coupled with the fear of physical and/or verbal harassment, have been cited as major causes of low self image, secrecy, isolation and potential suicide in young gay men (Plummer, 1989; Savin- Williams, 1990; Herdt, 1989; Cass, 1992). Further, contemporary research has little to say about the ways in which the current HIV/AIDS pandemic is affecting the coming out process. There is a consensus among researchers that HIV/AIDS is

undoubtedly affecting young gay men's lives by exacerbating many of the problems they are already experiencing (Herdt, 1989; Boxer & Cohler, 1989; Plummer, 1989; Edwards, 1992; Feldman, 1989).

Although disclosure of sexual identity can generate problems and difficulties for young gay men, discrimination and oppression are forces that are not simply accepted passively.

Plummer (1989), discusses how gay young people actively construct a positive gay identity and lifestyle and work towards acceptance and social change. In terms of HIV/AIDS, the virus has not just contributed to further sexual stigma, but has acted as a catalyst in consolidating (particularly politically), a positive self image for many young gay men (Edwards, 1992).

The dilemma of coming out, of deciding whether or not to disclose, of who to disclose to and when, of considering the implications and risks of saying "I'm gay!", are important decisions facing young gay men. Because of the lack of empirical research in this area, there is no way of knowing how young gay men are responding to such issues.

The Significance of the Study

The significance of this research is that it will provide an interpretative study that addresses the ways in which young gay men have negotiated their sexuality in the process of coming out. It is a gap that previous studies have failed to fill. Given that the process of coming out is likely to vary from one generation to the next (Herdt, 1989), the study will also seek to

provide an account of the contemporary social, political and cultural issues that the young men view as important and significant.

The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine young gay men's experiences in the process of coming out. A framework of critical analysis and phenomenological method will therefore be adopted to allow for an in depth examination of the individual's subjective experience. In this way, the study will constitute a source of information for youth workers when designing programs, projects and services for young gay men, and will also provide a basis for ongoing research.

Objectives of the Study

1. To explore the experiences of seven young gay men between the ages of 18-25 who have been involved in the process of coming out.
2. To examine the similarities and disparities of the experience.
3. To extrapolate common themes by conducting a thematic analysis of the data.
4. To identify, critically analyse and describe the common meanings that the experience holds for this group.
5. To provide a source of information for youth workers when designing programs, projects and services for young gay men.
6. To provide a basis for further research in the area of gay studies.

Research Questions

The abovementioned objectives are centred around two research questions.

A) What is the experience of young gay men when negotiating their sexuality in the process of coming out?

B) What are the cultural, political and social factors that impinge on the process?

Definition of Terms

Gay [Identity]: "The self-descriptive term asserting an intention of being guilt-free (having self-respect) and open (declining self-concealment) - hence glad to be gay and out" (Bullock Stallybrass & Trombley, 1988, pp. 392-393). In the present study the term gay will be used as an operational definition to refer to young men between the ages of 18 and 25 who self identify as being gay, and who have already established some kind of social or friendship network with other gay people.

Sexual Identity: "...represents a consistent, enduring self- recognition of the meanings that... [sexual feelings] and sexual behaviour have for oneself. Although a public declaration of this status is not inherently necessary for sexual identity, there must be some level of personal recognition of this status. Affirmation, to varying degrees, may or may not follow" (Savin-Williams, 1990, p. 3).

Personal/Self Identity: "...the answer a person gives to the question 'who am I?'" (Greenberg, 1988, p. 464).

Hegemonic Masculinity: Refers to the hegemonic ordering of dominant and subordinate male gender relations. In this order, certain constructions of masculinity are hegemonic, while others are subordinated or marginalised (Connell, 1992).

Homophobia: “...an irrational fear, revulsion and hatred of homosexuals resulting in prejudiced antagonism towards and mistreatment of them” (Grey, 1992, p. 10).

The Closet: A term used to describe the non-disclosure of same-sex sexual feelings so as to remain (ideally) safe from persecution and discrimination.

The terms gay will be used in this thesis in preference to homosexual. The term homosexual will therefore only appear when used by other researchers or by the study participants.

CHAPTER TWO

Theoretical framework and method

This chapter presents the theoretical and philosophical approach that underpins the study, and details the research method and procedures used for data collection and analysis. The study uses a social constructionist framework to provide a critical understanding of the participant's subjective experiences and the social structures that have impact and influence over their lives. A discussion surrounding essentialism, (the antithesis of constructionism), has been included in this chapter for two reasons. Firstly, to provide the reader with an overview of the main oppositional viewpoint to constructionism, and secondly, to elucidate why social constructionism was chosen as the theoretical framework on which the study was based. Finally, the research method will be discussed with reference to the philosophical and theoretical considerations that determined the usage of phenomenology as the chosen method, and will conclude with a detailed presentation of the steps and procedures used in data collection and analysis (including details of the pilot study).

The Functions Of Theory

Theory in inductive qualitative research is often driven by the researcher's conceptual commitment to a particular world view and association with ways of inquiring about human nature. Theory can therefore function to give credibility to the particular methodological approach chosen by the researcher. It can also function to provide a comparison with other

theoretical viewpoints or as an organisational framework for the interpretation and re-presentation of data after it has undergone preliminary stages of data analysis (Sandelowski, 1993).

Since there has been debate in academic circles regarding theories of essentialism and social constructionism, it was deemed important that an outline of the two approaches be given in this chapter because an examination of alternative theoretical approaches gives the study added strength and validity. This strategy is known as theory triangulation. Denzin (1972, p. 301) suggests that:

Rather than searching only for support of their propositions, investigators should deliberately seek negative evidence, a parallel to the strategy from analytic induction that directs the observer to view each data unit as a potential negative case that must be explained before further observations are gathered.

Theory triangulation will also be used at the end of the study when the findings of thematic data analysis are re-examined. According to Morse (1989), this is achieved by discussing the relationship of the researcher's conceptualisation to alternative theoretical approaches. In this way the research conclusions are given added strength and validity and will contribute to both the generation and application of theory.

The Nature Of Essentialism

Essentialists argue that an individual's biology is the primary influence that governs his or her behaviour and sexual activity. Sexual preference, an active human process, thus becomes subsumed by sexual orientation, a predetermined and static biological mechanism (De Cecco

& Elia, 1993). Sexual behaviour is also believed to be transhistorical, thus taking precedence over the influences of historically determined cultural variables. Differences in sexual behaviour or activity that do arise between individuals (for example, the sex drive), are assumed to be a consequence of underlying biological or psychological differences that exist between those individuals (Somerville, 1994; Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994).

In the late nineteenth century, sexologists created the identity label of “the homosexual” in an attempt to ratify their beliefs that diversity in human sexual experience was a complex natural process that needed to be understood (Weeks, 1991). By linking sexual behaviour with biology and nature, essentialists sought to give an explanation of the factors that cause the sexual variation of gay and lesbian experience. As De Cecco and Elia (1993) suggest, the label of “homosexual” reduced an individual’s sexual expression - the interpretation and meanings an individual assigns to the body, behaviour and desire, to sex - the physical and material ingredients that constitute an individual’s behaviour. The creation of “the homosexual” (and therefore the creation of “the heterosexual”), thus gave rise to a sexual dichotomy that located sexuality at the level of the body. Essentialists compared the biological function of procreation with non-procreation as well as the sexually determined gendered behaviours of masculinity with femininity in an attempt to give credence to their biodeterminist theories. Heterosexuality however, has received little attention in this regard, largely because it is the dominant sexuality in our culture and as such, is perceived to be the “natural” and “normal” identity that affirms the morally acceptable basis for sexual relationships (De Cecco & Shively, 1984).

Although homosexuality was regarded as “natural” in so far as its causation could be located in nature, early descriptions of sexually gendered inversion (males taking on female characteristics and females displaying masculinised behaviours) were theories that stereotyped the roles of male and female behaviour. Homosexuality was not regarded as a matter of individual choice, but as a preordained sexual given, located within the domain of pathology and abnormality. Kinsey, in his research on the “Sexual Behaviour In The Human Male”, criticised the heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy, relegating homosexuality to the realms of sexual relationships and experience rather than constructing a person as “a homosexual”.

The Kinsey studies of male and female sexuality (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948; Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin & Gebhard, 1953) indicated a widespread occurrence of same sex feelings and activity. The studies also showed that in some individuals, sexual preferences could and did change during the course of their lives, thus challenging the notion that individuals could be categorised as “homosexual” or “heterosexual” (De Cecco & Shively, 1984).

Since much of the previous scientific research has been undertaken by biologists and psychologists (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994), mainstream literature and contemporary theories of sexuality have reflected a sexological and biomedical bias focusing on sexuality as a “natural” given, predetermined by genetic, biological, or physiological mechanisms that are essentially innate and unchanging (Vance, 1989; Weeks, 1991).

Essentialist theories on the innate “nature” and “cause” of homosexual behaviour still dominate current reports and research literature and researchers continue to identify and categorise their subjects as homosexual or heterosexual (De Cecco & Elia, 1993). For example, in response to the amendments made to the Western Australian Criminal Code governing “homosexuality”, the Western Australian Branch of the Australian Council for Lesbian and Gay Rights stated the amendments reinforce “...the myth that homosexuality is something that people ‘choose’, and therefore it ought to be made illegal until the age of 21, to deter young people from ‘choosing’ this sexuality” (The United Nations Human Rights Committee findings and the implications for anti gay laws in Western Australia, 1994).

This response highlights an ongoing theoretical debate that has engaged researchers of sexuality and gay activists alike - the conceptualisation of human sexual activity and identity. Edwards (1994, p. 152) elaborates on the tensions that exist between essentialist and social constructionist assumptions when he states:

Conceptually, the problem lies in the very notion of liberation itself because it rests on the essentialist assumption that there is something there to be liberated, gay sexuality; whilst social constructionist theory clearly challenges the existence of a gay sexuality or any sexuality on this level. Gay sexuality is seen as essentially conceptual.

In essentialist terms, then, identity is not something that one chooses, but is preordained and specific to the individual. Essentialist theory does not take into account factors of socialisation into the cultural mores of the society, the intersubjective experiences of the individual, or the constraints imposed by society on the individual. These are important determining factors that need to be addressed when researching human sexual activity

(Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994; Kinsey, 1948). Human sexuality and expression is thereby reduced to the constrictive boundaries imposed by essentialist theories of natural science.

Social Construction Theory

Social construction theory has developed as an alternate field of inquiry that calls into question the essentialist viewpoint that sexuality is a “natural” given predetermined by biology and the body. From a constructionist viewpoint, the concept of identity is not innate and unchanging, but is socially constructed and culturally bound within specific periods of time and history. Social constructionism does not imply that reality is unimportant, but rather ascribes to the notion that the everyday life experiences of individuals reflect their interpretations and understandings of the world in which they live. Such a view is not formed in isolation, but by a process of intersubjective experience between the individual and society (Berger & Luckman, 1966). Reality, when applied to sexual behaviour, activity or identity, is thus presented not as an omnipresent force that is static and unchanging, but rather as a fluid force that takes into account individual agency, motivation and choice. Social constructionism, then, seeks to deconstruct the dominant heterosexist view of an intrinsic sexual essence by exploring and questioning the social, cultural and political contexts through which sexuality and sexual identity are constituted, negotiated and experienced.

The conceptual meanings attributed to identity are therefore historically, culturally, socially, politically and economically determined. It has been chosen as the theoretical and philosophical framework that underpins this study for the following reasons. Firstly, because

social constructionist researchers seek to question and explore the relationships of power, domination and social control that inhibit individual freedom and movement within society. This is achieved by critically examining the structures of established domination and interpreting the assumptions, relationships and meanings that the situation holds for both the individual and groups of individuals that are consequently marginalised and oppressed (Sargent, 1994). Secondly, because social constructionist theory has its roots deeply entrenched in feminism and the gay liberation movement, (both of which were born out of a history of oppression and marginalisation), it was deemed a valid choice for investigative research. Many of the questions that constructionists ask come from the politics of feminist and gay liberationist activism. These questions include the status of history; the social and historical forces that shape subjectivity and identity; and the implications of deconstructing the categories of nature, history and identity for contemporary politics, research and social change (Weeks, 1991; Vance, 1989). Social construction theory is therefore action oriented because critical thinking radicalises thought and the actions that occur as a consequence of that thought. (Van Manen, 1990). Greenwood (1994), when citing Habermas (1972) explains that knowledge is always constructed by human agents to serve particular human interests. These interests are technical, practical or emancipatory. Technical interests are served by a knowledge of means and ends which allow human agents to control the natural world. This knowledge is constructed by the natural sciences. Practical interests are served by practical knowledge which allows human agents to understand meaning in the social world and it is constructed by the interpretative or hermeneutic sciences. Emancipatory knowledge reveals the extent to which practical understandings are systematically distorted by prevailing socio-political conditions; this knowledge is provided by the critical sciences which seek to

liberate human agents from distorted ideology and oppression. Finally, social constructionism has been chosen because it seeks to explore the ways in which sexual identity (or more specifically gay identity), is a product of cultural, social and political changes that have taken place within society. Constructionist theory critically examines how socio-cultural forces have constructed an apparently continuous and stable experience of reality and identity over time (Vance, 1989; Greenberg, 1988; Weeks, 1991; Shepard & Wallis, 1989).

Critics of constructionism have, however pointed out what they consider as weaknesses in the approach. For example, although constructionism holds that individuals have agency and choice over sexual relationships, it does not explain why those individuals may choose certain partners to the exclusion of others (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994). Another difficulty mentioned is that constructionism does not take into account the variety of sexualities that are practiced differently across time in different societies with different social outcomes (Edwards, 1994). Politically, social, constructionist theory has been criticised as being sexist for its primary gay male focus, and racist because of its focus on western societies. A major criticism is the potential that constructionism holds for “corrupting” others into “homosexuality”. As exemplified in the previous section on essentialism, the notion of constructing identity choice means from a conservative viewpoint, there is the potential to construct and therefore “corrupt” others in the name of social constructionism (Edwards, 1994).

However, Vance (1989) concludes that such criticisms are based on misunderstandings and misreadings of constructionist theory and are ultimately unhelpful in the development and

advancement of constructionism. She contends that the real theoretical issues surrounding constructionist theory need to be focussed around examining the different degrees of social construction; the instability of sexuality as a category; and the role of the body.

While it is beyond the limitations of the current thesis to extrapolate the diverse ways in which constructionism has been applied by researchers and writers, it has been used here as a framework for critical social analysis of the study participant's experiences during the process of coming out. By utilising the theoretical tools of constructionism, it is possible to gain an in-depth understanding of the social, political and cultural factors that impact on the process by going beyond a simply descriptive account of cause and effect. In other words, instead of merely describing what is, constructionism also asks the question why, and so in this regard can be viewed as an action based strategy that opens up the possibility for social change.

More specifically, a social constructionist approach will be used in the context of this study to explore the meanings that the young men have given to their experiences of coming out by critically analysing the ways in which they have constructed themselves; how they have been constructed by others; the intersubjective experiences that have occurred during the coming out process; and the social milieu in which these experiences have occurred.

Method of investigation

A phenomenological method was considered to be the most appropriate to investigate young gay men's experiences in coming out for two reasons. Firstly, because it constituted a good theoretical and philosophical fit with the approach of social constructionist theory. Both a

phenomenological and social constructionist approach seek to examine and interpret the individual's perception of reality - their lived experience. Central to phenomenological inquiry is the question, what is the nature of the phenomenon as meaningfully experienced? (Van Manen, 1990). Further, phenomenology maintains that the meanings an individual gives to an experience is contextually constructed as an intersubjective phenomenon (Morse, 1989). Social constructionism, as part of the critical sociological perspective, goes one step further in that it seeks to suggest causal explanations for the experience. Secondly, as Sarantakos (1993) notes, methods are research tools chosen on the basis of criteria that is related to the major elements of the methodology in which they are imbedded, such as perception of reality, definition of science, perception of human beings, purpose of research and the type of research units. Therefore as a tool used for data generation and thematic analysis, the purpose, structure and process of phenomenological method aligns well with the conceptual framework of social constructionist theory.

Design

Patton (1990) suggests that the criteria for selection of the most appropriate research design in a qualitative inquiry is dependent on finding out the information that is most needed and then employing a method best suited to producing the needed information. In this study a qualitative design within the interpretative paradigm has been selected as the most appropriate to investigate young gay men's experiences in the process of coming out. The data were collected by face to face interviews and personal observations supplemented by the researcher's field notes. Consistent with qualitative research methods, a semi- structured question guide comprising of open ended questions and prompts was constructed for the interview process. Each interview was audiotaped and then transcribed verbatim. The method

of data analysis utilised six procedural steps outlined by Colaizzi (1978) together with the constant comparative method as described by Glaser & Strauss (1967). A final step in the process included a critical interpretation of data when it was re-presented after preliminary thematic analysis.

Practices for ensuring validity and reliability in qualitative designs differs considerably from those of quantitative research. Morse (1989), indicates that in quantitative research, internal validity, external validity and reliability are the criterion used to make a claim for confirmability. In a qualitative research design, Guba & Lincoln (1985) suggest that confirmability can be achieved by giving attention to credibility, auditability and fittingness.

Credibility is achieved when the study participants can provide a verification of the themes and interpreted meanings ascribed by the researcher as well as by others who read the research findings. Oiler (1982) suggests that bracketing can also be used to achieve researcher credibility. Bracketing involves “bracketing out” or suspending what he or she thinks or knows about the experience in order to reduce researcher bias. Auditability is achieved when the researcher leaves behind a clear audit trail that can be followed by other researchers interested in duplicating or adding to the study (Guba & Lincoln 1985). Utilising the procedural steps outlined by Colaizzi (1978) is one way of promoting auditability. Another, is by using triangulation. Patton (1990) concludes that triangulation can strengthen a study design by utilising a combination of methodologies or using several kinds of methods or data. Denzin (1978), outlines four basic types of triangulation, which include: data triangulation - the use of various sources of data in a study; investigator triangulation - where multiple

instead of single observers are employed; theory triangulation - pitting alternative theories against the same body of data; and methodological triangulation - the use of multiple methods to study a single problem or programme. Both theory triangulation and data triangulation have been incorporated into the present study to increase credibility and therefore establish a claim for confirmability.

Finally, the fittingness of the study is achieved if the findings of the study can be compared with environments outside of the study context and if they can be related back to the original data source (Guba & Lincoln 1985). Forchuk & Roberts (1993) suggest that when sampling procedures are being evaluated, attention should be given to appropriateness and adequacy. This is to ensure that an appropriate sampling method has a good “fit” with the study purpose, that the information provided by an adequate sample is of good quality and complete, and that it provides sufficient information.

To conclude, the outline of the study design presented was considered the most appropriate in gathering the kind of data required to conduct the research and for the stated purpose of the inquiry and evaluation. However as Patton (1990, p. 61) affirms, “Qualitative inquiry designs cannot be completely specified in advance of fieldwork....A qualitative design unfolds as fieldwork unfolds. The design is partially emergent as the study occurs.” It is to this process of unfolding that attention will be given in the subsequent sections of this chapter.

Sample

This study focussed specifically on young gay men and not lesbians. The rationale for the exclusion of young women from the sample is twofold. Firstly, that the issues and

experiences arising for young lesbians are likely to be qualitatively different in at least some respects from those of young gay men. It would therefore be beyond the scope and time limitations of the study to include them. Secondly, it was considered inappropriate for a male researcher to conduct this kind of research approach with a young woman, and therefore a female researcher would be a more appropriate choice.

In phenomenological method, the study sample is drawn from the population who are living the experience of the phenomenon to be studied (Parse, Coyne & Smith, 1985). This is because the sample in a qualitative inquiry is purposeful rather than random as the researcher selects participants according to the needs of the study (Patton, 1990; Morse, 1989). In qualitative research a small sample is often selected to gain a more open range of experiences that contributes to a depth rather than breadth of understanding (Patton, 1990). A small sample size was also selected in the current study due to the limited time and resources available to the researcher in the completion of an honours thesis. The research sample in the present study consisted of seven young gay men aged between 18 - 25 years who resided in the Perth Metropolitan area and who self identified as being gay. One other young man was contacted to participate in a pilot study and therefore did not take part in the final project. Initially, consideration was given to the type of sample selection procedure that could be employed in gaining access to potential participants. Since the researcher had access to potential participants through personal friendships, acquaintances and gay service organisations, it decided that an appropriate procedure would be snowball sampling. In snowball sampling researchers begin with the few respondents who are available to them and ask these people to recommend other potential respondents (Sarantakos, 1993).

Three initial sources of contact were therefore used to begin the snowball sampling process. An advantage in using several sources for potential contacts was that the risk of gaining access to only one specific friendship group was reduced. In this way the researcher hoped to gain a diversity of experience rather than the potential of interpreting commonly shared experiences that may have resided within a singular friendship group. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, none of the final participants were or had been partners. Further, none of the participants knew more than one of the other participants selected for the study.

Each of the potential participants were approached and asked if they would participate in the project. They were then asked if they could recommend other young men who might be interested in taking part. The researcher contacted the Youth Education Coordinator of the Western Australian AIDS Council for permission to circulate a flyer inviting young gay men between the specified age range to participate. Two young men responded to the flyer. It was decided that the researcher's contact telephone number be given to other potential participants by the recommendees because due to the sensitive nature of the inquiry, it was thought to be less threatening and intrusive. A further consideration was that participants who had been contacted and had agreed to take part were aware of the nature and purpose of the inquiry. They had the potential to inform their friends not only about the research study, but also about the credibility and ethics of the researcher. After eight young men agreed to participate, the study procedure was instigated (one young man in the pilot study and seven in the main study. None of the potential participants declined to take part in the study.

Procedure

After the participants had agreed to take part, they were contacted by telephone and a convenient time and location was arranged for an interview. At this time a second interview was arranged to verify, clarify and expand on the data collected from the first interview. This was done to strengthen the credibility and validity of the collected data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It was explained to each participant that a transcript of the interview would be posted out approximately one or two weeks prior to the second interview. This would allow each participant sufficient time to read the transcript. In accordance with the participant's wishes, one interview was conducted in a conference room located at the Western Australian AIDS Council, a second at the participant's home and the remaining respondents were interviewed at the home of the researcher. It was anticipated that each interview would last for the duration of approximately one to two hours, depending on the depth and level of involvement in which each participant wished to engage. The average interview lasted for approximately one and a half hours. The interviews were spaced out at least one day apart because it was anticipated that the interview procedure would be both a physically and emotionally draining experience for the researcher. If the researcher was not alert and attentive at each interview session the standard of the interview would drop and this could adversely affect the credibility and thus validity of collected data.

Prior to the commencement of each interview the researcher engaged with the participant in light informal conversation to put both the researcher and the participant at ease. Participants were then asked if they had any objection to the interview being audiotaped. All of the data obtained from interviews were taped and after each interview the researcher detailed observations in a personal diary of notes. In this way the two sources constituted a

triangulation of the data as a means of claiming for validity (Patton, 1990). The participants were informed that they could withdraw at any stage of the interview process or retract any information given.

Since the purpose of conducting the interviews was to explore and gather rich narrative data that would allow for a deepened understanding of the participant's lived experiences, the researcher allocated time before making contact with participants to reflect on the nature and purpose of the research question being addressed. This procedure allows for the researcher to focus on the interview process in an attempt to reduce the potential for becoming carried away or easily side tracked during the session (Van Manen, 1990). Each interviewee was initially asked to describe their experience of coming out. In several cases the participants had come to the interview with a clear idea of the issues and stories they wished to share. Others required clarification of the sorts of issues the researcher wished to explore. At this point all of the participants were encouraged to relax and take time and reflect on what they considered were important issues and experiences that had influenced their coming out process. As the interviews progressed, sometimes participants did go off on their own tangents. For example, when discussing the personality of a particular partner or details of a particular party or social gathering they had attended. In these instances the researcher had to pull the conversation back on track by prompting or redirecting the question. On occasions, the researcher had to be mindful of the path that the questioning was taking, especially when there was a particular issue that was of a personal interest to the researcher. At these times the researcher had to bracket out personal bias of opinions, beliefs and attitudes that might influence the participant's narrative, although at times this was extremely difficult to do, given the emotive

nature of many of the narratives. Bracketing was also necessary during data analysis in order to accurately describe the reality of the experience as portrayed by the participants. During the interview process and data analysis, bracketing was achieved by the researcher keeping a daily journal in which to express personal feelings and reflections. According to Munhall & Boyd (1993), this technique allows the researcher to sustain a heightened level of awareness.

The researcher used positive body language such as affirming nods and smiles to allow the participant to feel that he was being understood and supported. Often the researcher would encourage and support the participant by making verbal statements like "I understand", "That's great" or "I empathise with how you must have felt".

In conjunction with the interview question guide, prompts were used to either expand on the information being given, or to gain a greater insight into the meanings and feelings that an interaction held for the participant. For example, "What do you think were the reasons for it happening?", "What were your feelings during and after the event?", or "Do you think there were any other reasons that could have caused that reaction?"

On the conclusion of each interview participants were thanked for making themselves available for the interview and for their contribution to the study. It had been intended that the tape recorder would be left on after the interviews had ceased with the intention of gathering further information from informal conversation. It was the case that all of the participant's waited for the tape recorder to be turned off before they felt at ease to engage in this type of discourse. When interviews had been conducted in the environment of the researcher's home,

participant's were offered tea or coffee and encouraged to discuss their experiences further.

When interviews were conducted either in the participant's home, or in the neutral environment of the conference room, the participants were also encouraged to enter into a discourse with the researcher. Finally, the researcher added that he looked forward to talking with them at the second interview and that they would be contacted within approximately four weeks after the initial interview date to confirm an acceptable time and location.

As soon as possible after each interview, the researcher would write into a personal diary any new or additional information gathered during the concluding informal conversations and the personal observations made during the interview process.

Data analysis

After all of the raw data had been collected, verbatim transcripts of the audiotaped interviews were logged into a computer. Computer print-outs of each transcript were then posted out for the participant's perusal. Approximately two weeks later the second round of interviews were conducted at the same locations outlined in the initial interview procedure. There were additional questions that the researcher wished to ask some of the participants. This was to verify a chronological sequence of events or to clarify what a participant meant when a description was made. Sometimes the participants also wished to ask if meanings and inferences made were clear to the researcher and to expand on comments made during the first interview. Notes were taken by the researcher and any new or additional information was then added to the original transcribed data in the relevant sections of transcript and entered as additional information.

The raw data were then analysed in accordance with six procedural steps outlined by Colaizzi (1978). They include: that the subjects descriptions are read in order to get a feel for them; that significant statements are extracted from the data; that meanings are formulated from the significant statements; that formulated meanings are organised into clusters of themes; that the results of data analysis are integrated into exhaustive description; and that any new and relevant data are incorporated into the fundamental structure of the experience. Each of the participant's transcriptions were read in order to gain a feel for the material described. In order to gain a sense of meaning from the data as a whole and to identify the areas that need development, the transcripts were read numerous times. A process of coding was undertaken in order to sort out and categorise the data. The codes represented commonalities and disparities found within the collected data. In this process the researcher moved backward and forward through the transcripts comparing the information. The codes were then grouped into categories and placed in a hierarchical order of differentiation. This technique is known as the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Significant statements from each participant were then extracted from the data and written into a notebook together with the their formulated meanings. An additional procedural step of numbering and colour coding was devised and added at this point by the researcher. By allocating each participant a specific identifying colour, they could be easily and clearly followed through the process of thematic data analysis. Each of the participant's significant statements and meanings were allocated a specific coded colour and given a number ranging from one for the first statement and meaning to, for example, eighty for the final representation. By adding the participant's colour code to the statements and meanings, data

analysis was made easier because of the researcher's ability to refer to the colour (indicating who the participant was) and number (a reference back to specific statements and meanings) under the thematically grouped clusters. This proved extremely useful when presenting anecdotal descriptions within the study findings.

After the significant statements were extrapolated from the data and given corresponding formulated meanings, the combined meanings were then organised into theme clusters. When no new information was generated (saturation of data), the process was terminated. At this point the researcher returned to the original transcripts in order to validate the theme clusters.

Limitations

The sample group in this study is a purposeful rather than a random sample because all of the participants self identify as being gay. It is therefore beyond the possibilities of the current study to include those young men who either do not identify as being gay, or who are fully closeted and thus hidden from the researcher. Since the experience of continued isolation from other gay people may produce a different range of experiences, this study can only represent the experiences of the purposeful sample group.

Reflective accounts of past experience means that data collected provided a reconstruction of that experience. Given that the participant's beliefs, attitudes and lifestyle can change over time, current interpretations may not be the same as the interpretations made at the time the events happened.

A potential limitation to the study was the absence of Aboriginal or non-European young men from the sample group. This occurred as an unintended result of the sampling method. The inclusion of young men from different cultural backgrounds might have provided a different range of lived experience, however the cultural forces may have proved too varied to give consistency in such a small researched sample group (Rubin, 1979).

When flyers were presented to the Western Australian AIDS Council for distribution, the researcher asked for the publicity to be circulated amongst the various youth oriented programs operating within the organisational structure. A specific request was made for flyers to be handed out to the Asian youth group, however none of these young men came forward to participate.

Two volunteers who did come forward were employed by the West Australian AIDS Council as conveyors of a gay youth drop-in centre. There was a potential for participant bias because both young men had previously participated in gay education and awareness training programs. Their reflections and interpretations of lived experience might therefore have been influenced by the knowledge and concepts they had learned during their training.

Four of the young men who volunteered for the study were either first or second generation Australians, the other three were migrants who had lived in Australia for most of their lives. The study sample therefore did not include any newly arrived migrants.

Due to the nature of the sampling procedure and the small sample size, issues relating to class divisions were not specifically addressed. The study sample did, however, include young men from both working class and middle class backgrounds. In a larger or different type of study, attention could focus on issues of class division which may give an additional perspective to the coming out process.

Given that the study group had spent either all or most of their lives in Australia, they had also received the larger proportion of their education in this country. Of the seven young men who participated in the final study, five are either currently studying at University level or have recently completed a University course. Again, there is a potential for bias in that the participant's have exposure to possibly freer and more open channels for thought, exploration and experience that may be closed to others who do not have this type of exposure.

Alternatively, the prevalence of higher education may be influenced by the relatively more tolerant atmosphere for gay young men compared with some areas of the workforce or study, and hence university entrance may also be a strategy for reducing pressures to form heterosexual relationships in school.

Ethical considerations

All of the participants were given an assurance of confidentiality and anonymity. Informed consent was obtained from each participant prior to commencement of the interview. Both the researcher and the participants were given a copy of the consent form.

It was explained to each participant that the interview can be terminated at any time, that any information given can be retracted and that he has the right to decline answering any question asked.

Assurances were given that no personal names would appear on any records and a pseudonym will be used when reference is made to a particular person. The only person who will have access to audiotapes, personal diaries and journals, transcriptions or computer discs is the researcher.

All of this information will be stored in a locked drawer in the researcher's home and destroyed at the end of a five year period unless additional consent is obtained. The data will only be used for the original purpose for which it was collected.

The researcher undertook to recommend a referral to an appropriate agency if the participant requests a referral. The referring agencies will be: The Gay and Lesbian Counselling Service of Western Australia and the Western Australian AIDS Council.

Pilot study

It was decided that prior to the commencement of data collection, a pilot study would be initiated. The purpose of the study was to discover possible weaknesses, inadequacies and problems in the research method. This is achieved by testing the suitability of the research method and research instruments; by giving the researcher the opportunity to practice research in a real situation and environment prior to the commencement of the major study; and to test the response of the subjects to the method of data collection and thereby determine

the adequacy of their structure (Sarantakos, 1993). Conducting a pilot study is therefore a valuable technique that can be used for enhancing the reliability and validity of a research project (Morse, 1989). One young man was interviewed by the researcher. Data gathered from the pilot study was not included in data gathered for the major study.

Pilot procedure

The participant was contacted by telephone and a convenient time arranged for an interview. The nature and purpose of the study was explained to the participant as well as the expected duration of the interview (approximately one to two hours). The actual interview took place over a one hour and forty minute period and was conducted in the researcher's home (the location selected by the interviewee). A question guide comprising semi -structured open ended questions was used in the interview. The format of the interview procedure was modified in minor ways as a result of the pilot study. The changes related to the precise wording of questions and the modifications occurred as a result of the participant's apprehension regarding the ease or difficulty of the questions to be asked. The participant was given a copy of the questionnaire guide which appeared to put his mind at ease. The researcher noted that this procedural step would be adopted for the major study interviews.

Prior to the commencement of the interview both the participant and the researcher signed a consent form. The participant was informed that he could withdraw at any stage of the interview process or retract any information given. The ethical considerations of confidentiality and anonymity were also explained to the participant.

The data was obtained by audiotaping the interviews as well as the researcher's own personal observations which were subsequently recorded in a diary after the participant had left.

Pilot data analysis

Because this was a pilot study involving one person, thematic comparisons of the full participant group could not be conducted. The data was therefore analysed in accordance with only three of procedural steps outlined by Colaizzi (1978). They included: that the subject's descriptions are read in order to get a feel for them; that significant statements are extracted from the data; and that meanings are formulated from the significant statements. Since the primary focus of the study was to test data gathering procedures and techniques and analytical procedures, the final step of critically reviewing the findings was also omitted.

Results of the pilot study

Twenty eight significant statements regarding the process of coming out were extracted from the verbatim transcript. Examples of significant statements and their corresponding formulated meanings are given in Table 1.

Table 1. Selected Examples of Significant Statements and Corresponding Formulated Meanings

Significant Statements	Formulated Meanings
1. I was ready to do what I was going to do and so I did it and that was alright and I wanted to do it anyway.	1. Andrew had decided that the circumstances were right to come out and have a gay relationship.
2. At school I felt like I couldn't be myself. I really don't think I was ever myself at school.	2. Andrew felt that he was not expressing his true self at school.
3. You can't live a life someone else wants you to lead. You can't live a life that society says is what is to become of you.	3. Andrew rejected the idea of society dictating how he should live his life.
4. I know I'm living with a boy and I love a boy, but I don't see it as being gay - its just loving a person.	4. Andrew did not perceive his relationship as being gay, but as a loving relationship between two people who happen to be male.

The results gained from the pilot study suggest that overall, the techniques and procedures initiated were successful in gathering relevant, useful and insightful data from the study participant. Audiotaping the interview, using a semi-structured questionnaire, writing out a verbatim transcript and then analysing the data by extrapolating significant statements and meanings, proved to be useful tools in gaining insight into the young person's experience of coming out.

Discussion of pilot study

Audiotaping the interview proved to be a valuable and extremely useful technique in gathering data from the participant. When the tape was replayed, much of the information was beyond the recollections of the researcher. Taping the interview also provided a means to

document the participant's vocal inflections, for example when he displayed emotions such as anger, excitement, and sadness.

The pilot study was helpful because it highlighted the necessity to make changes to the questionnaire guide. For example, when asked "Have your feelings, experiences or circumstances changed since you came out?" the participant looked confused and uncertain. When rephrased to "How has coming out changed your life?", a clearer and more focussed response was given. When the questionnaire guide was given to the participant to read, he responded by commenting "I can answer the first three or four questions in the one go!" The participant's response to the first question "Can you tell me about your experience of coming out?" did indeed cover many of the other questions I intended asking him. The semi-structured nature of the questionnaire allowed for the flexibility to pursue a variety of issues that were brought during the interview as well as giving the researcher insight into other areas of questioning that could be included in the major study. For example, to inquire about friendship networks or about negative aspects of the "gay scene".

Another important outcome of the pilot study was the necessity to bracket out personal attitudes and opinions and to focus on the primary research question. During the course of the interview the researcher found that questions were sometimes asked out of personal interest and were not necessarily relevant to the participant's experience of coming out. It is something that the researcher made note to guard against in the major study interviews. The researcher was also conscious of occasionally projecting personal values, views and beliefs, and noted that it is was the participant's thoughts, feelings and experiences that were in focus.

However the researcher did feel that support was given when appropriate, for example by positively reinforcing the participant's pride in "being gay". This was achieved by verbal interjections such as "that's great", or "wonderful". At times the researcher felt that the participant was seeking reassurance, and the comments made appeared to have a positive effect. Nodding and smiling were also effective non-verbal queues in establishing a supportive and understanding relationship with the participant.

The pilot study proved to be a valuable technique, not only as a means of testing and evaluating the research structure and approach in relation to the major study, but also as a process of personal evaluation of researcher sensitivity. Both the technical and personal evaluations contained in the pilot study are therefore used to make a claim for credibility and validity of the completed thesis.

CHAPTER THREE

The Research Findings

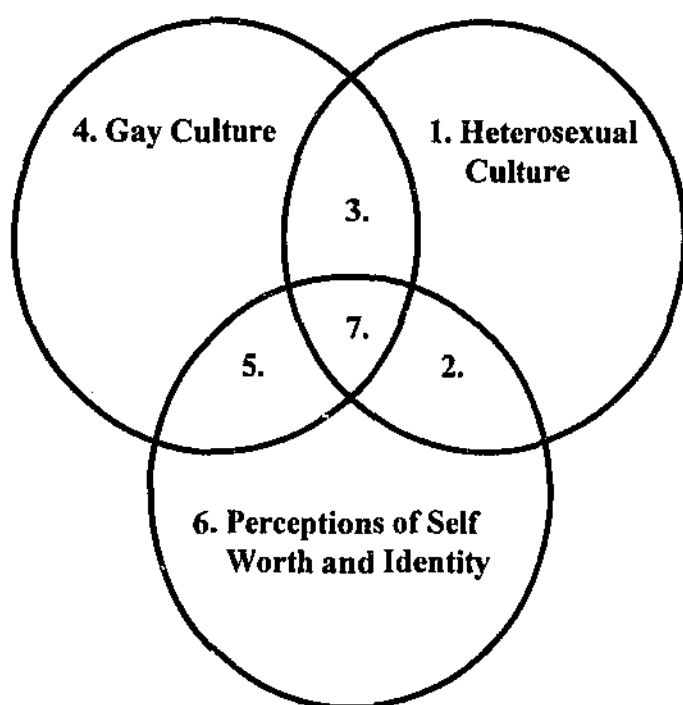
It is the purpose of this chapter to present the findings of the study and to provide an explanation of the schema used in structuring the categories under which emergent theme clusters will appear.

The Schematic Structure

Preliminary data analysis indicated that twenty distinct theme clusters could be drawn from the interview material. It became apparent from the study narratives, that mainstream heterosexual culture and gay culture played an important and integral part in the participant's perceptions and feelings of self worth and identity. Further, the intersections between heterosexual culture, gay culture and feelings about self, formed the relational basis for many of the emergent themes.

The twenty theme clusters can be grouped together and presented within seven categories formed by the intersections of heterosexual mainstream culture, gay culture and perceptions of self worth and identity. By organising the theme clusters in this way, it is hoped that the schematic structure will give clarity and depth to the study findings. The categories appear in figure 1.

Figure 1. Diagram of schematic structure of the seven categories of themes



KEY OF THEMES

1. The Influence Of Mainstream Heterosexual Culture:

The family
The education system
The workforce

2. The Intersection of Mainstream Heterosexual Culture and Perceptions of Self Worth and Identity:

Social isolation
Contemplating coming out to others
Having to continuously come out
Homophobia and heterosexism
Suicide
Moving out of home
Living a double life

3. The Intersection of Gay Culture and Mainstream Heterosexual Culture:

Seeking the acceptance of friends
The influences of cultural stereotypes on identity

4. Gay Culture:

Lifestyle issues
The gay scene

5. The Intersection of Gay Culture and Perceptions of Self Worth and Identity:

Drug use and gay culture

6. Perceptions of Self Worth and Identity:

Issues of gay identity awareness

7. The Intersection of Gay Culture, Mainstream Heterosexual Culture, and Perceptions of Self Worth and Identity.:

HIV/AIDS

The need for a bipartisan friendship and support network

Role models

Outcomes of disclosure

Gay pride

It should be noted that the schematic diagram used in this study does not represent a general or universal model. It has been used in this instance as a useful way in which to structure and present thematic data gathered from the experiences of the study participants. Since the study is only representative of the experiences of these participants, other qualitative studies in the area of gay sexuality research may uncover a different range of participant experience and this could ultimately require the deployment of some other form of schematic presentation.

Category 1. The Influence of Mainstream Heterosexual Culture

The findings revealed there were three traditional mainstream structures which impacted on the lived experiences of the young men involved in this study. Each of these structures can be found within the fabric of mainstream heterosexual culture; the family; the education system; and the workforce.

The Family

A major concern expressed by the young men was the effects that disclosure would have on their relationship with close family members. It was a theme reiterated throughout the transcriptions by all of the participants. When asked what they regarded as important coming out issues, two of the young men described their concerns respectively:

I think the most important is family. Everyone worries about what their family thinks. (Steve)

Definitely the family first. My first problem always has been the family and how they would react, because I come from a very homophobic, very religious family. (Larry)

While sibling relationships were regarded as important considerations, it was the relationships with parents that proved to be a primary issue of concern. The interview data suggested that the young men experienced closer family relationships with their mothers than with their fathers, and this gave rise to a desire to gain their mother's acceptance and understanding. It was often felt that somehow their mothers intuitively knew that they were gay.

I always think mums know before anyone else. I think if I told her she'd accept it. (Steve)

My mum knows. I haven't told her, but I think it's a mum's intuition. She knows - she's my mum. Mums always find out before you tell them somehow. (Larry)

I said I've gotta tell you something, and then she just said to me how long have you known? She sort of knew. (Jeremy)

In several instances disclosure was prevented by a poor relationship with their father and a fear of their father's reactions. The desire to maintain a close relationship with their mother after coming out and to be accepted, loved and understood by her as a gay son, was often countered by the fear of rejection by their father. At times this lead to feelings of anxiety, hurt, anger or guilt.

I've never had a good relationship with my dad and I feel guilty feeling this, but if he broke off the relationship or communication because I was gay I wouldn't miss it. I wouldn't miss him or anything. (Steve)

My mum could cope with it. The moment my mum finds out my dad will find out because she tells him everything that I do. My dad would probably die the moment I tell him. (Larry)

Remaining closeted also contributed to a breakdown in open and honest relationships with parents, particularly with mothers. The deception and secrecy involved, often resulted in abovementioned negative feelings because the young men could not express their true selves.

I'd love to tell my mum. I think the biggest thing -well the thing that hurts me most is that I can't tell her how happy I am. Like now I'm the happiest I've been for a long time because I'm with someone and I'm happy with who I am. I'd just like to go home and tell her everything that happens, but I can't and it pisses me off. (Steve)

My mum plays a smaller part in my life now and that's through my own choice. It really hurts me a lot. I love my mum. (Larry)

Of the seven young men interviewed, four are now “out” to both parents and a fifth to his mother only (his parents are divorced). In each instance they came out to their mothers first, and fathers have either been told later, or the mothers themselves have communicated the information to their fathers.

It was the experience of two young men that when disclosure was made, the negative reactions from the father resulted in a severing of father and son relationships.

After telling mum, dad didn't speak to me for two years. For the two years I think the ultimate in conversation was how are you? Then he'd walk off and that would be the whole contact with him. (David)

Mum has always been fine about it. Just recently I decided to breach [sic] the subject with my dad and that wasn't taken very well at all. He went on about how disappointed he was, and how if I needed help from him I wouldn't get it. Go to a psychologist and get healed sort of thing. You can change if you want to change. I told my mother that the only time I would visit her was when my dad was overseas or when he wasn't home or when he was dead. (Logan)

For the remaining two young men, coming out has been a positive experience, and they have all expressed a strengthened bond and deeper understanding in their relationships with parents. Initially, the disclosures were greeted with varying degrees of trepidation, but ultimately their parents came to terms with the fact that they have a gay son and have accepted this reality.

I sat down and told them the news. It went really well so it was really good. It was quite intense, a sort of big family talk for about two or three hours so yeah, I've got a lot of support from my parents. (John)

My parents believe that as long as I'm happy and healthy they want to be part of my life, and if it means they have to accept that I'm gay, then that's fine with them.
(Peter)

As discussed earlier, the issue of coming out to siblings was an issue that received a lesser degree of emphasis and immediacy in the narratives.

Five of the participants had younger brothers only within their families and the other two had only sisters - one older - one younger. None of the participants had come out to their brothers. Four of the young men stated that they had close family relationships with their brothers, the other citing homophobia as the reason why he felt distanced from the oldest of his two brothers.

The younger sister of one of the young men interviewed had been told by her parents that her brother was gay, however strong Christian fundamentalist beliefs prevented her from accepting him. It was mentioned that there had never been any close family ties between them, and so the rejection was not of any great concern. The older sister of the other young man had proved to be accepting and supportive of him when he had come out to her.

A concern for many of the participants was that their brother's age was an important consideration and reason for not coming out to them. It was felt disclosure would prove a burden at this point in their lives and they would experience difficulty coping with the stress and pressure, including peer group pressure, that disclosure would bring.

I have two younger brothers. They don't know yet. I think they're too young to know. They're still under the influence of peer pressure and stuff like that at high school and it's just not cool. I figured they probably would have a hard time dealing with it, so I'll probably tell the one who's fifteen in about two or three years once he's left school. (Logan)

My brother, I haven't told him. He's got enough problems of his own at the moment.
(Jeremy)

Others were of the belief that when they tell their brothers they may be somewhat shocked initially, but will come to terms with their sexuality and be accepting of them. One young man commented that:

I think my brothers would be pretty cool. They'd find it amusing at first I think. You know, the usual sort of surprise and maybe a bit of disgust, and then I think they'd get over it. (Steve)

Out of the seven study participants, only one young man had come out to extended family members. He recently came out to his grandmother and commented that her acceptance of him was an unexpected positive response. Another young man felt that because of their age and conservative beliefs, he could not come out to his grandparents.

I'm not out to my grandparents. I don't think I ever will be. That's a generational thing in that I don't think they'll be around much longer, and I don't really feel that they would understand or could understand. They're in their seventies and eighties. They're pretty closed minded about that sort of thing, and we have a very superficial relationship at the moment where I'm the dutiful grandson. I don't see any benefit in actually telling them. (John)

The Education System

The experience of social interaction at school or university was an issue often raised by the young men. Like the family, it was a traditional mainstream structure with which they had to contend. Although individual experience was somewhat varied, the majority of young men

have encountered problems and difficulties at school and university as a result of being gay.

Only in two cases did the young men describe scholastic life as being problem free.

Peer group pressure and homophobia were mentioned as factors that contributed to the level of discomfort and difficulty the young men experienced, particularly at secondary and tertiary levels of education. This often lead to the establishment of non-threatening friendships with the young women within their group. For young men who engaged in activities and displayed behaviours considered to be “effeminate”, the penalty was abuse and expulsion from the peer group.

At high school, two of the young men received verbal abuse and condemnation from peer group members as a result of their “overt” behaviour and friendships with the young women.

Everything was fine in primary school. I was totally accepted by everyone and that was fine. It was really obvious even with that age group, that I was competent with the female stuff and the male stuff. I'd be superior at skipping and the rope games and all that sort of stuff - hopscotch and all of this. I'd love and enjoy playing it all the time, and I would be able to handle myself with football and stuff to a point as well. I then got to high school. It was a state school in Melbourne, and started getting a lot of abuse from classmates and older years. (David)

For me there was a lot of homophobia at school. I was very effeminate at the time. I'm not effeminate now, but in high school I was extremely effeminate. All the friends I had were girls, and I think I used to adopt their mannerisms. I was extremely effeminate and the boys used to tease me. (Larry)

Often the young men felt they did not “fit in” with their peer group and expressed concern over feeling “different” and ostracised from the group.

When everyone comes to school with their little playboy magazines and everything and you have absolutely no interest, you know something's different. And every day, especially with young men - school kids - there's sex talk all the time. If you don't relate to it you're constantly on the outside of the circle. (Steve)

A fear of homophobic reactions and rejection was given as the main reason why the young men were often covert about their sexuality. They were either totally closeted at high school and university, or were extremely selective about who they disclosed to.

I suppose I was luckier than some gay guys because no one picked it up and so I wasn't bullied or anything. No one knew. I mean I suppose I'm not obvious enough that anyone would pick me out and do anything like that. (Steve)

At uni I was very careful about who I told. I was closeted all the way through high school and all the way through the first two years of uni. (Logan)

Remaining closeted (and therefore keeping up a pretence of heterosexuality), created added stress and pressure for these young men because they did not wish to appear visibly "different". A common theme discussed was concern over the issue of girlfriends. While many of their peers had begun to show an interest in the young women within their group and were establishing boyfriend/girlfriend relationships, they were not. There was concern that a visible lack of interest in girlfriends might result in either being "found out" or suspected of being gay.

I wasn't out at school. I didn't have full on girlfriends at school. I just wasn't really interested in girls. I was, but not to the extent that the other guys were. I think people sort of knew I was different and that was a worry because friends still say to me "oh, we suspected anyway". (Jeremy)

While this was an aspect of school or university life that most of the young men simply endured, one young man related how he had coped at high school by turning to study as a means of deflecting attention.

I think I turned to school work at that stage and sort of ignored everything else. I think it was perpetuated when friends - you know - every time they say when are you going to get a girlfriend? I'd say well I don't have time. I'm studying. It was just a convenient and easy excuse. (Steve)

While the majority of participants described their social interactions at school or university as being at times difficult and stressful, two of the study participants recounted how they had little difficulty coping with social aspects of academic life. In both cases the young men felt comfortable in coming out and being accepted by their peers.

One of the young men discussed how he had not become aware of the fact that he was gay until his second year at university. This was given as the reason why he believes he had a problem free passage through high school and early university. At that point he had already established good relationships and close friendships with many of his academic peers, and felt that they were open minded enough to be able to accept him as a gay person. He made the decision to come out of the closet, and was accepted by them.

The other young man described his peer group at high school as being accepting and open minded about gay issues, and therefore felt comfortable coming out to them. One of his peer group had previously come out and been accepted by the others, which made his decision to

come out easier. It is also significant that peer group members socialised outside of the school environment, often attending gay venues, and so were familiar with aspects of gay lifestyle.

There was this friend of ours who we went to school with. He left school and was working at a hairdressers. He came out to us and we used to go out with him. I don't think my close school friends - they didn't like so much expect me to be - but probably because we're in the environment all the time that everyone was so open about it that no one really cared. We used to go out to DC's, even when we were in high school, so like when they found out they didn't care. I was seventeen. (Peter)

At university his experiences were very similar. Recently Peter has come out to peers from his media course at university. He discovered that many of his university peers already had gay friends, which made it easier for him to make a disclosure.

The Workforce

Paid employment is an area in their life that many of the young men have yet to deal with.

Four of the participants are currently attending university and a fifth had left employment in the Navy to begin a university career. Of the remaining two, one young man has worked, but is currently unemployed, and the other has full time employment in the hospitality industry.

A major concern for the students was the issue of discrimination in the workplace. It was an area many of them felt uncertain about. They speculated about whether they would come out at work, or whether it would be in their best interest to remain closeted.

I have to worry about things like job. You know, if people know you're gay you're going to be discriminated against. (Steve)

Others maintained they would not go out of their way to promote the fact that they were gay, but if asked, stated that they would answer honestly. It was also felt that although the work environment might be homophobic, they could apply coming out techniques that have already worked for them in selecting who they would tell.

I've never really been employed. I've pretty much always been a student most of my life. I suppose I've never had the opportunity for it to come up. I don't go out to promote the fact I'm gay. If they asked I'd tell them. (Logan)

I think if I was to start a job somewhere where I don't know anyone and it was a conservative kind of place, I probably wouldn't tell anyone. But then I think the same thing would happen. I'd become friends with some people that I work with and I would tell them, but I don't think that I'd be open about it to everyone there. (Peter)

When I was working at Myers my workmates knew because I'd just bring up topics or whatever, and they were fine with it, but as far as management was concerned it wasn't an intrinsic part of what they needed to know so they didn't. But if I was asked I wouldn't have been bothered about discussing it. (David)

One of the students has recently completed his university science course with honours, and commented on the difficulty he has experienced in gaining a job interview. He believes he has been discriminated against by openly stating an affiliation with gay related groups and organisations in his employment resume and this has been the main reason why he has not gained an interview.

Both of my job applications came back within a week saying that I wasn't successful. So that seems a little bit suspicious, because a lot of their selection criteria are met with my experience as a volunteer with the AIDS Council. I didn't say specifically that I was a gay man, but I did say that I had extensive experience in conflict resolution and negotiating skills involved with a group for young gay and bisexual guys. That I had extensive experience in word processing and formal submissions for

funding with the AIDS Council, and yeah, I think that may have given the game away. (John)

Discrimination in the workplace was an experience described in considerable detail by Larry who is currently employed. Homophobia was given as the reason why he changed jobs several times, and why he changed his career path from catering to the hospitality industry.

After a three month period in his first place of employment, he was asked by the senior chef if he was gay. At that point he came out to her as a bisexual, believing this to be an easier and more acceptable alternative than stating that he was gay. She mentioned to him that she preferred the company of gay and bisexual men, and this had made him feel extremely good about himself. This positive response led him coming out to the other members of staff including the owner, however they proved to be extremely homophobic. He became the victim of verbal abuse and taunts and so decided to leave.

For the next year Larry worked at one of the large hotels in Perth, but did not come out to other staff members because he found them also to be homophobic and did not want a recurrence of his past experience. He was extremely unhappy in his employment, and so eventually decided to leave the catering industry. He then went to hospitality college for two years, and since that time has often found it necessary to remain closeted in the workplace. Currently Larry is "out" at work, but states that he only felt comfortable in coming out after a few of the homophobic staff members resigned.

Category 2. The Intersection of Mainstream Heterosexual Culture and Perceptions of Self Worth and Identity

The study findings revealed that while participants had inevitably to deal with aspects of mainstream heterosexual culture, it was heterosexist attitudes, beliefs and values existent within that culture that often had the greatest influence and impact over thoughts and feelings about themselves - their perceptions of self worth and identity.

The intersubjective experiences described by the participants have been clustered into seven themes. They include social isolation; contemplating coming out to others; having to continuously come out; homophobia and heterosexism; suicide; moving out of home and living a double life.

Social Isolation

Living within the framework of heterosexual culture was an experience many of the young men described as contributing to early feelings of loneliness and isolation. It was a period in their lives when they were coming to terms with their sexuality and sexual identity, but did not have any knowledge of gay culture or contact with other gay people to whom they could turn to for understanding and support. Two of the young men concluded:

I didn't have anyone basically. There was no support. I didn't even know anyone existed. I mean it was a classic case of I must be the only one in the world. I mean you know you're not, but when there's no one to talk to at the time, that's the way you certainly feel. (Steve)

I hadn't at that stage in my life had any contact with any homosexual people who could help me stabilise myself. To make me *feel* like I'm just not the only one. To make me feel like there is a community out there that you belong to. (Larry)

A desire to make contact with other gay young people resulted in participants answering advertisements placed in the personal column of local newspapers. Because of their isolation from gay culture, it was the only way they knew of establishing contacts with other young gay men. They described their positions respectively:

The first guy I met was when I read his ad and decided what the hell, I'd apply to it. That's the way I'd meet people. (Steve)

I just kept answering ads 'cause I found that was the only real way I could meet other homosexual people. (Larry)

Larry mentioned that while it was comparatively easy to make contact in this way, it was difficult to meet a person who was compatible. He added that quite often personality conflicts and disputes over lifestyle issues had arisen out of their incompatibility.

It was John's experience that a lack of intimate and direct contact with gay people prevented him from realising that he was gay. He had never consciously been aware of meeting any gay people and had internalised stereotypical images of gay behaviour and lifestyle. Because he was different from these preconceived images, he did not identify as being gay. When a highly respected and close friend came out of the closet, this changed his perceptions. It enabled John to identify with his friend's non-stereotypical persona and so the connection was made.

One of the other participants discussed how social isolation from the gay cultural scene had resulted in his appropriation of male sex-workers for the purpose of sexual experimentation and gratification.

It was rent boys [male-sex workers] at the time because I didn't know about the club. I knew about the Red Lion, but my viewpoint of who would go there was not accurate because I was totally isolated from the whole scene. (David)

Contemplating Coming Out To Others

Contemplating disclosure was something that all of the study participants had considered at some point in their lives. A strong desire to end the pretence under which they were living had also meant giving consideration to the difficulties they might experience if they did come out. On the one hand there was an expressed need to be accepted and understood. On the other, there was often consternation that such a disclosure would result in rejection from the very people they wanted to be accepted by, or from those to whom they were already close. Decisions over who could be trusted and who could not, who would be told and who would not, when will they be told and how will they be told, were dilemmas with which the young men frequently grappled.

Living inside the closet created a situation in which many of the young men lived with a constant fear of being "found out". Uncertainty and confusion over the reactions of others was perplexing, and meant that the closet was often considered a safer and more viable alternative than disclosure. This however, placed pressure and stress on the young men to maintain the pretence of heterosexuality to ward off any suspicions that they might be gay.

Living in the closet was therefore extremely restrictive in terms of their social freedom, functioning and mobility.

Before it was like I couldn't tell anyone about myself. I didn't feel like I could tell anyone about myself. I was pretty much closed in and I felt that I had to be very careful because I didn't want anyone to know that I was gay 'cause I was scared of how they would react. So I felt that I had to be very careful about what I did, things I did, who I did it with and stuff like that. (Logan)

He seemed alright with it and a couple of others have said during sensible conversations, that it wouldn't worry them to have a friend say that they were gay. Yet in a group with mates and drinking, there's always the bigotry and homophobia and it's just so confusing. You think alright, where might he have been more serious or where might he have been more truthful and you know you've gotta weigh it all up. In the end you think fuck it. Don't tell them - it's a lot safer. (Steve)

Two young men described how friendships between friends and family members prevented them from coming out of the closet. It was mentioned that many of their school friends knew their families quite well, and still lived in close proximity to them. There was a fear that if friends were told, they might respond by telling their parents and this would pre-empt their own decision to disclose.

My school friends all live in the northern suburbs and that's where my parents live, and they often drop in and see my parents even though I don't live there anymore, and you know, something can happen. If they react badly they might go and tell, or hear it from someone else and I really don't want that. If they're your friends you think they'll be okay with it, and that you shouldn't feel as if they're going to go behind your back, but I mean you do. When you're that scared and worried you do think these things. (Steve)

Then I went to college and I was still in the closet at that stage because all the people I'd come in contact with had known my family, knew my family, knew my family's friends, and so I couldn't come out with them. (Larry)

John mentioned that after he had come out to his family and friends, he was concerned about how many other people had been told. Steve recounted that when he made his first disclosure to a friend, he felt physically sick and scared because he believed that by telling this one person, the whole world would immediately know that he was gay.

A common dilemma described by the young men was the fear of losing close long term friends if they disclosed to them.

I didn't really tell anyone until about a year and a half ago. I felt I would lose friends in telling them I was gay. (Logan)

'Cause I spent five years at Uni, I developed some very close, some very intense friendships with both guys and girls. And I was concerned about telling them, especially some of the guys, because of the closeness and intensity of the friendships. (John)

It was the experience of one young man that the very idea that he would be rejected by his close friends was extremely upsetting. It made him feel angry at having to go through this stressful process in the first place, and in the end he decided that a disclosure would be too painful to endure.

And sometimes you just get so fucked off with it you think alright - tell everyone - if they don't like you fuck'em - they're not worth it. But every time you think *that*, then you go back to thinking but we've been friends for *so* long and we've been through so much, and in the end it gets upsetting 'cause you almost expect them to hate you, and then you hate *them* because they're gonna hate you after all you've done for them you know, it's just going 'round in big circles, and in the end you just think no - I'm not going to think about this anymore. (Steve)

A theme concurrent in the narratives was that living a closeted life was emotionally draining and had created so much turmoil within their lives, that a time came when they felt that they had to make a disclosure to gain peace of mind.

It was with the Navy, I just thought well stuff it - I don't care what anyone thinks anymore. I'll just tell them. (Jeremy)

There was a point just before I said it that I thought fuck it - I've gotta say something. Why not try it on someone and see what it's like? (Steve)

All of the young men described how they had eventually been able to suppress their fears to the point where they were able to come out to at least one other person.

Having To Continually Come Out

A theme revealed after data analysis was having to continuously come out to others. Changes within the young men's social environment involved contemplating disclosure to new people, and so the process of coming out was ongoing. Staff changes at work, changes in living arrangements, meeting new people at school and university and making new friends, created new relationships with which they had to contend.

One of the young men explained that part of the difficulty in being gay was having to come out continuously throughout one's life.

You come out every time you talk to someone basically. I think that's incredibly unfair. Actually my roommate's girlfriend is really great. She loves learning about different cultures and so on, and she's always amazed at the things you have to go through as a gay person. She said to me one day - she turned to me and said "that

must be so strange having to actually tell someone else your sexuality,” and like then she was talking to her boyfriend and saying “well how would we feel if we had to walk into a shop with friends and say oh I’m straight.” You know it would just be so bizarre for them. I had thought about it before, but I mean it is. It’s a real pain in the arse to have to do it. (Steve)

Jeremy described how coming out in the Navy was a constant process because many of the staff were posted in and out quite regularly. Larry recounted how a change in his place of employment forced him back into the isolation of the closet. It was not until a few of the homophobic staff resigned, that he felt comfortable in coming out at work.

After I left the restaurant, I joined the restaurant I’m working in now, and again I was put back into a pool of completely homophobic people....I felt very lonely and very alone working in this place because there was a restaurant full of bigots. I can just remember living in this realm of my mind of my own where I’d just work and go to sleep and try not to think about anything else. Then a couple of the bad ones left and I came out with a couple of the staff. (Larry)

Having to constantly go through the process of coming out had created disruptions and difficulties for the young men. The freedom, security and peace of mind they gained from being “out” was put in jeopardy when placed in new situations of possible rejection. The closet was omnipresent, offering an escape from the rigours of prejudice. Each time they were placed in situations with different people it was a decision that all of young men had considered, and so coming out is a process that is repeated over and over again.

Homophobia And Heterosexism

The data revealed that two significant factors impairing the coming out process were mainstream homophobic and heterosexist beliefs and values. It was the impact of these cultural forces that had the greatest influence in either preventing or delaying the young

men's decisions to come out of the closet. Traditional family values, peer group expectations and religious mores were heterosexist cultural norms to which the young men were expected to conform. It was also mentioned that homophobia and heterosexism were contributing factors to feelings of guilt and low self esteem. Since heterosexuality was regarded as the "normal" state of being, the young men often had to deal with homophobic beliefs and attitudes from parents, friends, the Church and the community at large.

Although homophobia and heterosexism have already been discussed in the context of education and work, they are issues that several of the young men raised in the broader context of mainstream cultural attitudes and beliefs. The compulsory nature of heterosexuality and the difficulties they have experienced as a result of cultural homophobia were given as reasons why they felt their gay identity was unacceptable.

Knowing that you're gay and having all these stereotypes of heterosexuality plummeted on you from your parents, especially parents like mine who are extreme Roman Catholic. They expected me to buy a house, have a girlfriend, get a mortgage, get married, have 2.4 kids and then retire at sixty five which is not what I want to do. (Larry)

I have no idea how my dad would take it - he's strict. I think if I came home one day and said I'd joined the army he'd kiss my feet and buy me a house and do all these things. He's one of those sort of men - to go out, join the army, get married, blah blah blah. So it would probably crush him. But I mean my whole family is. They're not religious, but they're Roman Catholic, therefore the family - they're everything. I figure if I've got a job and I'm working towards buying a house and doing all the "normal" type things he might take it a little better. (Steve)

Homophobia within the family was an issue that three of the young men have had to deal with. It was their experience that homophobic parental attitudes have prevented them from making a disclosure.

I haven't come out to my father 'cause he's in Africa, and he's - you know - all gay people should be shot. I never see him. (Jeremy)

I mean I grew up in a family where you know - to be gay is disgusting, and that's the way I felt. (Steve)

One of the young men described how his father's homophobia had resulted in physical and verbal abuse at home.

My father used to tease me and he used to physically abuse me as a child. It went from physical abuse as a child to verbal abuse as an adolescent. When he saw me acting this effeminate, I think he just used to constantly torment me and call me names and put me down. (Larry)

Religious homophobia was an issue raised by five of the study participants. It was the experience of the young men that parent's religious beliefs and attitudes or the attitudes of Church organisations of which they were members, contributed to feelings of low self esteem, guilt, hurt and anger. Religious homophobia was described as a belief system that had a considerable influence over societal attitudes, and served to exacerbate anti - gay sentiments within the wider community. The religious contention that gay lifestyle and behaviour is not acceptable created additional pressures on the young men to remain covert about their sexuality.

It [coming out] also depends on religious background, how families cope and stuff. Religion plays a big part in it, 'cause I don't agree with religion. I think religion is one of the things that stops young people from coming out, 'cause it portrays it as such a bad thing. (Jeremy)

I was closeted in my Church life 'cause up until I moved, I was very heavily involved in the Catholic Church. I did a lot of volunteer work as a member of a team which organised things for youth in the parish. Just the religious life doesn't promote homosexuality. (Logan)

One of the young men had been brought up in a Christian fundamentalist family, and was an active church member. The intense religious dogma from family and church members made him feel extremely guilty about his sexuality, and he was having problems coming to terms with being gay. When he sought advice from church members, he was condemned and ostracised.

I went to the church because they had a guilt trip camp. That anything sinful you had to confess. At the end of it I decided I couldn't deal with this anymore and I'm going to talk to them....I went to them and said I had a problem with ritualistic self abuse, which was how I was seeing the whole thing, and that I'd slept with ten men and one woman in the last five years. Instantly I was no longer head of Sunday school, was not allowed to talk to anyone under twenty five and was getting strict counselling - therapy basically every week. They were all aware that David's having problems. Various elders told their children that David's having a problem with homosexuality, just be careful if you're alone with him. These are people I'd grown up with and had known for about eight and a half years that were now treating me like they had no idea who I was. I was very very hurt by it. Very disgruntled. I was very unhappy with the church in a lot of ways. It was like I was desperately seeking acceptance and was getting nowhere fast. (David)

When David came out to his parents, his mother told him that he was possessed by the devil and his father refused to speak to him. Last year he attempted suicide.

While homophobia and heterosexism were often described in purely negative terms, it was the experience of two young men that it had in fact given them greater resolve and inner strength.

I was thrown out of a wedding once. That was just general homophobia - it happens. It's not really a disadvantage when you're "out" - it just makes you a stronger person. (Jeremy)

I just realised that my experiences had helped me to develop this person. All the negativity in my early childhood and adolescence had made me stronger. I was so positive, even though I was surrounded by all this negativity. (Larry)

Suicide

The interviews revealed that two of the study participants had tried to suicide and a third had come extremely close to actually attempting suicide. In each case the contemplation or execution of the attempt had been preceded by an extended period of inner turmoil and stress. Fear of being rejected by family and friends, feeling isolated and alone and feelings of guilt and confusion were the emotions described by the young men that had acted as a trigger in their decision to attempt suicide. The repression of these negative emotions had built up to such a point that they believed the only way out for them was to take their own lives.

I was just confused and I just didn't know what to do, and around sixteen I tried to commit suicide because of all the turmoil in my mind. I just couldn't bear it at the time. I basically felt abnormal. I didn't feel like I was right. I felt like I had this body of a teenager with a mind that just didn't programme properly. I felt like I was a mutant....My cousin James came over from the UK in the late eighties. He's heterosexual, but he's the closest I actually got to having a mentor. He made me feel comfortable, and when he left and went back to the UK I was devastated, and that's basically when I felt like this is it. There's nobody else left for me to guide me or make me feel like I'm a normal person and I just tried to take my life one night with sleeping pills. (Larry)

One of the young men described his initial coming out experience as extremely painful. He fell in love with his best friend who was not gay, which had acted as a catalyst in prompting him to contemplate suicide. He felt that he could not approach his best friend, close friends or family and tell them he was gay, and so his contemplation of suicide became a cry for help, love and understanding.

When I snapped, I wrote down like a huge letter explaining what was going on with me, various influences and stuff like that, and the fact that I was suicidal. And so I put it all in an envelope and I gave it to my best friend and disappeared for a weekend. I also left a letter on my bed for my mother. I went through a lot of things that weekend. I went to a few movies -I dunno -to sorta get out and do a few things. It was a Saturday night. I was sitting on the cliffs at the Roundhouse in Fremantle and just sort of really thinking should I or shouldn't I? And a group of people started talking to me for no reason at all, and it was from there that I just realise - I calmed down. From there I pretty much decided I think I'd better go back and face the music, and sorta see how things went. (Logan)

When Logan returned home, he was accepted by his mother, but experienced rejection from both his father and best friend. This he explained, had caused him to contemplate committing suicide several times in the past year. During that time he also came out to close university friends who were accepting of him. It has been through their acceptance and support that he felt able to overcome his periods of suicidal depression.

It was David's experience that growing up in a strict Christian fundamentalist community had a profound effect on his perceptions of self worth and identity. David had been a member of the Pentecostal Church for nine years, during which time he had become known as a "gifted prophet", engaging in a variety of religious roles and duties. His strong religious beliefs and commitments were at odds with his sexual desires and behaviours, and so he felt extremely guilty and confused.

After being ostracised by his Church and family, he left the Church and had little contact with his parents for nearly two years. At the beginning of last year David attempted to commit suicide, which he believes contributed to a renewed contact with his parents.

Since all this business in January [his suicide attempt] I probably see them twice a month now. But that's more because mum is very much clicky about the whole thing. From what I gather, she feels responsible that things got to a point where I tried to suicide with my life and how if the home environment had been different it wouldn't have happened. (David)

David described how he had emotionally distanced himself from his parents and Church and had become involved with the gay scene in Perth. However he experienced considerable difficulty in maintaining stable relationships with other young gay men. A series of failed relationships, having little financial means of support and his parent's rejection had left him feeling desperate, alone and stifled of love and affection. He commented that at the time he felt that he was a failure and believed the only release from his predicament was to commit suicide.

Moving Out Of Home

Leaving the environment of the family home was a theme recurrent in the study narratives.

While two of the young men had left home to follow career paths and a third as a natural progression towards independent living, four others had left specifically because of their sexuality. None of the young men currently live with their family.

The pressure of living a double life of secrecy and deception was the reason that two of the young men left home. They felt their social freedom and mobility was restricted because they

were under the constant scrutiny and surveillance of parents. Being closeted, they could not entertain gay friends at home, and if they did, there was a risk of being “found out” or asked embarrassing questions by their family.

Living a separate existence outside of the home environment was problematic, because parents wanted to know details about their social lives and movements. The young men often had to lie about where they were going, what they were doing and who they were seeing. This created difficulties because they did not have the freedom to come and go as they pleased. Staying overnight with a friend or lover, or attending late night clubs placed the young men in situations where they had to be covert and inventive about their activities.

I moved out of home because I was gay. I couldn't see myself going out anywhere without attracting questions. I mean they're just questions of curiosity - not trying to control me or anything. But my mum would like to know where I'm going, what time I'll be back and what I'm doing. Even now that I've moved out and go to uni there's always questions. You know, who's that young man? I've never met him before. And if I was at home it would sort of click eventually. Yeah, that was a very important reason for moving out. (Steve)

For another young man moving out of home meant an incredible emotional release of pent up tension. He no longer had to live a closeted home life and was free to express his gay identity. He attributes his recent personal growth and development to the freedom of expression gained by the move.

I decided on my twenty first birthday to move out of home. I phoned my best friend Ken and told him you've got a bedroom to let. I'll come and live with you, and he said okay, great....I moved in and it was the *best* decision I've ever made in my entire life. I've grown *so* much in the last ten months. The moment I moved out I just sat at my desk for one night and had a good cry. There was just so much tension. I cried from eleven o'clock at night till five o'clock in the morning. I could not stop. I just

felt so relieved that I was out of this threshold that was my parentage. I could be myself. (Larry)

Two study participants explained that it was because of negative responses they had received when disclosing to parents that had caused them to leave home. One young man recounted that although his mother had been accepting, it was his father's negative attitudes and abuse that angered him to the point that he decided to leave.

I pretty much stormed out of the house and I told my mother that night - I rang her and told her that I was going to move all my furniture and everything I had out of the house. That I was going to - I wanted all the money that I'd been saving up with them back. (Logan)

It was the other young man's experience that growing up in a Christian fundamentalist household had placed great pressure on him to be covert about his sexuality. Although his disclosure to parents had been a negative experience, it had also been an experience of great relief and personal freedom.

I was out in '92. I moved out of home and came out on the same day. In a way it was really liberating and really good. (David)

The three remaining participants had already moved out of home before they came out to parents. One young man left home to join the navy, and commented that his physical distance and separation from home had made it easier to come out to his mother. Another young man moved to Perth from the country to begin university studies, and was also physically separated from his parents when he came out. The third young man stated that his parents

never questioned him about his sexuality or his friends, and that he had moved out of home simply to experience independent living.

Living A Double Life

Since all of the young men are to varying degrees closeted in their lives, they are in the changeable position of having to move in and out of the closet. Three of the young men described how they felt relaxed and free to be themselves when in the company of gay friends or accepting "straight" friends and acquaintances. When closeted, they were often placed in restrictive and compromising situations that took a great deal of inner strength and energy to maintain. They had to constantly be on guard in terms of what they were saying, how they were behaving and what they were doing.

I mean they're complete and utter opposites of when you're around you're gay friends or straight friends that know, and when you go home to your parents or your old school friends. It takes energy to actually think about what you're saying when you're around people who don't know. Whereas when you're around your gay friends, it's like blurt out whatever the hell you bloody well want to and they laugh along or understand....And I know it's funny now - even going home I have to watch what I say....When I'm with my gay friends I just let it go. You know, you see someone walking down the street - ooh, look at those buns and stupid things like that. I remember watching a movie with my brother, and it almost came out. I was in mid sentence and had to completely swap it around. So now before I walk through my parent's front door I actually mentally say like don't slip up. It's something you have to think about isn't it? It's so weird. (Steve)

Even though I was in a closet and shielded and in a shell I was at home when I was out and about with my own kind. I would just be a completely different person. I was like two people. At home I would just be a complete different person. At home I'd constricted myself to being a good Roman Catholic boy who'd go to sleep at ten o'clock and wake up at seven and go to college or work and then come home and clean his room and all that kind of shit. But then when I'd go out it was a totally different story. I was always the liveliest one at parties. I'm always the liveliest." (Larry)

We were at the Flinders, and I was just having a great time but I didn't tell anyone else that. You know, I sorta like made a story up to protect myself so that they wouldn't think I was gay, you know what I mean? I said "oh Evan tried to crack on to me" and all this - you know - big butch Navy things and all this crap. (Jeremy)

Four of the young men recounted how leading a double life made had made them feel vulnerable to exposure. They were fearful that being publicly "visible" in gay company and at gay venues would result in family or friends finding out they were gay. It was one young man's experience that fear of exposure drove him overseas to seek anonymity.

There was a real stigma about meeting someone, because what if family found out? 'Cause I was still living at home, and there was a major network of churchgoers that could also spot me 'round the town, so I was very phobic about meeting people....I decided to escape, and to try and settle in the UK and have a life. I lasted five months and came back. (David)

Perth's leading gay venue is located in the heart of the city's nightclub district, and consequently extremely visible to the many people that visit the area. A fear shared by these young men was being spotted entering or leaving the club and hence identified as being gay.

A common experience recounted was:

My biggest fear was being seen going into the place. I mean once you're inside, you're alright. But then you've got to worry about coming back out again. (Steve)

My biggest fear about Connies is that you had to walk in off the main street. It wasn't so bad entering, 'cause you had your back to people and you didn't have to look at them, but actually leaving where you had to face the audience - I thought that was terrifying. (David)

I wasn't really comfortable with being identified with being a gay person. It was a big step going into what was definitely a gay venue. (John)

Living a dual existence was an experience the young men described as physically, emotionally and mentally draining. Apart from the secrecy and deception involved, it was the sheer hard work required to maintain the deception that sapped their energy and strength. The freedom and enjoyment the young men experienced when they were “out” had to be reconciled with the restrictions of the closet, and so they were in a constant position of having to make decisions that impacted on their personal growth and freedom.

Category 3. The Intersection of Gay Culture and Mainstream Heterosexual Culture

Analysis of data revealed coming out to be an extremely complex process, involving the negotiation of two different and at times dichotomous cultures. All of the young men had grown up within the cultural boundaries of mainstream heterosexual structures, and had experienced the social mores that were accepted as the “norm”. Simultaneously, they had begun to explore aspects of gay culture that offered a new range of lifestyle choices, experiences and relationships.

Seeking The Acceptance Of Friends

Since the greater part of their lives had been spent exclusively within the heterosexual culture, they had established a range of relationships with their “straight” peers, many of whom were close and valued friends. In the past, they had been able to openly discuss issues and problems with their friends, however the social stigmas surrounding gay lifestyle prevented them from disclosing changes that were occurring within their lives.

A number of the young men described how they felt isolated and lonely when they realised they were gay, and that the pressure of remaining closeted created a great deal of inner conflict and stress. At a time in their lives when they were exploring their gay identity, they felt particularly vulnerable to discrimination because of their awareness of cultural homophobia and heterosexism. It placed doubts and fears in their minds over potential lifestyle choices, how they would be received if they did make a disclosure. In order that these issues be addressed, there was a need to express and validate their sexuality and to "test out" reactions and responses to their gay identity. Friends were viewed as an established source through which this could be achieved and if they were accepting, would provide a structure of support and understanding.

Prior to his first coming out experience to friends, one of the young men described his attitude as:

If they're disgusted then you've learned your lesson. If they're okay with it, then see what happens. (Steve)

When discussing their coming out experiences with friends, four of the study participants described their experiences as positive, while three had experienced some negative responses and reactions. Within the positive responses there were degrees of acceptance that ranged from being generally okay with the disclosure to being very understanding and supportive. This was reflected in the level of comfort that friends had with gay issues and the duration and intimacy of the relationship. In terms of negative responses, it was their friend's homophobia that was given as the reason for rejection.

Data analysis revealed the young men first came out to close friends they felt could be trusted and who would be the most accepting, and then proceeded to tell others who were more distant.

I told all my closest friends and then any other friends....With my closer friends it was like I asked to talk to them, told them what happened on the weekend [his contemplation of suicide] and that I'm gay. With just normal friends - not close friends - I had to sort of play it by ear and see how it goes. (Logan)

I was fairly confident with all my friends, because they were all really really close friends, and when I did tell them it turned out fine anyway. It was really good. (John)

When the young men made their initial disclosures, it was to someone they felt comfortable with and that would be the most likely to be accepting and understanding. Three of the participants had made their initial disclosure to young female friends. Two stated they had done so because there was less likelihood of homophobic reactions than if they disclosed their sexuality to young male friends. It was also mentioned that when a positive response was received, the relationships were strengthened and deepened through the experience.

There seemed some reason to tell her because she's very open and easy about things like that. When she said she had doubts about her sexuality I thought well I'll just tell her and so I did. I was glad I told her 'cause even though she had doubts about herself at least she wasn't homophobic. As it turns out we're the best of friends now, so it was good that I told her. (Steve)

Karen was the first person that I came out to. She's my closest friend who was female and therefore I felt would be least threatened by the information. It was not something that she had ever considered, but she was very very warm and supportive. We had big hugs and talked things through for hours and it was great. (John)

The first person I told was my best friend Fran. We were at a birthday party for a guy that was gay and his friends from work were there. A lot of them were gay and one of them liked me, and I thought oh yeah - I liked him. So I went and told Fran. She said yeah, I know, so why don't you go and talk to him? So yeah, she was the first person. She was so fine about it like I expected her to be. And all of my other close friends - well they found out in time anyway 'cause I just told them....I think I am one of the luckiest people because my closest friends in high school are still my closest friends now, and that's because they were all so willing to accept my sexuality. (Peter).

Two of the young men described how they had declined telling close friends because of potential rejection. They were surprised when their friends responded with expressions of hurt and annoyance because they had not been privy to the information.

I told Paul eventually. He was actually one of the last people to find out at the end of my close circle of friends. I think that hurt him quite a lot. He's actually said that it hurt him quite a lot for a variety of reasons. 'Didn't you trust me etc, etc?' His reaction was probably the best of all my friends. He was very supportive. (John)

My godbrother and I practically grew up with each other. I didn't know how to tell him, and I didn't know how he'd react. He'd tell homosexual jokes and so I wasn't sure how he'd take it. And I didn't tell him till like two or three months ago, and he said 'fine -I really don't give a damn. I'm kind of a bit annoyed that you'd think I'd treat you any other way.' Other friends I just pretty much played it by ear and found out how they felt about homosexuals. If I felt that I could trust them yeah, I'd tell them. (Logan)

In several instances the young men described how their disclosures to friends had been a negative experience. Responses ranged from unfriendliness to outright rejection. Depending on the closeness of the friendship, participant's reactions ranged from not caring to feeling completely devastated.

There was a few friends at school that I didn't see after I left school. I saw a couple of them out like a while later and I said Hi to them and they went - you know - Hi, but not friendly. But they were people that weren't important to me so it didn't really matter. (Peter)

My best friend was a bit funny at first. He said it was okay and that it wasn't going to affect our friendship, and that was in theory. In practice he started ignoring me, avoiding me. It wasn't the same, the friendship anyway, and it was very painful. Last year was a very painful year for me because I was really jacked around by him, and I came very close to committing suicide so many times. (Logan)

Two young men recounted how they had felt more comfortable telling friends they were bisexual because it was less threatening than stating they were gay. Coming out as a bisexual was also a means of pre-empting disclosure as a gay person by gradually gaining their acceptance.

I was in the navy and I'd been having sex with guys. One night I was pissed and told everyone. I had originally told everyone that I was bisexual and then I told everyone I was gay. (Jeremy)

I didn't come out with him at that stage as a gay, I came out with him as a bisexual. I thought it might be more comfortable for me to do that. (Larry)

A theme common in the study narratives was that coming out became easier as the young men disclosed to more and more people. Even if disclosures to others had proven negative, the young men commented how the experience of coming out was satisfying and had given them strength and confidence to continue with the process.

After I told them [his navy friends] I felt excellent. I felt like this burden had gone, and I felt proud sort of. (Jeremy)

I mean going from telling the first girl and feeling physically sick, to telling the second one and feeling a bit queasy and when I told James it was fine. It sort of gave me confidence. (Steve)

Many of the young men were meeting and establishing friendships with other gay young people, and had begun to experience a new range of relationships and attitudes towards gay lifestyle. Acceptance by gay friends served to further validate and strengthen their confidence and identity as a gay person, and had contributed to their experience of personal growth and development.

I was going out with some friends and one of their friends was gay and I thought this is pretty cool. He's the first gay person I'd ever met that I knew was gay and we became friends and I think that might have speeded things up a bit. (Jeremy)

I got to hospitality college and that's where my life began to change. I met a whole variety of people such as Andrew and Paul. They were my mentors between the ages of seventeen and twenty. They're both gay people, and they helped me out of the closet....Basically how it happened is I came out to Andrew and Paul and they said "we know - we knew. We were just waiting for you to tell us." Paul and Andrew are great mates. I became their mate. Andrew and Paul were the biggest influences for me. They were my mentors for two years. I just wanted to be at work to be around them. When I left the restaurant I was working with a group of homophobic people, and I went back into my shell, but not completely. I'd tasted - I'd sort of gone into the gay community, had a feel for it and then left the root of it which was Andrew and Paul who put me into it. Then I'd left. It felt like I'd left a family. (Larry)

The Influences Of Cultural Stereotypes On Identity

The data revealed that while cultural mainstream stereotypes had a profound influence over the young men's lives, there also existed within gay culture, stereotypical representations of gay sexuality and behaviour to which they were exposed. Since their passage into gay culture was a new experience that formed a nexus between gay and heterosexual cultures, there was often conflict or confusion over their identity as a gay person.

A common theme in the narratives was the conflict between sexual and personal identity and it was issue that the majority of young men felt they had to resolve. In the "straight" community there was a desire to show that their sexuality was only one part of their total personage and be accepted as a whole person. In the gay community they felt the need to exert their own identity and resist cultural pressures to adopt a stereotypical persona.

And so I discovered this power that I had. This way of dealing with people about my homosexuality. That I could get people on my side and have them see that behind homosexuality there's a person. Behind *every* sexuality there's a person first and then there's a sexuality, so what's the big deal? (Larry)

I was very relieved. I suppose that relief was combined with the relief that all my friends didn't give a damn about me being gay. Most of their responses were fine - you're gay, but you're still Logan - you're still the same person. (Logan)

Basically we all came through a very similar rural background, so it was very important to spend a lot of time humanising the fact of being gay, because a lot of them are basically dealing very much with the stereotypes. (John)

Two young men described how they were liked and respected by peers because of their personal identity and so their sexuality did not create a problem. One young man felt his openness and frankness had added to the respect and support he received.

Because there's forty eight of us living in a mess altogether, and they respected me because they knew that I wasn't the only one in the mess that was gay, but I was the only person that said it. You know, I had pictures of Keanu Reeves up on my rack, and I had photos of guys and I didn't care at all.... Even though most of them were straight, or I thought they were straight at the time, I had their support. There wasn't really that much negative. They all thought it was cool. Every port had organised huge parties. I was the entertainment rep for the mess, so I used to do it. I've been around for a while, and I knew what I was doing, so they really didn't have much negative vibes. (Jeremy)

I found in my career at least, that the fact that I presented a person and not a sexuality to them or a problem, a dilemma of society which is homosexuality at the moment. They saw the person and not the dilemma, because that is posed to a lot of homophobes. They respect me for that. (Larry)

Six of the study participants concluded that an important coming out issue was making choices and decisions relating to their identity. For some it was an issue dealt with at the beginning of their contact with gay culture. For others, it was a decision made after a longer period of involvement and experience with gay cultural life.

I suppose an important issue for me was how I was going to act. Like whether you're going to be camp, or you're just going to be yourself or whatever. A lot of people don't know who they are at the time, and so they decide okay, I'm gay so I'm going to act it. There's this gay stereotype, so they go with the stereotype and they act really camp and all that. They go *that* way. Me, I decided when I came out that that's not the way I wanted to be. I didn't know what I wanted to be, but I knew what I didn't want to be and that was that stereotype. I didn't want to be forced to act in a camp way. I just wanted to be myself. (Logan)

I don't like the gay scene. It's just too bitchy. These full on queens - they're just really bitchy. They get this stereotype and they think that they have to act like that. (Jeremy)

Two of the study participants have had a considerable involvement with the gay scene in Perth. Their opinions differed over the extent to which cultural pressures influenced their sense of identity. When asked if they had experienced a sense of identity loss, they responded:

No, that's not a conscious choice. I know lots of people that have made that decision. Well, they'll just become a scene person and lose whatever they were before that. In a lot of ways I've constantly fought to maintain my identity as best I could. (David)

I think you do. I saw it happening to myself, and that's why I got away from it. 'Cause I thought that I'd become less of a person, because I wasn't so much interested in what my goals and dreams were before. My whole life seemed to revolve around one dingy nightclub in Perth. I got to thinking that there's the rest of the world out there. Your life doesn't have to revolve around one place. (Peter)

Gay cultural stereotypes and their influence over identity choices and decisions were contentious issues raised by the young men. Three participants felt that embracing stereotypical patterns of behaviour, language and dress contributed to mainstream perceptions of gays as "effeminate" and "deviant" and therefore served to reinforce mainstream stereotypes and homophobia.

Category 4. Gay Culture

Data analysis revealed that gay culture played an important role in the coming out process. It provided the young men with a feeling of acceptance and belonging in a community with which they could identify. Gay venues and outlets also provided a safe social environment in which the young men could be themselves and socialise with other gay people without fear of persecution or ridicule. Within mainstream culture the young men had experienced the social and behavioural "norms" associated with heterosexual lifestyle. In gay culture, they were exposed to alternative modes of expression that provided a different range of behavioural and lifestyle choices.

Lifestyle Issues

Coming out and identifying as a gay young person had involved the study participants making decisions about their gay identity. Similarly, coming out also evoked decisions about

lifestyle. As the process continued, the young men were mixing with a greater number of other young gay people. They had begun to establish a social network of friendships and relationships which led them increasingly into the public environment of gay cultural life and the gay community. The narratives revealed that a transition into gay culture and the sexual freedom they had experienced within this environment induced four of young men to leave their parental home and commence living an independently gay lifestyle. A theme concurrent in the narratives was that moving out of home and living a gay lifestyle strengthened the young men's sense of gay identity and contributed to a sense of personal growth and development.

The first time I moved out was the middle of '93. I moved out just as I met my first boyfriend. It was really funny because he wanted to hurry up and move out so we could start things, because at home it was just so restrictive. Someone was home all the time at either household, so you couldn't be natural, so yeah - that was a big factor. Most young gay guys want to move out because they can't be who they want to be at home. When I moved back after moving out the second time was because I couldn't go anywhere or see anyone I'd made friends with. I moved back home and then for the next four months that I was at home that was the worst time. I sort of confirmed that this is who I was, because I met this person and this is what I liked and loved and it sort of confirmed everything. When I moved back home I had to fit back into this "straight" role and it just didn't work, and so for the next four months living at home was hell. (Steve)

It was also Steve's experience that moving in with a young "straight" man had created difficulties because he could not be open about his relationship with his boyfriend. He eventually came out to his housemate and commented:

After I told him everything was alright, and I was getting a lot happier as it went on because it made the relationship a lot easier. I was with someone at the time, so I could bring them into the house without worrying and that's really all I wanted. (Steve)

Data analysis revealed that the mores of gay culture had a significant influence in determining lifestyle choices made by the participants. During the course of the interviews all of the participants expressed a desire for monogamy in relationships with partners. Of the seven young men interviewed, two are currently in long term monogamous relationships and one young man has a steady boyfriend. The young men in long term relationships indicated that their decision to choose monogamy had been made after some involvement and experience with gay cultural life. Monogamy however, was not accepted uncritically, but with a degree of scepticism and caution. When asked if monogamy was a lifestyle that all young gay men should follow, one of the young men commented:

I don't even think that this is so. If it was completely monogamous then yes, I think that a monogamous relationship is the way to go, but I don't think that you should get into it at a very young age. I think that a lot of people do that and it doesn't work out and people just end up getting hurt. I'm in a monogamous relationship and everything's hunky dory -everything's fine. But I'd like to be able to say I'd like to spend the rest of my life with this person but I can't say that. I can see a few years down the track with the same person, but I think that at a young age you still have a lot to experience. I can't say that we'll be together forever, but I can say sure, I'd like that. (Peter)

The other young man held very strong views about his lifestyle choice and the lifestyle stereotypes that exist within the gay community. He commented on a widespread belief that being gay meant the endorsement of sexual encounters with multiple partners and that his decision to choose a monogamous lifestyle had drawn criticism from certain factions within the gay community.

I don't like the stereotyping that goes on. Even within the gay community. Abnormal, because I have one partner - I'm abnormal. Why? That's fuckin' stupid. I'm in a monogamous relationship and that's the way I choose to live, and if other guys wanna choose to live in non-monogamous relationships then that's their choice. But like at SIDA [a support service for people living with HIV/AIDS] and that, they

all believe that I'm weird because I'm in a relationship with one guy and I won't sleep with anyone else. That's just them acting on the stereotype I suppose. (Jeremy)

A theme consistent in the narratives was that sexuality was only one of the factors involved when considering a choice of lifestyle. The young men discussed how living a gay life required choosing a lifestyle that would be the most suitable in terms of meeting their needs and expectations and required giving consideration to other factors in their lives including work, their goals and ambitions, creating their own family structure (including the adoption of children) and gaining emotional security, support and stability. Comments included:

Our relationship means that I've got something to look forward to all the time so it keeps me going. It's just good - support and stuff. You can talk things over and yeah, I like it. (Jeremy)

Andrew and Paul both have different lifestyles. Paul has two lovers, both of which are older than him and they take care of him. That's one type of lifestyle you can have when you're a homosexual. Andrew made the other end of the lifestyle, which is more appealing to myself, known to me which is settled in with a man. I want it - a stable life - a stable job - that appeals to me. (Larry)

What I said to him that night is I'd like to get married if it becomes legal and maybe adopt a child or two and try to live a life like that. (Larry)

A disadvantage in being gay, as far as I understand it, is not being able to foster or adopt children. But I believe very strongly that that's going to change soon. By the time I'm actually ready to start that part of my life I think the situation will have changed. (John)

While all of the young men had something to say regarding their choice of lifestyle, Larry was speculative about living a completely “out” lifestyle as a gay person. He posed the question:

Would you be able to live life completely as a homosexual member of society? As much as a lot of folks don't like it, being gay is perceived as a negative lifestyle in society. Therefore would you be comfortable living with all that stress, all that pressure and all that negativity? (Larry)

The Gay Scene

The data revealed that the first experience six of the seven study participants had with gay cultural life was through accessing conventional gay nightclubs and hotels colloquially known as the gay scene. The scene provided a contact point with the gay community and a safe anti oppressive social space they could claim as their own. Within the scene environment the young men were able to socialise with friends, meet new people and gain knowledge and insight into the mores of gay culture.

Conventional gay venues proved to be the most common means of exploring gay culture, however the majority of young men stated they had learned of alternative gay youth social and support groups through social contacts made at these venues. One exception was a young man who had learned of their existence through his university gay support group. Three participants commented they currently access gay youth support groups and services (including a dropin centre), however two of the young men felt that it was too confrontational and avoided making contact. They felt it easier to attend a large public venue rather than enter the more intimate environment of a small group setting.

Data analysis indicated that coming out into gay culture was a not a static process. It inevitably changed as the young men gained more knowledge, experience and familiarity with scene life and gay issues, became more confident and affirming of their own gay identity and as their social network of friends evolved and expanded.

Taking the first step into public gay culture was an experience described by all of the young men. Recollections of their early contacts evoked a range of mixed emotional responses from the participants. Some described it as an extremely liberating experience that had filled them with a sense of freedom and belonging, while for others it had also been frightening, first impressions being of a sleazy venue that had not measured up to their needs or expectations.

I remember it was a Saturday night after work. We all got there at eleven o'clock. I was all excited and shivery and nervous. We entered the front door and the moment I walked in I just felt at home. The moment I walked in I felt at ease. I could just let down and come out of my shell and I did and in the biggest way believe me. That's the first time I really felt comfortable as a gay person. Not just entering that club, but standing on the podium and seeing a thousand men - only men - in front of me. I just felt like I wasn't the only one - I'm not alone - for the first time since I was twelve and it felt good. It was a very good feeling. (Larry)

The Court was actually the first place that I went to. I went with some guys that were older than me that I met through the ad and I just didn't like it. I grew up thinking that two guys kissing and so on was disgusting and I mean even though I was gay, to see two guys - although it was interesting and almost arousing and exciting, it was still bad. (Steve)

We used to go to DC's. It was sort of people dancing and having a good time and talking. It was good in a way because I used to get a lot of attention and that was cool and I didn't think there was anything wrong with it. Maybe the first couple of times we went up - you saw a few guys dancing cheek to cheek or sticking their tongues down someone else's throat - it was sort of - it wasn't like ughh or yuck - it was sort of *alright*! Whatever they want, that's cool. Because you haven't been open to it before it was a bit of a shock, but not a repulsive sort of shock. It was just a sort of eye opening experience. But after that it was cool. It was fun to go up there. (Peter)

We went up to Connies and I saw my first drag show and just sat there going wow - that was wild. I really enjoyed it. I just thought it was really interesting and I was *really* nervous....After, I became comfortable with where I was and realised it's just a club and it all dawned on me that hey, it's just a normal place and I relaxed a lot. And then watching people and seeing everyone I was sort of oh wow. And I suddenly became very much at ease and very much more comfortable. It was almost like a safe haven in a lot of ways. And I had quite a large support group instantly there that were willing to talk to me and be friendly, non-judgemental and were actually interested in what I was interested in. There was like a kindred thing about the whole environment. (David)

One of the young men recounted that negative first impressions of the scene had caused him to question his decision to live his life as a gay person. It had not met with his needs or expectations and after his initial visit he did not return for some time.

The first gay venue that I went to was the Court and I thought it was the seediest, most disgusting place I'd ever been to. That was a big backward step for me for a long time. It wasn't what I had in mind. I was expecting this happy colourful friendly bar and it was like the worst - all my worst visions of a pub rolled into one. It was terrible. I basically felt threatened, very disappointed, very upset and perhaps more than a little worried that maybe I'd made the wrong choice. It was almost embarrassing too and quite disappointing. (John)

Three of the young men recalled how they had initially felt scared and uncomfortable visiting a gay venue or outlet because they were unaware of the protocol and expectations of the new setting.

When I first went to Connections I was scared. I just didn't know what was happening and I didn't know if I was doing the right thing, so I was like - I was feeling really guilty as well. I was shaking and stuff and bought myself a water. I wouldn't drink - standing at the bar. And I suppose what made it easier in the future was when I'd go up there - after I'd come out -and friends would come up with me - and so I think that made it a hell of a lot easier. (Jeremy)

When I first went there [the dropin centre] it was absolutely fabulous. We just sort of sat down and watched this video and I was feeling amazingly uncomfortable, 'cause I had absolutely no idea what the *boundaries* were in this place. I had absolutely no idea what to expect. (John)

In a lot of ways I was scared 'cause I really was unsure of what the protocol was. I had never been on the gay scene or even had enough experience to know what it was about. (David)

The young men's current beliefs and attitudes regarding scene life indicated that the scene had not met with many of their needs or expectations.

At Connections, I was never into the dancing of music [sic] or anything. As a way of meeting people, no, it's not my preferred way. But as somewhere to go with people you already know, yes. The Court's alright I suppose. (Steve)

I'm never on the scene. I don't believe the scene is for me. I touch them occasionally on a Sunday night, but that's about the only time I get involved. (Larry)

Data analysis revealed that as the young men's network of friends grew, reliance on the gay scene for social contacts and interaction diminished. Attending gay venues usually involved going with a group of friends rather than going alone or to meet other people. Anecdotal evidence uncovered in the narratives showed that after a sustained period of contact with the nightclub scene, the majority of young men became disillusioned and critical of that environment and either left it completely or limited their contact to occasional visits with friends. Only two of the study participants currently attend gay nightclubs on a regular basis.

Participants who had attended gay youth groups mentioned that normally the programs only ran over a limited number of weeks and therefore contact was not ongoing. Two young men still attend the dropin centre, however this is currently in their capacity as volunteer support workers.

Four participants stated that while they still go to gay hotels with friends they do so less frequently, preferring to socialise with their friends through other social avenues, including going to the movies, going out to dinner, picnics, holding parties and visiting friends in their homes.

While the young men all agreed that the scene had played an important role in their accession to gay culture and the gay community, there were elements of scene life that had caused them to become disenchanted. A common belief expressed in the narratives was that scene life placed an over emphasis on sex. The young men stated that they had often felt pressured into having sexual encounters when they had been propositioned, often by older predatory males. The scene was frequently referred to as a “meat market” filled with “sleazy old men”.

Comments included:

I visited the Court hotel a few times before I went to Connections. I quite liked the atmosphere of the Court hotel. Connections I couldn't stand. I didn't like the atmosphere. The first time I went up there was with my friend Terry. It was a men's only night and they have male strippers. I felt *really* uncomfortable. I suppose I didn't know anyone else at the time, but it felt like a *meat* market. I felt I was being checked out by everyone and I did not like it. I very rarely go up to Connections except with like a big group of friends and pretty much take it as it comes, but I still don't like the atmosphere. It's a lot like a meat market and I don't like it. (Logan)

You don't *have* to be on the scene getting a root every night, 'cause that's the kind of thing these guys are talking about. You have to go and get a root at Connections. You don't have to do that. Just because you're gay doesn't mean that. (Jeremy)

One of the things that concerns me about the scene is the emphasis on youth and sex. That it's almost compulsory to get out there and sleep with as many young gorgeous guys as you can. (John)

The first time we went to Connections I hated that. It was more like sleazy old men. We walked in and someone like grabbed my butt. It was a sleazy old man and we just stayed for about five minutes and left. My first impression of that place was probably like these are dirty old men looking for people to have sex with. I can't stand the gay scene anymore although I think everyone has to go through it. (Peter)

I got into the crowd that night after the show had finished and as usual got chatted up by old men, sixty five plus. (Larry)

Another issue raised by the young men was the "scene queen" sexual stereotype that was prevalent at gay venues. It was the experience of all of the young men that within the gay scene existed a core body of individuals and groups that adopted a stereotypical gay persona presented as being indicative of the gay community. Acceptance by these individuals or groups required that individuals adopt the semiotics of the group and the study participants often felt pressured into conforming to the stereotype. Comments made by the young men included that there were elements of scene life considered to be "clicky", "bitchy", "pretentious", "fake" and "phoney". The participant's also felt that there was a strong focus on male beauty, appearance and image rather than on an individual's personality and nature.

When you walk in there [Connections] I just see shields around the groups and you cannot go through that shield. It's very clicky. It's very stuffy. So I just prefer to go with my friends, have a quick drink and a chat and maybe a bit of a dance and then go on with what I had planned for the evening. (Larry)

A disadvantage of the scene is having to deal with like the whole gay ethos - the whole set up of the community; the fact that there's a certain image you're meant to be able to attain and maintain - the so called stereotypical gay male; the psychological negativity that surrounds you; the total image consciousness - that's very soul destroying if you don't fit the bill. That side of it is very negative. I felt a lot of pain and difficulty with that. The gay scene being so image conscious. The whole thing of trying to present a perfect visage - perfect hair - clothes appropriate to whatever the image was for the night. There's a certain expectation of what the image must be and it must be maintained at all costs. (David)

I know a lot of people there [on the scene] and have known them well enough to see that they were fake and phoney. Not that they were after one thing, but they only wanted to be friends with you for certain reasons, like they wanted to be friends with you because they liked someone that you knew. Or they wanted to be friends with you 'cause they thought you were fun to be with, but if you didn't speak to them for a couple of weeks then all of a sudden it had to be big dramas....The bad parts of the scene is just like -the people seem to be very bitchy, very materialistic, pretentious. They're only interested in what they see and not interested in what's underneath, like what's inside a person. (Peter)

It was the young men's experience that even though there were many negative elements within scene life, there were also positive aspects that existed in support of young gay men. In this regard, the scene positively reinforced that it was perfectly acceptable to be a gay young person and provided a safe environment in which the young men could meet and socialise.

I think the positives are that you can meet other people there - other people like yourself and know that you're not alone - that you're not the only one like this. I mean when you go out, especially if it's busy, there's so many other people like yourself and it's comforting in a way. That's good. It brings everyone together because they're all the same, but only in their sexuality. I mean people are different. Sexuality is only a small part of it I think. So it's positive that because it's something that is looked upon by a lot of other people as wrong. And when you meet other people who are like you or think it's okay and are accepting of it, then that's definitely a positive. (Peter)

In the scene people band together. It's also good because it provides a safe sort of place where you can go. I mean I love the Court hotel - It's just Connections that I have a problem with. The Court hotel is a safe place you can go to and *feel* at home. (Jeremy)

One young man stated that part of his role as conveynor of a youth group was to empower young people in making their own choices and decisions rather than feeling they have to fit in with the scene stereotypes.

I generally feel quite positive about the scene. I'm certainly on the scene and I access Connections a lot. To me it's a very valuable social venue for myself....It can be superficial and it can be damaging in some respects, but I think it's up to the individuals who go onto the scene to take a responsibility for themselves, which is generally not easily done. I suppose ideology of self and that's part of the main purpose of the youth education programme which I'm a big part of here [West Australian AIDS Council]. It's to empower people to make decisions that are for themselves rather than to fit into perceptions that the scene might impose on them.
(John)

One young man, currently in a monogamous relationship, described how scene life had been a negative influence on their ongoing relationship and so both partners decided to leave the scene completely.

I think there's so much - there's a lot of bitchiness and infidelity and everything on the scene and I know a lot of people who are on the scene are just - although I think a lot of people are looking for a proper relationship, it can only get to a certain point if you're continuously going out with a person, 'cause for me, there always seemed to be people who were there to jump in or to ruin the relationship in some way because they liked you or they liked the other person and so they wanted to see it not work.
(Peter)

Accounts given by the young men indicated that although they were aware of the influence that scene stereotypes had over their own scene experiences and relationships, the young men could not explain why such attitudes and behaviours prevailed.

Data analysis has shown that the young men's attitudes and beliefs changed as they gained more knowledge and experience of scene life and as they became more confident and assured of their gay identity. The study narratives revealed that out of the seven participants, six have come out into gay culture over the past one to two years, and of the six, five have had sporadic contact with conventional gay venues over that time. Although the young men still on occasion accessed these venues, they had rejected the collective sexual stereotype and public persona of scene life in favour of maintaining their own personal identity as a gay person. It could therefore be speculated that a lack of interest in and rejection of the gay stereotype is a significant factor in their inability to explain why the stereotype existed.

The seventh participant has had almost continuous contact with the gay scene for the past three and a half years, currently accessing venues on a regular weekly basis. Apart from spending the longest period of time on the scene, he was also the oldest of the study participants (twenty five years of age) and self identified as being a "scene queen". It was his experience that the time spent on the scene (particularly in one specific night club), gave him rights and privileges as a long term scene member that did not exist for young men who were new to scene life.

Often I think it comes down to the fact that there's my group who have been at the club for *so* long and basically own it in our eyes. And we've served out time and we deserve to be here and we can destroy anyone because *we own the club* - the regulars, the staff and the rest of it. There is a lot of bitchy attitude going around from our age group that are basically getting insecure about our age and are taking it out on people. I think because of that the younger guys *just* out that are just seeing this place are meeting people that are just giving them attitude - a lot of attitude and they've had years to refine their skills and abilities with it. They are finding that they meet this guy - they take them home - they have sex - they go out the next night and suddenly everybody knows about them and they have to put on some sort of guise to be able to deal with the fact that there wasn't a loving, caring relationship there. It was just sex. And I think that's more prevalent now. (David)

David indicated that ageism and the focus on youth were the reasons why his particular group felt insecure and threatened by younger gay men coming out on the scene. It was described as a cyclical pattern in which new younger men took control from the older established group members. He felt that at twenty five he was already becoming too old to sustain his position and feared that younger, more attractive males would take over the spotlight and attention that he had enjoyed and this made him fearful about his future lifestyle. It was also David's belief that young men new to the scene, were vulnerable to sexual exploitation by manipulative males who had more experience with scene life. The younger study participants described how they had encountered negative attitudes and behaviours while out on the scene and David's experiences provided a possible explanation as to why this was occurring.

Category 5. The Intersection of Gay Culture and Perceptions of Self Worth and Identity

It has been the experience of the young men involved in this study that gay culture had a significant influence in determining choices and decisions they have made in their lives. The gay scene, as a public part of gay culture, provided a social learning environment through which they could postulate choices and make decisions regarding their behaviour, identity, and lifestyle. Data analysis has shown that acceptance or rejection of scene life was often based on the needs and expectations of the individual participant. Further, their needs and expectations were influenced by their own perceptions and feelings about themselves, and how they wished to relate and identify with others on the scene.

I didn't like it much [the gay scene]. I always associated that with being open and accepting of yourself and at that stage - the early stages I still wasn't accepting....It

was also the fact that everyone was open and happy with themselves and I wasn't. I was annoyed that I wasn't happy with myself and annoyed that they were. I just wasn't happy there. (Steve)

Drug Use And Gay Culture

The use of drugs on the scene was an issue raised by four of the study participants. There was speculation as to the intrinsic nature of drug use on the scene and how, if at all, the degree of drug use differed from mainstream hotels and clubs.

I don't think it's so different. I find the gay and straight scenes in Perth are the same for drugs. (Jeremy)

In the whole club scene drugs are a big issue. I know that when I was full on in the scene I was definitely taking drugs a lot of the time. I think I could have ruined my life by it. (Peter)

Drugs are prevalent, but I wouldn't be sure how different it is to how the straight scene is now. There's a lot of recreational drug use and that's a problem for a lot of people from what I can see because there's no limits and no boundaries imposed by the person. And there are some people I know who are *very* screwed up now. But at the same time I don't see it as any different to the straight scene now. (David)

Drugs are part of the scene but drugs don't attract me, nor does the scene, so the scene is not for me. There are a lot of innocent people out there who probably feel the same way I do. That's the way I feel about it. (Larry)

It was the experience of one young man that drugs were used as a means of participating and gaining acceptance into scene life. He described how they had lowered his inhibitions and enhanced his ability to adopt the image of a scene personality while achieving a state of mind shared by others using drugs.

You feel freer - you lose all your inhibitions and are more willing to jump out and be the person you want to be, not the person you are, but this free spirit running around, not caring....I think everyone does it. No one really seems to have their own identity when they're like full on - on the scene. They just want to be accepted by everyone else and be liked by everyone else and be *known* by everyone else. Like it's important to be a *known* face and *known* out there. So people do it so they're like everyone else. They're on the same wavelength as other people. It's part of the image to have the right clothes and the right drugs. (Peter)

Category 6. Perceptions of Self Worth and Identity

While analysis has shown the influence that cross cultural forces have had on the young men's experiences in coming out to others as a gay young person, it also revealed that an early awareness of feeling different was a first step in the process of coming out to themselves which preceded disclosure to other people.

Issues Of Gay Identity Awareness

Although all of the young men now accept and identify themselves as being gay, there was an earlier period in their lives in which they first recognised that they were different and experienced feelings of attraction to other males.

I think the first situation that made me feel I was gay was when I was six years old and I was wondering what this guy would look like in speedos. From then on I pretty much decided well, I'm fine, I'm different, I'm attracted to guys not girls. It was just all natural to me. (Logan)

Looking back, when I first realised I was gay was probably about two years ago, so about a year before I came out. But looking back, from a very early age, I had feelings about it definitely. Sort of homo-erotic from as early as I can remember. (John)

Feelings of same-sex attraction had often lead the young men to engage in sexual experimentation with their peers. Although they currently define their early experimentation as gay encounters, it is worth reiterating that the narratives are retrospective accounts of past experiences. Since the term gay is defined in this thesis to assert the intention of being guilt free and lacking self concealment (being "out"), the participant's early self labelling as gay would seem to indicate their sexual identity rather than gay identity.

I reckon I knew I was gay when I was really young. Before I came to Australia when I was nine. I knew then. I dunno - dreams and feelings. I didn't really start to think about it till I was eleven. Eleven was when I was having this - well not relationship - but every weekend I'd sleep at his house and we'd go and sleep in the back tent and muck around and then he'd be at my house next weekend. We did this for years - three years. I knew then that I was different. (Jeremy)

I discovered I had homosexual tendencies when I was about twelve. That happened with a friend of mine - just experimenting - it just felt good. (Larry)

I became fully active at seventeen. Not just rolling 'round on a friend sort of thing, which I'd been doing since age eight or nine, but actually oral sex and things like that. (David)

Analysis of the narratives revealed that during adolescence, five participants developed feelings of shame and guilt which had resulted in two young men negating their sexual desires towards other males. Data analysis has shown that negative societal attitudes and beliefs towards gay people, especially from those they loved and respected, had been internalised by the young men through a process of social learning. Further, this had created a state of inner turmoil and conflict between their sexual desires and perceptions of these

desires as being deviant and perverse. The outcome of this conflict was that the young men either suppressed what they were feeling or denied their feelings completely.

I first felt attracted to men probably about eight or nine. By thirteen it was like better suppress this - this is dangerous. I mean all at school - I was gay according to most people. (David)

I think I was about fifteen and it's like the classic case - it hit me that I was. I knew, but I had denied it and then there was a certain point where I just woke up one day and thought I am. After that I was really depressed and everything. I can't even put it down to one particular happening. I just woke up and that was it - you're a poof and that's as far as it goes. I mean it seems awful now that I was so upset by it 'cause I'm quite happy to be who I am now. (Steve)

I knew then that I was different and that it wasn't a bad thing, but I thought it was a bad thing. (Jeremy)

The period of time that elapsed between the young men coming out to themselves and then disclosing their sexuality to others was considerable, often taking a number of years. The narratives indicated that each young person had their own issues to work through in coming to terms with and accepting their sexuality before deciding to come out to others and identify themselves as gay young men.

I was a straight A student in everything until year nine, which is when I experimented and stuff - my first coming out. I don't know, I suppose coming out is a good word. The only expression I had - the only way I could express myself as an individual, as a gay adolescent, was through my poetry. Between year nine and year eleven I won eight awards for my poetry because of how much confusion and guilt and everything inside me....Around fifteen I met a man. We met through college. He was a couple of years older than me and we got on really well. He's basically the first person I think I fell in love with. When I found out that he was going out with a girl I just wouldn't talk to him and was completely heartbroken. I discovered then that I was gay. (Larry)

I first came out about September of last year, so it's very recent. From the first time I found out that I was gay to the time I decided to tell the first person was like years. It was age fifteen till twenty. (Steve)

I was in the navy and I'd been having sex with guys for years before I told them. (Jeremy)

It's something I've known for sure, probably since the end of year twelve, which probably means about fifteen or sixteen. I knew myself for a year or two before anyone else did. (Peter)

Early encounters were described by the young men in a positive manner, indicating they did not feel ashamed about their sexuality and behaviour. It was not until they acknowledged their sexual identity that perceptions of themselves often became negative and guilt ridden. Speculation can be forwarded that homophobic mainstream attitudes and beliefs towards gay sexuality had a strong and negative impact on the young men's self identification as gay. Being gay was therefore perceived as bad or deviant and the meanings the young men ascribed to their sexuality and behaviour changed accordingly.

Category 7. The Intersection of Gay Culture, Mainstream Heterosexual Culture and Perceptions of Self Worth and Identity

Analysis of data has thus far considered the participant's coming out experiences and involvement with mainstream and gay cultures and the impact these cultural forces have had on individual perceptions of self worth and identity. The relative nature of these three areas of experience have also been explored to reveal the points at which they have intersected and merged. Analysis of the narratives revealed that thematic clusters existed which simultaneously incorporate all three areas of experience. These include the issue of HIV/AIDS; the need for a bipartisan friendship and support network; role models; outcomes of disclosure; and pride in their gay identity.

HIV/AIDS

Data analysis indicated that the social and personal impact of HIV/AIDS were two issues that had affected the lives of study participants. Of the seven participants interviewed, five gave comment regarding the impact of HIV/AIDS within their social setting. A common concern was that societal fears and anxieties and AIDS related homophobia had created additional pressure and stress when disclosing to others. Although the impact of HIV/AIDS was generally viewed by the participants as a negative factor in the coming out process, it was the experience of the young man living with the virus that it had induced a range of positive experiences and changes in his life. In this way, HIV was not viewed as a death sentence, but as a factor that has changed his life in many affirming ways.

One of the young men felt that HIV/AIDS was not an issue or concern for him because it had never directly touched his life and therefore he seldom thought about it. It was his belief that

in addition to practicing safe sex, a lack of promiscuity and the selection of potentially “safe” partners provided him with added protection against contracting HIV/AIDS as well as other sexually transmitted diseases.

At the sake of sounding like an irresponsible young man I never think about AIDS. I'm not the sort of person to root around I suppose....I've never really been involved with anyone who's had it or been at a threat of having it or anything like that. It's not affected me yet, or you know, either through someone else. It's not like this big cloud looming over me. I rarely ever think about it. I practice safe sex, but that's not only because of the AIDS issue. It's also the other STD's [sexually transmitted diseases] that are floating around. (Steve)

It was the experience of one young man that an awareness of HIV as a sexually transmitted disease had occurred through the death of friends.

I've lost a number of friends over the past five years of my life. I've lost eleven friends to AIDS and to cancer. Aids has touched me with Damien and Rick dying. They were two friends. Their deaths were devastating to me. After those two contracted it and I found out you can get it through sex, it was a very close to home kind of thing for me. (Larry)

Two of the participants felt that AIDS is still equated with a gay lifestyle, which has exacerbated mainstream homophobia and made it increasingly difficult for young gay men to come out of the closet.

The issue of AIDS - it's still very much associated with a homosexual lifestyle. Can you live with the ideology behind that? Some people won't even touch you now or shake your hand if they think you're gay. You might have the AIDS virus, which is bloody stupid. I've had that thrust down my throat - I have. My parents have stressed that too. They say “don't go next to gay people - they'll probably give you AIDS.” (Larry)

When I was at the youth sexuality conference this older bloke - he came out of the closet when he was sixty or something - he said how easy it is to come out the closet nowadays compared to when *he* was young. That's not true, because now we've got AIDS as another issue which has hit the gay community and so the Christians are using *that* as a weapon against us now, saying that we're causing all this shit. It's hard for young guys coming out of the closet because a lot of people associate AIDS with being gay. (Jeremy)

A further issue raised was the additional pressure that HIV/AIDS caused when coming out to others, particularly to parents. Even if the young person was not HIV positive, there was a concern that parents would worry over the potential threat of their sons contracting the virus. When the young person was HIV positive there was the added stress of making a double disclosure. Two of the participants described the process as a "double whammy" that created added difficulties and concerns for the young men involved.

It's hard enough for some people to come out of the closet as a gay person, but if they're positive as well that's a double whammy. They have to go tell their parents and some parents just will not accept it at all. You could say to your parents "well mum I'm gay and I'm HIV positive" - that's a really hard thing to do." (Jeremy)

It's a double whammy. It's something that from my experience terrified my mother in particular. The fact that her son could end up with this horrible disease. And so in that respect it can make it very difficult for people to come out, because they don't want to put this stress on to their parents of worrying what their doing. (John)

It has been the experience of the young man who is living with HIV, that his status has politicised and strengthened his gay identity and reshaped his life, giving it a new focus, direction and meaning.

When I got diagnosed positive I started to get right fully involved in all the HIV/AIDS stuff as well, which is very gay orientated. Now I feel like I am part of it [the gay community]. They told me - they said this afternoon that I'm the youth activist for PLWA [People Living With AIDS] which is good. They said you don't

mind being the youth activist here and I said no. So I'm fully involved at the moment....When I was diagnosed positive my life changed. That's the best thing that ever happened in my life I reckon, 'cause it's just reshaped my life. Now I've got things that I'm doing and everything's organised and I'm just happy. I just wish I could change the world - that's my aim. So my life has improved heaps - big time. (Jeremy)

The Need For A Bipartisan Friendship And Support Network

During the course of the interview procedure all of the young men expressed the importance in having an established group of friends they could rely on for friendship and support. Data analysis indicated that a supportive friendship network provided the necessary social space in which the young men could interact and express themselves openly. Having the support and acceptance of friends was also an important factor in raising their confidence and levels of self worth by providing positive reinforcement of their gay identity. Further, they provided a source of strength and backing that could be called upon in times of distress or confrontation.

I think coming out is something that everyone has to do in their own time - when their ready - and I suppose the main ingredient is a very close and committed support network. So I think more than anything else a gay person needs a network of friends that they can rely on when they're coming out. That's very difficult to build up. (John)

It was the experience of one young man that he felt unable to come out to his parents and so turned to his friends for support. Previously, he was able to talk openly with his parents and discuss events and occurrences that were taking place within his life. Remaining closeted to his parents meant that he was no longer able to engage in such open discourse and so his friends provided the necessary alimentionation.

I couldn't tell my parents about what was going on in my life and that's where friends who already know come in. They take over that role. (Steve)

Establishing stable relationships with other young gay men was an issue raised by another of the participants. It was his experience that several of the young men whom he befriended through newspaper advertisements had internalised feelings of self hate and low self esteem. He described how these relationships had at times been volatile and were unsuccessful because of a primary focus on sex and the fears and conflicts these young men held regarding their sexuality.

One thing that he said to me very early in the relationship was that being gay isn't normal. I said wouldn't it be great to get married and make a commitment and settle down a couple of years down the track and adopt a couple of kids and have a mortgage and a house on the hill with a great view and all that sort of stuff. And he *exploded*. He said don't you know that we're abnormal and we shouldn't be on this earth etc, etc. And he absolutely made me feel like shit. But him being such a bastard helped me to develop an extra strength. It helped to develop a strength in me. (Larry)

Since Larry was coming to terms with his own sexuality, he felt the need to surround himself with others who already felt comfortable with themselves.

I had a lot of inner turmoil at an early age and I had to learn how to settle that within me. That's why I preferred at that point in time to put people around me who were comfortable with themselves and Jason is one of them. He's my best friend. (Larry)

Two of the participants described how they had established a gay social network by accessing relevant support groups.

After I came out to everyone [his family] I actually joined Wild Alliance, which is the university gay and lesbian group. So my first step into gay culture was joining *that* group which was very valuable. My first real *gay* social network was established through the AIDS Council through a course called Esteem Express. (John)

I first went to the Freedom Centre and that's like a drop in centre for gay and bisexual young men. I now staff there and there's a pool table there and it's a meeting place for a lot of people and I really enjoy going there. (Logan)

The relationship between their network of "straight" and gay friends was a further issue raised by two participants. One young man described how he regularly spent time with both his "straight" and gay friends and was also able to mix the two groups when arranging social gatherings. In contrast, another young man felt that when a young person begins to form a gay friendship group and regularly socialises with that group, they begin to establish a new lifestyle and tend to move away from their "straight" friends.

I'd say I still keep in contact a lot with my straight friends and I go out very regularly with them. The rest of my social life is pretty much taken up with my gay friends. When I have parties and stuff like that I invite *everyone*. I invite friends from Church, from uni, from school, from the scene, from the Freedom Centre, from retreat, from Esteem Express, everywhere....I had a few parties before I went on retreat, before I got to know a few gay people and they were good parties. Mainly straight people and stuff like that and they were okay. But after the retreat I had a party and invited a lot of the gay people and all I can say is that it was the best party I ever had in my life. Because they were so free and all of that, it promoted an atmosphere of freedom and so everyone got up and danced and it was really great. And just parties from then on, like combining my gay friends with straight friends. It's just been great. (Logan)

They start to meet people and then they get a group of friends - like gay or whatever - and it's sad, but often they like shift away from their old friends - their straight friends. I don't think it's always because they don't accept them for being gay, but because they've got this new life of all sorts of gay friends who all go out to gay venues and so they push their other friends out. (Peter)

Role Models

Having positive role models with which they could identify was an issue raised by three of the study participants. Data analysis revealed that the importance of suitable role models was expressed on two levels. Firstly, having personal contact with gay people to whom they could

turn such as friends or other family members, was described as a source of positive reinforcement and support when coming out. Secondly, the presence of publicly “out” and visible role models was described as providing a source of political strength and support for young gay men. In this regard role models were described as promoting an awareness of the gay presence within the general community, bringing public attention to gay issues, reinforcing the individual’s sense of gay identity and promoting a sense of gay pride and belonging within the wider gay community. Analysis of the study narratives indicated that what was considered to be suitable or appropriate role models differed, depending on the young men’s experiences and viewpoint.

It was one young man’s belief that a particular gay youth support group was convened by individuals who had appropriated the gay cultural stereotype. He felt that such individuals were inappropriate role models for young men coming out because they were not representative of the wider gay community.

I have a major problem with the Esteem Express course that they run at the AIDS Council. All of the guys that run it are full on scene queens and when these guys - fifteen, sixteen - coming out of the closet, that’s not positive role models for them. (Jeremy)

Another young man felt that his experience with members of gay support groups had been extremely positive in helping him to develop his gay identity.

I can certainly remember high school feelings about gays and they were fairly negative, but since I came to Perth I began to interact. I met some gay people from Wild Alliance and then Esteem Express and they were very nice people and that helped me a lot. (John)

The role of the mass media in affecting public perceptions of gay culture was an issue also raised by Jeremy and John. While there was considerable disagreement over the validity and usefulness of media representations, both agreed that the media was influential in shaping mainstream community attitudes and beliefs towards gay people and gay issues.

John felt there has been an increased awareness and understanding of gay sexuality issues due to the generally positive portrayal of gay people by the media. This he believes, has resulted in the peer group becoming more supportive of gay friends because they are now better informed, particularly with regard to coming out issues.

Jeremy did not agree, and felt that the media portrayed gay people in an extremely stereotypical manner. It was his belief that such homogeneous representations prevent the general populace from seeing the cultural diversity that makes up the gay community.

There's a lot more - seems to be a lot more knowledge about sexuality issues in young people these days than perhaps there was ten years ago. I'd say maybe that's because it gets a lot more media coverage these days. I think the media can take a big responsibility for that and the fact that people are just talking about the issues more, generally. So that there have been movies made about it. There are always items in the news about gay sexuality and gay rights and generally it's presented in a fairly positive light. So in general, homosexuality is viewed a lot more positively that it has been in the past I think. So friends - especially the peer group - tend to be a lot more supportive of people coming out. And there's generally a lot more understanding of the issues and difficulties involved with coming out. (John)

People need to see that the only ever things that gay people - that get on telly or in the movies is all these effeminate people that dress up and wear makeup and stuff. But then they don't see the real gay community. The doctors and the lawyers and the builders. They're the people that need to be out in public. (Jeremy)

The Outcomes Of Disclosure

Analysis of data revealed that coming out of the closet had significantly changed the lives of all of the young men involved in this study. While the process of contemplating disclosure had often been worrying and stressful, the longer term consequences of being “out” were positive. Three of the young men described how coming out meant they now felt much more comfortable within themselves because they no longer had to keep their identity and lifestyles a secret and could express themselves openly.

Being out of the closet means I can be who I want to be. I can act natural. (Steve)

I'm a lot more comfortable with myself and with what I'm doing in my life now than I was before. I'm not feeling I'm living a lie, which is the typical thing about coming out. (David)

My life has been fuckin' great since I came out of the closet....I didn't have to sneak off from the guys [navy friends] at the pub and go to a gay nightclub, have sex with someone and then get back in time before they all leave. I could just go out with who I wanted to. I could bring my boyfriends out to meet the guys and that was good and they accepted it all. (Jeremy)

Each of the young men described how there had been an improvement in their life situations that was directly attributed to being out of the closet. Commonly shared experiences included an increase in feelings of self worth, an improvement in the quality of friendships and relationships, a broadened friendship and support network and an increase in social mobility and functioning.

Coming out has changed my life in a lot of ways. It's allowed me to develop a much stronger feeling of self worth than I've *ever* had during *all* the time I've been growing up. It's given me a great deal of acceptance - feeling of acceptance. I've

become a very social person where I never was before. I spend a lot more time being out with friends than I do being at home. It's improved a lot of my friendships with my straight friends. It's given me an access to a huge number of friendships with my gay friends. It's given me a much deeper and broader relationship with my parents. I feel I have a really valuable input to make in society in general and I feel that's been greatly enhanced by coming out, because I feel that I've really become a complete person. (John)

Since I've come out I've gained a lot more friends and gained a lot more support from like the AIDS Council and people like that. Also support through my network of friends; safe havens like in various clubs and the knowledge of where these sort of places are; my knowledge about sex, safe sex, HIV; social things about dealing with different sorts of people increased unbelievably - as soon as I came out basically. My acceptance of difference in other people was always good, but it was heightened when I came out because I was surrounded by so many different sorts of people. (David)

When I came out I made a lot of very close friendships. I could talk a lot freer. I could have deep and meaningful conversations to a greater depth. I could pretty much be myself and not have to worry about anything. (Logan)

Participants described how coming out had given them a feeling of freedom that contrasted with the isolation and oppressive nature of the closet. Comments included:

If I hadn't come out I'd still be in this little shell. I'd still be staying at home. I'd still be a recluse. I would be nowhere near as happy as I am at this point in time. (Larry)

One of the big advantages in coming out is the freedom to talk about everything that bothers me, because before I came out I didn't feel that I could talk to anyone about my problems, because I was scared about how they'd react. Whereas now, if I have something bugging me, I feel free to go and visit a friend, or a friend can come here, or we can just talk and bitch about things. (Logan)

I think that once I'd come out it made me feel like well now my friends truly know who I am and I can be a better person because of it, because I'm not closeting myself because everyone knows. I can be freer about it. I can talk to people about it and that's definitely better. (Peter)

Data analysis showed that while the majority of young men had felt trepidation when contemplating disclosure, the positive life changes that had resulted from being out of the closet outweighed any specific instances where they had experienced a negative response. Although the data indicated that homophobia and heterosexism had inhibited the young men's social mobility and functioning, the personal growth and development gained from experiences of positive as well as negative reactions to disclosure had given them the inner strength and confidence to openly express themselves.

Gay Pride

Data analysis revealed that in the process of accepting their gay identity the young men had given that identity meaning. In other words, what it meant for them to be gay in terms of their current identity and self image within the contextual framework of the social world in which they live.

The majority of young men described a feeling of pride and excitement in their experience of being different from mainstream heterosexual culture. Being different from heterosexual counterparts had conferred a status and identity that was alternative to the mainstream and was a social position the young men felt proud of and enjoyed. Identifying as a gay young man had also meant they felt part of an exclusive group of gay people who shared this common experience.

Now I love it. It's great and it's almost exciting. It's like being part of this exclusive secret group. I mean that's the other thing I suppose. If you can get past everyone calling you abnormal it's exciting because you're doing something different to everyone else. You're not part of this big straight machine. (Steve)

Being different is one of the big payouts in being gay. For myself it's one of the big payouts. It's the fact that I am quite different from a lot of my friends and part of that is the fact that I'm gay. (John)

It's fun in a way to sort of have - not secret, but it's fun to be different in a way. (Peter)

I love being gay. I love being a homosexual. I couldn't imagine life as a heterosexual. I don't want to be like the average Joe. (Larry)

Analysis of the study narratives revealed further that the young men's pride in their gay identity was not only a result of being different from mainstream heterosexual culture, but was also as a result of their intersubjective life experiences. Coming out has been described by participants as an ongoing process of self disclosive experience that involved negotiating new and changing social relationships and situations during the course of their lifetimes. By engaging in this process, the young men had to deal with a variety of issues that have had a significant impact over their lives. Analysis indicated that as a consequence of negotiating these experiences, the young men have developed an affirmation and pride in their identity as gay young people which included their right to unequivocal free and open expression.

I believe that being gay means having a great freedom to express myself. To have whatever friendships are good for me. To have whatever relationships are good for me. I suppose freedom is the biggest word. Freedom to feel the way I want to feel without associated feelings of guilt. Freedom to generally say what I want to say. To be with who I want to be with. I suppose a big thing about being gay for me is freedom to be physically affectionate with my friends. That's something I really value about being gay. It allowed me to be physically affectionate in a total non-sexual way which is something that's denied males in Australian society in general. (John)

To me being gay is normal. There is nothing else. I'm sure that I'm gay. I have already begun a very comfortable lifestyle and got into action as a homosexual person. I've made friends, I'm comfortable and I feel normal as a homosexual. That is what I associate with being gay. That's what being gay means to me. I would not be able to lead any other form of existence. I firmly believe you create your own normality. There's no set description for it. (Larry)

I'm just not in the mainstream heterosexual which I don't believe in anyway. We as gay people have got the balls to express our sexuality and we're brave I reckon. I'm proud to be gay. (Jeremy)

The process of coming out of the closet detailed in this chapter has shown that it is a process of exploration and discovery which has been closely linked to the young men's experience of personal growth and development. There is no ultimate resolution to this process since it is ongoing, however the young men represented in this study have travelled a considerable distance in resolving their own doubts and fears about "who they are". In this sense, pride in their gay identity can be regarded as a personal resolution and celebration of that voyage of exploration and discovery.

CHAPTER FOUR

Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter of the study is dedicated to a critical review of research studies and literature which focus on issues associated with young gay men and the process of coming out. The review of literature has been included after the findings chapter in an attempt to reduce researcher bias. In keeping with the tenets of phenomenological research, premature examination of relevant literature can bias the researcher's openness and thinking during data collection (Patton, 1990).

The literature review is divided into two major sections. The first section consists of an overview of the status of empirical gay research. Issues considered for review in this section include heterosexist bias in the research, the status of youth studies and the influence of researcher interest on empirical studies. The second section reviews and evaluates previous research studies, including studies of young men and the process of coming out, studies which focus on specific aspects of the coming out process, and studies which examine coming out as a facet of research into the lives of young gay men. A summary of the main points will then be outlined, and conclusions drawn from the material presented for review.

Overview of Empirical Research Studies

This section of the literature review briefly examines several key issues that underpin the current status of empirical research on gay young people. Firstly; heterosexist bias in the research; secondly, youth research and gay young people; thirdly, the influence of the researcher on research projects both in what is suggested and how they are conducted. This last issue is examined by exploring the influence of stage theories on research design; the issue of quantitative versus qualitative research; and longitudinal versus cross-sectional studies. A summary of the main points raised in the overview concludes this section of the chapter.

Heterosexist Bias in Research

Heterosexist bias in research into gay young people is an issue that has been raised by several researchers expressing concern over the nature and approach taken in studies investigating gay youth (Deisher, 1989; Boxer & Cohler, 1989 Southgate, 1991). For example, Boxer & Cohler (1989) commented that "...previous researchers of adolescence have, perhaps unwittingly, made heterosexual assumptions with regard to their samples and research questions". The issue of sexual bias prompted the current researcher to critically evaluate the studies reviewed to determine the validity of this claim. Three significant factors appeared to be evident after many studies were reviewed.

Firstly, several studies that investigated young people did not knowingly include gay youth (an issue that will receive further attention in the following category) within the sample group, and such an omission could be interpreted as heterosexist bias. For example, a recent Australian study conducted in Melbourne investigated homeless young people and the

relationship between their sexual and drug related behaviour and the risk of contracting HIV/AIDS (Rosenthal, Moore & Buzwell, 1994). The researchers did not however, include gay young people within the parameters of the research project. This is surprising, considering a Sydney study conducted by Irwin, Winter, Gregoric, & Watts (1995), which concluded "...we estimated that there could be between 5,000 and 6,250 homeless lesbians and gay youth at any one time in Australia" (p. 6). The study proceeded to report that the issues and needs of this particular group of homeless young people differed significantly from homeless heterosexual young people. The findings concur with a Perth study into youth homelessness conducted by Macdonald (1994). While there are no current figures available in Australia to determine the reasons why young gay people leave home, an American study by Hetrick & Martin (1992), suggested that one in four gay and lesbian young people were forced to leave home because of their sexuality.

Secondly, language used in research reports demonstrated heterosexist bias. The language used in the report by Rosenthal, Moore & Buzwell (1994) appears to be sexually biased. For example, when the authors discuss their findings, one conclusion reached was that "They exhibit high levels of risky sexual behaviour including a worrying number engaging in anal sex...". The statement reflects not only a condemnation of a particular sexual practice, but also fails to acknowledge that a proportion of the sample group might be gay. While these findings place some doubt over the credibility and validity of the study, it would appear that a claim of heterosexist bias could also be made. An earlier study conducted by Dank (1971) into the coming out experiences of gay males was particularly biased towards the "normacy"

of heterosexuality. For example, the author stated categorically that "This paper is devoted to exploring the emergence of a particular deviant identity - the male homosexual identity".

Thirdly, even when young gay people were mentioned in the research the discussion often marginalised the experience of young gay people. For example, Cubis (1992) conducted a study into contemporary trends in adolescent sexual behaviour. While the researcher investigated aspects of sexual behaviour in Australian young people, only a brief paragraph at the end of the study was devoted to issues relevant to young gay people.

It is the current author's contention that while heterosexist bias does appear to be prevalent in many research studies, this does not necessarily negate the value of the research. It does, however, mean that there needs to be a critical awareness by investigators researching gay young people to the possibility of heterosexist bias in the literature and research studies. Further, researchers pursuing this area of research investigation should give attention to bracketing out any heterosexist assumptions or ideas that could negatively impact on the research approach and design.

Youth Studies

There have been relatively few empirical research studies conducted in the youth studies field which have focused on the coming out experiences of gay young people. Overseas researchers have pointed out that while much has been researched and written on young people, the experiences of young gay people and the issues they face have been neglected (Plummer, 1989; Savin-Williams, 1990; Herdt, 1989; Parker & Carballo, 1990; Boxer & Cohler, 1989; Remafedi, 1987). In Australia, the position is very similar. For example, White

(1993, p. vii) contends that "A proliferation of empirical studies across a wide range of diverse issues - from homelessness to unemployment, youth crime to violence in schools - have served to document charge on young people". The studies have however, neglected to account for gay young people, and such an omission has rendered them "invisible" and unrepresented in the youth studies field and in Australian academic research generally. Given that one in ten males are gay (Kinsey, Pomeroy & Martin, 1948), and that one and a half million gays and lesbians live in Australia and New Zealand (Talbot, 1985), and further that sexual orientation may be an issue for, at a conservative estimate, anything between 10% and 20% of young people (Cooper, 1992), such an omission is significant.

The Influence of Researcher Interest on Empirical Studies

It may seem an obvious point to make, however the standpoint of the researcher is a crucial factor in determining what is to be researched, how it will be researched and for whom the research is designed (Van Manen, 1990). Similarly, research into human sexuality cannot readily be described in terms of the same understandings, methodologies and research topics (Allen, 1992). The literature revealed that researchers investigating the process of coming out came from diverse disciplinary backgrounds including psychology, psychiatry, medicine, anthropology and sociology. This was particularly evident in different conceptual, theoretical and methodological approaches to the study of the coming out process. It is therefore necessary to delineate these major differences in the research and briefly examine some of the tensions that exist between the differing perspectives.

The influence of stage theories on research design

Many previous research studies have focussed on investigating and defining the developmental processes of gay identity formation. Various theoretical stage models of coming out have been constructed by researchers to explain phases of development that a gay person encounters during the coming out process (Coleman, 1982; Coleman, 1987; Dank, 1971; Troiden, 1989; Hetrick & Martin, 1987; Cass, 1979; Plummer, 1975). However, as Bell (1975) concludes, the discussions that have taken place regarding homosexuality have been prompted by theoretical models whose constructs have not been rigorously tested in any systematic manner. For example, Troiden's sociological study "The Formation of Homosexual Identities" (1989), was based on a literature review that included recollections given by lesbians and gay males as to how they acquired their homosexual identity. The model borrowed from other theoretical models and research on identity formation (Plummer, 1975; Ponce, 1978; Cass, 1979, 1984), but was not research tested to ascertain validity. One notable exception was the study by Cass (1984) which came from a psychological perspective. In this study Cass evaluated her earlier six stage developmental model. The issue of methodological rigour will receive more detailed attention later in this chapter.

Longitudinal versus cross-sectional sampling and analysis

There have been few research studies designed to investigate the process of coming out, particularly from a young person's perspective. While the general literature often argues for the inclusion of gay youth on the research agenda, there is some debate over what approach would be best suited to such an investigation. Several researchers have argued for a longitudinal study, investigating the life course through adolescence and into adulthood (for example, Boxer & Cohler, 1989; Hetrick & Martin 1987; Savin- Williams, 1990). The

theoretically based argument outlined by these researchers is that issues or difficulties that may occur during adolescence can only be understood within the broader framework of an individual's lifetime. They make the assumption that during the life course, a linear progression of developmental stages are negotiated by the individual. If they are negotiated successfully, a mature stage of homosexual identity formation is reached. Unsuccessful negotiation may result in some form of maladjustment that impinges on developing social and personal identities as homosexual youths (Hetrick & Martin, 1987). The successful resolution of each of these stages is therefore deemed necessary for an individual to achieve ongoing personal growth and development.

Boxer & Cohler (1989) argue that a longitudinal study would have greater validity than cross-sectional analysis which relies on the respondent's recollections of past experiences and the inferences made by the researcher about developmental processes and outcomes based on cross-sectional sampling. They argue further, that such a study would move investigations away from previous research assumptions concerned with childhood "causes" of homosexuality, inherent in many previous studies, and would therefore reflect a more accurate interpretation of the experiences of gay youth within a historical context.

Other researchers have argued that cross-sectional analysis is crucial because of the focus by previous researchers on adult homosexual populations. For example, Remafedi (1987) argues that previous studies have usually focussed on adult males recalling the coming out experiences of their youth and have not directly focussed on coming out from the young person's viewpoint. It has also been suggested that adolescents' experiences with

homosexuality may differ from their adult counterparts due to related factors of age, life experience, emotional and financial dependence, and the particular developmental tasks unique to this population (Deisher, 1989; Herdt, 1989; Remafedi, 1987). In essence, both approaches seek to understand the unique experiences of young gay people. The longitudinal approach however, seeks to examine these experiences in relation to consequences for later life course development (Boxer & Cohler, 1989). Cross- sectional analysis seeks to examine the experiences of gay youth from the point of view of understanding what it means to be young and gay solely from the young person's perspective (Herdt, 1989; Remafedi, 1987).

Qualitative versus quantitative design

One other consideration expressed in the literature was one of research design. Should a qualitative "in depth" approach be utilised, or should a broad based quantitative approach be the design strategy used? Patton (1990), suggests that the trade-off between qualitative and quantitative methods is often one of depth versus breadth. The former allows for the researcher to study selected issues in depth and detail, while the latter requires a standardised approach that allows the possibility to measure reactions of respondents to a limited set of questions, thus facilitating comparison and statistical aggregation of the data. It is also possible that both qualitative and quantitative approaches can be used in a research study, or one approach can be used to verify or clarify the findings of the other.

It is acknowledged by the present author that inevitably the type of research approach, be it longitudinal or cross- sectional, qualitative or quantitative, or a combination of both, largely depends on the purpose of the research; the finances available to the researcher; the time available; and the interests of those involved (Patton, 1990).

The literature revealed that there were few qualitative studies that specifically addressed young people's coming out issues. Several studies did however, incorporate a qualitative approach to data collection (face-to-face interviews and open ended questionnaires, for example), and then utilised quantitative methods (statistical aggregation) for data collation. As previously mentioned, many of the studies reviewed came from the disciplines of psychology, psychiatry or medicine. As far as the current author could ascertain, there were few research projects that could be considered as coming from a sociological perspective.

Summary

The general literature reviewed often presented a case for qualitative research to be undertaken into the lives of young gays (Trenchard & Warren, 1984; Troiden, 1989; Herdt, 1989, Parker & Carballo, 1990; Weeks, 1991; Connell & Dowsett, 1992; Edwards, 1994). A literature search revealed that few researchers have done this. The claim of heterosexist bias in the research appeared to be valid, particularly when young gays were excluded from the research sample, or when they were designated secondary status within the research. The use of heterosexist language in research reports and studies was found to be commonplace. A review of the Australian youth studies field indicated that young gay people were generally absent from the research agenda, which had the effect of further marginalising this particular group of young people within contemporary youth studies and academic research. The disciplinary background of the researcher has a significant influence in determining the conceptual, theoretical and methodological approaches taken in the research. While they are generally not validated, theoretical stage models have influenced the conceptualisation of gay identity formation. There are both advantages and disadvantages of longitudinal and

cross-section sampling and analysis, and the appropriateness of a qualitative and quantitative approach as a strategy of research design. The choice in these respects must depend on the purposes of the study, the resources available to the researcher, and the external constraints placed on the study.

Review of Previous Studies

The focus of attention in this review has thus far been outlining some of the major issues and considerations that underpin research on young gay people and the coming out process. This section of the review is focussed on a critical review of specific empirical studies that have contributed to an investigation into this process.

However, achievement of this goal is not straightforward for several reasons. It has already been argued that the interest of the researcher has a major role to play in determining the focus and approach that a research project will take, and that historically, much of the research has come from the disciplines of psychology, psychiatry and medicine. The approach undertaken in the present study is sociologically based, and it was difficult to locate research studies based in this discipline. The difficulty was further compounded by the paucity of research (particularly from an Australian perspective), into the lives of young gay people. A search of the literature revealed however, that there have been several research projects conducted in Australia initiated in response to the HIV/AIDS pandemic. While most of this research has focussed on the sexuality and sexual behaviour of adult males, some studies have addressed issues relating to young gay men. Although the stated purposes of these studies were not specifically focussed on the coming out process, the issue was often

suggested as a relational factor which was given attention in the research. Since coming out was an integral part of the research studies, and since the issue of HIV/AIDS was also addressed in the present study, the projects were considered relevant for inclusion in the present review of literature.

After consideration of the above factors, it was decided that the material in this section of the review be grouped into three categories for presentation and critical appraisal. The categories are: firstly, studies of young men and the process of coming out; secondly, studies focussing on specific aspects of the coming out process; and thirdly, coming out as a facet of other related studies that focus on young gay men. The first category comprises of “benchmark” studies, presented as a primary source of evidence against which the other two categories will be compared and contrasted. The second category offers partial evidence determined by the particular interest and/or focus of the researcher. The third category consists of “incidental” evidence, arising out of research into the sexual health and behaviour of young gay men.

“Benchmark” Studies of Young Men and the Process of Coming Out

An extensive search of the literature revealed only two previous studies could be found that were similar to the present study. The studies selected for review were chosen on the basis that both investigated coming out by examining the intersubjectivity of meaning between the individual and his social environment. The studies were also similar in that both addressed coming out by applying a sociologically based approach and research design to the phenomenon under investigation.

A study by Dank "Coming Out In The Gay World" (1971), postulated that the development and formation of a gay identity was largely determined by the conceptual meanings that individuals ascribed to that identity. Although this study did not focus exclusively on the experiences of young gay men (49% of the study sample were aged between 15 and 29 years), they formed a significant proportion within the overall sample. The study has also been referred to frequently by subsequent researchers.

Dank personally interviewed 55 gay men who were all part of the same friendship network. In addition to the face-to-face interviews, a one page questionnaire was utilised and data collected from 182 questionnaires that had been posted to a gay organisation. This study claims to use a participant observation technique, with interviews lasting for four to five hours.

The study suggested that a gay identity cannot be formed in isolation, but requires the intersubjectivity of experience between the individual, other gay people and the wider society. Dank concluded that individuals who felt desires towards other males had often been socialised into accepting the negative stereotypes that were prevalent in society, and therefore perceived gay people in a negative way. In order for a gay identity to develop, the individual had to change his perception of the meanings given to this category, and only then could he willingly identify as being gay.

The study is significant because it focuses on giving the individual agency and choice in determining the meanings they ascribe to their sexual identity and brings attention to the

social contexts in which meaning and identity are formed. However although the study findings can be regarded as relevant and important contributions to research knowledge, there are several criticisms of the study that arose from the current researcher's critical appraisal of the work.

While the research method employed appears to "fit" with the type of research study being conducted (by claiming to use interviewing and participant observation as the major data collection techniques), an evaluation of the study suggests weaknesses within the stated methodology. Firstly, a heterosexist bias in the research was evident, particularly when the researcher claimed to engage in participant observation with the sample group. For example, Dank states that "The researcher was introduced to this group by a homosexual student who presented him correctly as being a heterosexual who was interested in doing a study of homosexuals as they exist in the 'outside world'". Further, he added that "He was able to gain the trust of the most prestigious person in the group, which enabled him, on the whole, to gain the trust of the rest of the group". It would seem that instead of using strategies to gain entry into the group and establishing the acceptance and trust of the participants, the researcher potentially distanced himself from the group by invoking a heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy that could further reinforce feelings of marginality and inequality. Since participant observation means sharing as intimately as possible in the lives and activities of the participants and gaining the trust of the group by being understanding, sensitive and empathetic towards the group members (Patton, 1990), the researcher's claim for utilising this strategy as well as gaining group trust would appear to be weak.

Secondly, the credibility and accuracy of the study is questioned, because as Patton (1990) suggests, all credible research strategies utilise techniques that help the researcher become aware of and deal with selective perception, personal biases, and theoretical predispositions. Since the tool of data collection in this study was the researcher, there were no strategies or procedures outlined that would suggest any attempt to “bracket out” biases or prejudices that might contaminate the data.

Thirdly, the sample group used in this study was taken from only one source of potential respondents and this had the potential of reducing the credibility of the study. As mentioned in the method chapter of the current study, the use of data collected from a singular source such as a friendship group may show biases not found if multiple sources were used in the study.

A final point is that while there is no set time restrictions on interviews, the current researcher felt that four or five hours of individual interviewing seemed quite long, considering the exhaustive nature of face to face consultations. It is suggested that the depth of concentration and focus required by the researcher, and the taxing nature of disclosure on the part of the interviewee, could result in a drop in the quality of raw data collected during such a lengthy procedure.

A study by Remafedi “Male Homosexuality: The Adolescent’s Perspective” (1987), contained a more in-depth analytical approach. The study sought to examine the meaning and experience of homosexuality from the perspective of young gay men, and also sought to

reveal factors that impacted on their lives as a consequence of their sexuality. The researcher claimed that the study represented the first attempt to understand the meaning and experience of homosexuality solely from the perspective of young males (Remafedi, 1987).

Unlike Dank, Remafedi recruited 29 young gay respondents from three different potential sources which added credibility to the study. The age range of the sample group were 15 to 19 years, and were predominantly “white”, middle class and Christian. The interview schedule consisted of both structured and open-ended questions, and investigated several relevant issues. These included the definition of homosexuality, the process of acquiring a homosexual identity, the impact of sexual identity on family, peers, and community as well as gathering data on relationships, education and employment.

The study found that coming out to parents was an important consideration when considering disclosure to others. Of the 29 participants sampled, 62% had come out to their mothers, and two others believed that their mothers knew. A fewer number (34%) believed that their fathers knew and only five had personally disclosed to their fathers. The process had generally been described by the participants as quite painful and distressing. Responses to disclosure had been mixed. Of the total sample, only 21% of mothers and 10% of fathers responded or were expected to respond positively. Almost twice as many mothers and five times as many fathers were believed to be entirely negative. Of the 29 participants, 93% had revealed their sexual orientation to friends, with 90% reporting having at least one gay friend. However, 41% had lost at least one friend because of their sexuality. Ten of the 19 subjects (53%) who lived away from their family homes were concerned about potential negative

responses from roommates, including fear of physical reprisals in half the cases. Ten subjects believed they had already been discriminated against in education, employment or housing and eight were victims of physical assaults. Half of the assaults occurred on school property. In addition, 55% of those attending school reported regular verbal abuse from classmates. In contrast to school problems, only one of 17 employed subjects reported sexuality related difficulties in the work setting.

The data indicated that coming out to others can be potentially negative in terms of the physical and psychological outcomes that may result from discrimination and abuse based on the individual's sexual identity.

Remafedi concluded that a young person's development from recognising homosexual feelings to "coming out", paralleled the stages of identity formation as described by Troiden (1989), stating that he found coming out to be followed by a final stage of "acceptance".

During this stage Remafedi ascertained that the subjects were accepting of their homosexuality, unwilling to change it, and striving to develop intimate relationships. The study found that participants who had not yet achieved this level of acceptance were experiencing a loss of self esteem, masculinity, or spiritual worth.

Although the study found that external factors often had a negative impact on the lives of the young men, in contrast, the young men expressed a high degree of self acceptance and personal satisfaction in being gay. The findings indicated that the participant's sexual identity held a greater meaning for them than merely engaging in sexual experiences with other males.

For example, comparing heterosexual and homosexual lifestyles, only 11 of the 29 subjects (38%) acknowledged any differences beyond sexual orientation, and eight of these (73%) attributed more positive qualities to gays such as self awareness, personal strength and understanding. However sexual orientation appeared to be a factor in the participant's views on masculinity. When comparing themselves to male peers, 52% viewed themselves as "less masculine", and only four as "more masculine". Thirty four per cent believed that religious beliefs had affected their own attitudes to homosexuality, and seven of these described a loss of self esteem or inner conflict as a consequence of perceived religious condemnation.

Conclusions drawn by the researcher indicated that adolescent homosexuality was a highly complex, controversial and emotionally charged subject and that the issues facing this group of young people have not been adequately investigated.

The study by Remafedi provides considerable insight into the issues that arise for young gay men during the process of coming out to others. The study is important because it attempts to make connections between the perceptions and meanings that the young men gave to their sexuality and sexual identity, the intersubjective experiences lived by the participants, and the social settings in which these experiences were framed and negotiated.

Comparison of study findings

Although both studies provided a source of valuable information there are several weaknesses in the language and terminology that should be discussed. For example, Dank often uses the terms gay, homosexual and homosexual identity interchangeably, and this is often confusing for the reader. Although he infers a difference between homosexual behaviour and

homosexual identity and further, uses the term “gay” to refer to a homosexual identity, this is never specified. He does state that the term “gay” means homosexual, however this only adds to the confusion, because it is never clear if he is referring to “homosexuality” as an orientation, a behaviour, or an acquired identity.

Similarly, Remafedi begins by talking about “homosexual” teenagers acquiring a “gay” identity, but then proceeds to talk about “the process of acquiring a homosexual identity”.

While the mixing of terminology is confusing, the indiscriminant use of terms indicates a lack of care taken by the researcher, and this can decrease the credibility of the study findings.

Remafedi examined the development of a gay identity, and concluded that it was a lengthy process that begins with initial recognition of homosexual feelings and attractions that are first realised anywhere from between early childhood up to puberty. These findings were similar to the earlier study by Dank, who ascertained that 90.5% of the participants indicated same sex attractions from an early age up to 19 years. Remafedi calculated the mean age for self identification as being gay at 14 years. Dank ascertained that the mean age for self identification in his sample group was 19.3 years.

Both studies concluded that coming out was a developmental process, negotiated in the context of an individual’s social domain. Further, a gay identity was not formed in isolation, but was dependent on the intersubjective experiences of the individual to give it meaning.

“Partial” Studies which Focus on Specific Aspects of the Coming Out Process

Researchers investigating the process of coming out have often stated that they are dealing with an extremely diverse and complex phenomenon. Coming out, as part of human experience, is dependent on many variable factors that are relational in generating the nature and context of that experience. These researchers have discussed an aspect of coming out.

This section of the review will examine and evaluate three empirical research studies that have focussed on a particular aspect or issue related to coming out and young gay people. A study by Savin-Williams “Gay and Lesbian Youth: expressions of identity” (1990), examines the issue of self esteem; a study by Telljohann & Price “A Qualitative Examination of Adolescent Homosexual’s Life Experiences: Ramifications fro Secondary School Personnel” (1993), investigates the life experiences of a group of gay high school students; and a study by Hetrick & Martin “Developmental Issues and Their Resolution for Gay and Lesbian Adolescents” (1987), addresses the issue of stigmatisation. The study material will be reviewed by examining the method of investigation used in the three studies; examining and comparing the study findings; providing a brief summary of the findings; and finally discussing the limitations of the three studies presented for review.

Examination of study methods

Savin-Williams (1990), investigated the issue of self esteem and coming out among gay and lesbian youth. The intention of the study was to explore developmental issues from a psychological perspective in a bid to understand feelings of self worth and the coming out process among adolescents and youths who defined themselves to some degree as

homosexual. The primary goals stated by the researcher were to assess the psychological well being of a diverse population of gay and lesbian young people and to explore self esteem and self disclosure during the years of the life course when issues of identity were central to healthy development.

A gay and lesbian questionnaire (GAL Q) was constructed for the purpose of collecting the raw data and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale was used to measure levels of self esteem within the sample group. The questionnaire took approximately 15 to 30 minutes to complete. Potential participants were recruited from various sources including a gay community picnic, undergraduate university students and their friends, attendees at a gay and lesbian activist conference, and students from a university sexuality class.

Of the 317 respondents, 214 (68%) were gay males aged between 14 to 23 years. Although it was the intention of the researcher to gain access to a wide range of participants, 75% of the respondents were college student. Variables included in the GAL Q assessed six major theme clusters that were considered by theory or past research to differentiate self esteem and coming out level. They included sociodemographic characteristics, attitudes and interests, gay related activities and attitudes, support of family and friends, love and love affairs, and self descriptions and self worth. A summary of the clustered findings are presented below.

Telljohann & Price (1993) conducted a qualitative examination into the life experiences of homosexual adolescents to gain insight into the issues they faced while attending high school.

It was hoped the results of the study could assist school personnel in resolving inequalities that existed in their social environment.

Topics relevant to high school personnel were selected for investigation and addressed the following questions: When did the student first realise they were homosexual? Did their peers, family, and personal physician know they were gay? Have they been able to talk with teachers or school counsellors and its attendant problems? Has the topic of homosexuality been discussed in any of their classes, and if so, how was it handled? What have been the biggest problems they have faced in school concerning their sexual orientation, and who (or what) has been most helpful to them in dealing with these problems? Finally, what could schools do to make their life better at school?

A 17 item open ended questionnaire was developed based on a review of literature on adolescent homosexuality. The researchers' claimed to have constructed the questionnaire in such a way as to elicit the feelings and perceived experiences of the adolescents.

Respondents consisted of 120 homosexual youths, 89 males (74%) and 31 females (26%). The ages of the respondents ranged from 14 to 21 years. The educational background of the students ranged from seventh grade to having completed some college course work. The majority of the respondents (62%) were currently attending school.

Hetrick & Martin (1987) focussed on investigating the effects of stigmatisation on homosexual adolescents. The data is drawn primarily from the authors' experience dealing

with homosexual adolescents. The authors' specified that the study focussed on specific issues that arose out of the interaction of psychological and social factors resulting from stigmatisation.

The sample group consisted of 329 young people who attended The Institute for the Protection of Lesbian and Gay Youth in New York City. Seventy two percent of the sample group were male. The agency was established to meet the needs of homosexually oriented adolescents and their families. The age of the sample group ranged from 12 to 21 years. The raw data collected for the study represented problems elicited at clients' initial interview when a specific problem or concern was stated.

Comparison of Study Findings

Although the areas of investigation into coming out differed between the three studies presented for review, there were a number of issues that emerged out of the data from which comparisons could be drawn. In this section, attention is given to listing and comparing the themes which emerged from each of the three studies.

Savin-Williams Study (1990)

Sociodemographic characteristics

The study found that self esteem for gay males apparently increased with advancing age. This would tend to concur with the "acceptance" stage outlined by Remafedi (1987).

Attitudes and interests

The findings of the study indicated that attitudes and interests were poor predictors of self esteem with one exception - political liberalism among the males. Gay males who reported a liberal political philosophy had the highest level of self esteem, and those that saw themselves as gay conservatives had difficulty in accepting a positive view of self. Contrary to the findings of Remafedi (1987) (which indicated a correlation between "acceptance" of gay identity and spiritual worth), the findings of this study claimed little correlation between religiosity and self acceptance.

Gay-related activities and attitudes

The study found that gay males who did not wish to give up their homosexuality had the highest levels of self esteem. Combined with active participation in gay rights and activities, gay activism proved to be an important predictor in ascertaining high levels of self esteem. The study concluded that positive attitudes towards oneself and one's sexual orientation and outward conformation of that sexual orientation were associated with each other. This would tend to concur with the findings of both Dank, (1971) and Remafedi, (1987).

In terms of sexual contacts, the study found little relationship between the number of sexual partners and self esteem. It was concluded that neither the stereotype that gay men are promiscuous because they have low self esteem, nor the stereotype that those who avoid sex do so because of low self evaluation was supported by the data. Factors other than self esteem (for example, sex drive, moral values, opportunities, and personality characteristics) were suggested as determinants in the number of sexual relations that a young person has.

Love and love affairs

The study found that self esteem among young gay males was predicted by factors pertaining to love affairs. Of importance were a large number of love affairs including a current one.

Unrelated to positive self esteem were the longevity of affairs. The conclusion was drawn that those in a relationship have more positive views of the self. Self descriptions and self worth

Both the study by Remafedi (1987) and Savin-Williams (1990) agree that sexual orientation was a factor in participant's views on masculinity.

The researcher stated the young men described themselves (as cultural stereotypes would assume) in a feminine manner, for example as feminine, romantic, affectionate,

compassionate, and understanding of others. But counter to these stereotypes, good looks and a muscular build were seldom noted as frequent descriptors.

The study revealed the best predictors of higher levels of self esteem in the sample group were not stereotypical "feminine" characteristics often attributed to self, but "masculine" attributes including ambition, aggression, forcefulness, outgoingness, self sufficiency, accomplishments and sexy good looks. The study concluded that generally, youths in the sample viewed self esteem and masculine attributes as coming from the same "underlying construct". Further, it was claimed that the finding substantiates the view held by social scientists aware of sex bias in research, that self esteem is a masculine construction. The author concluded that to have extremely high levels of self esteem would appear to be discrepant with how these gay young men viewed themselves.

Telljohann & Price Study (1993)

Awareness of homosexual identity

The responses for the gay males ranged from four to 18 years of age. Thirty six percent reported they knew they were gay between the ages of four and 10, 27% between 11 to 13 years of age, and 33% between 14 to 18 years of age. Four percent gave non specific responses such as "I've always known". These findings appear to collaborate the findings of Dank (1971), and Remafedi (1987), indicating the process of identity formation to be a lengthy developmental process, beginning at a young age with same sex feelings and attractions.

Reaction of peers and family

The study revealed that 73% of the males had told their peers that they were gay. Responses to their disclosure ranged from "they didn't treat me any differently (18%), "positive and supportive" (17%), "O.K." (12%), and "mixed response" (9%). Only four percent of the males claimed that their peers responded negatively to their disclosure.

An examination of the respondents' families' awareness of their homosexual orientation found that 74% of the males' families were aware of their homosexuality. In response to how their families reacted to their disclosure, only 35% of the males' families reacted in a positive and supportive manner.

Problems faced in school

When asked "What have been the biggest problems you have faced in school concerning your sexual orientation?" 73% of the males reported their problems included "people always

putting gays down”, “bashing threats”, “physical abuse”, and “nowhere to turn, no one I can trust”.

Those who have been helpful

Only 20% of the males were able to identify others who were of major support to them.

Identified sources included: gay and lesbian support groups, friends, and a family member (usually mothers). None of the male respondents mentioned their fathers had been helpful, and few identified school personnel.

The schools' role

When asked “What could schools do to make your life at school better?” responses included: teach about the topic in a positive way in the classroom, have a gay support group in the school, be more caring and understanding of homosexuals, and punish those who are always “cutting down gays.”

Other concerns of homosexual adolescents

A final question posed to the group was “Is there anything else you would like to share with us concerning the issue?” Twenty seven percent of the males responded and were likely to cite the following issues: I feel being gay is good, we need more programs dealing with gay youth, teachers and counsellors should be more educated on the topic, and gay youths don't have many places to go. One student had added “Thank you for asking me”.

The study concluded that the most common issue facing young gays was social, emotional and cognitive isolation. Feeling alone, having no one to talk to, self doubt and the constant

anxiety of being discovered may lead to internalised homophobia. It was mentioned that schools need to take a stronger stand in countering discrimination and abuse of homosexual students, and that sexuality should be a component of a comprehensive health education curriculum. It was suggested that schools should also consider developing support groups for homosexual students or a system of referral to community agencies more likely to be free of the conservative encumbrances characteristic of school systems.

Hetrick & Martin Study (1987)

Isolation

In agreement with the previous study, the findings indicated that the most common problem presented was social, emotional and cognitive isolation. These young people felt they had no one to talk to and felt alone in social situations including the family, peers, school, and church. Feelings of isolation was usually closely connected with fear of discovery and the need to hide. The study claimed that contemplation and attempts at suicide are sometimes major results of the almost total isolation suffered by homosexual youth.

Family

The second most commonly experienced problem was with families. All of the sample group had stated that they felt distanced and detached from their families. The difficulties ranged from fear of rejection by parents to violence and expulsion from the home. The study found that many of the young people reported no family difficulties prior to their awareness of their homosexuality. The study claimed that it was when a young person attempted to handle their sexual identity rather than homosexuality per se that caused family difficulties.

Violence and suicide

One third of the young people claimed that they had suffered violence because of their sexual orientation; 49% being attributed to the family. Twenty percent of the group stated that they had either contemplated or attempted suicide. The study claimed that the high percentage of suicide attempts during teenage years was probably related to isolation.

Emotional problems

Nineteen percent reported some form of emotional problem, usually involving depressive feelings and anxiety.

Shelter

Twenty percent presented with shelter problems that ranged from the need for emergency accommodation to a need for help in finding alternate housing. The study found that young males were more likely at risk of violent expulsion from the family home than females, who were more likely to suffer physical and verbal abuse but be kept in the home.

Job related problems

The study found that problems in work could be divided into two major areas: difficulties in finding work, and fears of being fired if one is discovered to be homosexual. The findings indicated that many young gay people are afraid to apply for jobs, or have difficulty on the job because of their perceived need to hide their homosexuality. The study found that a fear of humiliation was even greater than the fear of violence.

The study concluded that while the roots of many of the issues covered in the study may lie in the pre-adolescent lives of homosexuals and the results can extend into adulthood, the issues were usually of primary importance during adolescence. Further, the study claimed the problems that homosexually oriented youth face are also social in nature. The researchers suggest that young gay people need access to sources of accurate information on homosexuality, including adult role models. It was also suggested there is a need to counter the mythology and homophobia surrounding homosexuality.

Summary of findings of the three studies

The research findings outlined in this category indicated there were recurring and similar issues that could be linked between the studies presented for review. A theme concurrent in the studies was the difficulties and anxieties often experienced by the young men during the process of disclosure. Isolation, fear of rejection and abuse (both verbal and physical), homophobia, and discrimination in school, work and housing were major issues raised in the research. The studies indicated that disclosing to parents was probably the most important issue that the young men had to contend with. The studies generally agreed that mothers were the most accepting parent, and that disclosing to fathers proved to be a contentious issue for the young men. Seeking the approval of friends and peers was also an issue the young men had to deal with. The impact of sexual orientation on perceptions of self identity and masculinity was shown to be an important consideration in predicting levels of self esteem. The research studies also revealed that many of the young men held positive views about themselves and their gay identity, and this was linked to a high level of self esteem and acceptance. Underlying all of these issues that relate to the coming out process is the actual process itself. All of the studies thus far considered have pointed to coming out as a linear

developmental process of identity formation that most young gay people negotiate. However, attention will be given later in the review to findings that dispute this claim. The studies did, however, indicate that the ease or hardship that each young person experiences during coming out is largely dependent on a variety of social factors that can either act to expedite or impede their process of social development.

Limitations of the studies

An important point to consider when evaluating the studies under review is that all of the research was undertaken either in Britain or America. When examining coming out in an Australian context, consideration needs to be given to the cultural and social variables that may differ from the Australian counterpart. For example, the study undertaken by Hetrick & Martin (1987) was conducted in New York City, which has a much larger general population and cultural and ethnic mix than Australian capital cities. This would also suggest that a further limitation to the studies is that they do not include the experiences of young men from country and rural areas where issues such as social isolation could be aggravated by physical isolation. This leads to considering the issue of recruitment of study participants. The majority of young men sampled came from educated middle class backgrounds, which may limit the range of issues and experiences elicited from the respective research samples.

One other possible limitation is that some studies did not separate the experiences of the young men and women. Although the study by Savin-Williams (1990) presented the findings for the two groups separately, the questionnaire was homogeneous in that the one set of questions was presented to both young men and women. Given that the experiences for young women may be different (for example, the study by Hetrick & Martin (1987) showed the

differences in the accommodation experiences of young men and women), the studies do not make allowance for difference of experience for young lesbians.

While it is undisputed that all three studies had a specific purpose or reason for investigating aspects of the lives of young gay people, the studies' designs appeared to be constructed with preconceived notions about the lives of the participant's that were to be researched. For example, the study by Savin-Williams (1990) relied on past theory and research when he constructed six categories for evaluating self esteem. Telljohann & Price (1993) constructed a questionnaire and questions relevant for school personnel. From a phenomenological perspective, the preliminary knowledge gained from a research review coupled with the study goals could act to constrict and pre-empt the findings. In other words, there was a risk that the young people interviewed would anticipate what was expected by way of a making a "correct" response.

The study by Hetrick and Martin (1987) dealt only with the authors' personal interactions with young people who had specified problems. While the authors' did make a disclaimer to the effect that they acknowledged the fact they were dealing with this specific group of young gay people, nonetheless the research study was based on the assumption that young gay people were stigmatised. This knowledge came from an extended period of contact and familiarisation with young gay people experiencing social, emotional and cognitive problems.

“Incidental” Studies where Coming Out is as a Facet of Other Studies that Focus on Gay Young Men

The literature search revealed that several Australian research studies have been undertaken in response to concerns over behavioural aspects of young gay people's lifestyle relating to HIV/AIDS. Since coming out can have an emotional and psychological impact on the health and well being of young gay people (Derry, 1995), issues relating to coming out and gay identity were often covered in these reports. Because an investigation into coming out was not the prime focus of the research, the current review includes only a summary of those aspects of the findings which relate to coming out.

Summary of the findings

The study undertaken by McLeod & Nott (1994) concluded that coming out was generally not a straightforward and easily identifiable process of linear development. Rather, that coming out for young men was a difficult process of self - acceptance, tentative exploration of aspects of gay life, and a reevaluation of themselves in terms of these experiences and further exploration.

Most people made very tentative steps towards publicly identifying as gay. These steps were often oblique and obscure. They may have formed a coherent pattern to the person themselves, but to an outsider they would probably have seemed disjointed and incoherent. Many of the young men (and their parents in retrospect) thought that their homosexuality was the proverbial “phase” (McLeod & Nott, 1994, p. 17).

Derry (1995) agreed that acceptance was a particularly important factor in the development of young gay men. Disclosure to family and friends, learning to relate to other gay people, fitting in to the gay community, forming relationships and dealing with discrimination were

important issues of acceptance and learning. The study concurred with findings elsewhere that mothers tended to be more accepting of their son's sexual identity. The study found that 94% of mothers were either accepting or indifferent. Only 17.5% had not come out to their mothers. As evidenced elsewhere in the review, fathers were the least accepting. The study found that 65% were either indifferent or unsupportive of their son's sexuality.

The study found that although siblings of young gay men were the least likely to know about their brother's sexuality, they recorded the highest level of acceptance. Of the siblings who were informed, 83% were supportive as opposed to mothers at only 63%. For those young men that had come out to one or more family members, less than 11% experienced unsupportive attitudes.

When separated into two groups, those whose family and friends were accepting and those who were not, it was found that acceptance was related to higher levels of confidence. The study claimed that the overall results pointed to high rates of disclosure and acceptance among the sample, and suggested that this perhaps indicated that the coming out process, arguably shrouded in a perception of low success rates, is more often successful and the benefits proven to be quite real.

However a study undertaken by Goggin & Sotiropoulos (1994) found that 53% of the young gay male respondents had not told others about their same-sex feelings, and 76% had not told any family members. Although the study concurs with previous findings that indicate that mothers are likely to be more accepting than fathers and are therefore told first, the study

found that young men are more likely to talk to female friends first, then male friends before speaking to a sibling or mother.

There are several reasons that can be speculated as to why such a discrepancy exists in the research. Firstly, the studies by Derry (1994) and Mcleod & Nott (1995) elicited their sample group from young men who had already developed an attachment to the gay community and had established a network of gay friends. To varying degrees, they were “out” to a significant number of other people. Both studies acknowledged that this constituted a bias in the research, however it should be reiterated that the purpose of the research was not to investigate coming out per se, but rather to examine the behaviours of young men who are in some way “active” in the gay community.

Secondly, both Derry (1994) and Mcleod & Nott (1995) used a qualitative “in depth” approach, focussing on the lived experiences of a small sample group (64 and 40 respondents respectively) for their study. In contrast, the study by Goggin & Sotiropoulos (1994) was aimed at “hard to reach” young homosexually active gay and bisexual males. The study design incorporated an Australia wide media campaign to elicit responses from young gay people. The results of the study were based on the 623 respondents who participated in answering a 20 item mailed questionnaire. Since the study guaranteed total anonymity, it can be speculated that many of the young people had not yet come out to significant others or had attachment to the gay community, and were therefore socially isolated.

It is therefore not surprising that the study findings upheld the findings of Remafedi (1987) and Savin-Williams (1990), that acceptance of a gay identity increased with age and experience.

The study by Goggin & Sotiropoulos (1994) also included elicited responses from young people from rural areas, and claimed this to be a factor in identity formation. The study found that demographic factors could be linked to the formation of a gay identity. For example, the study found that rural males who were sexually experienced with females only identified as mostly straight or bisexual, while city males who were sexually experienced with males only were most likely to identify as totally gay.

Further, the study found that a correlation between sexual experience with males and disclosure. It found that those young men who were sexually experienced with males were more likely to talk about their same sex attractions to a friend or family member than those who reported to no sexual experience with other young men.

The study concluded that coming from a rural background and/or having any sexual experience with females, tended to entrench secrecy about same sex feelings and uncertainty about sexual identity. In contrast, having sex with other males enhanced the certainty about being gay and appears to encourage talking about same sex feelings.

Attachment to the gay community and acceptance of the cultural identity was an issue raised by both Derry (1994) and Mcleod & Nott (1995). The study by Derry (1994) concluded the

young men went through a process of comparing their own interests, experiences and expectations with the opportunities afforded by existing gay venues. These venues included bars, clubs and saunas to “non profit” social support networks, to informally organised contact points such as “beats”. McLeod & Nott (1995) found that the study participants had an extremely high level of association with the gay community (87% were in contact with the gay scene several times per week). The researcher concluded however, this may not be representative of young gay men generally, because the locations where the group was sampled are likely to have inflated the result to this level as many were gay scene oriented. The findings by Derry (1994) contrasted with this claim, indicating that the young men interviewed felt at odds with the conventionally defined gay community because of the perceived levels of promiscuity, the obsession with sex and sexual conquests, and the lack of an intimate context in which sex occurred. This was not a community to which they felt they belonged.

Derry (1994) claimed that for most young men who are tacitly aware that they are or might be gay, the language they have available to them is mostly derogatory and pathological. The language of the dominant heterosexual culture gives little room for homosexual experiences and lifestyle issues which would have been adequate to what these young men were feeling. Further, that the existing gay scene was just as inadequate for many of the young men who were interviewed. The study found that the need to talk and establish a sense of community through shared experience was very strong in the young men who were interviewed.

Although the gay scene was often perceived in largely negative terms, gay youth support services were viewed as valuable. The study found that the young men who were involved in gay youth support services spoke positively about the experience. The support groups and the courses they operated, functioned to make a transition into gay lifestyle easier, and developed a sense of confidence and a more positive image of what it was to be gay. However as the researcher points out, for those young men who do not identify with the gay scene and have rejected it, such support groups could be seen as trying to recruit young men to a lifestyle which may not be perceived as desirable by the young men themselves.

Summary of the Literature Review

A review of previous research indicated there were few studies into coming out that were sociologically based and further, that Australian studies were limited in both number and scope. The existing research was divided into three categories: studies that were similar to the present study and therefore of primary interest as “benchmark” studies; studies that offered “partial” evidence by focussing on specific aspects of the coming out process; and Australian studies that provided “incidental” evidence on coming out arising from research into HIV/AIDS.

The studies conducted by Dank (1971) and Remafedi (1987) concluded that coming out was a developmental process of identity formation that was social and contextual in nature. The studies found that the formation of a gay identity was not formed in isolation, but was largely determined by the conceptual meanings ascribed by the individual to that identity. These meanings were a product of the intersubjective experiences the individual negotiated in the

context of the social world in which he lived. The studies were considered “benchmarks” because they gave the individual agency and choice in relation to their sexual identity by focussing on the social contexts in which identity formation was given meaning.

The study by Remafedi (1987) provided supporting data to aliment the contention that social factors were present which significantly impacted on young gay people’s lives as a result of their sexuality. A critical appraisal of the studies found that while they were a valuable source of research information, there were weaknesses in the area of language use, terminology and study design that could reduce the credibility and validity of the research.

A review of data provided by “partial studies” added support to the argument that social factors impinged on the lives of young gay men by exploring further the dynamics of sexuality on the physical, social and psychological well being of this group of young people. The main findings from these studies related to self esteem and self worth, disclosure to others, discrimination, abuse (verbal and physical) and identity formation.

Australian HIV/AIDS research studies provided an investigation of the experiences and identity construction of sexually active young gay men, many of whom had considerable attachment to the gay community. The studies highlighted the learning experience involved during the coming out process. Studies undertaken by Derry (1995) and McLeod & Nott (1994) concluded that coming out was usually not a process of straightforward linear development, but was a process of self-acceptance, exploration of gay life, and reevaluation of themselves resulting from these experiences which leads to further and ongoing

exploration. Both Derry (1994) and McLeod & Nott (1995) were in agreement that acceptance was an important factor in the young men's process of development and social learning. They concluded that disclosure to family and peers, relating to other gay people, participating in the gay community, forming relationships and dealing with discrimination were all major issues of acceptance and learning. Both researchers suggested that a progression into mainstream gay culture was not automatic, but was subject to the young men comparing their own needs and interests with those offered by the gay scene. If their own perceived requirements were not congruent with gay public life, they were likely to have little interest in the gay scene. For example, if a young man perceived the gay scene to be promiscuous and a high priority being given to sex and sexual conquests he may decide it is not suitable. Goggin & Sotiropoulos (1994) added a further dimension to the issue of gay identity by discovering a correlation between demographic factors and gay identity. The findings concurred with those of Remafedi (1987) and Savin-Williams (1990) that an acceptance of a gay identity increased with age and experience, however the study claimed that rural isolation was a factor in identity development. The study concluded that young men who lived in metropolitan areas were more sexually experienced with other males than their country counterparts and were therefore more likely to strongly identify as being gay. Because of their experience, young metropolitan gay men were more likely to make a disclosure about their sexual feelings to family or friends than young men from the country who reported to having no such experience.

The need to appropriate a suitable language was mentioned as a factor in establishing a sense of shared experience. The derogatory language often used in heterosexual culture and the

stereotyped language of gay culture was cited as being inadequate for the expression of feelings that many young gay men held.

Although gay youth support services were considered to be useful by some of the participants, Derry (1994) raised the issue of indoctrination and recruitment into a gay lifestyle as a possible criticism of support service networks.

Conclusion

It has been the purpose of this chapter to present a critical overview of the status of contemporary research knowledge in the area of youth sexuality (particularly focussing on young gay men), and to review research studies that have, in varying ways, investigated the phenomena of coming out.

The review has shown that the experiences of young gay people are marginalised within contemporary research studies. There were relatively few studies that knowingly included young gay people in the research, and this was particularly evident in studies focussing on young people generally. Heterosexist bias in the research is considered by the researcher to be responsible for the lack of attention and consideration given to young gays.

Research initiatives that have been undertaken have either focussed on examining only the specific area of coming out that has a designated purpose or interest to the researcher or organisation, or have examined coming out as a relational factor in determining the behaviour or status of health in sexually active young gay men. While these studies provide valuable

data in terms of fitting together parts of a bigger social puzzle, there has been little attention given to understanding coming out as a process that incorporates the dynamics of young gay people's total life experience from their own perspective. It is part of this that the current thesis fills.

CHAPTER FIVE

Discussion of findings

The research findings discussed in this chapter represent findings that contribute to new knowledge, or contradict existing research findings, or are considered by the researcher to be especially relevant to youth work practice.

Category I. The Influence of Heterosexual Mainstream Culture

This category was concerned with the influence of mainstream heterosexual culture on the coming out process. The theme clusters were the family; the education system; and the workforce. The findings of this study in general concur with those of other studies, and so will not be further discussed in this section.

The significance of the findings for youth workers relate particularly to the youth worker's own knowledge and understanding of likely consequences for a young person who decides to come out to their family, at school, college or university or in the workplace. A youth worker might consider sharing these research findings with young people who are in the process of coming out. This would enable the young person to prepare themselves for the possible consequences of disclosure, and enable them to discuss the possibility of potentially negative

consequences, with the likely positive consequences of coming out. It would also enable the young person to make decisions about any possible practical support that they might require.

To summarise the relevant findings for youth workers

- mothers are more likely to be accepting than fathers
- the consequences of not coming out to family members is likely to lead to a distancing between the young person and their family even if relationships were previously good, because it is not possible to speak openly about significant feelings
- homophobia was normal within the school system and only two of the participants in this study chose to come out at school
- strategies employed by participants to avoid pressure at home and school to conform to heterosexual behavioural norms included using study as a reason for not engaging in heterosexual activity and deliberately abandoning any 'feminine' behaviour to avoid verbal and physical abuse
- most participants were wary of coming out in the workplace and usually only did so after they had formed positive relationships with workmates and 'tested them out' in terms of homophobic attitudes
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Category 2. The Intersection of Mainstream Heterosexual Culture and Perceptions of Self Worth and Identity

The themes in this category are concerned with how the young person negotiates their relationships within heterosexual culture and the impact of that culture on the young person's

perceptions of their own self worth and identity. The themes include social isolation; contemplating coming out to others; having to continuously come out; homophobia and heterosexism; suicide; moving out of home and living a double life.

The findings in this section generally concur with the findings of other studies. In some cases the interview data offer possible explanations of the finding from other studies. The interview data also offer youth workers some very powerful insights into the difficulties which young gay men face as they struggle to maintain a positive self identity when confronted by a homophobic heterosexual culture. In the first part of this section, discussion will focus on instances where the data differ from that found in other studies, especially the findings on religion and homophobia. In the second part of this section, discussion will focus on youth suicide and on social isolation as the data appears to offer additional material to extend existing explanations. In the third part, discussion will focus on how existing theory on masculinity and heterosexism offers an explanatory framework which connects the findings in different parts of this section. The section will conclude with a discussion of the relevance of these findings to youth work practice.

Religious Homophobia

Homophobia was mentioned as an issue that affected a wide range of the participant's interpersonal relationships, including relationships with their families and friends, relationships at school and university, in the workforce and as a factor that the young men often had to contend with in society at large. In this respect the study findings concur with those of Ramafedi (1987); Savin -Williams (1990); Telljohann & Price (1993);and Heterick & Martin (1987). However, this study also found that religious homophobia has been a major

issue in the lives of over half of the study participants, (including the influence of religious attitudes and beliefs over decisions to attempt commit suicide, which is discussed in greater depth in the next section). This seems to be contrary to the findings of Savin-Williams(1990), who discovered little correlation between self acceptance and religiosity, and has not been specifically addressed in any of the other research. A possible explanation for this discrepancy could be that the current study adopted an open ended in depth approach to the research. This contrasts with the more structured survey initiated by Savin Williams(1990). When discussing the research design of his study, Savin-Williams commented that future research that asked more in depth questions should aspire to understand the meanings that “being homosexual” held for young gay people.). One explanation for the non-appearance of this theme in other research may be that the research was focused around other issues which made it unlikely that religious homophobia would emerge (for example, Telljohan & Price (1993).

An in-depth discussion of the data elucidates some of the ways in which religious homophobia affected the self perception of the study participants. Four of the seven participants revealed they grew up in families that had a firmly established religious background. As part of the family group, they had often become personally involved in Church related duties and activities, which for two participants had included involvement in Church run youth groups. The young men indicated that part of their concerns in disclosing to parents was fear of rejection on the grounds of religious prejudice, and so they initially remained closeted in relationships with both family and Church. Working through issues that were arising out of their religious affiliations was part of the process of resolving conflicts

and confusions manifest in accepting and defining their gay identity. The determination of where they stood in relation to religious beliefs, religious dogma and their own thoughts and feelings, were examples of the process. This is reflected in the interviews with Logan and David. After coming out to his parents and experiencing rejection from his father, Logan discontinued his relationship with the Catholic Church. He did not believe the Church would be accepting of him. David, from a Christian Fundamentalist background, initially came out to the Church elders and experienced prejudice and rejection. The Church had informed his parents about his “homosexuality” and he was then rejected by both parents. He also discontinued his relationship with the Church.

For others, the experience of religious homophobia from within their social settings remained a perceived threat to their identity and lifestyle. Whether or not their expectations of discrimination are well founded is not the point, the *fear* of homophobic reactions on the grounds of religious persecution had prevented several of the young men from coming out to significant others, and had therefore contributed to their experience of alienation and social isolation. It is suggested that religious homophobia has constructed non procreative gay relationships and sexual behaviours as “deviant” and “unnatural”. The majority of participants had internalised these mainstream cultural “norms” to some degree, and especially when they first began to come out this had produced feelings of anxiety, depression and guilt. As the young men had become more comfortable and accepting of their gay identity, and were more “out” to others, this often changed to feelings of anger, hostility and resistance. Thus it appears that as the young men became more comfortable with their gay identity, and as their network of support and friendship grew, their experience of negative

emotions and feelings as a consequence of religious homophobia (for example guilt, shame and low self esteem), diminished but were replaced by feelings of anger and resentment that this form of oppression continued. These findings parallel those of Remafedi (1987), who found a correlation existed between acceptance of gay identity and increased levels of self esteem, including spiritual worthiness.

Suicide

Data analysis revealed that of the seven participants who volunteered for the study, two young men had attempted to suicide, and one other had contemplated taking his own life. It is suggested by the current researcher that suicide is an extremely complex issue, involving a range of interrelated factors and issues. This study can not provide an explanation for suicide amongst young gay men as a subcultural group however, it may indicate factors which were relevant to the young men in this study and hence indicate a possible direction for future research.

The review of literature revealed the rate of deaths from suicide amongst young adolescents and young male adults in Australia has continued to increase since the 1950's. In the period 1983 to 1992 in Western Australia, there were 1, 512 reported male deaths which represented an average increase of 2.1% per year, with those for females representing a decrease by an average of 0.5% per year. In country areas the age-standardised rates have increased on average by 2.7% per year. Suicide rates were highest in the 20-24, 25-29, 75-79, and 80-84 years age groups, however the actual number of deaths was much higher for males aged between 20 and 29 years with over 400 deaths, compared with 68 deaths in males aged 75 and over (Swenson, Serafino, & Thomson, 1995). The Select Committee On Youth Affairs

(Interim Report, 1991), revealed that suicide attempts in Perth among young males aged 15 - 19 years more than doubled in the 15 years (1971-72 to 1986-87) from 118 per 100 000 to 252 per 100 000. The report claimed the statistics only represented the “tip of the iceberg”, and that the increase in suicide rates and the prevalence of attempted suicide, self-harm and depression amongst youth suggest an association with relatively new factors which are particular to the present generation of youth.

The sample interviewed in the current study is too small to draw statistically valid conclusions. However, the Hetrick & Martin (1987) study, suggested that 20% of lesbian and gay young people attempted or contemplated suicide. This would indicate that the rate of suicide attempts is significantly higher amongst young gay men than other sections of the population. The Select Committee On Youth Affairs (Interim Report, 1991), submitted the rate of actual death by suicide among young people in Australia was higher than in the USA, Japan, England and Wales.) Despite this, as the review of literature indicated that little attention has been given in the research or literature to suicide involving young gay people.

It is suggested by the current researcher that suicide represented one way of dealing with the fear and repression the young men experienced as a consequence of their sexuality. Kourany (1987) suggested that due to developmental, sociological, familial, and moral tensions, young people with a homosexual preference would be at greater risk for suicide, however he did not support this speculation empirically.

Analysis of the data from the present study revealed there was no apparent single factor that had caused the young men to contemplate or attempt suicide. Rather, there were a number of factors impacting together, that had led the participants to consider suicide. These factors were: social and emotional isolation, homophobia (including religious homophobia), rejection, guilt, confusion, depression, self hatred, and a lack of support networks. The young men's responses indicated that a combination of negative internal and external factors were present that had created an intersubjectivity of experience which was responsible for their feelings of low self worth and identity. Kourany (1987) suggests that young gay people who face society's negative pressures, whether from family, peers, or other groups, may experience more acutely their conflicting impulses, needs and desires. Further, these conflicts can generate a series of negative responses, including low self esteem, loneliness, feelings of worthlessness, rejection, and shame, all possibly culminating into depressive symptoms and suicidal gestures. The data gathered in the current study appear to support Kourney's analysis, as shown in the following example.

Evidence provided by the present study revealed that a contemplation or attempt to suicide had been preceded by a sustained period of intense depression and emotional turmoil. Larry and David both indicated their suicide attempts had occurred after a period during which they had felt confused and emotionally distraught. Larry claimed to have felt "abnormal" and "a mutant" because of sexual feelings that he believed were inappropriate for a young male. Similarly, David had gone through a lengthy period of confusion, guilt and turmoil resulting from conflicts arising from his fundamentalist Christian beliefs of "normal" sexual expression and his own sexual feelings. It is suggested that as a result of internalised homophobia, self

hatred was a result of having adopted negative stereotypes of gay people. Dank (1971) concluded that individuals who felt same sex desires had often been socialised into accepting widespread negative stereotypes of gay people, and so perceived them in a negative light. Kourany (1987) found that homophobic values when internalised by the adolescent may contaminate the process of adolescent identity formation. Telljohann & Price (1993) concluded that the constant anxiety of being discovered could also lead to internalised homophobia.

Data analysis also indicated that social isolation and the lack of a support network were contributing factors that had led all three current participants to consider suicide. In each instance, the young men felt they had no one they could confide in about how they were feeling. A commonly shared experience was that emotional isolation from family members, and social isolation from others that could provide support and understanding, resulted in suicide being either attempted or contemplated. Telljohann & Price (1993) proposed that because young homosexuals are part of a stigmatised group, they require the support of "sympathetic others". Heterosexual adolescents can turn to family and peers for support, however young homosexuals find it difficult to seek help from family and friends. Thus, the traditional areas of support for young heterosexual students, peers, family, and school, are often not available to most gay youths. This would appear to confirm the findings of Hetrick & Martin (1987), who claimed that the contemplation and attempts at suicide are sometimes major results of the almost total isolation suffered by homosexual youth.

Data from the present study indicated that Logan's situation of repressing his sexuality by remaining closeted from those he loved, had resulted in his contemplation of suicide. His situation had been further complicated by falling in love with his best friend who was heterosexual, and this had acted as a trigger to the actual event. It is suggested that leaving a suicide note and disappearing for the weekend was a medium through which Logan could inform others of his sexuality and ask for their support and understanding. This view is supported by Healy (1994), who emphasised that a contemplation or suicide attempt is often a "cry for help" by someone who feels hopelessly alone. Although he was accepted by his mother he experienced rejection from his father and best friend, the latter of which had him to contemplate suicide several times in the following year. It was not until he had gained the support of close friends that his periods of suicidal depression ceased. Hart (cited in Mason, 1990) elaborated that a suicide attempt indicated there is a need for change, and unless a change occurs, the attempts will continue.

Religion and Suicide

The data revealed that each of the young men who had contemplated or attempted suicide had come from families with a strong religious background. Larry claimed that he has not come out to his parents because of their homophobia and strict religious beliefs. David had also experienced rejection because of his parent's Christian fundamentalist attitudes and beliefs regarding the "sin" and "immorality" of gay sexuality and lifestyle. After Logan's father was told that his son was gay, he too had rejected him. The current review of literature did not reveal any research studies (from Australia or overseas), that investigated the connection between religion and youth suicide. This concurs with the findings of the Select Committee On Youth Affairs (Interim Report, 1991) which stated there has been no research into youth

suicide which has conclusively identified specific causal factors. However, Strommen (1989) suggests that the family's religious values and beliefs regarding homosexuality can cause the rejection of a gay family member and as such play a large part in determining family reaction. It is therefore posited that although religion and religious homophobia may not be solely responsible for the young men's contemplation or attempts at suicide, it is a causal factor that should not be overlooked.

Heterosexual culture, masculinity and social isolation

After consideration of the data presented for analysis, it became clear that socialisation played a large part in the young men's experience of isolation. Having grown up within mainstream heterosexual culture, the young men had been exposed to social and cultural mores presented by mainstream culture as indicative of heterosexual identity and lifestyle. It is suggested that through a process of socialisation, the young men had not only internalised these social mores, but were also aware of the possible outcomes of breaking the accepted normative behaviours governing heterosexuality - alienation and rejection.

Analysis of the data suggested that remaining socially isolated from others was often also due to hiding internalised feelings of guilt and shame at being what society deemed as "deviant" and "abnormal". It was intimated that in breaking with the established hegemonic sexuality, (and it is suggested hegemonic masculinity), the young men were jeopardising their futures as "respected" and "valued" members of society. Feeling alienated and "different" from their heterosexual peers, placed the young men in a situation of having to hide their fears, confusions and feelings while simultaneously attempting to deal with them on their own. Data analysis indicated that remaining socially isolated (and therefore having a lack of

emotional support), was a primary factor in the loneliness that many of the young men had experienced.

Effects of social isolation

The data showed that social isolation had a considerable impact over the young men's ability to maintain a reasonable level of social functioning within the mainstream structures of the family, the education system and the workforce. Two of the participants mentioned that peer group pressure to conform to established group norms such as having a girlfriend was often problematic. Exposure to homophobic comments and attitudes espoused by peers and feeling "different" and "outside" of the peer group were other issues raised by the young men.

Feeling the desire to socialise with their peers, but simultaneously fearing they might be discovered, was a conflict that had resulted from isolation. Similarly, being privy to negative parental responses regarding gay people and lifestyle caused feelings of fear and anxiety for several participants. One young man describe the difficulty involved in covering up his identity while at home, and the mental effort involved in not making a verbal "slip" that could give him away. Remaining totally closeted at work was also mentioned by one participant as a contributing factor to the depression, loneliness and anxiety he had experienced.

Data analysis revealed that eventually, the need and desire to explore their sexual feelings, resulted in participants making various forms of contact with other young gay people. This concurs with the findings of Cass (1984), who claimed that an increased commitment to homosexual self image caused individuals to seek out the company of others to fulfil social, sexual and emotional needs. Because of their isolation and lack of knowledge and experience of gay culture, several of the young men utilised the local print media to establish early

contacts. While this form of contact appeared to provide a source for potential relationships, it was mentioned by one of the participants that a difficulty arose from finding a person that was compatible. Although it could be suggested that heterosexual young people might experience similar difficulties, it is posited that a majority of their heterosexual peers do not experience social isolation, and therefore have access to openly meeting and socialising with young women within their social setting. Even if their relationships prove to be incompatible, they could both seek other potential partners from within their social network. For young gay men who do not have this avenue available, their only recourse was to seek alternative means of initiating contacts and relationships. It was indicated that if a relationship did not work out, the procedure of answering or placing advertisements was repeated. Eventually relationships snowballed, with participants meeting other gay young men through their partner's friendship group. This usually led to participants accessing traditional gay venues where they were exposed to a larger number of other young gay people that presented a potential source of friends and partners. David described how his social isolation had resulted in using the print media to obtain male sex workers for the purpose of sexual exploration and satisfaction. In this instance, it would appear that the purpose of making contact was not to initially seek out potential friends or partners, but for the purpose of sexual experimentation.

Another young man described how social isolation from other gay people had prevented him from self acknowledging that he was gay. His internalised stereotypical images of gay people disallowed him from making the connection. It was not until a close friend with whom he positively identified came out that the realisation occurred. Social isolation, then, can be seen to be an impediment to the personal development and social functioning of the young men so

predisposed. Caused in the main by the intersubjective experience of mainstream heterosexual stereotypes and homophobia, social isolation is a defence mechanism initiated as a response against potential hostilities and abuse. How the young men eventually deal with their experience of isolation has been shown to vary in accordance with the issues and situations that each young person is faced with.

Significance of the findings for youth work practice

The findings in this section provide youth workers with some insight into how a young person may be feeling when they first make the decision to come out. This study should help youth worker empathise with young men who are likely to be very fearful of homophobic reactions and who may be experiencing feelings of guilt due to internalised homophobia.

Some relevant findings from the study include

- When young men first come out to a heterosexual person, it is likely they have already made contact with gay people
- Coming out is something which gay people have to do over and over again throughout their lives
- When they come out to a heterosexual person, young men experience fear of rejection. This can be extreme the first few times but is likely to lessen as they experience acceptance.

- Young people in rural and remote areas may not recognise their identity as gay because they do not connect with the gay stereotypes in the media and have no access to any local forms of gay culture
- Sexual identity may well be an important issue for young men who attempt suicide.
- Suicide attempts are most likely to occur when the young man feel they have no one in whom they can confide, and are most likely before the young person has come out
- Young people from religious families, and who have themselves been involved in church activities may feel more isolated because of religious homophobia (internalised and actual) and this may contribute to a suicide attempt
- Providing opportunities for young gay men to explore concepts of masculinity within a supportive environment may support young men in affirming their self identity

These findings imply that what young gay men need from youth workers is acceptance and affirmation of their normality. In Perth, because approximately 40% of youth work organisations and agencies are either Church based or affiliated (and therefore uphold a religious ethos within the organisational structure), the issue of religious homophobia has particular relevance for youth workers. Even if individual youth workers are accepting of gay people, young people who have experienced religious homophobia are likely to avoid contacting youth workers who appear to be working within a religious organisation. Thus

most religious organisations are likely to be perceived by young gay men as unsuitable agencies to provide supportive services.

Category 3. The Intersection of Gay Culture and Mainstream Heterosexual Culture

The theme clusters appearing in this category represented the young men's experiences in addressing conflicts and confusions arising out of gay and mainstream cultural life. The themes include seeking the acceptance of friends, and the influences of cultural stereotypes on identity.

Friendship networks and identity

One of the most pervasive issues that arose from the data was the importance of a network of understanding and supportive friends, both gay and "straight". Friendship networks were shown to have had a positive influence on each participant's process of identity formation and development. The findings concur with those of Remafedi (1987), Dank (1971), and Savin-Williams (1990), who found that where young men had a positive attitude towards themselves and their gay identity, it was largely dependant on having the support and confirmation of others who affirmed that it was perfectly acceptable and "normal" to be gay. The current study found participants who had the highest levels of self worth and self acceptance were those who were the most "out" and who had already established a friendship and support network. It is suggested that through their involvement with other gay young people, the young men began to develop a sense of affirmation and acceptance of their identity as gay young men. This would appear to concur with the stage theories of Cass (1979) and Troiden (1989) who claim that participation in gay subculture earmarks the

individuals' self definition as homosexual. However, the findings from the current study indicate there was a degree of variation in how study participants accessed gay culture, and how gay culture had been experienced, perceived and defined by each of the participants in the process of determining their own identity.

Coming out as bisexual

Two of the study participants claimed they had initially come out to others as bisexual rather than gay, because it was easier and less threatening for them to do so. After a period of time elapsed they felt sufficiently accepted by their peers and comfortable in their social relationships to disclose their gay identity. It seemed that disclosing as a bisexual was a coping strategy and defence mechanism used by some young men for the purpose of personal survival in a potentially hostile social environment. In addition, it is suggested that a bisexual disclosure allowed the young men the social space in which to assess the reactions and responses of other people and evaluate whether they would proceed to disclose their gay identity. Cass (1979) calls this type of strategy "ambisexuality", claiming that the individual perceives themselves as bisexual as an easy way of coping with alienation. Similarly, Hetrick & Martin (1987) conclude that young gay people develop coping mechanisms which help them deal with the process of stigmatisation. They submit that a denial of sexual identity is a strategy that young gay people may use to consider these possibilities when a young man indicates a bisexual identity. It is therefore postulated that by coming out as bisexual, the participants might not only have been protecting themselves from possible negative responses, but may also have been going through a process of testing their own sexuality.

The influence of heterosexual stereotypes on identity

Data analysis indicated that for all of the participants, a transition into gay cultural life had meant a process of personal evaluation and reevaluation. The study revealed that during the course of their lives, the young men had been exposed to gay sexual stereotypes that existed within heterosexual culture. Since all of the participants had grown up in heterosexual families, they had been socialised into the mores of “normal” and “acceptable” heterosexual behaviour and expression. Early experiences with gay cultural stereotypes tended to reaffirm their internalised negative attitudes and beliefs about gay identity and lifestyle. Early encounters with scene life often produced perceptions of promiscuity and an obsessive focus on sexual encounters and being “picked up”. The findings concur with those of Derry (1994), who claimed that many young men felt at odds with what they perceived as the traditionally defined gay community as a consequence of the scene’s sexual connotations. For some of the young men this perception of gay lifestyle created feelings of fear and loathing in the sense that they could not and did not wish to identify with the stereotype. However, initial repulsion and rejection often decreased as the young men became more experienced with the gay scene and developed their own independent gay friendship network. Having an established friendship network meant they no longer solely depended on the gay scene for socialising, and either felt safe and secure in going to gay clubs and bars with friends, or would only occasionally attend. For others, the gay scene provided a transition into traditional gay culture and formed an integral part of their social lives and identity. It is suggested that the differences in individual experience confirms the claim by McLeod & Nott (1995), that there is no conventional way of coming out because each young person has to find their own way of coming to terms with their sexuality and this means finding an appropriate form of expression.

It is suggested that the ways in which the young men define themselves can be at odds with how they are defined by mainstream heterosexual culture and gay culture. It is argued further, that individual agency is a key component in the decisions and choices made by individuals rather than as a response to the influence of stereotyped group “norms”. Data analysis indicated that sexual identity stereotypes were a major issue that all of the young men had to contend with. The ways chosen to resolve this involved a process of exploration, personal comparison and evaluation.

Significance of the findings for youth work practice

The findings presented in this category suggest that if a youth worker is openly accepting of alternative sexualities, this increases the chance that young people who are questioning their sexuality, or who feel alienated or isolated, will choose to come out to staff members. The worker is then in a position to provide assistance and support to the young person concerned. This is particularly relevant for workers employed in Church based agencies who may be treated with suspicion, or experience resistance from young gay people who fear persecution on the basis of a stereotyped religious ethos. The point should be made that whatever the individual attitudes youth workers are, the current study indicates that gay young men are likely to expect Church affiliated agencies to be homophobic.

- The young men are only likely to disclose confusions or problems they are experiencing with those they trust, and whom believe are not homophobic.

- Coming out to others is an important process in gauging potential reactions and responses to their sexuality.
- A supportive network of friends is central to the establishment and positive affirmation of an identity with which the young men felt comfortable.
- Homophobic stereotypes and heterosexism were primary reasons that prevented the young men from coming out and identifying as gay.

Category 4. Gay Culture

The themes presented in this category are directed towards the role that gay culture played in providing an alternative range of behavioural and lifestyle possibilities that influenced choices made by the young men. They comprise of lifestyle issues and the gay scene.

The findings provide a more in-depth examination of gay culture than previous studies have by offering possible explanations as to how and why young gay men differ in their responses to traditional gay culture. This understanding holds particular relevance for youth workers, because it highlights the need for workers to be particularly attentive to the specific expectations and needs of individuals when discussing issues of identity and lifestyle. The findings can also provide youth workers with a degree of insight into the issues young men face when exploring and interacting with gay cultural life.

Identity and the gay scene

Two key identity issues that arose from the study findings were acculturation and acceptance into the traditionally defined gay scene. Scene life had presented a combination of positive and negative elements that were evaluated by the young men over varying periods of

contact and interaction. It appears the gay scene positively reinforced the social acceptability of the young men's sexual identity by providing a safe environment in which they could freely express themselves. In this sense, the scene can be regarded as a social space in which the young men interact with others without the potential hostilities inherent in mainstream heterosexual culture. However, acceptance into gay cultural life was often predicated on adopting a sexually stereotyped persona presented as being indicative of gay lifestyle and identity, and this was generally perceived by the young men as undesirable. It is suggested that the pejorative effects of heterosexual stereotyping of gay sexuality are responsible for negative judgements made by the young men in terms of their rejection of the overtly "feminine" forms of expression encountered in the gay scene.

Several participants mentioned the stereotype was perpetuated by a "core body" of individuals in attendance (particularly at gay clubs), who were resistant to accepting "outsiders" who did not conform to the sexual "norms" (frequent sexual encounters with a multiple range of partners) and semiotics of the stereotype. It was to this body of individuals that the young men often referred to when discussing the negative elements of scene life, for example, a focus on male beauty, and the "clickiness", "bitchiness", "pretentiousness" and "fakeness" of the scene. Two young men (who were themselves involved in monogamous relationships), commented that couples participating in serial or long term monogamous relationships received hostile treatment from members of this "core group" intent on interfering to break them up.

A possible explanation for the existence of gay cultural stereotypes may be found by examining the experiences of participants who have had a sustained attachment to the scene over a considerable period of time. In particular, the experiences of David (who identified himself as a “scene queen”) and Peter, suggest that by adopting the gay stereotype it functioned to give meaning to their lives as gay young people. Further, the adoption of the stereotype had resulted in their sexual identity becoming their primary identity. Through the adoption of group semiotics, they were able to resist and separate themselves from a potentially hostile outside world and create their own existence within a totally gay social setting. This engendered a kind of gay separatism in which sexual identity became a dominant part of their lives. This phenomenon is described by Cooper (1992) as a form of ghetto mentality, instigated in response to rejection by more powerful and dominant groups in society. David, for example, was extremely proud to be gay; was affiliated with gay groups and organisations; socialised almost exclusively with other gay men; and attended gay venues and events on a regular basis. On a personal level, David had multiple sexual partners and spoke, behaved and dressed in accordance with the stereotype.

Similarly, Peter felt an initial attraction to the scene. He stated that when he first began attending gay venues he received a lot of attention from other young men, and enjoyed scene life. An aspect that was not revealed in the taped interview was Peter’s attractiveness and confidence which may help to account for his on scene popularity.

It would appear from David’s experiences, that a focus on ageism and youth were central “norms” in the group to which he belonged. In other words, a substantial part of his ability to

participate and enjoy the lifestyle to which he was accustomed was dependent on being “young”. Since he was now twenty five, the group “norms” by which he had abided in the past were now becoming a threat. For example, being able to use manipulative skills to “pick up” another young man for the purpose of sex was mentioned. Sex was commodified and therefore depersonalised in the sense that it was not based on developing a loving and caring relationship, but on using learned skills to procure young men for the purpose of sexual one night stands. In this regard, the study findings tend to agree with those of Savin-Williams (1990), who concluded that having a large number of love affairs was often regarded by participants as important, while the longevity of the affairs was not. The current study indicated this was often problematic for young men new to the scene who were searching for more caring and sustained relationships.

As he was becoming older, David felt less capable in his abilities to attract young men. He indicated that the insecurities of an “aging” population of club regulars was responsible for much of the “attitude” and “bitchiness” experienced by young men new to the scene. David stated that his group felt threatened by younger more attractive men who could take control and upset the established hierarchy of the older group. It is suggested that ageing represented a threat to the group’s cultural identity that was perceived as a life line to their social existence and that younger males not only presented a threat to the established order, but were a constant reminder of their increasing age. These findings are in agreement with the study undertaken by Harry & De Vall (1978), who concluded that regular frequenters of gay bars are more likely to be more “youth oriented” than those who attend bars less often. The study suggested that for these individuals, aging may appear to be a relentless march into social

undesirability among an already undesired minority. The study also found that because of the heterogeneity of the gay male community, the degree of emphasis on youth will be found to vary according to social setting.

To summarise the relevant findings for youth workers

- The gay scene provides a safe environment which allows for and supports the free expression of young gay people
- Young gay men may experience pressure from a “core body” of individuals on the scene to conform and identify with a gay stereotype presented as indicative of gay cultural life.
- Although the gay scene has many positive advantages for young gay people, it may not meet with the needs or expectations of individuals
- The acceptance of a sexual identity as a primary social identity may be a response by young gay men to pressures and hostilities inherent in mainstream heterosexual culture
- There is a strong focus present at traditional gay venues on youth and “beauty”.
- Young gay men who are beginning to explore scene life may be particularly vulnerable to exploitation and manipulation by older “more experienced” gay men
- Gay specific youth dropin centres were found to be helpful by some but not by others

Category 5. The Intersection of Gay Culture and Perceptions of Self Worth and Identity

This category focussed on how the young men perceive themselves in relation to gay culture, and how these perceptions influence choices made when engaging in scene life. A theme that emerged from the data was drug use and gay culture.

The findings from this category provide insight for youth workers into an area of the gay scene which may, at some point, touch the lives of young men who participate in scene life. Central to the issue of drug use was how participants felt about themselves and how they wished to identify with other young men who attended gay social venues. The interview data suggested that if scene life did not meet the needs or expectations of the young men, then recreational drug use at venues did not appear to be an issue. However, it would seem that for some young men wishing to feel part of the “on scene” experience, drugs provided a means of achieving social acceptance, equality and unity with others. Although drugs were used at gay venues, there was no evidence presented to suggest that the extent of the use of drugs at gay venues was any greater than at non-gay hotels or nightclubs.

A summary of relevant findings for youth workers include

- The use of drugs at gay venues may be dependent on a young person’s level of self worth, social functioning, and how they construct their social relationships with other young gay people.
- Although drugs do form part of gay scene life, the extent of drug use by young gay people does not appear to be greater than their heterosexual counterparts.

Category 6. Perceptions of Self Worth and Identity

This category was concerned with how a young person's perceptions of self worth and identity had impacted on their process of coming out to others. A theme that emerged was issues of gay identity awareness. The findings of the study concur with study findings elsewhere (for example, Cass, 1979; Troiden, 1989; Dank, 1971; Remafedi, 1987) that suggest an awareness of same-sex attractions can occur from an early age. Although there is considerable speculation as to when this is most likely to occur, this study suggests a time scale between very young to mid-teens.

The findings drawn from data analysis indicate an awareness of sexual attraction towards other males experienced by the young men during this period was manifest in their thoughts, dreams and erotic feelings. A desire to realise their attractions lead participants to engage in same-sex sexual experimentation, often predating puberty. It is postulated that denial or suppression of sexual attraction may be a result of feeling guilty or ashamed when they realised the continuation of such activities was socially, at around puberty, condemned and subject to negative labelling.

Relevant findings for youth workers include

- Self awareness is an important step in the coming out process and identifying themselves as gay was an important part of developing their sexual identity in a guilt free way
- Young gay men often experience conflicting emotions over their feelings towards other young men

- Feelings of guilt or shame can cause the suppression or denial of same-sex attraction
- Social settings and social relationships play an important role in determining young men's experiences of same-sex attraction and experimentation

Category 7. The Intersection of Gay Culture, Mainstream Heterosexual Culture and Perceptions of Self Worth and Identity

This category was concerned with the ways in which the young men resolved the conflicting pressures of gay culture, mainstream heterosexual culture and the young person's perceptions of self worth and identity. The theme clusters included HIV/AIDS; the need for a bipartisan friendship and support network; role models; outcomes of disclosure; and gay pride. The study found that HIV/AIDS was not a major issue for discussion, and it has been included in the section that discusses issues that did not emerge from the study.

The role of others as a primary factor in personal development

The interview data presented in this category highlights the positive role that cross-cultural friendships and relationships play in the personal growth and development of young gay men. An important finding of this study was that coming out of the closet and identifying as a gay young person was an empowering and self-affirming process. While the young men did have to negotiate structural factors that caused a great deal of oppression and personal vilification, generally, the longer term outcomes proved to be a positive experience. Accounts given by the young men outlined the benefits inherent in maintaining a bipartisan group of gay and "straight" friends. The emotional and psychological benefits of having gay people that were publicly "out of the closet" and visible in the general community was also a factor that had

contributed to the young men's experiences of social and psychological support, increased self worth and gay pride. The public presence of gay role models was seen as a positive response to the influence that mainstream media has in shaping the wider community's perceptions of gay lifestyle and gay issues.

Out and proud

The findings of the study tend to disagree with other research studies (Remafedi, 1987; Telljohann & Price, 1993; & Hetrick & Martin, 1987) that suggest that coming out to others can be physically and emotionally damaging for young gay men. The data from this study indicated that although some of the responses to disclosure were negative and had often been followed by periods of depression and anxiety, these experiences had acted to strengthen and empower the young men. A commonly shared experience was feeling a sense of increased depth and intimacy in relationships; freedom; and relief after coming out to other people.

Data analysis revealed that one of the most dynamic outcomes of disclosure was a shared feeling of pride in identifying as gay young person. The study narratives affirm the theoretical viewpoint taken in this thesis that by negotiating their intersubjective experiences during the process of coming out the young men had given meaning to those experiences. This was apparent in the reflective ways in which the young men expressed their thoughts and feelings in relation to their current status of self worth and identity.

A summary of the relevant findings for youth workers include

- Coming out of the closet can have negative outcomes, however the overall experience for this group of young men indicated that, on balance, coming out was both a positive and an empowering experience
- A bipartisan friendship network provides an infrastructure offering support and social interaction which assists young gay people in their personal growth and development
- Publicly visible role models are important in affirming to young people that it is acceptable to be gay.
- The presence of gay role models in the general community can act to challenge “common sense” and stereotypical views about gay people.
- Gay pride can act as a political force, causing young gay men to question and challenge mainstream cultural domination and oppression

Issues which did not emerge from the study

There were several issues that one might have expected to be forthcoming which did not surface at all, or were less significant or relevant in the lives of the young men than might be expected.

HIV/AIDS

Analysis of the data showed that HIV/AIDS was not such a big issue as might have been expected. Other researchers (for example, Herdt, 1989; Boxer & Cohler, 1989; Parker & Carballo, 1990; Plummer, 1989; Edwards, 1992; Feldman, 1989), have suggested that

HIV/AIDS may be negatively impacting on the coming out process by exacerbating difficulties experienced during this time, thereby preventing or delaying the young men's ability to come out of the closet.

Findings from the present study did not concur with this belief. Although HIV/AIDS was speculated upon by several participants as an issue that created difficulties in coming out, their actual experiences did not seem to corroborate this. A possible explanation for the disparity is the young men were in fact discussing the social stigma and mythology circulating in the dominant culture. It can be speculated that these factors exacerbated their experiences of mainstream homophobia rather than directly affecting their experiences of coming out.

The current study found that while HIV/AIDS did prove to create stress during the coming out process, it did not appear to prevent or delay disclosure, but was one additional issue that the young men had to contend with (particularly when coming out to parents). Although HIV/AIDS was an issue that the majority of young men were aware of, the data indicated that (apart from the young man living with HIV), the virus had not affected the chosen lifestyles of any of the participants. For example, none of the young men had chosen celibacy or engaged in monogamous relationships as a prevention strategy against contracting the virus. Apart from considerations regarding the practice of safe sex, HIV/AIDS was not a particular issue for concern amongst the majority of young men. AIDS related homophobia, on the other hand, was an issue of concern for many of the study participants. Since the purpose of

the study was to focus on the coming out experiences of the sampled group, attention was not directed towards behavioural aspects of the young men's lifestyles.

Other health research studies that have specifically focussed on this particular aspect of young gay men's lives have generally focussed on young men with a significant attachment to the gay community, and who have had a long period of exposure to issues relating to HIV/AIDS. The small sample group presented in this study was not selected on this basis and so the results may differ from other purposefully sampled research projects

Legal issues

The United Nations Human Rights Committee findings and the implications for anti-gay laws in Western Australia (1994) states the legal age of consent in Western Australia for homosexual adults "in private" is 21. The committee report elaborated there is a five year difference between the age of consent between sexually active heterosexuals and homosexuals. Gay people between the ages of 16 and 21 are therefore deemed to be criminals and can be jailed for three years.

Issues arising out of the legal age of consent in Western Australia were not represented in the study findings. When asked about the issue, all of the young men replied that it was not a lifestyle consideration or constraint. The relationships formed by the young men were based on mutual attraction and did not include consideration of the age of their respective lovers or partners. Since the young men were referring to relationships with other young men of approximate age, it was understood by the current researcher that they were not referring to intergenerational sexual relationships. There was a general feeling, however, that the law

should be changed to eliminate potential problems and to reduce the age of consent from 21 to 16, thereby making it the same as for young heterosexuals.

It is the current researcher's opinion that comparisons can be drawn between issues of legality and the young men's experiences with HIV/AIDS. In both cases there was a relationship existing between personal experience with the issue and self awareness. It would appear that none of the young men had experienced any negative outcomes as a result of engaging in under age sex, and so it was not an issue for them. This could suggest that the age of consent is not strictly upheld by the law, but more likely, that it is a restriction that authorities find simply too difficult to systematically enforce. It can be speculated that young gay men who are either both under age or whose partner is under age are open to blackmail or to being reported to the police for prosecution. The current researcher could not, however, find any supporting evidence to corroborate this statement.

Homelessness

Homelessness was an issue that did not emerge from the study findings, although pressure to leave home did. Data analysis indicated that four study participants had left home because of their gay identity. After coming out to parents, two young men experienced rejection but had not been told to leave. Instead, they had been told by parents to seek counselling. Strommen (1989) stresses that counselling is often a parental reaction to their child's disclosure. He claims it appears to be due to the fact that parental reaction is inevitably negative, with the disclosure being perceived as a crisis by the family needing resolution. These findings and the findings from the present study, differ from the studies conducted by Hetrick & Martin (1987 & 1992), who found that participants were frequently thrown out of home as a result of

parental rejection. The two other young men stated the pressure involved in hiding their sexual identity from parents had caused them leave.

Although all of the participants had experienced pressure while living at home, the ultimate decision of moving out and deciding when to move out had been their own. This, in part, may explain why the young men did not experience homelessness when they decided to leave. All of the young men were either employed or in receipt of a study grant or social security benefit at the time they left home, and were therefore not solely dependant on their parents for income support. Another possible explanation is that accommodation in Perth is relatively cheap and easy to come by compared with accommodation in other Australian and overseas capital cities, especially if the accommodation is shared. It can also be posited that the participants in the present study have all come from educational backgrounds from which they received skills in making them more adept at negotiating accommodation and financial arrangements. The findings are therefore not representative of the wider range of experience of young gay men in the community. For example, young gay men from lower socio-economic backgrounds may have a different range of issues and experiences relating to their sexuality and homelessness.

CHAPTER SIX

Conclusion

The study has revealed that the process of coming out had considerable influence over the lived experiences of each of the young men involved. There were a multiplicity of structural factors present from both mainstream heterosexual and traditional gay culture that affected the development and personal growth of the young men, and the interplay of these factors influenced their own perceptions of self worth, esteem and sense of identity.

Although the young men had at times to contend with negative influences in their lives, most had a high degree of resilience, acceptance and pride in their gay identity. The studies conducted by Remafedi (1987), McLeod (1994) and Derry (1995), concur, finding a great resolve by participants in dealing with issues relating to their sexuality and identity.

In terms of the present study, coming out was seen to represent a process of experiential learning through which the young men processed social information and gave it meaning. Each individual participant embarked on a journey of exploration and discovery, and this was closely linked to their personal growth and development as young gay people. More precisely, if reactions to their disclosures were positive, they served to reinforce and affirm their identity choice. If negative, the experience usually served to empower the young men with an inner strength and resolve to learn from the experience and actively resist.

Coming out as a conceptual model

The findings of the current study do not support the concepts put forward in some other studies (for example, Remafedi, 1987; Cass, 1974; Troiden, 1989), that suggest “success” in coming out is dependent on negotiating a series of linear steps that require successful stages of negotiation and resolution in order to achieve a final stage whereby acceptability and comfortability as a gay person signifies the completion of the coming out process. Rather, coming out signifies an ongoing process that continues throughout an individual’s lifetime. Continuing changes within a person’s social environmental setting means they are in a constant position of contemplating disclosure to new people as changes occur. The findings are therefore more in agreement with the findings of Mcleod & Nott (1994), suggesting that coming out is an ongoing individualistic process of experiential learning, personal exploration and evaluation and reevaluation as the process continues throughout a person’s lifetime.

Rather than some sort of group process of stage negotiation and development common to “homosexuals”, the personal growth and identity development experienced by the participants during the coming out process was more a result of individuals negotiating and coming to terms with their own specific life experiences within the social constructions of gay and mainstream heterosexual cultures. It is suggested that the impact of structural factors present within the two cultures, and the variance between individual experience and expression are factors neglected by developmental stage theorists. Although the categories presented in the findings chapter of this study did represent issues and experiences that were commonly shared between the participants, no linear progress between “stages” seemed obvious in the findings. Instead, individuals seemed to develop their own coping strategies

and gained inner strength and determination by negotiating their own personal experiences rather than by passing through commonly shared linear stages of development that determined their levels of self worth, acceptance and gay identity formation.

It is proposed that by acknowledging the structural associations inherent in coming out, an extra dynamic is added to the process. Coming out can then be conceived of as a matrix or web through which each individual makes their own way in response to changing socio-cultural factors bound by time and space rather than as a linear series of stages that have a finite and fixed end point, that signifies the completion of the coming out process.

The structural relations of gender and the coming out process

It is proposed that the main structural factor that has impacted on the young men's lives has been cultural perceptions of masculinity and identity. Both mainstream heterosexual culture and gay culture have been shown to have had influence over the young men's sense of self, gay identity, and identity expression, and this has largely been informed upon by cultural conceptualisations of a gendered masculinity. The process of coming out for all of the study participants had begun within the boundaries of mainstream heterosexual culture and had then proceeded to involve an exploration of traditional gay cultural life. This had lead to a process of evaluation and reevaluation of themselves in relation to the two cultures.

Central to this process was the participant's exploration of masculinity and identity, because they represented the conceptual framework against which the young men evaluated and judged themselves and were evaluated and judged by others. It is proposed that essentialist based beliefs surrounding heterosexuality (as the natural and compulsory sexual expression

within the dominant culture), and “homosexuality” (as the socially defined and subordinated “other”), has resulted in the construction of hegemonic gender relations through which heterosexual forms of masculinity and identity are presented as the idealised “norms” of sexual and behavioural expression. Other forms of masculinities are therefore devalued and subordinated.

Connell (1992) concluded that the hegemonic relations between heterosexual and homosexual men are central to the understanding of the social dynamics present in the exploration of masculinity. He notes that for many people, homosexuality is seen as a negation of masculinity, with homosexual men being defined as unmasculine or effeminate. Given that assumption, Connell claims that antagonism and hostility towards homosexual men may be used to define masculinity. He suggests that the same historical process that saw the creation of “the homosexual”, has led to hegemonic masculinity being constructed by dominant groups of men as implicitly and exclusively heterosexual. Homosexual men were consequently expelled from the repertoire, and through this process, hegemonic masculinity has been constructed as homophobic.

In terms of the current study, the impact of hegemonic masculinity over the participant’s lives has resulted in what Connell, (1992) defined as structurally induced conflicts over their masculinity. These included conflicts about their sexuality and how they will be perceived by others; the meanings that choosing a gay identity and lifestyle holds; and the construction of relationships with heterosexual men and women.

The impact of these structural conflicts is exemplified by the involvement participants have had with mainstream heterosexual structures including the family, the education system and the workforce and the difficulties they experienced in relationships with parents, friends, peers and in the workplace. Cultural homophobia has been shown to play a key role in regulating and controlling the young men's social mobility and personal freedom, and as a result, their experiences of social isolation and oppression. Further, the effects of being subordinated and defined as "unmasculine" was shown to have evoked a range of emotional responses including internalised homophobia and suicide. Mainstream heterosexual culture (particularly in the earlier periods of coming out), was therefore often seen to represent a potentially hostile environment that conflicted with the young men's personal feelings and desires. It is suggested their own knowledge and experience of gender relations had taught the young men what the cultural expectations of a male sex role were, and that masculinity was a key component of that role. Hegemonic masculinity, then, can be seen as a fundamental source of structural conflict, responsible for each of the young men evaluating and judging their own sense of masculinity and identity in relation to this cultural "norm".

Traditional gay culture also had influence over the coming out process by providing the young men with an alternative range of possibilities and choices. Physically, by affording a safe haven against a possibly hostile outside world, and emotionally, by providing a potential source of support and understanding. However it is posited that the most influential role that gay culture had played was in presenting the young men with an expanded range of masculinity choices other than those they had previously been exposed to in mainstream

culture. The experiences participants had with gay cultural life indicated that exposure to alternative modes of expression played a decisive role in the process of identity formation.

A common response from participants was in reference to the exposure they had to alternative forms of sexual expression and behaviour. The most pervasive form discussed was the representation of the “effeminate” gay stereotype, and their individual processes of evaluation and reevaluation of themselves in relation to the stereotype. Each of the participants had gone through this constant comparative process by exploring the possibilities presented by gay culture; comparing these with mainstream culture; and then relating their evaluations back to themselves and their own needs and expectations.

It is therefore posited that each of the young men’s experiences in coming out had involved engagement in a process of identity formation largely influenced by gender relations present in both gay culture and mainstream culture. Further, it is suggested that alternative masculinities present in gay cultural life are not formed in social isolation, but rather as a subcultural response to structural conflicts with mainstream hegemonic masculinity. The boundaries of identity negotiation and formation will therefore be likely to change in response to changes occurring within mainstream heterosexual culture. In this sense, the process of coming out can be seen to be influenced by a series of gender relations and negotiations that are determined by structural changes taking place in a pluralistic society. The extent to which mainstream culture influences gay culture or the influence that gay culture has over mainstream culture, is a phenomenon that requires investigation in future research studies.

Suggestions for future research

The outcomes from the current thesis have highlighted the need for further qualitative exploration of the gender relationships formed between gay men and their heterosexual counterparts and the relationships gay men have with each other. It is suggested that by focussing on the study of relationships rather than on the more typical approach of behavioural research investigation, there would be a move away from labelling and pathologising the social category of “the homosexual”, by focussing more on the social meanings and interpretations that individuals bring to their lives and relationships. Such an approach would also draw focus and attention away from defining similarities that constitute the “homosexual” experience by concentrating on the variations that exist between individual gay men.

It has also been suggested that structural dynamics associated with mainstream heterosexual culture and gay culture have been neglected in previous identity “stage” models of theoretical investigation and research. A conclusion reached in this thesis was that the process of coming out could be conceptualised as a socially and culturally determined, ongoing, multivariant and fluid matrix or web through which each person sought out their own pathway and destiny. Research is therefore required to validate this proposition, and to explore the possibilities that such an approach would have for examining the coming out experiences and life course journeys of gay men.

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