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# **Inside a gay world: A heuristic self-search inquiry of one gay man's experience of a 'cultic' gay male friendship group**

**Jason Holmes**

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# Declaration

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I declare that the following thesis has been compiled by myself, and that the work is my own.

Jason Holmes

# Abstract

This thesis is a Heuristic Self-Search Inquiry (HSSI) that explores the personal experience of one gay man's participation in a gay male friendship group whose culturally constructed sense of being gay, characterised by specific places, customs and practices the researcher considers 'cultic'. The study is undertaken through the researcher who found himself outside a closed group of emotionally intimate gay friends, which represented an entire world.

Using the HSSI model created by Sela-Smith (2002), this profoundly personal qualitative study considers the researcher's internal experiencing as the primary source of knowledge. Material from online images, academic papers and personal writing of the inquirer's lived experience of the research topic provided for periods of contemplative incubation and illumination, typical of HSSI. The output was the depiction of six emergent themes that highlight the qualities and nuances of the topic: pain, frustration, mistrust, joy, disgust and confusion. The other main findings are: this gay male friendship group developed characteristics of a symbolically enclosed cultic institution; that gay men are susceptible to forming cultic relationships; and a depth of distress experienced when intimate friendships between gay men fail. The findings finish by offering a creative synthesis, which captures the resultant integrated understanding of the experience in the form of a short story.

Recommendations are made for counselling professionals to trouble their understanding of gay male friendship groups, and for public and third sector organisations working with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) identifying peoples to begin discussing interpersonal issues inside LGBTQ populations.

# Lay summary

This thesis explores one gay man's participation in a gay male friendship group whose idea of being gay was characterised by highly demanding customs and practices. The study focuses on the personal experience of the researcher who found himself outside a group of emotionally intimate gay friends. Images from the Internet, academic papers and personal material are used as data, in a deeply personal inquiry that considers the researcher's own thoughts and feelings the main way of making sense of the gathered material.

The outcomes are six themes that highlight the qualities and nuances of his experience: pain, frustration, mistrust, joy, disgust and confusion. The other main findings are: this gay male friendship group developed characteristics commonly associated with cults, and there is deep emotional distress experienced when intimate friendships between gay men break down. The findings finish by offering a short story, which captures the results of the study in a creative way.

Recommendations are made for counsellors to think about gay male friendships groups as emotionally tricky relationships, and for organisations working with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) people to begin discussing the problems LGBTQ people have with other LGBTQ people.

# Acknowledgements

It seems I am quite adept at moving in circles and tangents, and so it was with this research. The following people are those who, at various times, threw me a lifeline and steered me away from the choppy seas of feeling lost, frustrated, bewildered and overwhelmed; without their support, this study would have not been possible. It is with those rough seas in mind that my thanks go to: Dr Jonathan Wyatt, for his support and encouragement; Elizabeth Welsh for her patience and understanding; Professor William West and Dr Sandra Taylor who, as gentle hands, offered me an emotional container and who vicariously gave me permission to express myself; Professor Liz Bondi for offering her experience and wisdom in reviewing an early version of the thesis; my parents for their encouragement and support throughout the research process, and life itself; my colleagues and friends, especially Edgar and Natasha for their guidance and expertise; and finally, to the men who jointly participated in this study, thank you.

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Society does not hate us because we hate ourselves; we hate ourselves because we grew up and live in a society that hates us [...] All gays are born into a straight world and socialised to be straight; consequently, we have internalised the enemy.

Denneny (1983, pp. 409-423)

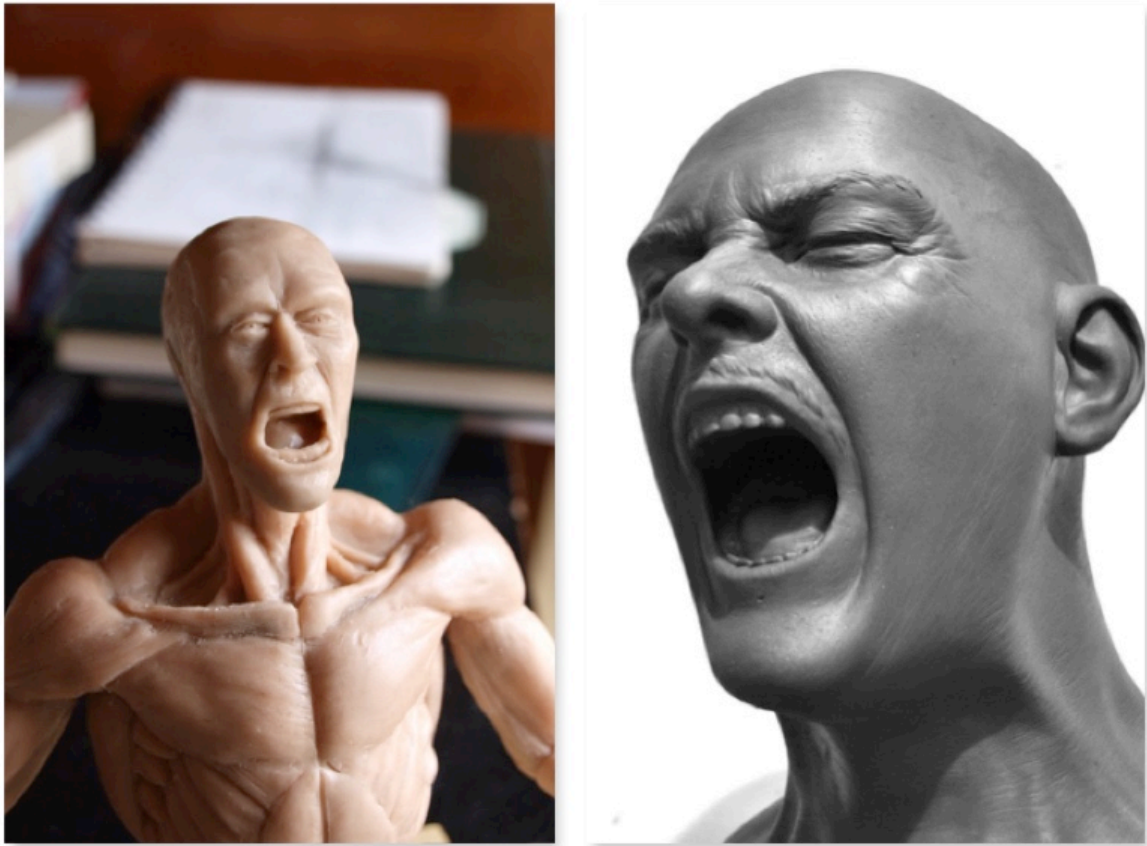
# Preface

*It's a lovely sunny morning. I park the car at the office I've been renting since losing my job a few months previous. I don't remember how I got there. For the past few months my mind has been fucked; I call it my washing machine head. For fifteen years I've had a clean driving licence, yet in the last few months, since living in my head, I've been prosecuted for speeding, crossing a red light, and using my mobile phone while driving. I park on a back street lined with terraced houses. My mobile rings; it's Graham.*

*"Hi". By the shakiness of my voice, he must know I'm distressed.*

*"Jason, we all had dinner last night. [My body floods with adrenaline. I'm getting accustomed to something shocking coming my way. An imaginary gun goes off in my head - BANG, BANG, BANG, BANG, BANG, BANG, BANG.] Stew, Dan and the others say they don't want to see you again. [BANG, BANG, BANG, BANG, BANG, BANG, BANG, BANG.] I know that must be tough to hear. [BANG, BANG, BANG, BANG, BANG, BANG, BANG, BANG.] I've never seen anything like it. [BANG, BANG, BANG, BANG, BANG, BANG, BANG, BANG.] They've acted like a pack of wolves and torn you apart. Jason, you can never come back from this. [BANG, BANG, BANG, BANG, BANG, BANG, BANG, BANG.] The best thing you can do, is use some of that money of yours and buy yourself a new life. It's over for you here.*

*[ARGHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH]*



**Figure 1 Left: Screaming Man II [online image] (Death-a-holic, 2011), Right: Man Screaming 3 [online image] (CarabARTS, 2009)**

*I can't speak. I sit paralysed in my car; screaming in my head deafens me. I begin to shake. It's a shake that will never stop. I cry. Tears roll down my face. My friends, my little gay family; in fact, everything I've thought of as my gay life has asked me to go away. For twenty minutes, I sit in the car with tears rolling down my face. As I look outside, the morning sunshine reflects off the redness of the bricks, giving them a cheery glow. People, women struggling with toddlers and pushchairs, men going to the post office, go on with their everyday lives around the car. But it's not a normal day for me; it's far from it. My world is shattered. Nothing makes sense. I go to the office, sit at my desk and listen to the screaming in my head.*

*The expulsion throws me into a state of existential crisis. I feel bereft. In therapy, I'm struggling to make sense of my expulsion. From his chair, the counsellor speaks of post-traumatic stress and dissociative disorders. As I sit on the floor of my counsellor's room, my mind hums at a frequency that I consider too high to be healthy. I have never felt more energised or numb. I can't sit still; my body jerks. I'm buzzing; thoughts stay only for a few moments, before cutting to another; flitting images like a chewed up cine film.*

*For the next few years, I will be unable to focus; instead, I will gaze into empty space, my frantic thoughts trying to make sense of the trauma that possesses me. Anything associated with those friends – places, people, smells - will catapult me back into a state of anxiety: my overwhelming distress only serves to increase my sense of existential questioning. I change telephone numbers, and avoid giving my number to anyone who knows those who have expelled me. I need to feel 'safe'. I seek sanctuary away from everything I associate with my gayness.*



# 1 Introduction

This thesis presents a heuristic self-inquiry (HSSI) of how it is to be a member of a group, whose culturally constructed sense of being gay, characterised by specific places, customs and practices I consider 'cultic'. It is an account of how it was to inhabit a closed group that became my whole world. From that account, I reflect upon how it was to socialise with its members, feel welcome and embraced, only to be later expelled from the places and people associated with that world.

The dissertation reports the change in self-awareness concerning other gay men and myself that I gained after a two-year immersive study. It presents a story portraying "the nuances, textures, and constituents" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 31) of how I, someone who has experienced membership of a 'cultic' friendship group and, as a counsellor, moved from refusing to work with gay men, to tentatively entering into a therapeutic relationship with a gay man devoid of gay male friendships and isolated from the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) peoples that surrounded him. By documenting the transformation I experienced in my 'internal world' of subjective thoughts and feelings, the thesis deconstructs my reminiscences of that cultic group and explains how it provided me with an increased sense of ontological security and what that means for me as a person, a practitioner, and the space in-between.

I come to the thesis as a gay man who has experienced life inside a 'cultic' friendship group and a counsellor. The last four decades have seen radical changes in the counselling profession's approach to LGBTQ issues. Before the 1970s, the predominant approach towards the counselling of LGBTQ peoples was of pathologisation; cure and treatment (King, Semlyen, Killaspy, Nazareth, & Osborn, 2007). However, the organisation of LGBTQ populations into 'communities', and the emergence of LGBTQ right movements, led to the increased visibility of LGBTQ people in wider society and the understanding that LGBTQ issues could not be considered as lacking in body or mind. These societal changes served as the catalyst for professional activism within the counselling profession. The later decriminalisation of 'homosexuality' and the disappearance of large-scale stigma led to a shift in the profession's approach to LGBTQ issues from considering 'homosexuality' a 'problem', to identifying anti-LGBTQ social and institutional prejudices as the major factors impacting a LGBTQ person's wellbeing (Gambrill, Stein, & Brown, 1984).

LGBTQ populations represent a significant proportion of the counselling consuming population (King et al., 2007). Evidence shows that despite the "recent plethora of LGBTQ

affirming legislation” (Bianchi, 2016, para. 1); specifically, the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013, the Equality Act 2010, and the Civil Partnership Act 2004, LGBTQ people are “not thriving as we should [and are experiencing] disproportionately high levels of depression, self-harm and suicide” (Todd, 2016, pp. 9-10).

For counsellors, working with LGBTQ clients, particularly those bringing LGBTQ specific difficulties, can be challenging (King et al., 2007). By offering a close-up, feeling-focused first-person account of life inside a closely-knit and a highly demanding group of gay men, the thesis’s aims are to inform and educate counsellors, of all modalities and sexual identities, of LGBTQ lifestyles and cultures. Counsellors, who like a former gay male therapist of mine, whose limited knowledge of LGBTQ friendships could be potentially harmful to clients, as when he told me to “go fuck them [my former friends] because that is what gay friends do”. Counsellors, like a former colleague who laid bare her ignorance of LGBTQ peoples when querying if her client had “turned gay” as a consequence of childhood sexual abuse. It is thus unsurprising, that LGBTQ people feel poorly served by LGBTQ identifying and non-LGBTQ identifying counsellors alike (Davies, 1996b; Gambrill et al., 1984; Jones & Gabriel, 1999).

A systemic review completed by King et al. (2007) on behalf of the British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) recommended counsellors working with LGBTQ clients should:

“Inform themselves about LBGT cultures and lifestyles through their personal and professional lives, rather than expecting their LGBT clients to educate them. All psychotherapy training institutes [should] regard knowledge of LGBT development and lifestyles as part of their core training”. (p. 3)

The BACP commissioned review clearly illustrates counsellors working with LGBTQ peoples have an ethical duty to learn about the socio-cultural contexts in which LGBTQ peoples exist. Knowledge derived from cultural stereotypes or previous informal encounters with LGBTQ-identifying friends and colleagues is, based on the personal experience outlined above, insufficient for ethically working with LGBTQ clients experiencing LGBTQ cultural difficulties.

Despite the emergence of specialised LGBTQ counselling provision, the need for research into the cultures and lifestyles of the LGBTQ counselling population remains (King et al., 2007). Many LGBTQ people feel only LGBTQ identifying therapists can provide competent LGBTQ counselling services (Jones & Gabriel, 1999), with many believing LGBTQ non-identifying counsellors exhibit a lack of mutual understanding and prejudice towards LGBTQ lifestyles and cultures (Gambrill et al., 1984; King et al., 2007; Mair & Izzard, 2001).



As (King et al., 2007, p. 9) point out, many LGBTQ people anticipate “a heterosexual therapist [as] having inadequate knowledge of the dynamics of gay and lesbian lifestyles and resources, and concern that the therapist would expect the client to educate them about gay and lesbian cultures”. Even LGBTQ-identifying counsellors, too, should be aware of any internal bias that could impact on the service they provide (Davies, 1996a, 1996b; King et al., 2007). In summary, LGBTQ people's social networks and support systems; the unique mental health vulnerabilities and needs of LGBTQ people; and the ‘expertise’ of counsellors on LGBTQ issues are topics that continue to be under-researched within counselling (King et al., 2007; Mair & Izzard, 2001; Nardi, 1999). Consequently, despite the broad acceptance of LGBTQ issues within the profession, a self-inquiry of how it is to be a member of a ‘cultic’ friendship group of gay men remains pertinent.

## 1.1 About me (and the group)

At the time of writing the thesis (2018), I am 45 years old. I have identified as 'gay' since my



mid-twenties and I live as an openly gay man with close family, friends and work colleagues aware of my gayness. Over the last 20 years, I have become acquainted with and become friends with hundreds of gay men. Many stemmed from my founding of a gay men's social group. Others originate from my participation in an outdoor pursuits activity group.

With these men, I have had many hundreds of hours of informal conversations about the friendships that existed between us, and the men's other gay male friendships. Some disclosed episodes of physical violence between themselves and their friends, others of anger and hurt. Many spoke of the confusion they felt at being both emotionally and sexually intimate with men with whom they were not in a 'relationship'. A few talked about how such blurring of the emotional and sexual delighted them. Take, for instance, Tom and Rich (not their real names), who were best friends and occasional sexual partners. Both were in and out of relationships with other men, and both could have mighty rows that resulted in bitter periods of silence. There were many times when Tom or Rich would privately talk to me about the other. To make matters more complicated, I have slept with Tom in Rich's house, while Rich was present. As such, I feel confident to write about a topic

of which I have had my suspicions and beliefs regularly challenged and reinforced by this first-hand experience.

Of my many friendships with other gay men, I only perceive a handful as being 'cultic'. These were the individuals with whom I spent the most time and, as such, what existed between us was much more emotionally intimate than those men of the social group or outdoor pursuits club. These were the relationships which, when ended, emotionally cut very deep. These are the relationships that, many years after they have ended, keep me awake at night.

To be clear, 'cultic' is a term I - Jason Holmes - alone apply to the group. None of the other men involved used the term to describe it. I use it in an academic context to locate the study in the relevant academic debate and to conceptually frame a highly subjective experience. In linking personal experience to theoretical concepts, I am reminded of Bondi (2013, p. 9) when she writes

“I would describe my research as offering stories about the world, stories that I hope bring some kind of new perspective to my theme and thereby make possible new meanings. In so doing, I seek to contribute to conversations with others both within and beyond the academy”.

I would only add to Bondi's (2013) comment by proposing to offer stories of experiences I have not yet resolved in my mind. By positioning those stories in a theoretical framework, I not only seek to advance conversations with others (both inside and outside the academy), but also those I have with myself.

Secular in nature, the group did not adhere to any spiritual doctrine, deity or leader. However, it did follow a lifestyle commonly associated with middle class, white, gay culture. The majority of the men attended gyms. Alcohol consumption was routine, with the social life of the group focused on the gay bars in the gay district of the city in which the majority of the group lived. All had a substantial disposable income and purchase of the latest goods was usual. Sexually, casual encounters were not uncommon amongst the members and outsiders. Some of the group routinely found sex in gay saunas. All except me used online dating websites. Sex between members did not occur.

Lies and manipulation led to my expulsion. I had become besotted with two of the younger members of the group. Neither found me sexually attractive and had rejected my offers to pursue sexual relationships. The infatuation came at a time when my mental health was a cause for concern; experiencing, as I was, a generalised anxiety and prolonged bouts of

dissociation (the separation of mind and body) encompassing depersonalisation (functioning as a different personality) and dissociative amnesia. In the autumn of an undisclosed year, within a week, I lost my job and my home. Consequently, I was forced into temporary accommodation, relocating three times within six months. During the same period, I experienced five shoulder joint dislocations; thus restricting the use my left arm. Over a period of six months from the spring of the following year, my interactions and private conversations with other members of the group became increasingly 'controlled' by the members. Social events were arranged without me, and relationships, particularly with the two men with whom I was smitten, became strained. At the same time, another member of the group let it be known to others inside and outside of the group that he believed I was living with borderline personality disorder. I believe he too 'controlled' my relationships, telling the others that due to my mental state, I was best left alone and that I was displaying behaviours characteristic of stalking. His public statements were in direct contrast to what he told me privately. The continued disruption I was bringing to the group was seemingly a threat to its existence, and in the autumn of that year, based on lies and manipulation, I was ex-communicated via the telephone call written about in the preface.

Growing up, it was never my intention to study gayness. I was not a researcher or a counsellor at the time I involved with the group. I had no academic knowledge, no research methodology and no foundation on which to base any argument. This inquiry is simply borne out of an attempt to make sense of aspects of my personal experience. At times, my interest, with being a member of that group of gay men, has taken over my life. Now, years later, the experience represents the primary focus of my academic and personal life. I still feel cruelly cast aside by the group and there are 'fragile' (Margaret Warner, 2000) parts of me that are held together by emotional tape that sometimes breaks.

Painful existential interrogation lingers underneath what I let others see, like a bruise that will not fade. At the times when emotional boundaries, thinned by tiredness or the cacophony of the everyday voices that exist in my head breach, my mind swirls with questions, which I have not been able to answer - as yet. When I turn to others - authors, researchers, personal acquaintances - to seek reassurance in collective shared experience, the stories I read and hear leave me unfulfilled, ever more isolated. How can they offer me the comfort and answers I crave? The truth of the matter is, while open to what others say, the resolution I seek lies "ultimately within me" (West, 2001, p.129) and nowhere else.

The question that guides this research is the question that consumes my being. That question is: "How is the experience of a 'cultic' friendship group of gay men?" The term

'how' is interrogative, in recognition of the inquiry's aim of discovering the "qualitative aspects rather than the quantitative dimensions" (Moustakas, 2001, p. 6) of the topic under investigation. In other words, the word 'how' gives me space to reveal the phenomenon's qualities and meanings, as I understand them.

## 1.2 Thesis style and structure

Through writing about my personal history, I feel have already situated "the person I think of loosely as 'me'" (Gingrich-Philbrook, 2014, p. 25) firmly in the thesis. While scary to do so, my self-disclosure is beneficial, as the heuristic methodological underpinning of the study demands my personal and passionate involvement. In recognition of my subjective 'I' taking a stake in the work, the thesis is written in style involving ample use of the first person. I also use photographic images to punctuate the writing. I have a dyslexic process and find reading and, writing utterly exhausting. I have a reduced ability to manipulate phonemes and phonological structures of words (complicated words). I also experience poor word retrieval, comprehension, working memorisation and reading speed. In other words, I tick every box for struggling to write a thesis. Photographs, therefore, allow me to organise my writing. As Mathers (2005, p. 5) points out "people with 'learning disabilities' [my quotation marks] respond well to methods [of visual communication] that allow them to be involved as active contributors [in research]." In Chapter Three, you will read how the images used in the findings also give extra meaning to the research topic, and how human experience is often (if not always) beyond words.

In situating myself in the thesis, I thank the feminist researchers (for example, Bondi, 2014; Haraway, 1988), who argued the third person in academic writing was a strategy designed to uphold a masculine, objectivist perspective that simply does not exist. They give me, a first generation university goer, dyslexic, middle-aged, gay man, the right to explicitly immerse myself neck high in the 'mud' of the study. I am opening myself up and allowing you, the "actual and imagined readers" (Bondi, 2014, p. 336), to judge the context(s) in which what is offered as knowledge is situated; as the inquiry's claims are far from neutral. They are socially, politically and culturally co-created between those I have met along life's path and myself; between you and me (maybe in 'real life' or inside my head) and of course you and the others you have encountered up to the point you read this thesis. However, while the writing style of the thesis maybe more personal than then norm, the structure is traditional (albeit with a few creative twists again in keeping with the study's methodology). The thesis is presented in five chapters: Introduction, literature review,

methodology, findings and discussion. Each chapter is introduced by an overview and closed by a summary.

In Chapter Four, where I present the findings of the inquiry, I use text boxes to demonstrate reflexivity in what by the nature of HSSI is a personal and subjective study. As (Etherington, 2004, p. 19) notes, "reflexivity is [...] an ability to notice our responses to the world around us, other people and events, and to use that knowledge to inform our actions, communications and understandings". Using Etherington's (2004) definition, the text boxes are designed to show critical distance in relation to an experience in which I felt 'consumed', thus ensuring that my 'researcher voice' is not lost in an inquiry filled with painful memories. Evidencing reflexivity or as Sela-Smith (2002, p. 75) puts it, "observing-not-experiencing", is maybe meaningful for someone like me, whose use of colloquial written English as a dyslexic man of working-class origin produces a form of writing which does not always rest comfortably with the scholarly vocabulary ordinarily associated with academic texts.

In this chapter, I have written about my autobiographical history relevant to a friendship group I consider 'cultic'. My experience of being inside and then expelled outside this group led to feelings of significant personal unease and a topic of professional curiosity. In the next chapter I start by reviewing the literature concerning gay worlds, the importance of friendships (both for LGBTQ and other identities), the notion that friends can constitute 'family', and the relationship between friendships with others and the friendship with self. In so doing I define the term 'gay world'. The aim is to show the metaphorical world as a multi-perspectival cultural construct that is more socially and ontologically complex than any real or imagined understanding of human spatiality.

The third chapter picks up the research question and asks how it can be methodologically addressed. The chapter examines the ontological and epistemological implications of a research question interested in 'experience'. The chapter documents the methodological considerations I made on how to approach studying personal experience, before outlining the methodological principles of HSSI. I then reflect upon the evolution of the research topic and me as a heuristic researcher. I describe the methods employed in data collection, analysis and synthesis. I end chapter three with an account of the ethical issues that arose during the research process.

Chapter Four presents the findings of the inquiry in the form of performative writing. Dominant themes are portrayed in a series of explicitly written vignettes that highlight the autobiographic material from which the themes are forged. Chapter Four ends with a

'creative synthesis' (Moustakas, 1990, pp. 31-32), which presents the findings of the study in the form of a fictional short story.

By discussing the findings of the inquiry in relation to the material written about in the literature review, Chapter Five addresses the question of "So what?" The chapter documents the societal implications of the inquiry, particularly those for LGBTQ people and the organisations that support them. What is required of counselling professionals in response to the experience documented in the thesis is also discussed, as are recommendations for future research. Chapter Five ends with a review of the limitations of what is a highly subjective personal inquiry. Chapter Six concludes the thesis. In a brief creative close to the inquiry, I write to the heart of the inquiry and its significance to me and to others.

### **1.3 Summary**

Gay male friendships groups exhibiting customs and practices considered 'cultic' by their members is undocumented in the academic literature and also provides a rich source of information with which to problematise perceptions of LGBTQ friendship networks. As such, the thesis is of interest to the following groups: (1) Counsellors wanting to deepen their understanding of the everyday lives of gay men (2) Counsellors who work with gay male clients who consider themselves outsiders to gay culture and/or who have been rejected by other gay men (4) Scholars interested in the social processes of, and conflicts within, LGBTQ friendship networks (5) Public and third sector organisations aimed at promoting/supporting the wellbeing of LGBTQ populations and (5) Gay men, who consider themselves at odds with the cultural construction of gayness in which they are located or who have experienced rejection by gay friends.

I have an autobiographical connection with a closely-knit group of gay men from which I was expelled. My experience has led to personal feelings of significant unease and a topic of professional curiosity. The research question stemming from my autobiographical connection is: 'how is the experience of a 'cultic' gay male friendship group?' In so doing, the inquiry prompts questions both inside and outside counselling research over whether homophobia and heteronormativity influence gay male 'communities' to the extent these influences are the basis of painful intra-communal conflicts.

The inquiry is more than about my expulsion. Its aim is to explore the qualities and meanings of my thoughts, insights, perceptions, bodily, and emotional feeling responses attributed to my experience about a symbolically enclosed social space for which I use the

spatial metaphor 'gay world'. To maximise the use of my experience, and to acknowledge the personal foundations of the inquiry, the study is heuristically guided, using the methodology established by Moustakas (1985, 1990, 2001) and later adapted by Sela-Smith (2002). It is an inquiry that uses my experience as the material from which findings forged from my intuitive thoughts and feelings are based. The majority of the thesis is therefore written in the first person and is highly subjective. At its heart, it is a study of a gay man who has felt disconnected from other gay men since adolescence and who found the demands of a gay friendship group difficult to cope with.





## 2 Literature review

Studies exploring LGBTQ cultures and lifestyles took off in the 1980s, predominantly in the social sciences and human geography. This early body of work implicitly or explicitly celebrated the presence of LGBTQ individuals and communities in numerous different contexts. There was also an emphasis on showing both the impress of heteronormativity and internal challenges to it from individuals who considered themselves sexual and social non-conformists. Reflecting the socially diverse nature of LGBTQ studies, the literature review draws upon ideas and papers from sociology, emotional geography and counselling. The multi-disciplinary approach captures what is known about friendship groups in general, and LGBTQ friendship groups in particular.

My review of the literature begins by writing about cults. First, I examine what is meant by the terms 'cult' and 'cultic relationships'. This examination requires me to review key literature on total and reinventive institutions; organisations where space becomes metaphorically and, in the case of total institutions, literally enclosed. I then move to exploring when the symbolically confined space of cults and institutions morph into an all-prevailing 'world'. I explore examples where the term 'world' has been used to describe cultural groups in which individuals felt they were either inside or outside, before reviewing what is known about the 'gay world'. I review in depth two books that write about the contemporary experiences of gay men inside the gay world. I also explore the phenomenon from a different angle by then highlighting what gay men outside of academia – in online blogs and forums – say about the 'gay world'.

Within the context of this gay world, I examine the sociological literature on LGBTQ friendships. I highlight the body of literature in which LGBTQ friendships are considered of equal importance in social support and identity formation to conventional familial relationships. Deepening examination of the role friendships play in the formation and maintenance of identity, I review studies that look at the role friendships play and the notion of 'ontological security'. I end the review by detailing the psychoanalytic origins of the concept and examples where people have experienced ontological insecurity as a result of being abandoned or rejected by an all prevailing 'world'.

The sequence in which disciplines are presented in the review is deliberate. In moving from sociology to emotional geography and ending with psychoanalytic theory, the review intentionally moves from thinking about the many to the few to the individual. In counselling terms, the review moves from writing about others, to the self-other, to the self.

Thinking about and privileging the experiences of the self, stays the focus of the thesis moving forward.

## 2.1 Cults



Figure 2 Fans of the television programme 'Star Trek' [online image] (Wold, 2017)

### 2.1.1 Cults as high demand groups

For some, the social and. in some cases physical environments in which they are located dominate every aspect of their life; defining who they are and setting their self-worth. In other words, their social and physical worlds become all consuming or 'cultic'. There are various definitions – sociological/theological/dictionary. From a psychological perspective, Langone (1995, p. 5) conceptualises a cult as:

“A group or movement that, to a significant degree a) exhibits great of excessive devotion or dedication to some person, idea, or thing; b) uses a thought-reform programme to persuade, control and socialise members (i.e. to integrate them in the group's unique pattern of relationships, beliefs, values and practices; c) systematically induces states of psychological dependency in members; d) exploits members to advance the leadership's goals; and e) causes psychological harm to members, their families and the community”.

Others (for example Dubrow-Eichel, 2001; Kendall, 2006; Shaw, 2014) understand the term 'cult' as meaning a high demand group. Jenkinson (2013) argues understanding cults as high demand groups better fits with many individuals' experiences of “destructive or

controlling" (Monroney, 2008, p. 4) groups, which although cultic in nature, do not fit traditional ideas of what a cult is. Likewise, Dubrow-Eichel (2001, p. 154) proposes that the term 'high demand group' better captures the "sometimes slippery category of religious, political, therapeutic and marketing groups and movements that are often labelled 'cults' by the media". Shaw (2014, p. 4) supports Dubrow-Eichel (2001), pointing out that, "albeit clumsier", understanding cults as meaning high demand groups more accurately captures assemblages which are firstly exploitative and abusive, and secondly, misunderstood as cultic in the public imagination. For Shaw (2014), the popular interpretation of a cult is of a group centred around charismatic leadership by one person or a group of people. According to Shaw (2014, p. 4), cultic group followers in the public's eye "fanatically embrace an ideology dictated by the leader(s) [...] to eliminate impurities in the world [through] ritualised, idiosyncratic modes of speech, dress and behaviours that are typical of the group as a whole". In focusing on the presence of alluring and enigmatic leadership as the central feature of a cultic group, Shaw (2014) believes that a lot of groups that could be labelled as 'cultic' go unnoticed. He notes that any group, "political, therapeutic, business, academic, technological, and almost any other kind of community" (Shaw, 2014, p. 4) – a term often associated with LGBTQ culture – can be considered cultic. Furthermore, Jenkinson (2013) argues that cultic groups can be any size, even a one-to-one relationship; for example, a therapeutic relationship between counsellor and client, in which the client is rendered helpless and dependable, can be considered as cultic. In all, regardless of the cultic group's size or setting, an individual or group of individuals exerts psychological/spiritual/physical power over another (Hill, Hickman, & McLendon, 2001; Jenkinson, 2013; Langone, 1995).

Studies show individuals involved in cults change personality (Hassan, 2000; Jenkinson, 2008, 2013; Lalich, 2004; Langone, 1995). Referring to this new social identity as the 'pseudo-cult personality' Jenkinson (2008, 2013) suggests psychological techniques deployed by cults such as manipulation and exploitation lead to identity loss and confusion and hence the emergence of a pseudo-cult personality. As L. J. West and Martin (1996, p. 274) note "cases of pseudo-identity observed among cult victims are often very clear-cut, classic examples of transformation through deliberately contrived situational forces of a normal individual's personality into that of a different person". L. J. West and Martin (1996) and Jenkinson (2013) suggest the pseudo-cult personality is the individual's psychological adaptation to the stress of the cult through 'dissociation' - the process (or its result) of a "breakdown in the continuity of the felt sense" (Levine, 1997, p. 137). In other words, a personality split.

## 2.1.2 Cults as total and reinventive institutions

A cult can also be thought of as an 'institution' (Lundskow, 2008; Monroney, 2008). Describing an institution as an "abstract organisational structure that is reproduced through the everyday lives of their members", Scott (2011, p. 1) outlines one particular type of institution – a total institution (TI) – in which “members are immersed and enclosed both physically and symbolically for a long period of time to the exclusion of other attachments”. Although extensively reviewed and modified by Scott (2011) in her book *Total Institutions and Reinvented Identities*, TI was a term first described in detail by Goffman (1961) in his ethnographic study of life inside a physically and symbolically enclosed mental health asylum. Inside the studied asylum, Goffman (1961) showed how inmates lost their freedom of movement and outside identity, thus becoming objects of a strict regime of organisational control. What they wore, how they scheduled their time, what spaces they could enter, what they could do in them, and the types of privileges afforded to them, became lost to an institutional process under which individual autonomy was degraded (Shulman, 2016). In other words, in the regulated environment of a TI, people are subjected to large amount of controls. Prisons, army barracks, boarding schools and long-stay hospitals are all examples of Goffmanesque TI (Goffman, 1961). In all, the TI moves beyond managing the emotional wellbeing to the “complete re-socialisation” (Shulman, 2016, p. 28) of its inhabitants. A prison deters future crime and a military training facility turns recruits into soldiers, for example. By focusing on themes of power and ritualisation, Goffman (1961) showed how patients within an asylum were disciplined (institutionalised) to ensure compliance with the hospital's regime.

Such physical and symbolic institutionalisation plays an important part in the history of British LGBTQ peoples. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, sexual contact between men in Britain was not only a crime – it was also a medical illness (Smith, Bartlett, & King, 2004). The pathologisation and consequent social construction of the diagnosis of homosexuality led to the enforced incarceration of LGBTQ peoples, particularly men. By the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, enforced hospital-based aversion therapy sought to 'convert' homosexuals into heterosexuals was at its peak, only ending in the early 1970s, years after decriminalisation (Smith et al., 2004). First-hand accounts of the incarceration of gay men are unsurprisingly rare. Many chose not to speak due to the legacy of shame, that criminalisation and medicalisation imposed on them (D'Silva, 1996; Downs, 2012). However, of the few that tell their story, it makes for difficult reading. In giving his oral history, Price (as quoted in D'Silva, 1996), incarcerated in 1964, says, “It was like being in a horror movie [...] I don't think any description can match what they did to me”. Price was 18 years old when admitted to a psychiatric ward in North West England. He was confined to one room,

given vomit-inducing medication, and left in a bed covered with his own faeces and vomit. Although the therapy 'only' lasted three days, Price says the devastating psychological impact of his institutionalisation destroyed 30 years of his life.

Like the psychiatric ward which made Price lay in his excretion, at the heart of his argument, Goffman (1961) aims to show how institutional power is exerted through strict hierarchical leadership, authoritarian routines and intimidating practices. Researchers (for example Lundskow, 2008; Monroney, 2008; Scott, 2011) argue that, although not explicitly defined by Goffman (1961), cultic groups have similar dynamics to a Goffmanesque TI. In both a TI and a cult, Monroney (2008) proposes, a closely held structure of hierarchical leadership exerts pressure on participants to adhere to a strict regime of social rules and practices. Likewise, Monroney (2008) states a cultic high demand group member will become reliant on the group for social support, as communication with 'outsiders' is discouraged or forbidden. Monroney (2008) highlights an important aspect of Goffman's (1961) work in which, through symbolic acts, such as the confiscation of personal effects, and the restriction/removal of access to outside social networks, a TI 'inmate' is stripped of their past identities. These acts leave the inmate with just one identity, that which they need in order to be located/held in the TI's social order. The net result for the participant is a total dependency on the institutionalised cultic group to meet all personal needs. Consequently, as Weik and Walgenbach (2016, p. 8) point out, through the systematic degradation of their personhood, members become "docile bodies [...] separated from the world outside and their former life by the literal and symbolic enclosure of space". It is the same degradation of personhood that Altman (1997, p. 420) writes of in his exploration of Filipino men who have embraced the practices, languages and symbols of a "global gay world". In so doing, Altman (1997) demonstrates how personhood is overpowered – or at least influenced – by larger social phenomena, such as the globalisation of gay cultures and identities. Altman's (1997) study is a powerful example of how gay culture as a Western construct has been somehow universalised to places as far as the Philippines, Malaysia and Hong Kong, and materialised there by reproducing the same type of venues and entertainment that Western gay men enjoy.

However, unlike Price in the psychiatric ward, the Filipino men in Altman (1997) paper freely entered the gay orientated social spaces they frequented. In line with this voluntary nature of participation, Scott (2010, 2011) advanced Goffman's (1961) model, arguing for a contemporary re-interpretation of a TI which she named a Reinventive Institution or RI. Scott (2010, p.226) defined a RI as "a material, discursive or symbolic structure through which voluntary members actively seek to cultivate a new social identity, role or status". Scott (2011, p.4) argued that a "physically bonded structure that 'totally' encompassed its

inmates – spatially, temporally, socially & psychically” characteristics of a Goffmanesque TI, died out when mental health provision (certainly in the West) moved to the more progressive, community-based and welfare-orientated model. In so doing, Scott (2010, 2011), broadened the range of ‘organisations’ to which aspects of the Goffmanesque TI model could be applied. Unlike Goffman (1961), who focused on physically enclosed spaces, Scott (2011, p. 234) proposed “institutions range from the physically tangible – buildings, organisational premises boundaries spaces – to the pervasive and nebulous – friendship groups, political movements, imagined and virtual communities” provided the contemporary settings in which a) “self-identity” (Bondi, 2014, p. 333) can be formed and b) the discourses from where individuals make sense of the process are anchored.

Scott’s (2011) proposal that some friendship groups can become institutionalised makes her work relevant to the inquiry. Her RI model demonstrates that friendship groups can be enclosed spaces with social processes reminiscent of a high demanding cultic group. In so doing, Scott’s (2011) work provides a theoretical foundation for thinking about the social processes that occur when friendship groups symbolically enclosed the space around them. The RI model illustrates that what can be thought of colloquially as ‘cultic’ is not necessarily restricted to commonly held notions of religious groups centred around charismatic yet delusional leadership and a perverse set of beliefs or people locked away in mental asylums, or prisons. Scott’s (2011) model captures people like myself, who were not physically imprisoned in a TI, but who volunteer themselves to RIs in order to pursue the new identity on offer (Scott, 2011). As Shulman (2016, p. 29) points out, individuals who enter RIs “want to throw away an old me and suit up a new self”. Like an RI, studies into gay male culture have shown a similar voluntary assimilation of identity. In his studies, Podesva (2011a, 2011b) suggests that gay men have developed a particular way of speaking, a so-called ‘gay pitch’, in order to socialise and create identity. Podesva (2011a) argues that “sounding gay” represents an important social identifier, because, as he writes, “one could reasonably argue that vowel quality is poorly suited for indexing gayness because vowels mark where a speaker comes from, whereas gay identity is generally not conceptualised in geographical terms” (p.32). In other words, whereas TI inmates are given a new mass identity that meets the purpose of the organisation, RI devotees, such as the men adopting Podesva’s (2011a) gay pitch, voluntarily commit themselves to be ‘reinvented’ with an “organisationally sponsored identity” (Shulman, 2016).

It is not only through the use of specific linguistic practices that gay men symbolise their belonging to a dominant gay culture. In a study exploring the experiences of disabled gay men in the Manchester commercial gay venues, Blyth (2010) observed how some gay men

learnt to conceal their disability (both in the venues and online) to “pass” as a member of the dominant non-disabled group. Similarly, as Ayres (1999, p.94) writes:

“Essentially, the ‘masculine’ body is aggressive, in control, and powerful while the ‘feminine’ body is passive, relinquishing control, and powerless. Most images of gay Asian men that I’ve seen [...] are ‘feminine’ in nature compared to representations of the Caucasian body in the mainstream gay media, which are aggressively masculine”.

It is the same performative negotiation of identities that Chong-Suk (2008) writes about in his study of racism amongst gay men in Australia. Chong-Suk observes how Asian men feel under pressure to transform their bodies from traditional slim oriental frames to muscular notions of Westernised gay ideals. In so doing, Chong-Suk (2008) observes the intersectionality of one marginalised identity and another. Of how the dominant white gay male population shaped and regulated by heteronormativity controls the bodies and behaviours of another gay male population, who are both a sexual minority and a racial minority.

Scott (2011, p.49) supports conflicting participation in her model, arguing that people entering and within a RI are "simultaneously controlled and controlling, docile and agentic, solipsistic and other orientated". It is an emotionally dynamic reality that Crooks (2013) also describes in his autoethnographic study of the gay hook-up app Grindr, writing:

“Many profiles routinely suggest that Grindr is only for casual sexual encounters; many profiles say the exact opposite. Profiles often state age, racial, or body type prerequisites in crass or dismissive terms [...] Users deal with these aggressions by blocking other users. When you block someone, he no longer appears in your Grindrscope and can no longer contact you. You know when another user has blocked you and the notice can sting”.

Like Roderic N. Crooks (2013), Scott (2011) does not assume that life inside an RI is always harmonious. In her model, Scott (2010, 2011) uses the term ‘performative regulation’ to explain how within an RI people monitor and discipline each other’s behaviour. As Scott (2010, p.226) points out: “[discipline] is achieved through not only formal instruction in an institutional rhetoric, but also [through] performative regulation in the interaction context of an immature culture”. So while in a TI an air of authoritarianism strictly enforces organisational control, in the RI, people opt into a shared commitment to adopt the ‘corporate’ identity. Just as Crooks (2013) writes of how members of ‘Grindrscope’ (Crooks’ term for the symbolically enclosed space created by the app) implicitly and explicitly assert what is and what is not sexually attractive through the content of their online profiles, the RI sponsored identity is one that is maintained and regulated by mutual social control (Scott, 2010, 2011). As Scott (2011, p.49) points out, "members gaze at each other and monitor relative progress towards a shared goal [and] this mutual surveillance implies a

network of connections between inmates, who exercise an equally penetrating, ubiquitous gaze". In terms of LGBTQ culture, the scrutinising RI gaze of Grindr is directly and indirectly sustained by the sharing of 7,000,000 messages and 2,000,000 photographic images by 950,000 men each day (Roderic N. Crooks, 2013).

However, where Crooks writes about the self-monitoring of Grindr users through written and visual "curation and self-presentation", Scott (2011) draws on a number of theoretical ideas such as Foucault's (1977) 'disciplinary gaze' producing 'docile bodies' to support her performative regulatory model. Scott (2011) argues that performative regulation within RIs is dynamic and open to change. Consequently, rebellion is rare. Furthermore, Scott (2011) argues RI devotees are free to leave should they wish to. Consequently, unlike in the latent agency of the TI member, RI devotees possess "manifest agency – expressed as violation or desire to change or improve oneself – and latent coercion brought on by the execution of performative regulation, which keeps the [RI devotees] in check" (Scott, 2011, p.50). It is the same latent coercion Isaiah Green (2008) writes about when he offers the reader a detailed description of 'Chelsea Boys' – gay men whose social inclusion is both presented and regulated through clothing and body shape. .

Similarly, just as Isaiah Green (2008a, 2008b, 2011, 2013) argues, power in LGBTQ populations is exerted through the horizontal differentiation of individual sexual characteristics and the vertical stratification based of group characteristics (in other words, populations sort what is and what is not sexually attractive first, and then differentiate individuals according to those characteristics), Scott (2011, p.48) believes power within an RI "operates not only vertically, but also horizontally, diagonally, and circularly". Put another way, power is democratic and exerted on, through, and over the devotees, with peers and 'gurus' alike regulating the thoughts and actions of RI adherents in addition to internal self-monitoring. Dawson (2017) suggests performative regulation is therefore highly effective, as RI devotees acknowledge that by conforming to the institution's beliefs and practices, their own interest is helped, and that helping other adherents to do the same is good. As he points out: "I am better because I am helping you make yourself better" (Dawson (2017, p. 9). Foucault (1979) argued contemporary society embraced institutional structures for example "prisons resembles factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons" (Foucault, 1979, p. 228). Scott (2011) argued that the RI devotee sees the voluntary application of institutional power as in their best interests, pointing out that rather than "resenting their guardians, [volunteers] seek them out as authoritative experts, whose penetrative gaze does not intrude but rather informs and elucidates" (p.49). In so doing, Scott (2011) draws upon Foucault's (1979) notion of the 'carceral society' (Foucault's concept of contemporary society in which it is a prison in the sense that emergence of



supervisory professions such as psychiatry and social work induce individuals to be agents of social control, so that they willingly comply with the profession's definition of normality) to explain why a RI's 'disciplinary gaze' (another Foucauldian idea) stretches beyond the physical boundaries of the institution. It is the same admiring yet submissive gaze that Guy, a young gay French model in White (2016) novel *Our Young Man*, gives to Pierre-Georges, an older gay man who becomes his mentor in the world of fashion. As White (2016) writes:

"He [Guy] thought he was an expensive racehorse whom all the other people around him kept inspecting and trotting not for his wellbeing but to protect their investment [...] If he went out without his sunglasses Pierre-Georges came running after him to remind him of squint lines. If he gained an ounce, Pierre-Georges would pinch his waist and murmur 'Miss Piggy'".

As Guy was discovering, the symbolic, "discursively regulated" (Blyth, 2009, p. 71) stretching of the institution's boundaries, strengthens the RI's grip and makes its powers inescapable. In other words, the RI demands "time, commitment, loyalty and emotion" (Dawson, 2017, p. 9). Drawing on Coser's (1974) idea of a 'greedy institution', Scott (2010, p.218) reinforces the devotion demanded by the RI, pointing out such institutions "claim the totality of their members' social identities by pervading every role they play and every aspect of their lifestyle". Just like the gay men who obsess about exercise and their body image (Duncan, 2010), an institution can consume its devotees. As Goffman (1961, p.312) points out, "every [institution] captures something of the time and interest of its members and provides something of a *world* [my emphasis] for them".

### **2.1.3 Cults as all-pervading worlds**

In her book *Ballet Across Borders: Career and Culture in the World of Dancers*, Wulff (1998) offers an ethnographic account of life inside what she refers to as the 'ballet world'. Centred on a Swedish ballet company, Wulff (1998, p. 23) writes about a "closed world, its competition and camaraderie, sexual politics, intimacy, its pressures and, not least of all, its magic". In a revealing and straightforward view of the world of ballet, Wulff (1995) details how a specific ballet culture was forged from the dancer's perception of the company as a 'second family'. What's more, Wulff (1998) illustrated how, from relentless practising (or at least being seen to practice) to backstage gossip, members were intent on demonstrating their immersion in this exclusive world. Wulff (1998, p. 11) described the physically and symbolically closed ballet world as thus:

"The notion of the ballet world as a closed world is something dancers agree with, albeit it reluctantly. They do not like to be told that they may be missing out on other aspects of life, when they, in fact, get experiences most people do not. Dancers identify themselves as different from other people – more so than most groups. There

are even traditional efforts in the ballet world to hide what is going on backstage, into the work practices, which are sensitive; dancers are exposed both physically and psychologically in the studio [...] The ballet world is fenced with security at electronically monitored stage doors where visitors have to sign a roster and get visitor's tag. Inside the theatres, there are signs saying 'no admittance' at doors leading to the stage as well as red lights that are on when there is a change of set going on".

In other words, Wulff's ballet world speaks to a 'total' quality: something that is (or at least feels very strongly to be) binary (in or out) and something that pervades all aspects of life. In other words it becomes a "greedy institution" (Coser, 1974). Such worlds engulf their members, demand total commitment, and expect new recruits to weaken their relations with other social groups, thus giving the organisation undivided loyalty (Scott, 2010). Unlike Goffmanesque TIs, symbolically enclosed worlds rarely incarcerate their members; instead, they create a symbolic boundary between insiders and outsiders that are "no less powerful as any concrete wall (Scott, 2010, p. 207). They are "institutions without walls" (Scott, 2010, p. 219) or as Foucault (1975) refers to them, disciplinary mechanisms and not blockades. Although seemingly free to leave, participants of worlds choose not to. Instead, through institutionalisation, they experience a "mortifying loss of self" (Scott, 2010, p. 44), freely abandoning their old selves in the hope of forging a new one. Scott (2010) suggests Coser's (1974) greedy institution model may explain why participants in RIs experience a strong sense of commitment and why, when they leave, they might experience what Goffman (1961) refers to as "release anxiety". As Scott (2011, p.44) points out, "If one lost one's former identity and social network, and the new role cannot be performed outside the institution, then how should one behave and where does the real self lie?"

The term 'gay world' is rarely used in contemporary LGBTQ studies, and has never been used to represent a reinventive institution. My search of the sociological or psychotherapeutic scholarly literature between the years 1980 to 2017 did not find one study that used the term in its title. The omission may reflect Goltz's (2014) view that 'gay world' is a term associated with an older man's understanding of gay identity and community. The term is most commonly seen in 1970s sociological studies (for example Adam, 1985; Blachford, 1981; Dank, 1971; Warren, 1974, 1977; Warren & Ponse, 1977). In this body of literature, of which female sociologist Warren's work is the most prolific, the gay world is centred on the physical spaces – predominantly bars and North American ghettos where gay identity was formed and constellated into a "homosexual subcommunity" (Forer, 1975). For the older men, Goltz (2014, p.1516) suggests the 'gay world' was hard won, "but also a place to be discovered [...] something once hidden, uncovered, and requiring a process of initiation and introduction. It's spatialised and discrete". In other words, for Goltz (2014, p. 1517), like Warren (1974, 1977; 1977), the gay world was once the physical spaces that older gay men sought "to be moved in and out of".

Goltz (ibid., p.1517) proposed that gay culture for older men was a “sensitivity and strategy for navigating dual worlds” and the role of older gay mentors was of central importance in introducing men to gay worlds; a concept which he proposes has vanished due to the expansion of gay sensibilities into mainstream culture. In other words, Goltz’s (ibid., p.1517) gay world represents a “cherished inheritance, a homecoming as much as a coming out”, where men find others just like themselves.

While early LGBTQ studies therefore predominantly used the term ‘gay world’ to represent physical geographical gay defined areas or commercial gay spaces, later studies (for example, Emslie, Ridge, Ziebland & Hunt, 2006; Goltz, 2014; Lin & Israel, 2012; Ridge, Hee & Minichiello, 1999; Robinson, 2008) used the term in the body of their texts to describe ‘lifestyle enclaves’; that is, social spaces made up of men conducting one-to-one interactions with men with a similar interest in male gayness (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1993). In so doing, from the 1980s, sociological studies move from linking the term ‘gay world’ with physicality of gay bars and other gay commercial settings to capturing the symbolically enclosed space characteristic of institutions. For example, Ridge et al. (1999) used the phrase ‘gay world’ to represent their participants’ (Australian gay men who originated from Southeast Asia) understanding of the particular gay male discourse that surrounded the gay district of Melbourne. Yet, despite recognising the gay world as one which was symbolically boundaried, the studies did not describe it as a space in which men were devotees inside a greedy and all-consuming institution. Loyalty to the gay world by the participants of these sociological studies was unquestioned. The assumption made by LGBTQ researchers of the time might have been: ‘Why wouldn’t gay men want to belong to a group offering solace and mutual understanding?’

To reinforce the inclusive and unified qualities ascribed to groups of gay men, studies (for example, LeBeau & Jellison, 2009; Morris et al., 2015) promoted use of the alternative and more evocative term ‘gay community’. As Eribon (2004, p. 26) points out:

“A shared participation on a stigmatised sexuality and the marginalisation and exclusion implied by that sexuality form the basis for a specific world, inscribed just as much in the topography of cities as in the personalities of individuals who have congregated in that world. Such individuals foster its existence and ensure its perpetuation from generation to generation. It is a group one is fated to join (un groupe de destin) [...] an invention, both collective and individual, of oneself”.

In other words, the term seemingly better described a universal illusory ‘village’ with its connotations of mutual support and belonging, to which gay men by default of their sexual preference were automatically attributed. The intimate and neighbourly evocations of a ‘community’ seemingly reflect the era in which these studies were completed. The AIDS

epidemic outbreak of the early 1980s meant gay male populations were under extreme pressure from both the impact of the virus and intense and somewhat critical public scrutiny. Consequently, studies at this time, many funded by monies from AIDS organisations, focused on the support offered by gay male friendships in light of the threats. What stemmed from this work was different interpretations of 'community', including: subgroups of gay men (Peacock, Eyre, Quinn, & Kegeles, 2001); involvement with gay organisations (Morris, McLaren, McLachlan, & Jenkins, 2015); a unified and global gay population (LeBeau & Jellison, 2009; Morris et al., 2015); personal friendship groups (LeBeau & Jellison, 2009; Morris et al., 2015); or formal, institutional level networks (LeBeau & Jellison, 2009). However, given the extreme pressure put on LGBTQ populations, the idea of the gay 'community' as something other than supportive and unified could not seemingly be tolerated. The infamous cry 'we are queer, and we are here' seemingly served to silence any discontenting voices; maybe understandably, given the high level of vitriolic abuse aimed at gay men at the time.

In exploring what binds symbolically enclosed groups, if it's not the concentrate of physical structures, one study within this body of work stands out. In his study of gay men in New York, Woolwine (2008) proposed a postmodernist interpretation of what is meant by a community and in so doing makes an inadvertent link to the work on cults and institutions. To do this, Woolwine draws a comparison between the New York gay community and the New York Jewish community. Basing his thinking on Markowirz's (1993) work on the Russian Jewish immigrants in New York, Woolwine argued both were: a) groups formed within the last few decades; b) situated in America; c) geographically distributed in the New York metropolitan area; d) share a value system; e) identify with a larger culture; and f) possess a symbolic neighbourhood.

In making his comparison, Woolwine suggested the New York Jewish and gay populations were 'imagined communities'; that is, groups not restricted to a particular geographical urban enclave. Woolwine (2000) draws upon the seminal work of B. Anderson (2006) for whom such socially constructed imagined communities (which Woolwine argues for in relation to the New York Jewish and gay communities) formed the foundations for nationalism by the people who perceived themselves as part of that group. However, whereas Anderson's imagined communities were primarily bound by politics, sovereignty and language, Woolwine (2000) argues that the gay community is held together by what Markowirz (1993) referred to as 'talk' centred on a particular moral discourse. Woolwine (2008) distances himself from Anderson's work further, arguing gay men experience deeper "community-like connections" than those in the mass media created national or international groups espoused by Anderson. It is the conceptualisation of community

bound by something more than actual concrete space that Woolwine argued makes the gay community postmodernist (Woolwine, 2000, p. 8). In suggesting the imagined gay community is 'discursively bound', Woolwine suggested it is a group that is symbolically enclosed. Of course, the metaphoric closing of space is a key characteristic of both Goffman's (1961) and Scott's (2010, 2011) institution models and the body of work concerning cultic groups. However, Woolwine (2008), while extending the notion of the 'gay community' beyond physical geography and into emotional geography, he maintains a relatively supportive and low-demanding perspective on gay groups. Woolwine's (2008, p.8) "postmodern community of discourse", like the majority of the LGBTQ studies of the AIDS era onwards, is a unified world, one from which gay men draw emotional comfort for its familiar qualities.

Two books in particular, *The Velvet Rage: Overcoming the Pain of Growing Up in a Straight Man's World* (Downs, 2012) and more recently, *Straight Jacket: How to be Gay and Happy* (Todd (2016), are relevant to knowing about the gay world. In *The Velvet Rage*, clinical psychologist Alan Downs (2012, p. 5) sets out a three-phase model for gay men to overcome shame to achieve what he refers to as "authenticity". For Downs (2012, p. 5) such "authenticity" is the capacity of "staying true to myself, regardless of how others may view me" – a working definition that holds throughout the thesis. Downs's (2012) model is based on his belief that gay boys experience emotional pain both upon a realisation they are different from other children and the rejection of their first gay love – their fathers. Based on his clinical work with gay men, Downs (2012) proposes these early 'traumas' leave gay men feeling invalidated. In other words, from childhood, gay men, consumed by shame, are forced to separate their growing sense of gayness from what Downs (2012, p.54) refers to as the "outside world". The psychological impact of this separation is what Downs (2012) refers to as "splitting". It is this split between a gay man's gay and straight worlds that explains the sexual promiscuity and high levels of substance abuse Downs (2012) sees in his gay male clients. At the heart of *The Velvet Rage* is Downs's (2012) assumption that for gay men, the early internalisation of shame is inescapable. Like lead running through a pencil, shame forms the one emotion around which a gay man's life experiences are hinged. It is shame that he strives to keep hidden behind a screen of physical perfection, high creativity and material success.

In *The Velvet Rage*, Downs (2012) portrays the gay world as a flamboyantly sexual world, filled with seductive beauty and artful creativity. Yet, it is also a world in which at some point in adulthood the pursuit of constant validation "no longer seems to soothe the gay man's distress" (p.82). This 'in-validatable' gay man becomes depressed, questioning aspects of his life such as his relationships and career. In something that Downs (2012)

considers resembles a classic midlife crisis, a gay man makes lifestyle and relational changes in his pursuit of “authenticity” (Downs, 2012, p. 5) and relief from shame. Furthermore, Downs (2012) proposes the failed intimate relationship with their father and other early male figures in their lives leave gay men experiencing a type of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). For Downs (2012), this relational trauma impacts an adult gay man’s romantic relationships as betrayal (i.e. the deliberate act of one partner to undermine, deceive or destroy the other), abuse (physical, emotional or sexual), abandonment and relationship ambivalence, namely, partners who fluctuate between warm and caring and distant and removed. At heart, Downs (2012, p. 129) argues that any romantic relationship difficulties between gay men stems from the fact that “two deeply emotionally wounded people cannot form a healthy relationship”.

In *Straight Jacket*, Todd (2016) asks the question whether is it possible to be gay and happy. Hinged around the recollection of his personal experience as a British gay man, Todd (2016, p.52) raises problems for the contemporary ‘gay world’. His premise is that despite the increasingly accepting legislative and social contexts in which contemporary British gay men live, many are “not thriving as we should” (Flynn & Todd, 2011, June 30) thus experiencing “disproportionately high levels of depression, self-harm and suicide” (Todd, 2016, p. 52). Todd’s (2016) main argument is that the ‘straight world’ leads gay men to harbour a deep sense of shame, thus starting a lifelong battle with low self-esteem. In so doing, Todd (2016) owes a lot to Downs (2012) and his exploration of shame and gay men. Todd (2016, p.56) acknowledges this debt, pointing out, “*The Velvet Rage* by Alan Downs [...] for me what the first step is in understanding what is going on]”. However, by incorporating his own experiences, Todd (2016) builds upon Downs’ (2012) observational based argument and creates a piece that is more understandable to a British audience. In so doing, Todd (2016, p. 234) is careful not create a narrative in which “being gay is a disaster” and he is wary not to present the book as “false evidence” in support of such an argument. In its place, Todd (2016) explores the psychological and social factors, which place immense pressure on young gay men in early 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain. Of particular note, Todd (2016) argues for a “survival bond”, which he describes as an “evolved, overwhelming primal bond between parent and child” (p.58) that starts as a relationship in which materialistic and nourishment needs are met, but then extends into a “character shaping bond” (Bianchi, 2016, para. 3), in which youngsters look to their parents for advice on what is “physically safe and socially acceptable”. Todd (2016, p.62) proposes that, as boys, gay men tend to exhibit behaviours outside accepted heteronormative values, resulting in “subtle signals of awareness and/or disapproval”. Thus, when a boy insists in carrying around his sister in his sister’s handbag (as in my case) the parent’s censure/dissatisfaction leaves the boy feeling “somehow flawed, bad and unlovable” (p.64). Todd couples the self-esteem eroding

impact of a parent's disapproval with the negative portrayal of gay men in the media as another source of negativity. As Bianchi (2016, para. 4) in reviewing *Straight Jacket* notes of the scathing campaign against the gay world during the AIDS crisis, it was "a pressure-cooker atmosphere [in which] comparisons to perversion, paedophilia and the calls for execution-style culls [were] generated". Todd (2016, p.59) queries the happiness of individual gay men in relation to the emotional wellness of what he refers to as "the gay world". He discusses how, for him, the gay world centres on alcohol, drugs, sex and quick wit, and in so doing exacerbates gay men's mental ill health. Using graphic descriptions of the modern and urban gay culture, Todd (2016, p. 59) describes his gay world thus:

"On the gay scene men often had a bark and a bite, and I became apprehensive about talking to them. It felt like if people didn't want to sleep with you, they didn't want to know you. We seem to communicate by only having sex, and if you weren't worthy of sex then you weren't part of the conversation. The concept of the gay world became a thing. In the gay world, having sex was like shaking hands. In the gay world it was only about whether every new man was worth going home with. In the gay world, if you are attractive and young people wanted to know you, engage with you in value to their parties – and if you weren't, they wouldn't".

What's more, quoting one young gay man, Todd (2016, p.152) writes, "I'm far from nice. You can't survive the gay world being nice [...] I used to be nice but it only made me suffer [...] you have to adapt". In other words, Todd (2016) offers a description of a "pressurised" (p.130) life inside a drug and sex-centric world in which "anxiety, depression, addiction [...] suicidal thoughts and behaviour, and the difficulty in sustaining meaningful relationships" (p.1) is prevalent. In *Straight Jacket*, Todd (2016) also acknowledges the negative impact the modern gay media has on a gay man's emotional wellbeing. Todd's views on this matter are of particular interest, as he has been the editor and editorial director of *Attitude*, the U.K.'s top-selling gay magazine since 2008. By virtue of his editorial position, Todd was responsible for placing white men with washboard stomachs on the vast majority of the magazine's covers whilst simultaneously living with low self-esteem and substance addiction. He attempts to reconcile his personal and professional dichotomy by lambasting the gay world for wanting to embrace body and racial diversity while failing to buy issues of his magazine when covers moved away from offering stereotypical homoerotic images of masculinity and towards personalities such as the actor Stephen Fry and the musician Beth Ditto. Todd (2016) then moves into a detailed discussion over how LGBTQ third sector organisations, therapies and hotlines provide a vital resource for gay men, while maintaining the stance that it is the individual's responsibility to overcome the 'trauma' he believes beholds gay men.

Todd (2016) concludes by proposing the creation of a national organisation which would oversee a network of large-scale LGBTQ community centres that would offer office space to

the multiple pre-existing LGBTQ organisations together with a social space away from “apps, bars and clubs” (p.254) and house special events and exhibitions. Todd (2016, p.136) also argues for changes “within the gay community”, including increased awareness of self-care, racism, ageism and sex addiction. Todd’s (2016) argument for the creation of centres is to foster a new sense of ‘kinship’ that brings together different factions of LGBTQ populations into concrete spaces, fostering positive changes in the imaginary and discursively bound gay world. Put another way, in Soja’s (1996) terms, he sees the building of Firstspace (physical space) as having a positive impact on the social, political and cultural aspects of Thirdspace. In referencing the Jewish community, Todd (2016) also adds to studies, such as Woolwine (2000), in suggesting that there are lessons to be learnt from the way in which Jewish communities foster togetherness and mutual support.

### **Summary of part one of the literature review**

In the first section of the literature review, I have drawn on the relevant literature to conceptualise two separate but interlinked gay worlds. The first is a culturally constructed *universal* gay world. The global gay world is an “imagined community” (B. Anderson, 2006) held together by a distinct “talk” (Woolwine, 2000), to and from which my former gay friends and myself adopted values, customs and social practices. It is a discursively bound cultural construction – a “shared world of understanding” (Kincheloe & Horn, 2007, p. 481)western-style politicized homosexuality” (Altman, 1997, p. 417).

It is from, and within, the universal gay world that my friendship group produced its own discrete gay world. This is the localised gay world referenced in the research question – another symbolically enclosed relational space, and one in which I experienced the immersive qualities of the group. This discrete gay world can be thought of as an institution. One type of symbolically enclosed institution is the reinventive institution (referred to in the literature review as an RI) introduced by Susie Scott (2010, 2011) as a development of Erving Goffman’s (1961) notion of a Total Institution (TI), a concept more closely associated with physically enclosed spaces such as prisons and asylums. Unlike the coerced members of a TI, individuals voluntarily join RIs in the hope of “reinvention, self-improvement or transformation” (Scott, 2010, p. 226). As with my friendship group, in an RI it is peers who are “the ultimate source of personal authority” (Goldman, 2013, p. 276), rather than prison guards or the medical personnel of an asylum. RIs are the products of contemporary western society, and range from new religious movements such as Scientology, through social groups like fraternities, or web-based virtual communities of, for example, former gaming addicts, to fitness classes and gyms. The notion of RIs,



therefore, provides a body of work in which the social processes, power and identity formation within my former friendship group can be explored.

To take the argument further, some reinventive institutions can also be thought of as cults. As Jenkinson (2013, p. 20) points out, “cults [...] have a very high intensity but are not closed to outside influences”. Accordingly, I have drawn on the relevant literature to demonstrate that contemporary sociological thinking conceptualises cults as “high demand groups” (Kendall, 2006), rather than as quasi-religious groups centred around charismatic leadership, which is the more commonly held notion of them. Jenkinson (2013) argues that a cult can be of any size, even consisting of a one-to-one relationship. Indeed, a therapeutic relationship between counsellor and client in which the client is rendered helpless and dependent can be considered cultic. In sum, regardless of the cult’s size, in a cult one individual exerts psychological/spiritual/physical power over another. This contemporary conceptualisation of cults as extremely controlling relationships involving ritualistic practices, beliefs and customs is carried forward in the thesis.

## **2.2 Friendships**

### **2.2.1 LGBTQ friendships as chosen families**

It is within the gay world that gay male friendship groups are forged. Indeed, Woolwine (2008), argued that for some gay men, their friendship networks constituted their gay world. Studies exploring LGBTQ friendship groups and social support systems have been taken up predominantly by sociology. Such interest in gay male friendship networks began in the post-Stonewall years of the 1970s (Altman, 1982; Bell & Weinberg, 1978; Warren, 1974). At the time, one theory for the emergence of gay male friendship groups was the migration of sizeable numbers of single gay men to the major cities of the United States due to changes in the job market (D’emilio & Freedman, 1988; Nardi, 1999). This movement created sufficient numbers of men to form political and social groups (Murray, 1996; Nardi, 1999). According to Nardi (1999, p. 21), these “young, educated, affluent, never married, childless” men sought to replicate the nuclear families and small friendship groups associated with the rural areas from where they had moved. However, despite their rural backgrounds, the men were, Nardi (1999) argues, more likely to be similar in their lifestyle choices to fellow city-dwelling friends than the traditional networks of ‘family’ and co-workers (Fischer, 1982). Consequently, increased urbanisation provided greater opportunities for gay men and others to self-select friendships based on similarities of

identity and lifestyle, rather than more traditional networks such as blood relations, neighbours and religious organisations (Fischer, 1982; Nardi, 1999).

In the 1980s, scholarly attention into gay male friendship groups was dominated by studies aimed at identifying which resources in the lives of gay men were best placed to provide social support to those living with HIV and AIDS (Hays, Turner, & Coates, 1992; Herek & Glunt, 1988; Holt, 2011; Simon Rosser, West, & Weinmeyer, 2008). Unsurprisingly, these studies demonstrated that emotional, practical and informational support was best served from close friendships with other gay men, leading to, for example, lower rates of depression (Hays et al., 1992) and an increased capacity to serve as positive role models to others (Holt, 2011). At the same time as these studies exploring the relationship between gay male friendships and wellbeing, French philosopher Foucault (1997) (himself a self-identified gay man who died of an AIDS-related illness) articulated different ways of thinking about gay male friendships in a series of interviews and discussions with several gay publications. Foucault (1997, p. 153) argued that what people find most disturbing about gay male cultures and lifestyles is the potential to create 'unusual' practices of friendships that do not conform to existing cultural norms and which constitute inherently experimental and undetermined ways of relating. Of note to Foucault (1997) is the idea that gay men had developed cultures and lifestyles based on pleasure and desire, and this had led to innovate and creative ways of connecting. Therefore, for Foucault (1997), it is the question of what is meant by 'friendship' that requires challenging, rather than any assimilation of gay male friendship groups into heteronormative ways of relating. In arguing for debate, Foucault (1997, pp. 158, 165) turns any radical concept of gay male friendships into an act of political and social activism; firstly through local resistance to social normalisation in marginal spaces, and secondly by challenging normalisation of relationships on a broader cultural level. In other words, for Foucault (1997), LGBTQ friendship networks represented a potential source of political disruption and large-scale societal change.

The importance of friendship groups and support systems to gay male cultures and lifestyles was later explored beyond the context of gay men and HIV/AIDS. In this body of work, LGBTQ friendship groups and social systems represents "de facto families [...] which can be far more supportive than most nuclear families" (*Altman, 1982, p. 190*). In other words, LGBTQ friendships are relationships of comparable importance and meaning to those between families of origin, albeit biological, adoptive or otherwise. From the 1990s, because of experiences of rejection and alienation, friendships between people with a shared LGBTQ identity began to be identified as compensating for poor relations with families of origin by fostering role modelling and a sense of unity (Dewaele, Cox, Van den

Berghe, & Vincke, 2011; Heaphy, Weeks, & Donovan, 1998; Weston, 1991). Within this body of work, as emotional havens for young and old alike, LGBTQ friendships groups became widely known as 'families of choice' or 'chosen families' based on the work of Weston (1991). The notion of close friendships representing familial relationships is not restricted to LGBTQ people (Dewaele et al., 2011; Oswald, 2002; Tierney & Venegas, 2006). The use of family metaphors to describe close friendships has been studied, in relation to ethnic minority populations (Pahl & Spencer, 2004) and in low socio-economical status families who establish relationships with more powerful others as means of gaining social mobility (Ball, Reay, & David, 2002), for example.

Weston's (1991) use of the term 'family' was highly symbolic of the significant and intimate nature of these friendships, reflecting the ability of LGBTQ friendship groups and including those between gay men to compensate for the lack of supportive biological family relations (Dewaele et al., 2011; Heaphy et al., 1998; Nardi, 1999). Dewaele et al. (2011) in particular, note that close friendships with others of a shared gay identity afforded men emotional solace in homophobic societies while further developing their gay identity and providing a pool of men from which to forge romantic relationships. Nardi (1999) believes there is no set size or shape for chosen families; instead, these variables are dependent on the degree to which individuals have experienced negativity about their LGBTQ identity. Some gay men integrate their gay male friendships with blood family relations; others maintain strictly separate given and chosen family relationships (Dewaele et al., 2011; Nardi, 1999). Either way, researchers such as Dewaele et al. (2011) and Foucault (1997) have argued that chosen families represent political acts which challenge orthodox heteronormative ideas of 'family' as being only one of genetic ties; others (for example Fraser, 2008; Holt, 2011; Woolwine, 2000) have proposed that gay male friendship groups represents what is meant by 'community' to a significant number of gay men. Given the significance of gay male friendship groups and other forms of chosen families, even with growing integration and acceptance of gayness into 'broader culture', the unique functions and support offered by them means they cannot be considered a temporary social construction (Dewaele et al., 2011; Nardi, 1999). Yet despite Weston's (1991) and others such as Dewaele et al. (2011) formative work on chosen families, and the focus on gay male friendships during the HIV and AIDS epidemic of the 1980s, researchers such as LeBeau and Jellison (2009), Morris et al. (2015) and Nardi (1999) argue these relationships are poorly understood and under-researched.

### **2.2.2 Friendships as mirrors of the internal world**

Research into LGBTQ friendships, particularly 1970s and 1980s studies of gay male friendships, tended to emphasise the identity forming and supportive aspects of these “critical chosen relationships” (Heaphy & Davies, 2012, p. 311). This largely euphemistic stance made sense at a time when populations of gay men were under threat from AIDS as well as intense public scrutiny. Undeniably, the body of work focused on those gay male urban groups whose culture and lifestyle was most threatened by disease, death and discrimination.

Outside the LGBTQ literature, other studies have explored how troubled friendships can challenge an individual’s sense of how they are, regardless of their sexual identity. Of note, Smart, Davies, Heaphy, and Mason (2012) argue that through mutual interaction and identification with others, an individual comes to know themselves; in other words, friendships form an important part of an iterative and reflexive construction of a person’s “self-identity” (Bondi, 2014, p. 333). In particular, Smart et al. (2012) observe the deeper the friendship, the more involved the ‘self’ becomes; thereby highlighting how important chosen relationships, such as those between gay men, play an integral role in the formation and maintenance of self-identity. Consequently, while people forge ‘critical chosen relationships’ for a number of reasons, Smart et al. (2012) suggest one key element is that, through interactions with friends, individuals have opportunities to develop their ‘sense of self’. As Smart et al. (2012, p. 99) say, “getting to know someone else is also a process of becoming known to others and arguably to know oneself”. Smart et al.’s (2012) study supports Burkitt (2008) argument that self-identity is formed through social frameworks, in that it is through relationships that individuals see themselves as others see them, thus establishing a relationship in which they learn to reflect upon themselves.

In conceptualising important chosen relationships as reflections of oneself, Smart et al. (2012, p.99) highlight the risk of “becoming known to others” while becoming more self-aware, as the process involves trust or, at minimum, a need to establish trust. Consequently, Smart et al. (2012) propose that if trust is abused or lost in the early stages of friendship, the relationship is unlikely to progress. It is therefore not surprising that Smart et al. (2012) suggest in more intimate, long-term friendships, the breaking of bonds of trust can be severe and disturbing. In their paper, Smart et al. (2012) highlight two aspects to this distress: the sense of lacking judgment in others, and friends act as lenses through which people see themselves. Burkitt (2008, p. 10) further supports Smart et al. (2012) and states “it is in this mutual interaction and identification with others that a view of our own self is possible, because we judge our own conduct by viewing it as through the eyes of other people”.

In highlighting the importance of friendships in the formation of self-identity, for example, Smart et al. (2012, p. 99) describe friendship difficulties as "ontologically unsettling"; these studies draw upon Giddens's (1990) sociological understanding of the concept 'ontological security'. Giddens (1990, p. 92) described the concept as:

"The confidence that most human beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments of action. A sense of reliability of persons and things, so central to the notion of trust, is basic to feelings of ontological security; hence the two are psychologically closely related".

In other words, for Giddens, ontological security is the taken for granted, psychological tacit acceptance of the world and self-identity. That through reliability in the ordinariness of everyday life, anxiety and existential issues such as trust in others is kept in abeyance. In using Giddens's (1990) conceptualisation of ontological security, studies such as Smart et al. (2012) use a sociological view of the 'self'. Consequently, these studies reiterate that although the loss of "taken for granted [...] external sources of security" (Bondi (2014, p. 333) are eventful, the ruptures in the participants' social environments did not (seem to) fundamentally challenge "confidence [...] in their self-identity" (Giddens, 1990, p.92). In other words, Giddens' sociological formulation of ontological security implies that even in the face of extreme external pressure, an individual's ontological security in the sense of knowing who they are, what they are worth, the right to benevolent relationships, remains intact.

Counselling researchers have taken up the notion of ontological security in a different way; making use of the earlier psychoanalytic work, primarily Winnicott (1971), Erikson (1993) and Laing (1959) for whom Giddens (1990) drew upon in his understanding of ontological security as a "psychological achievement" (Bondi, 2014, p. 332). At the heart of Laing's characterisation of ontological security is the lack of an integrated self. In his book *The Divided Self*, Laing (1959) describes a state of vulnerability where an individual is devoid of the points of existential affirmation that a psychologically 'healthy' individual takes for granted. As Laing (1959, p. 39) says, such precariousness means the inability to "encounter all of the hazards of life, social, ethical, spiritual, biological, from a centrally firm sense of his [and to bring Laing's use of gender pronouns in line with contemporary thinking, her own and other people's reality and identity". Put another way, in Laing's (1959) conceptualisation of ontological security, the relationship between the individual and their external environment, which Bondi (2014, p. 342) refers to as "being in the world" becomes disjointed. Other people and situations become potentially dangerous. As Collier (1977, p. 2) points out:

“By using the term ontological insecurity, Laing means to indicate that it is about one’s being that one is insecure. This should not be taken primarily as meaning anxiety about one’s continued presence in the world as a living being [...] One’s being includes not merely that one is (one’s existence) but [...] who one is”.

Unlike sociological studies, counselling researchers have returned to the concept's psychoanalytic underpinnings to explore personal feelings of anxiety and distress. Although writing for a human geography audience, Bondi (2014), a counselling and psychotherapy researcher and part-time practitioner, draws and extends Laing's (1959) psychoanalytic underpinnings of ontological security to explore personal feelings of insecurity. Bondi's (2014) paper offers a close-up heartfelt account of anxiety and despair in the midst of prolonged and melancholic fatigue. She foregrounds two aspects of Laing's (1959) formulation, which are often overlooked. The first is Laing's (1959) belief that an individual's internal world – their thoughts and feelings – is inseparably enmeshed with the external – social, physical, biological etc. – environments that surround them. In so doing, Bondi points out that Laing (1959) did not contemplate "the mind of a person [being] isolated or abstracted from the world in which he or she lives" (Bondi, 2014, p. 337). Bondi reiterates Laing's belief that an individual considers the exterior environment secure or insecure may be in part a reflection of the security or insecurity they feel in their psychological internal world. In other words, ontological security or insecurity are both simultaneous qualities of "interior experience and [the] exterior environment" (Bondi, 2014, p. 337). A person may experience the external world as secure or insecure because of internal thoughts and feelings. Conversely, factors in the external world may influence how a person feels 'on the inside'. The two facets are impermeably bound as feelings and experiences continuously flow and mould both a person's internal and external worlds.

Bondi (2014) offers a reprise of different applications of 'ontological security' in previous studies. One such usage is in the exploration of experiences of distress when “the external world cannot be relied upon” (Bondi, 2014, p. 333). Citing studies such as Valentine’s (1998) account of personal harassment, Bondi’s (2014) take up of the term in exploring relational anguish is comparable to Smart et al. (2012). However, unlike Smart’s et al.’s focus on the impact of external events on a person’s interior experience, Bondi (2014, p. 337) emphasises the dynamic relationship between a person’s internal and external worlds, arguing “our experience of the exterior world we inhabit as secure or insecure might be understood as at least partly produced by qualities of our interior world”.

### **Summary of part two of the literature review**

LGBTQ friendships play an important role in the lives of gay men (Fraser, 2008; Holt, 2011; LeBeau & Jellison, 2009; Nardi, 1999; Ridge, Minichiello, & Plummer, 1997; Woolwine, 2000). Friendships with others of the same minority sexual identity represent significant “personal communities” (Holt, 2011), in which sexual minority group members develop and maintain their sexual identity (Fraser, 2008; Holt, 2011). Gay men, in particular, turn to gay friends for emotional support (Holt, 2011; LeBeau & Jellison, 2009; Woolwine, 2000); meaning-making (Holt, 2011); formation and acceptance of identity (Holt, 2011; LeBeau & Jellison, 2009); love (Woolwine, 2000); and advice (Woolwine, 2000). In other words, they receive support with personal issues that non-gay identifying friends are unlikely to understand (Dewaele et al., 2011).

For some scholars, LGBTQ friendships function as pseudo-familial constructs (Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan, 2001; Weston, 1991). Foucault (1990), however, argues that LGBTQ relationships disrupt heteronormative ways of relating. For Foucault (1990), traditional familial structures do not match the political, counter-normative views or the differing needs these relationships serve. Therefore, applying heteronormative ways of relating to LGBTQ support networks shows a lack of imagination. Indeed, within gay male friendship groups, the term ‘family’ is rarely used (Woolwine, 2000). For many men, the term evokes painful memories of strained relationships with biological or adoptive family and friends (Woolwine, 2000).

LGBTQ or not, friendships serve as a mirror to the reflexive self (Heaphy & Davies, 2012; Smart et al., 2012). Through their friendships, individuals see themselves as friends perceive them. Friendships therefore exist at the boundary between the interior psychological and exterior social worlds (Bondi & Fewell, 2003) and play an important role in understanding the communal world and individual psychology. Rejection by friends can be therefore deeply distressing and adversely impact on the ‘ontological self’ – the relative stability or instability of an individual’s interior world of feeling, thought and self-belief. However, ontological insecurity – conflicts in the ontological self – can also disturb friendships. In summary, psychological and social worlds are both mutually exclusive and permeably related (Bondi, 2014).

## **2.3 Summary**

In this chapter, I have looked at the concepts and ideas which I believe connect with my experience as a member of a group whose culturally constructed sense of being gay, characterised by specific places, customs and practices, I consider ‘cultic’. I have reviewed a range of topics including cults, institutions, families of choice, the psychology of

friendships and the relationship between the social and psychological aspects of everyday life. I have identified the literature which suggests that, for many LGBTQ people, their friendships with others of a similar LGBTQ identity perform a crucial role in cultivating the LGBTQ facets of their own identity (Heaphy & Davies, 2012; Ridge et al., 1997). I have examined studies which indicate a link between the intensity of LGBTQ friendships and an understanding of 'community' (Warren, 1974; Woolwine, 2000), and those which suggest that significant LGBTQ friendships serve as pseudo-familial networks (Dewaele et al., 2011; Weeks et al., 2001; Weston, 1991). Moreover, I have looked at research that describes the disruption to an individual's understanding of who they are and of being in the world when significant friendships fracture.

Upon initial reading, the LGBTQ friendship literature reflects the significance of my involvement with the group of men, which with I was involved. However, whether the group served as a pseudo-familial network and a reinventive institution (Scott, 2010, 2011), how I positioned myself in the group, and what brought me to attach so firmly to it, requires more detailed examination. Likewise, questions on whether my seemingly strong attachment led to the group's becoming a 'high demand group' (Shaw, 2014), and whether my intense involvement led to my perceiving its practices and customs as 'cultic', are unresolved. My study of the literature reveals that the term 'cultic' is not restricted to groups centred on spiritual beliefs (Gomes, 1995; Jenkinson, 2013; Langone, 1995, 1996). Therefore, my adoption of the term in order to locate a discussion of a non-religious friendship group in the academic literature on cults is at first glance not unusual. However, the question of whether my group behaved in ways scholars such as Langone (1995) and Jenkinson (2013) would consider 'cultic' requires further work. In that context, Langone's (1995, 1996) criteria for assessing cultic processes provide a useful standard against which to compare my experience.

As it draws on broader social issues, the study may interest those concerned with concepts of cults, institutions, LGBTQ families of choice, the psychology of friendships, and the links between the social and psychological aspects of everyday life. Researchers into these ideas may read the inquiry and discover facets of their work reflected in what I have reported. However, as a researcher in the field of counselling and psychotherapy, the contribution to knowledge this inquiry produces is contextualised within this discipline. It is common for in counselling and psychotherapy to replicate what goes on in clinical practice and to use introspection, reflexivity, insight and the self as sources for understanding the relational (Bondi & Fewell, 2016). Counselling and psychotherapy problematises stories, without saying they are true. As a counsellor, I listen to my clients' stories. This doesn't mean that I can apply to others the meaning that clients assign to what they tell me, or that it represents



an undeniable truth. I value the 'not-knowing' approach to therapy, considering the client, rather than myself, the expert on their life (Anderson & Goolishian, 1992). However, the experiences clients share in the stories feel true to them and provide the material from which they make meaning. Therefore, what is said in counselling (either by my clients or by myself as a practitioner) is always open to debate and discussion. As a researcher of counselling and psychotherapy, I therefore wish to mirror this therapeutic stance in my research design. In other words, I value and adhere to the field's commonly used research tradition of 'experience-near' research, that is studies that stay close to the feelings and subjective states of those involved (Bondi & Fewell, 2016).

Despite my efforts to find it, this kind of research differs from that used in the majority of studies I have reviewed. Cults, institutions, LGBTQ families of choice, the psychology of friendships and the social and psychological aspects of everyday life tend to be investigated using a particular kind of inquiry that seeks to understand how these concepts and ideas work at a theoretical or societal level and how the knowledge derived from that understanding can be applied more broadly (Bondi & Fewell, 2016). When taking the concepts and ideas written about in the literature review as a whole, questions of belonging, community, forging close friendships and meeting potential partners appear. These topics seem more intimate than the larger sociological and theoretical ideas I have reviewed. As a counselling and psychotherapy researcher, I want to understand the peculiarities of my own experience and what brought me to think of the group as 'cultic'. I want to understand a phenomenon that happened to me, but that could resonate with others. By use of the experience-near research tradition I want to bring a lens from the discipline within which the inquiry will be contextualised, which allows me to dissect experience from the perspective of the individual: because as a counsellor and researcher, I believe that understanding the individual is adequate for academic study (Bondi, 2013; Bondi & Fewell, 2016).

Accordingly, this inquiry will concentrate on the experience of a particular gay man. While it may be possible to extend the outcomes of the study, the extent to which the inquiry relates to other gay men and LGBTQ groups in general is not assumed at this stage. Studies on gay men have tended to concentrate on larger social issues such as HIV/AIDS, human rights and stigmatisation. In presenting a close-up account of a topic that some may consider trivial, I want to contribute to a growing body of work that looks at the ordinary lives of a considerable portion of the counselling client population. As far as I am aware, no past studies have brought together the concepts and ideas of gay male pseudo-familial structures, ontological insecurity, and reinventive institutions, and the notion of the cult. Based on the material I have read, conceptualising the customs and practices of gay

men's friendship groups as 'cultic' has apparently not been done before. In my review, I failed to discover accounts of counsellors working with gay men or LGBTQ people either involved in a closely-knit friendship network or cast out of one. Indeed, I could not find in any discipline "thick descriptions" (Geertz, 1973, p. 6) of what it is like to be inside and then outside an insular gay male friendship group.

Since the studies of Ridge et al. (1997), Nardi (1999), Woolwine (2000), Rowe and Dowsett (2008) and Rumens (2011) show that gay male friendships impact on the emotional wellbeing of the men who take part in them, the shortage of research bringing these particular concepts and ideas together into one academic argument is troubling. Maybe it is an inherent consequence of painful experiences that they make people unwilling to share them with others. Possibly gay men, and more explicitly gay male researchers in the field of counselling and psychotherapy, have not been sufficiently willing or robust to look inwards at themselves and examine what goes on inside such groups. As previously explained, studies of gay male friendship networks only appeared in the 1970s, and certainly the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s supported much research into what worked rather than into what didn't. It was also around this time that the chosen family literature and its familial undertone emerged. It seems that now, after 40 years, gay men and specifically gay male researchers in counselling and psychotherapy are just beginning to openly questioning how gay men treat each other. In conclusion, the question 'How is the experience of a "cultic" gay male friendship group?' stands unanswered.

# 3 Ontological and epistemological foundations underpinning my research methodology

## 3.1 Research paradigm

In chapter one of the thesis, I write about my autobiographical connections to the research topic. I have self-identified as a former member of the friendship group for over ten years, openly discussing my personal experience of it with family, friends and strangers. What's more, I have experienced intense feelings in relation to this phenomenon and these feelings remain of "passionate personal interest" (McLeod, 2011, p. 206). I am a researcher with first-hand experience of the inquiry's focus and it is from a lingering curiosity and passion to discover more about the experience that a priority in my personal and scholarly research lives has been forged. Because of my first-hand experience, I strive to compile a "thick description" (Geertz, 1973, p. 16), using my experience as the material from which social meanings are constructed.

To this end, the research project works with three key elements/concepts: (1) the symbolically enclosed gay world of the group (2) the cult, and (3) the heuristic self-inquiry. Later, the research paradigm section deals with the idea of 'experience' and how this concept becomes the core aspect of heuristic self-inquiry as my chosen epistemology and methodology. At the start, I explain what a 'cultic gay men's friendship group' is, as that concept encompasses the other two on which the research is founded, namely, (1) the gay world and (2) the cult. This explanation is necessary, since 'researcher positionality' (Jackson, 2013; Opie & Sikes, 2004) is a crucial consideration in methodological decision-making. My philosophical assumptions concerning ontology, epistemology, beliefs, values and relationality "shape the outcome of the research [and] profoundly affects what I find" (Kincheloe & Berry, 2004, p. 6).

My assumption in doing this research is that there is a social construct which gay and non-gay people refer to as 'the gay world'. It is an imagined construct (B. Anderson, 2006), which does not exist apart from the individuals who create the practices, rituals and beliefs against which the states of being 'inside' or 'outside' are located. I see it as a primary medium that gay people might rely on in order to understand what it is to be gay and how to relate amongst themselves (Altman, 1997; Downs, 2012; Todd, 2016). The gay world is

therefore discursive in nature and as such I believe gay men with their 'insider status' (LaSala, 2003; Roberts, 2014) are ideally placed to instinctively and intuitively generate the detailed material associated with participation in it. I harbour intense feelings towards the gay world. At a time of deep and profound crisis, it is not a world in which I find sympathy or support. The inquiry is therefore also founded on my belief that there is something about the gay world that is inherently toxic, and on a concern that it can negatively influence and impact on the emotional wellbeing of other gay people. Furthermore, I support the idea that the gay world as a concept is formed by a group of cultural constructs that, under certain circumstances, can become cultic.

What I understand by 'cultic' is an aspect of a group (of two people or more) that follows a localised set of beliefs, values and practices which overwhelm each member's personhood. Located "in the middle ground between the localism of 'discourse' [and] translocal-sexual politics" (Warner, 1993, p. 7) a cultic gay friendship group is enveloped in a discourse heavily influenced by outside cultural constructs. Although it is a group that members voluntarily enter, failure to perform its beliefs, values and practices entails leaving or being expelled from it. I believe that membership of a cultic gay friendship group is likely to cause psychological harm. likely to cause psychological harm.

A key challenge for research that aims to examine 'experience' is how we can know about, or generate knowledge of, 'experience'. On most understandings 'experience' is intrinsically elusive and never matches our descriptions of it. In some framings, for example Gendlin's (1959) privileging of present time 'experiencing', part of its elusiveness consists of the experiencer's own inability to describe his or her experience without losing core features of it. Within the confines of this inquiry, the term 'experience' means my encountering, observing and participating in events associated with a cultic friendship group "through which one has lived and gained learning from" (Tudor, 2002, p. 52). The word 'experience' recognises that the learning I take from the events resides inside me as a dynamic fusion of thoughts, insights, perceptions, bodily feelings and emotional responses. In other words, through participating in and learning from events, individuals experience the experience. Experience, further, is a blend of two components: (1) the present, that is, the thoughts, insights, perceptions, bodily feelings and emotional responses arising when the experience is lived, and (2) the past, namely what is remembered as having been present at the time of the initial event (Tudor, 2002). For example, when I recall my expulsion from that group of gay friends, I remember the anxiety I experienced then, and when writing about it now, I feel nervousness in my stomach: thus fear potentially lives on inside me or as something yet unknown. In summary, the word 'experience' is the totality

of the present and past cognitive, physiological, psychological and spiritual learning I gained from encountering, observing and participating in the friendship group of gay men.

My ontological position is consistent with Rogers (1961) conceptualisation of experience. Rogers considered the knowledge derived from experience as the ultimate source of knowing; he argued that all scientific research and the process of theory construction was a way of making sense of personal experience. As he writes, “experience for me is the highest authority [...] Neither the Bible or the prophets - neither Freud or research - neither the revelations of God or man - can take precedence over my own direct experience” (pp. 23-24). What’s more, Sela-Smith (2002, p. 54) argues that experience constitutes an “interior world” that has long been “resisted” by researchers as a source of understanding of human phenomena. As she writes:

“Within this interiority, feeling responses to external circumstances combine to create meaning, and out of meaning, personalities are organised, personal and cultural myths are formed and world-views are constructed. Some would even say that worlds and universes themselves are created from this interiority”.



**Figure 3** Feet in the sea [online image] (Rosenburg, 2010)

As Jourard (1971, p. 59) writes, “the only person who can ever know of a man’s experience directly is the individual himself”. It also follows that later recollection of experiences can only ever represent distorted echoes of the direct experiences themselves. In other words, I am unable to recall the experience of my involvement in the group without losing core features of it. Depictions of experience are “memories or imaginings” (Adzema, 2016, p. 217) of the thoughts, insights, perceptions, bodily feelings and emotional responses that make up the total experience. They cannot claim to constitute the direct experience itself. The material is an echo guiding me, both as direct experiencer and as researcher, back to the original experience. It is a secondary interpretation of the reality – an illusory interpretation in words and images – but not itself the actual reality of my experience of the group. As Adzema (2016, p. 212) points out, images used to depict an experience of being at the beach “is not the reality itself any more than a picture of a beach is the actual waves hitting the sand or the feeling of the beach-goer basking in the sun”. In other words, like the end of the proverbial rainbow, experience is intrinsically elusive.

For example, in the experience I describe in the preface to the thesis, my voice is shaking and I feel pins and needles in my hands. I interpreted these bodily responses as feelings of anxiety and distress. Bodily responses are pre-linguistic; therefore the concepts of anxiety and distress are not the feelings themselves, but an approximation of the felt sense of the experience (Gendlin, 1959). If my personal thoughts, insights, perceptions, bodily feelings and emotional responses represent the felt sense of the experience, then what I aim to depict through words and images is not the feelings themselves but elements that give a “sense of achieving verisimilitude” (Bondi, 2013, p. 9).

It therefore follows that my personal thoughts, insights, perceptions, bodily feelings and emotional responses are used to derive knowledge that is epistemologically ‘secure’ (Gerler, 2017). It is secure in the sense that the claim of knowledge stemming from the interior world can be considered ‘omnipotent’ and ‘infallible’ as long as it represents an individual’s own beliefs and not those reflecting the conscious or subconscious influence of others. In Gerler (2017, para. 5) words, “one is infallible about one’s own mental states if and only if one cannot have a false self or belief to the effect that one is in a certain mental state. One is an omniscient about one’s own mental states if being in a mental state suffices for knowing that one is in that state”.

However, for Bondi (2014), despite originating from the interior world, self-knowledge is never free from influence by externally generated forms of knowledge. The attribution or comparison of words and images to externally sourced knowledge, be it theoretical or

observational, means that it is always co-constructed. According to Bondi (2014, p. 335), “claims to knowledge based on introspection and first-person testimony are no different from those grounded more externally”. However, I argue that whereas co-constructed knowledge can be expressed without resonating with thoughts and feelings, self-knowledge, if it is considered to represent direct experience, as Rogers (1961) argues, has to be understood and aligned with the “cognitive, physiological, psychological and spiritual” (Ratliffe, 1997, p. 7) of the self. In other words, self-knowledge is invariably co-constructed but ultimately made sense of inside the interior world. In, and only in, that sense can self-knowledge be considered epistemologically secure, authorial, and a proclamation of ‘truth’ (Gerler, 2017). What an individual perceives as knowledge is primarily forged from the interior world, using cultural influences to convert it from the implicit to the explicit.

### **3.2 Research methodology**

That human experience has evocative, “spiritual” (Ratliffe, 1997, p. 7) qualities means that it cannot be “deduced rationally” (Adzema, 2016, p. 212) or fully understood by orthodox, objective scientific approaches. In other words, experience is more than observed, objective events. Depictions of experience, being qualitative, comprise of more “words than numbers” (Maxwell, 2012, p. 22), so the exploration of experience is incomplete in studies where experience is considered an objective entity (i.e. a recollection of events), rather than only one aspect of an individual’s thoughts, insights, perceptions, bodily feelings and emotional responses in relation to complex social phenomena (McLeod, 2011). Therefore, quantitative or positivist methods and approaches are not useful in a study exploring my total experience of such a complex and nuanced social phenomenon as my involvement in a cultic friendship group. Bluntly put, I cannot capture the “the nuances, textures, and constituents” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 31) of the experience of the group by completing a questionnaire. Accordingly, a qualitative research methodology is required to capture the totality of experience and an interpretive approach is needed to ‘analyse’ the gathered material. As Laing (1982, p. 9) writes: “experience is not an objective fact”.

As the literature review established, friendships are ‘mirrors to the reflective self’. It therefore makes sense for an inquiry furthering knowledge of my friendships to focus on the (my)self, “thus arriving at an understanding of [...] the phenomenon” (McLeod, 2011, p. 38). Furthermore, using the inquiry’s definition of experience, it follows that, to answer the question of how it was for me to encounter, observe and participate in a cultic friendship group of gay men, I need to delve into my interior world of thoughts, insights, perceptions, bodily feelings and emotional responses. Only I can experience the material gathered and

make sense of it. Only I choose what material best represents the experiences that best answer the research question of this thesis. In other words, the highest form of knowledge about the experience under investigation must be derived from a methodology that privileges the self-search of me, Jason Holmes. By engaging in this self-reflexive writing, I attempt to explore social meanings related to friendship groups between gay men. In other words, the research 'produces' knowledge through the medium of the reflexive self and not that of any exterior other.



**Figure 4 'Embodied at the GPO' [online image] (Truffarelli, 2016)**

Methodologically, words and images are the most common forms of observable and comprehensible material with which experience is depicted, certainly in a thesis. Indeed, words and images are needed if the experiencer is to share his/her memories and imaginings of the raw experience with others. However, experiences are often researched from the perspective of an observer of an event that is happening to another person. Such approaches base their 'truth claims' on an interpretation of an interpretation. To add further distortion, and in an attempt to claim further verifiability, often the abstracted interpretations are considered through a theoretical lens, meaning that the raw experience has a third level of abstraction added. So, while many of these methodological approaches are deemed credible on grounds of replicability and verifiability, they are tertiary interpretations of the raw experience that their proponents claim to understand. However, as (Nietzsche, 2002, p. 134) points out, "all credibility, all good conscience, all evidence of truth come only from the senses". In other words, Nietzsche (2002) argues that only what can be directly perceived or observed can be truly considered 'real'.



Therefore, it was important to use a qualitative research methodology, which removed as much experiential distortion and abstraction as possible. In other words, “to seek out the words and images which are reflecting off the least disturbed pond [that is] most closely mapped on to direct experience” (Adzema, 2016, p. 234).

After I have stated that the best depiction of experience uses words and images that are as close as possible to the actual experience without being experience itself, the reader may be thinking that what I argue here in terms of changing concrete aspects of events is problematic. But the direct experience should not be confused with recollection of events. Indeed, ethical considerations such as the need to protect identities may mean that the exact retelling of events is not possible. However, while concrete details are changed in ways that protect participants, the ‘substance’ of the experiences and thus the theme to which the material relates remain valid. Even with a degree of ‘fictionalisation’, the methodological underpinnings of the inquiry remain consistent. Put another way, my psychological, cognitive and physiological responses evoked by the “memories or imaginings” (Adzema, 2016, p. 217), and from which self-knowledge of the experience is derived, remain central to the research field. The inquiry presents material that evokes the same felt sense inside the researcher as the actual events they depict. In other words, the philosophical premise of the inquiry, namely that the field of research is co-constructed, but is ultimately made sense of inside the researcher, is upheld. Any ‘fictionalisation’ in the representations, as required by ethics, does not impact on the findings of the study. Themes represent the felt sense of the experience “(in the sense of achieving verisimilitude) and [being] meaningful” (Bondi, 2013, p. 12).

This means that the ‘material’ from which understanding of the experience is forged is as close to my direct psychological, cognitive and physiological experiencing as possible. If, as Rogers (1961) argues, knowledge is a way of making sense of experience, it follows that the best symbolisation of experience is gathered from the interior world of the experiencer him/herself. In this inquiry, the person who encountered, observed and participated in the group, and the person who decides which words and images best symbolise the totality of the experience in the thesis, is me, Jason Holmes. Consequently, the research field lies inside me (West, 2001). In other words, I answer the research question not by abandoning the ‘truth’ of my interior world, but by descending into it (Moustakas, 1990; Sela-Smith, 2002).

Based on my review of the literature, there is no established methodology with which to research the experiences of a cultic friendship group. By presenting human experience using an orthodox academic rhetoric, the majority of the papers reviewed in this thesis fail

to “penetrate the visceral and day to day experiences” (Caines, 2008, p. 52) that, based on my personal experience, are pertinent to this particular research topic. The methodology therefore needs to favour a method that differs from those that report what can be directly observed; that is, the supposedly empirical approach of modern science. It needs to favour a method that embraces Nietzsche's sense of the term ‘empirical’ in that it encompasses my total experience – cognitive, physiological, psychological and spiritual – as a way of understanding my experience of the group. In other words, the methodology upholds the epistemological premise that understanding of the phenomenon under investigation lies within me, the researcher (West, 2001). That method is heuristics, and heuristic self-search inquiry in particular.

Unlike traditional positivistic (often quantitative) research that requires authors to generalise to other groups or populations, HSSI allows the readers to make connections between the experiences depicted in the thesis and others with which they may or may not be familiar. As a heuristic researcher I can only offer my experience; I do not know how my experience relates to others. However, if other gay men or any other people say: “I connect with your experience”, for me that is how those connections are established within heuristic research. Readers of HSSI are simply invited to reflect on how – if at all – the experience applies to their lives.

Heuristic research uses the self of the researcher in a disciplined self-exploration of a topic that is of “existential significance to the inquirer” (McLeod, 2011, p. 206). Consequently, “the heuristic researcher has undergone the experience [of the research focus] in a vital, intense, and full way” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 14). Heuristic research takes different forms. The most common, ‘Heuristic Inquiry’, is associated with the humanistic psychologist Clark Moustakas (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985; Moustakas, 1990, 2001). Heuristic Self-Search Inquiry (HSSI) is a less commonly known adaptation of HI, developed by Sandy Sela-Smith (1998, 2002).

The fundamental principle of HSSI is the self-involvement of the researcher, at a depth that goes beyond other forms of phenomenological first-person inquiry, such as autoethnography, which also use the systematic exploration of the researcher's personal experience as a basis of scientific research. Hiles (2001) observes that the heuristic researcher does not choose the topic; the topic chooses the researcher. For me, the same could be said for the methodology itself. I was introduced to heuristics early in the research process, before my research question was fully formulated. My doctoral supervisor suggested that the way I was immersing myself in a topic of such personal significance resembled the early phases of a heuristic inquiry (Moustakas, 1990); then it turned into

actual dialogue with heuristic methodologist Sandra Taylor. With Sandra I learnt about the nuances of the heuristic approach, and where attempts at heuristic inquiry frequently fail. I sought photographic images of Moustakas, which entered my dream states. In this sense, Moustakas represented an 'internal supervisor' (Casement, 1985), albeit wholly imaginary. At heart, I felt that Moustakas's works (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985; Moustakas, 1990, 2001), and later those of Sela-Smith (2002) and Taylor (2013) evoked the sense of finding a methodology that documented the process I was intuitively following. I had a deep sense of ease in deciding to work with heuristics.

HSSI is an adapted phenomenological approach (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985; McLeod, 2011): adapted, because heuristic research and other phenomenological approaches have different methodological underpinnings. Whereas the phenomenologist is encouraged to "bracket" off his/her worldviews, the HSSI researcher puts on a methodological wetsuit, "jumping into a river [in a] free fall surrender" (Sela-Smith, 2002, p. 70), that is, into a topic of existential significance. In so doing, the participants, of whom the HSSI researcher is considered the primary one, remain evident in the data. As Douglass and Moustakas (1985, p. 43) point out, "phenomenology ends with the essence of the experience; heuristics retains the essence of the person [including the researcher] in the experience". In other words, in traditional phenomenological approaches, the description of the experience is privileged over the experiencer, whereas in HSSI, the experiencers, namely the researchers, remain "visible as whole persons" (McLeod, 2011, p. 206) throughout the research process, and in the thesis itself.

Given that I have strong feelings towards the research topic, adopting a methodology that required me to minimise/suppress/ignore my firmly held view about the friendship group would have been futile. I wanted to know more about an experience that has dominated a large part of my adult life and caused me significant emotional pain. I believed my experience of the friendship group was a source of such emotional pain. I wondered if other gay men had experienced something similar. Any attempt at archetypal phenomenological bracketing of my beliefs, values, thoughts and hypotheses, biases, emotions, preconceptions, presuppositions and assumptions (Tufford & Newman, 2012) in relation to a topic of which I have decades of first-hand experience would have lost the potential of my experience to offer meaning and depth to the findings of the study. As West (2000, p. 97) points out, bracketing is impossible anyhow; it "is itself a way of structuring reality [and one which] has its own sets of values and ethics" that may well differ from those of others. Therefore it was necessary to adopt a methodology that embraced my positionality and my personal, passionate engagement in the topic.

Given that my personal thoughts, insights, perceptions, bodily feelings and emotional responses represent the felt sense of the experience that constitutes the “sense of achieving verisimilitude” (Bondi, 2013, p. 9), the methodology needed to take the experiencing of the researcher as its central tenet would work best with my personal knowledge of the topic (West, 2013). West (2001, p. 129) reports findings solely based on the researcher’s inner experiencing, while Sela-Smith (2002, p. 264) states: “in every learner, in every person, there are creative sources of energy and meaning that are often tacit, hidden or denied”. HSSI is the one methodology that makes claims based on phenomena, which “hover” (Adzema, 2016, p. 234) as closely as possible to psychological, cognitive and physiological experiencing.

It is common for HSSI researchers to use representation of aspects of events as material. As others have debated (e.g., Bondi, 2013; Kvale, 1995; Lincoln & Denzin, 2003), any fictionalisation does not mean that my inquiry is not valid, trustworthy or rigorous. As a qualitative researcher and counsellor, I do not claim that the stories I tell “represent singular, universal, or stable truths about the lives of those who participate in them” (Bondi, 2013, p. 12). Instead, in exploring the events I write about, I focus not on the specifics (e.g. who said what to whom, and where incidents happened) of the events themselves, but use them as “vivid illustrations of the processes in which qualitative researchers engage [as symbols] to which I turn [...] in order to develop a way of understanding between what [I] seek to narrate and the representations [I] generate” (Bondi, 2013, p. 12). Put another way, qualitative inquiry does not ordinarily purport to offer true depictions. However, sometimes the divide between personal experience and its telling can be used as a space for meaning making, particularly in the case of painful experiences the narration of which can be difficult. In the context of heuristics, Moustakas (1990, p. 31) claims that experience is comprised of “nuances, textures, and constituents” rather than ‘just’ the retelling of events.

HSSI is a methodology within which my self-knowledge of these qualitative dimensions of experience is valued; and at the end of the inquiry, I experienced a change in my self-awareness and self-knowledge concerning an experience that consumes me. The methodology allowed me a space in which to make sense of my unsettled inner experiencing of the group. As a counsellor, it is invaluable that I engage in the counselling process based on my life history and countertransference to what the client addresses. As a gay man, I know my identity, aspects of the gay culture and its threats, my strengths and ‘healthy areas’, as well as my unresolved issues. Only through this mind-set can I take care of my (gay and non-gay) clients so as to approach them not from my unconscious biases, but from my self-knowledge that helps to prevent discrimination against the ‘other’. At

heart, HSSI acknowledges the importance of my personal wellbeing for the benefit of my professional development. The HSSI researcher is immersed in the research to the extent of being “transformed” (Sela-Smith, 2002, p. 84) in what he/she feels about the phenomenon under investigation. HSSI therefore allowed me to participate in an inquiry that was partly therapeutic in its endeavours (McLeod, 2011). In other words, HSSI was the best methodology for me inasmuch as it considered my subjectivity and positionality as assets rather than liabilities.

### **3.3 Research methods**

Although HSSI felt like the most appropriate methodology to adopt, the process of identifying the focus of the study involved a prolonged process of refinement and spoke to the issue of resistance within the researcher towards exploring the one topic that was a source of significant personal unease (Sela-Smith, 2002; Taylor, 2013). Moustakas (1990) proposes that this initial engagement requires the heuristic researcher to engage in an open-ended self-dialogue until the research question, which is of “existential significance” (McLeod, 2011, p. 206) to the researcher, emerges organically.

Over three years, I identified and refined two different research topics leading to four different research approaches, albeit within the heuristic research paradigm. The initial topic concerned post-traumatic growth (PTG) (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1995, 2013). Since I self-identify as experiencing PTG, I wanted to explore the relationship between PTG and the person-centred approach using classic Moustakian HI. In researching PTG, I discovered Janoff-Bulman’s notion of the ‘Shattered Assumptive World’ (Janoff-Bulman, 1985, 1989, 1992). I felt intuitively attracted to Janoff-Bulman’s work, as the thought of an individual’s worldview breaking captured my post-expulsion feelings of crisis. Accordingly, I found my intuitive pull to Janoff-Bulman’s work stronger than my exploration of PTG, and I abandoned the latter as a research theme.

While working with assumptive worlds as a research topic, I interviewed five gay men for the purposes of the study. The interviewees were asked to tell their stories about their assumptions about one another, where their assumptions come from, and what experiences they felt might change a gay man’s assumptive world. They were also asked to share an aesthetic representation of the experience of living inside, outside or in between gay worlds. My decision to include interviews was based on Moustakas’s (2001, p. 5) comment that the fundamental aim of heuristic research is to explore “My experience and that of others”. I felt that by interviewing others I would meet Moustakas’s requirement, and the process

allayed my concern that the study was 'nothing more' than a piece of "self-therapy by the researcher" (McLeod, 2011, p. 216).

However, I was ambivalent towards both PTG and Janoff-Bulman's 'shattered world' theory. I did not "love" (Sela-Smith, 2002, p. 74) either. I had lost sight of the fact that, at heart, the heuristic research model is a vehicle for self-search and self-discovery. As Ratliffe (1997, p. 59) points out, the heuristic researcher "cannot lose sight of the fact that he is himself the principal of his own experimental intervention". For Sela-Smith (2002), the presence of others serves to distract the researcher from his/her internal process. Sela-Smith's concern is that the inclusion of interviews encourages the heuristic researcher to move away from the upper left quadrant's 'interior I' to the upper right quadrant's 'exterior I' of Wilber's (1995, 2000a, 2000b) 'all quadrants, all levels' model. As Damasio (1999, p. 28) points out, researchers using interviews risk using their "minds [as means to] not to discover facts but to hide them". The inclusion of others in HSSI is, therefore, rare and only used to highlight areas of the researcher's inner processes which may be denied or distorted (Sela-Smith, 2002; Taylor, 2013).

My ambivalence being picked up on during research supervision, I was asked whether my interest in assumptive worlds centred on my experience that "the gay world not been a supportive place at a time when I needed it to be" (J. Wyatt, personal communication, 8th July 2015). My supervisor's comments constituted encouragement, applicable to every heuristic researcher, to "follow his or her own path in self-understanding and disclosure" (Moustakas, 1961, p. 52). Indeed, my supervisor's question represented the first occasion on which gayness, along with the term 'gay world', was raised as a potential research topic. It was a moment of intense illumination. I experienced a profound visceral response, which I found both comforting and disconcerting. Comforting, as I experienced an inner sense of comfort and ease. Perplexing, as the comments identified a long-held subconscious resistance within me, which up to that point had stopped me from knowing and working with the "pain" (Sela-Smith, 2002, p. 65) embedded in the question. For Sela-Smith (2002), it is from the HSSI inquirer's pain contained in the research topic that self-transformation and new understanding are established. Anything that takes the researcher away from the pain, such as my desire to explore topics, which, although close to the actual problem, did not fully capture what I was attempting to do with my research, can be interpreted as avoidance or resistance.

However, my decision/need to move to a self-inquiry presented the ethical and moral dilemma of how to deal with the interview material. From 'Mem' [not his real name] I had learnt of the pain he experienced when his friends withdrew support. From 'Christian' I

learnt of the joy when he was with queer but “broken” friends. ‘Greymatter’ taught me how male sexuality was constrained by Western labels, while ‘Geraldo’ inspired me to reflect on how gay men are “incubated” by the gay world. Finally, ‘Teàrlach’ made me weep in sad reflection over his recently experienced homophobic abuse. In the end, I gained comfort from the echoes of the men’s stories that lived on within the inquiry. It was only because of their stories and their experiences that I was able to get nearer to mine.

Despite being upset at having to move away from the interview material, the need for the inquirer to research a topic of sufficient personal interest to sustain the ‘passionate’ (McLeod, 2011) interest of the researcher is a prerequisite of the heuristic approach (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985; McLeod, 2011; Moustakas, 1990, 2001; Sela-Smith, 2002) and I sought ethical approval to change topic and methodology. The feelings of comfort and discomfort caused by the shift stirred my curiosity, so I distanced myself from the research for several months. The retreat served also as a period of ‘incubation’ (Moustakas, 1990). Without the constraints of chronological time, I made space for my tacit knowledge and intuition – instinctive hunches – about what my supervisor’s comments caused me to ruminate on and develop. Tacit knowledge means pre-verbal, intuitive, embodied and habitual forms of knowledge; in other words, knowledge that is implicit rather than explicit.

Polanyi (1958, 1964, 1966), the founder of the term, argues that all knowledge is either tacit or at least forged from tacit knowledge, thus proposing that all claims to objective scientific knowledge rely upon personal knowledge. As he writes, “we can know, more than we can tell” (Polanyi, 1966, p. 4). In HSSI, the researcher’s tacit knowledge is considered the origin of the researcher’s understanding of the research topic (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985; Moustakas, 1990, 2001; Sela-Smith, 2002).

After several months I felt ready to re-engage, and one morning, in a coffee shop in Edinburgh, I had a moment of intense illumination. Aware that the notion of ‘rules’ had stayed with me since reading Janoff-Bulman’s (1985, 1989, 1992) work, I wondered what ‘rules’ had been broken in my internal world and if so, whether any related to my experience of the gay world. I immersed myself in understanding the relevance of the term ‘rules’ to my research question. In a burst of activity, I intuitively scribbled. Below is a summary of that process:

“rules of gay life [...] Gay culture [...] Going against the rules [...] experiences, of the gay rules [...] Belonging [...] Not-belonging [...] Policing the rules [...] Tribal laws [...] laws of the gay world [...] Living with the gay world [...] Living in the assumptive gay

world [...] Living in the gay world [...] Living in and out of the gay world [...] Living inside and outside gay worlds”.

(Extract from my research journal, July 2015)

The outcome of this intense activity was the research question ‘What is the experience of living inside or outside gay worlds?’ Upon submission my doctoral supervisor offered the following feedback:

“You need an additional word or phrase to indicate what is being negotiated, e.g. ‘What is the experience of gay men negotiating their place inside or outside the gay world?’. Also, does inside and outside sound too binary? Do you want that clear demarcation? You could say ‘inside, outside and in between’”.

(J. Wyatt, personal communication, 8th July 2015)

I felt it was naïve of me not to have identified the dualistic nature of my question for myself. However, the binary form in which I had phrased the research question inadvertently highlighted how I experienced the gay world of my friendship group as something that I was either in or out. That I unconsciously reflected this split in the question both shocked me and highlighted my ongoing processes of ‘interiorisation’ and ‘exteriorisation’ (Bondi & Fewell, 2003) of the sudden, violent exclusion from my friendship group that I experienced. However, the binary nature of in and out also highlighted the ‘cultic’ nature of the group and led to my formulation of the research question as: “How is my experience of a ‘cultic’ gay male friendship group?” Here was the topic, autobiographical in nature, and of intense interest, concern, fascination or excitement to me. My strong feelings of discomfort towards my former group of friends and my role in it meant that I held the necessary ‘existential’ unease to “get inside the question [and] become one with it”(Moustakas, 1990, p. 15): in other words, to tear it apart.

After clarifying the research topic, one in which I had confidence, I immersed myself in self-search and reflection on my experience of the group (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985). I recorded anything, from both waking and dreaming states that was connected with the research question. In other words, I experientially lived with my experience of the ‘cultic’ gay male friendship group, thus becoming “intimately involved” (Sela-Smith, 2002, p. 65) with it. Using tacit knowledge and the heuristic process, indwelling, I wrote the words that best described my experience of the group. Moustakas (1990, p. 24) explains that indwelling “involves a willingness to gaze with unwavering attention and concentration into some facet of human experience in order to understand its constituent qualities and its wholeness”. By considering ideas from different viewpoints, indwelling allows the heuristic researcher to become aware of themes as they surface in the relationship with oneself and others.

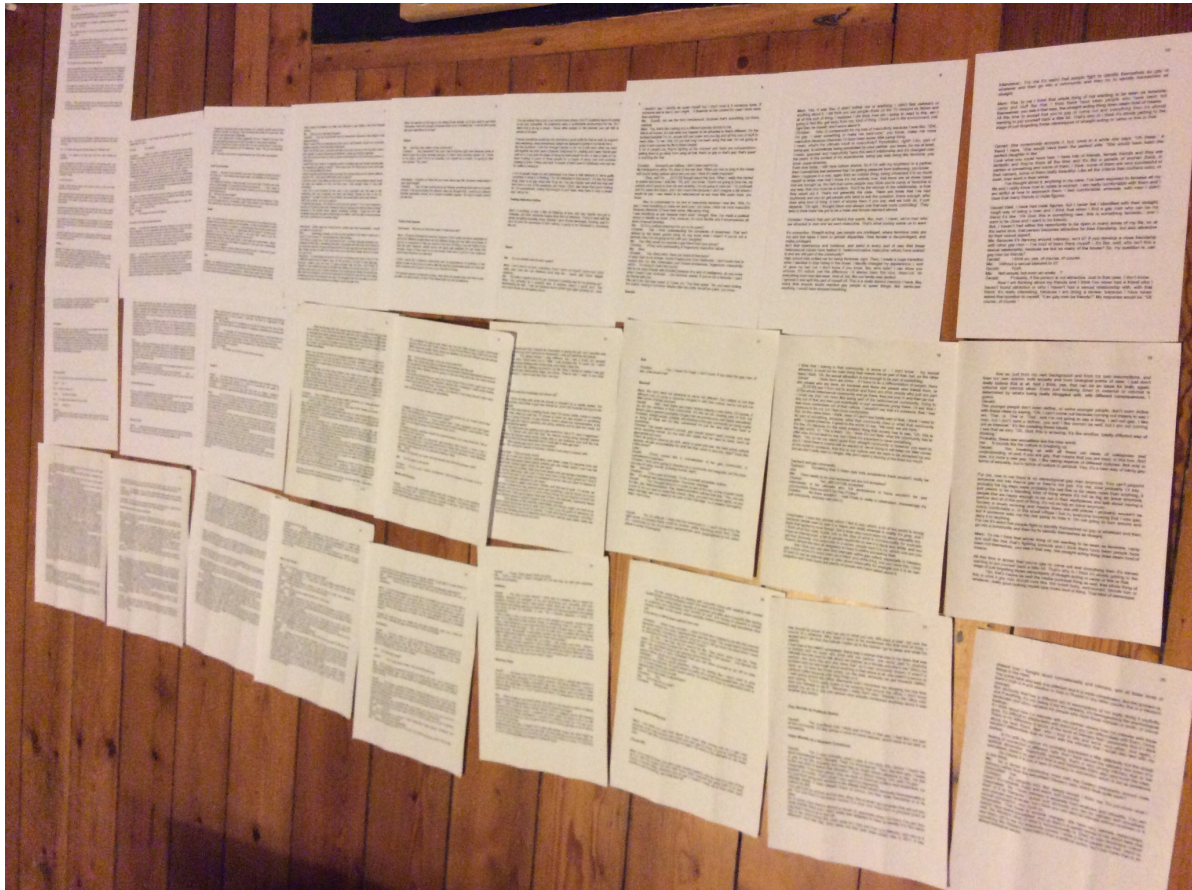


Sometimes what I wrote was expressed in lengthy paragraphs, at other times in short phrases or single random words. When words and transcription failed to capture what I was experiencing, I searched for images on the Internet. The images were found using keywords that hovered around my felt sense of them as search terms. The method gave me a tranche of images to sort through, while working out which best depicted what I was failing to articulate in written form. Throughout, I did not attempt to organise, collect, theorise or analyse the writing. Instead, I simply moved between self-searching and starting to establish the approaches needed to explore the phenomenon further. As Douglas and Moustakas (1985, p. 48) point out, the immersion phase is “more impulsive than deliberate, a more wandering than a goal, more a way of being, than a method of doing”. Over a period of six months, through free writing and dictation, I collected 100 pieces of material.

For the next five months, I intentionally retreated from the study, accepting an interruption of studies. Although primarily designed to give me a restorative break from academia, the interruption also served as a withdrawal from active deliberation. In the process, words and images incubated inside me. I had made space within my internal frame of reference; I got under and then within my experience with the aim of discovering the implicit meanings behind the gathered material and thus expanding my understanding of my experience of the group. As Polanyi (1964, p. 34) puts it, “the way you reach the peak of a mountain by putting in your last ounce of strength – but more often comes in a flash after a period of rest or distraction”.

After five months, I experienced an emergent desire to progress with the research. I moved towards explicating what I had gathered. I sought to identify the study’s core themes and “to fully examine what has awakened in consciousness, in order to understand its various layers of meaning” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 31). I evolved a process of synthesis involving the free writing and Internet images, along with the feelings and bodily sensations associated with them. My writing and collected imagery was prolific – one hundred pieces in total. But, while representing my best attempt at depicting the experience, the collection of material was confusing. To make sense of it, I developed a method that enabled me to approach the data analytically. I studied the data in their different forms and started to look for connections. I read the material generated in the free-writing sessions and looked at the photographs gathered from the Internet. I laid out the written material on the floor of my flat, as illustrated in the photograph (figure 5) below. I aimed to get a sense of what I felt each piece was communicating about the experience of a ‘cultic’ gay male friendship group; to process and begin to ‘comprehend’ the qualities, nuances, and themes

surrounding the research question into an organised and processed form that others could understand.



**Figure 5 Photograph showing the written material on the floor of my flat**

In the case of particular pieces, there was a clear relationship such as a description of a night out clubbing and images of disco lights. In these instances, I would bring the pieces together. Others were not so obvious, and I ended up with some data that I could not (originally at least) connect with any other data. This kind of material left me feeling perplexed, and I could only work out what it related to, and how, after some time away from it. For example it wasn't until I was in the final stages of reviewing the thesis that I noted my writing had become progressively more fragmented, with shorter sentences and a disjointed timeline of events. The incoherence made me think about the image of the equally bewildering and disconnected words I had written on the counsellor's floor. I don't know how I hadn't noted this connection before. The connection I was seeking had been present all along. It was the frustration, firstly, of trying to present an intelligible sequence of experiences in the thesis, secondly, of trying to remember events when writing down the material, and thirdly, of recapturing what I felt in the counselling session when I was

writing the list. In other words, confusion was the connection that I sought. The search for connections wasn't about me being clever or sophisticated; sometimes what was obvious was the feeling that 'stared me in the face'.

The initial sifting of data left me with twenty lots of material. I wanted to combine them further as I felt that presenting twenty themes would not permit the level of inquiry demanded of doctoral research. When I spoke to others or read what others had produced, I noted that many turned to key word analysis, which I felt went against the ontological premise of heuristic inquiry: namely, that it was not focused on feeling. After a period of deliberation, I tried a 'technique' that I use in my counselling practice. When I work with clients who I feel navigate life at a practical cognitive level, I sometimes give them a list of feeling words and ask them to find the word on the list that best represents what's going on for them experientially. Many find using the list a helpful way of articulating sometimes confusing feelings, so I thought it could work as a way of organising the data, using my feelings as a compass. In other words, I relied on my internal frame of reference to derive sense and meaning from the data (Moustakas, 1990). Whenever my felt sense, bodily reactions, memories, and associations grabbed my attention, I 'focused' (Gendlin, 1962, 1981) on pulling the relevant material together in a way that felt intuitively 'right'. Focusing is the process by which the HSSI researcher accesses their tacit knowledge. By attending to inner reality, the HSSI researcher clears an internal psychological space of "curiosity, welcoming and openness" (Glanzer, 2014, p. 49). Within their internal world, the HSSI researcher focuses on and tries out symbolic words, images, thoughts or feelings that might resonate with what Gendlin (1962, 1981) refers to as the 'felt sense'; an unclear, pre-articulated sense of knowing that has not been consciously thought or verbalised.

I studied each data set in turn. Re-reading the material and looking at the images, I used the list to identify the feeling word that I felt suited each set best. Where two or more data sets evoked the same feeling, I brought them together. These moments of pulling material together echoed the felt sense of my experience of the group, and were illuminatory – each one bringing a Eureka moment (Bernthal, 1990) of clarity in thought. As Moustakas (1990, p. 30) expresses it, "In illumination [...] missed, misunderstood, or distorted realities [...] make their appearance and add something essential to the truth of an experience".

As with the initial shifting, some connections were straightforward and others were more complex. For example, feeling anxious when writing about certain events and feeling aggrieved by others' behaviour could have been classified as hurt. However, for me, the feeling was not hurt but frustration – both at my ongoing sense of trauma when recalling events for the purposes of writing, and at my recollection of times when others dismissed

my sexual advances. Put another way, where there was uncertainty about which feeling word was correct, I did what I do with my clients and evaluated each option until I could determine the word I believed best captured the felt sense of the experiences the data sought to depict.

Using this embodied technique, I organised the data several times, interspersing the explication with periods of retreat so as to “facilitate the awakening of fresh energy and perspective” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 51). When attending to feelings, thoughts, beliefs, and judgements pulled me between data types, I intuitively brought the relevant information together. For example, several passages addressed buying, shopping, brands: aspects of material culture, and these were associated with a sense of belonging. As Moustakas (1990, pp. 52-53) points out, these intuitive moments are potentially rich sources of new meaning and direction.

“My intuitions are hunches, but they are extremely important in [heuristic research], often precipitating a breakthrough [...] the breakup of a stalemate [...] sometimes initiating movement towards or away from [discovery] a sudden engagement in an activity or an absolute withdrawal from [the heuristic process]”.

This to-ing and fro-ing between immersion and incubation, using focusing to articulate what I was experiencing, continued until moments of illumination in the form of dreams, images, and ideas came to a stop. As Ratliffe (1997, p. 54) writes, “I let myself steep in all that I had been immersed in, not pushing or probing, but waiting until I experienced a sense of fulfilment”. At this point, when I sensed there was simply no more and my embodied engagement with the data was yielding no new insights, the analysis was deemed complete and the recurring themes were identified.

At the end of the data analysis, I had brought the twenty sets of material into six principal themes, each identified by a feeling word. However, I still needed a means of showing how the data were organised in the thesis. When I turned to other examples, most presented data in tabulated form. However, I felt that this missed something of the intuitive and subjective approach that I used. For this inquiry, I felt mind maps better illustrated the iterative qualities I wished to show.

Once the research findings regarding the dominant themes were explicated and the mind-maps completed, I fitted them together like jigsaw pieces to make a final creative expression of their understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Bernthal, 1990). In the form of a short story, I synthesised my intuitive and reflective understanding (Moustakas, 1990) of the lived experience of one gay man’s experience of a ‘cultic’ gay male friendship group.

### 3.4 Ethics

Two ethical values shaped the inquiry. The first was consideration of the fact that people represented in the thesis might one day read it (Ellis, 1995; Medford, 2006). The second was the awareness that without adequate self-care, a three-year immersive exploration of personal experience could be physically and emotionally detrimental to me. Both values refer to the need to 'avoid harm' (Kitchener (1984), since in writing about personal experience, I produce a thesis representing a potential source of harm both to my former friends and to myself. As to the relational ethical concerns that moulded the study, in what follows I demonstrate how the ethical basis of the inquiry "recognizes and values mutual respect, dignity, and connectedness between researcher and researched, and between researchers and the communities in which they live and work" (Ellis, 2007, p. 4). In so doing, I intentionally use raw, vulnerable, direct and heartfelt language, and so do not hide behind a wall of theoretical academic text: a wall that, for me, represents the distance between perfunctory ethical considerations and real-life distress. I believe it is the same distancing that Sela-Smith (2002, p. 57) refers to when writing about how heuristic researchers "dissociate" from the inherent pain of their research topic.

The inquiry gained ethical approval from the University of Edinburgh Counselling and Psychotherapy Ethics Committee twice during the course of its completion (see Appendix 1). The first approval was obtained at the outset of the project, on 11th December 2014. At that time, the Committee approved the practical arrangements and documentation (consent forms, information sheet) concerning the interviews of gay men I did not know, which were later discarded. Following the change in topic (from the 'assumptive world' of others to my experience of the group) and research design (from HI to HSSI), a second submission was made in 2017. On this occasion, approval was given (approval date 31st October 2017) for a) the change in topic, b) the change in research design, c) ending use of the interview material, and d) writing about the other members of the group without their informed consent. Approval for Point D - writing about others - was granted on condition that no specific information that would make the members of the group identifiable was included in the thesis, and that anything posing a risk of defamation was removed.

I have complied with these conditions. Names, locations and other concrete aspects of our experiences together were changed. As my intention is to further the inquiry and not to settle scores, I focus on my experiences, the learning gained from such experiences, and how that serves as material for research. I don't reveal anything other than my feelings and the experiences I have undergone. The thesis is clearly labelled a subjective account derived from personal experience of how destructive it was to know that group of people.

I omit any material that could be considered slanderous or that would put the University or myself at risk of legal action. There is nothing insulting, degrading or defamatory in my descriptions of the people I write about. Nothing in the thesis can be considered illegal activity and no one commits a criminal offence or adultery. Any details creating a risk of direct identification, such as names, locations and occupations, are omitted. Background information such as events in the other men's childhoods is not revealed, nor is the size, name, or date of formation or dissolution of the group. Likewise, in Chapters One and Two, I deal with the meaning of the word 'cultic', and how I alone use the term in an academic context. Given these measures, it is not possible for individuals to recognise themselves and no one is defamed.

Scholars such as Adams (2008), Ellis (2007) and Wyatt (2012) don't underestimate the ethical difficulty in deciding whom not to consult. For Adams (2008), it was writing about his father without his consent that led him to debate the rights and wrongs of doing so in a context where no amount of anonymisation or fictionalisation would have eliminated the challenges of writing about a parent. What Adams does is make space for a discussion in which consent can be challenged for research of a kind that makes complete anonymisation impossible. In other words, anonymisation is not necessarily a forbidden zone, but something that requires further reflection – which I practise in this thesis. For Wyatt (2012), who served as supervisor for my inquiry, the challenge came when he was writing about a former counselling client for whom, despite attempts to do so, he could not guarantee anonymity. As Wyatt (2012, p. 167) notes:

“In light of Adams (2008), Ellis (2007), and following helpful conversations with Tony Adams, Sophie Tamas, students and faculty at St. Cloud State University, and others, about the ethics involved in this piece, I have taken the difficult decision not to consult about this article with the client on whom Terry is based. He may recognize himself in the piece, but I am confident others will not. If he were to read it, I hope that he would see the writing as a tribute to him and a way of honoring both him and his father”.

In querying the ethics on consent, both Adams (2012) and Wyatt (2012) seek to balance a contribution to knowledge with particular experiences and how that may help, while doing all that can be done to protect people's identity and confidentiality. With their written and verbal input, it is a balance I have sought to emulate. At the time of writing, the men and I had not been in contact for several years. Consequently, I no longer considered these relationships as either intimate or significant for my actual everyday life in 2017. My belief begged the question: 'If the risk of relationship breakdown was minimal, why did I not consult them?' Scholars that draw upon personal experience involving others as research

material (in particular, autoethnographers as heuristic researchers are worryingly quiet on the matter), hold contrasting views. Autoethnographer Ellis's (2007) preference is for students to seek consent. As she writes:

"I tell my students they should inform people they write about and get their consent. Then they bring me projects where that is an unreasonable goal and might even be irresponsible. Sometimes getting consent and informing characters would put them in harm's way (such as from an abusive parent or partner). Sometimes my requirement that they get consent means they cannot do a project that would help them heal and get on with life. Then I ask myself, 'Is the well-being of the researcher always less important than the well-being of the other, even others who have behaved badly?' I answer, 'No, not always'".

Ellis (2007, p. 24)

However, Adams (2006, p. 720), problematizes Ellis's supervisory preference, writing:

"Informed consent makes it increasingly difficult to negotiate life texts because the stories we tell always implicate others (e.g., our parents, guardians, employers, friends, significant others) [...] when should I seek permission to write about others in my life writings? Will I silence myself worrying about harming them?"

Adams (2006, p. 184) problematizes Ellis's preference by arguing that procedural ethical demands, such as having informed consent, "potentially 'persecute' an-Other while simultaneously acknowledging ways this-Other persecutes us with her or his discourse". Translated into the terms of the inquiry, Adams's arguments meant that the other men and myself were drawn into a battle between victim and abuser, the need for informed consent verses our weapon - harm.

The nature of my research highlights my insider knowledge of gay men's culture and their practices, which raises the problem of whether this insider knowledge gives me licence to describe the group in a way a researcher who does not belong to this culture would not necessarily do. Therefore, it might be a licence that needs curbing. Except for Wyatt (2012), these studies and discussions on the ethics of representation focus on close familial relationships such as parent-child or spouse. I am a gay man writing about my troubled friendships with other gay men. The relevance of these studies in dealing with friendships that have ended and minority identity is therefore, I believe, limited.

My research seemed to evoke concern about harm and defamation beyond the concern raised in the case of research involving heterosexual or familial relationships. Even though no-one in the study is defamed or labelled abusive, each time I sought approval, concerns were raised around defamation, harm and anonymity, which seemed to imply a demand for stricter ethical standards than those required of scholars writing about heterosexual

familial relationships (for example Berry & Adams, 2016; Fletcher, 2018; Hadlow, 2018; Rober & Rosenblatt, 2017; Wyatt, 2014). That these scholars' family members can be identified and their studies have been published seems to privilege the value of the production of knowledge over the anonymisation of those involved in the research.

In their ethical decision-making model, Herlihy and Corey (2014) write about the importance of considering the values that underpin the research process. It is clear that in the studies by Adams (2012) and Tamas (2009) etc., the underpinning value is the production of knowledge, whilst in this study, the principle of 'no harm' and the duty to protect the individuals involved in the narratives are the values that needed to be prioritised. This observation has made me pose the question of whether gay men are incorrectly perceived as inherently vulnerable. In contrast to some studies such as Gandy (2015), I do not see this particular group as vulnerable by virtue of being gay. The so-called 'sexual minorities' are a diverse group and only some of their members in particular contexts experience risk. Following this argument, considering the group of friends described in the thesis, I would not categorise them as vulnerable per se. However, my research question has brought to the fore sensitive topics for which I have taken all the actions prescribed by the guidelines to ensure that the anonymity of participants, the sensitivity of the themes, and researcher safety are protected.

Of course, a question of the utmost importance that was demanded of this type of LGBTQ research is how to find the balance between pursuing knowledge and protecting a population who have been abused in the past and still are in the present. The ethical debate this study created raises questions about research on troubled LGBTQ relationships, as the need to be considered just as robust as those researched in the aforementioned studies in which anonymisation could not be achieved. The process of ethical revision of my study has made me further reflect on the need for more specialised research on ethics in relation to tensions inside LGBTQ populations, especially when the research intersects with self-reflective pieces that question the ownership of the narrative and the 'narrative privilege' (Adams, 2008). Further debate is needed to answer the question of whether LGBTQ people or gay men specifically are inherently vulnerable, thus demanding a level of ethical protection comparable to that given to children.

In the case of this inquiry, my decision not to consult was based on self-care. I had spent so much time in therapy detaching myself emotionally from the group that the thought of contacting them filled me with dread. In deciding whether to contact the men, all I could hear was my internalised former counsellor, whose opinion I valued, telling me it was not a good idea. Much of the first 12 months I spent with him was taken up with his efforts to



wean me off them. I was emotionally addicted, and so the thought of reaching out to the other members of the friendship group I likened to a former drug addict dabbling, at someone's request, with his/her drug of choice. The mere thought of trying to find their email addresses and seeing old messages elicited a flush of adrenaline. The thought of constantly checking my inbox to see if they had replied made me dissociate. 'What if they didn't reply?' The thought that they might ignore any email terrified me. Such silence would have reawakened thoughts and feelings that had softened with time. If, as a heuristic researcher, I turned my attention inward and focused on my intuition, then every cell in my body said no to consulting them. Put another way, as Ellis (2007, p. 4) proposes, "relational ethics requires researchers to act from our hearts and our minds". I was scared. I had to decide what was right for them *and* for me (Jago, 2002; Rambo, 2007). The anxiety I experienced in relation to the group was beginning to settle and I did not want to reignite feelings of turmoil that I could not handle. The thought of telling my former friends that I was writing about what happened between me and them, and what had happened to me since we last spoke, I found frightening. I could not do it. So, my not consulting was forged from a position of fear and self-care, not privilege or arrogance. I was comfortable with the knowledge that I did not want to extend the relationships beyond their natural end. The 'unspokenness' that existed between me and them has afforded me the space I needed to begin the process of working through the emotional impact of the experience. A troubling of the calm could have had potentially unmanageable consequences for me. It was not a risk I was willing to take. There was sufficient discomfort in my personal exploration of the experience without the extra distress of having to reignite contact with people who were fading nicely in my mind. My decision may be interpreted as solipsistic, but after feeling guilt and shame for so long, I feel entitled to use *my* experience as the basis of personal and professional growth and thus not to seek consent.

My decision not to consult the men afforded a significant degree of interpretational and authorial power. It is the same narrative privilege Adams (2008, p. 181) writes of when writing about his father's inability to respond to the academic representation of him: "my father does not have a computer and does not have the grammatical and linguistic tools to write academically. I know he cannot personally respond via print and academic publishing outlets. I can thus portray my father any way I choose". In my case, it was a power I both relished, as I alone decided how others were depicted, and felt nervous about possessing, in regard to how my former friends might respond if they should gain access to the thesis. At times, when my emotional boundaries were strong, I meant no harm by what was written; as Adams (2008, p. 181) puts it, I was able to "temper any demonizing feeling [...] while still allowing my story to unfold". At such times of emotional strength, I did not seek to punish them or seek revenge for what had happened (Sikes, 2010, 2015). During

periods when my boundaries were thinned by tiredness or overwhelmed, the freedom to write however I saw fit I have found cathartic. Truthfully, the part of me I call 'victim/survivor', cannot write that I did not seek revenge by exposing what had happened to me. However, the "ethical life writer" (Adams, 2008, p. 181) within me, moderated by supervisors and peers, accepted that I could do nothing but depict the men ethically, both in relation to myself and others concerned, in other words, that while "I have textual control [...] I must understand, as best I can, how I may (re)present" (Adams, 2008, p. 181) them.

At the cognitive and felt levels, the ethical demands of the study moved me from a defensive "You guys hurt me, it's now my story. So back off!" to "I don't mean to hurt you". In psychoanalytic terms, there was a shift from the paranoid/schizoid to the depressive position in how I perceived them. This was a reflection of how abusive I found the whole experience and how much power they had in my internal world as potentially both hostile and nurturing figures. In repositioning my imaginary relationship to these men, I accepted that I was "no longer the hero of [my] own story" (Ellis, 2007). My move from silenced victim to privileged researcher facilitated a necessary "loss of innocence" (2006; 2012). It was a change whereby I moved beyond trying to see and portray myself as good, and my intentions as virtuous, to acting as a researcher open to new perspectives and the self-understanding that invariably follows. As Lather (2007, p. 114) writes:

"No position is by nature correct, all positions are subject to critical investigation, and every position must be argued for, with no one position automatically at the centre. As feminists we believe that the meanings of human rights, liberation, community, and social justice cannot be assumed unproblematically anymore".

From this position of loss, I accepted that I did not seek to skew events to support a hypothesis (Sikes, 2015). As a heuristic self-search inquiry, my study contained no hypothesis – no theory on cults or LGBTQ friendships that I sought to support. I did not have to write about people I considered 'manipulative' in a (wholly) 'violent' way (Bergin & Westwood, 2003; Redwood, 2008). If anything, through the choice of researching the topic of my own gayness and emotional distress, it was myself who was violently depicted in the thesis. Early topics were practice related and adopted methodologies for which extensive self-disclosure was not required. However, after much deliberation and many false starts, I turned my attention inwards and discovered a research topic that, being deeply personal, required me to expose details of my private life, which in other circumstances I may have chosen to have kept secret. My extended family was (and probably still is at the time you read the thesis) unaware of my gay identity. To write about it was therefore a difficult decision. I was aware that the thesis would be publicly accessible, so that, at some point in the future, family members might become aware of its contents. It

was not my intent to vicariously 'out' myself by conducting an LGBTQ self-inquiry, nor did I choose to disclose my gayness to family members by means of the study's availability. Throughout the study, although it was of concern to academic colleagues, I was comfortable with my non-disclosure. My stance was a reflection of my growing ease with being gay and a gentle degradation of long-held internal homophobia. Part of me might have been pleased if they did find out. Either way, contact with these relatives was so infrequent that any relationship breakdown, however remote, would not have impacted on my everyday life. At the heart of my stance was a growing belief that my gayness is none of my extended family's concern.

Disclosing a recent history of mental distress was just as challenging as disclosing my gayness. If anything this was more of a challenge to my everyday life, in which I am in regular contact with others who expressed concern at my recent distress but who were comfortable with my sexual identity. Consequently, I did not find it either comfortable or easy to openly discuss my research with people with whom I did not feel emotionally 'safe'. Counselling colleagues, familiar with working with difficult feelings and open to discussion of what was coming up in the course of completing the study, were of great assistance. Likewise, family and friends who were unaware of or frankly uninterested in the study, but were interested in me as a family member and friend, provided much-needed relief. The joy of being away from the study, not dwelling on my thoughts and feelings, proved a great relief. Such weightlessness served as a reminder to switch off (or indeed switch on) and that there needs to be light to balance darkness. Putting my own needs first and admitting that I am not coping doesn't come easily to me. As a survivor of psychologically abusive relationships, I have a propensity to put others' care needs ahead of my own. So it is valuable that in the course of completing the inquiry I have worked out the self-care measures that feel respectful for me. I now know that an effective self-care regime can be extended beyond the research and serve as a foundation of lifelong emotional and physical wellbeing for both readers and myself. I decided to temporarily step away from my counselling practice, since I was aware that I would not have the mental capacity to immerse myself in the inquiry and still be emotionally available for clients. In particular, feelings of impotence I felt as a researcher were clouding my ability to be with the impotence of some clients. Consequently, and with some reluctance, I suspended my practice until the research was completed. In summary, I have reconnected (albeit with some difficulty) with my body, gone on long walks and filled the fridge with nutritious food. I have taught myself to look up from the laptop, shut the lid and walk away. At the heart of my self-care, I've learnt to look up at the sky as well as down at my feet.

Consequently, given my disclosure of gayness and emotional distress, the risks of the study to my personal life were huge. As a semi-closeted gay man with a history of emotional distress, perhaps the project demanded a level of self-disclosure for which, at the time of choosing the topic, I was not ready. I was certainly not prepared (Medford, 2006) to continually 'out' myself as a) a gay man, b) a gay man rejected by other gay men, c) someone who has experienced emotional ill health, and d) most importantly, all three. Perhaps such exposure reflects an unrealistic expectation of qualitative research, since even though it's my decision not to tell my extended family, my non-disclosure is contextualised within a broader socio-political, cultural, historical landscape of oppression. I'm a working-class, first generation university-going, gay, psychologically traumatised man who sensed on the part of 'academia' an implicit expectation that exposing stigmatised parts of my identity was something I should have done a long time ago. For some, such disclosure in a piece of research like this can be considered a privilege of those who occupy dominant positions: those whose families and culture can celebrate minority identities. My family and culture of origin cannot, and it is an oppression I bring to academia. Negotiating what is spoken and unspoken and to whom and how is a heavy burden carried by people who do not have the same freedoms as those with power in society.

Writing about how other people have affected me, particularly if I consider them 'cultic', creates a real ethical predicament. Ethical research practice would suggest that what is included and what is excluded are both very significant decisions about which the researcher needs to be transparent. In the thesis, no one is named other than myself. I repeat experiences and dialogues as I remember them. However, some of the recollections are troublesome and so maybe challenging to those depicted. To be clear, at the time of writing the thesis, I have not had contact with the men for seven years, so my recollection was based solely on subjective memory. In other words, the men depicted are a mix of the real and the imagined. What's more, while I have no desire to 'out' them, any anonymisation is invariably limited, as even though names are withheld, the men would easily identify each other (Tolich, 2004). There is nothing I can do or write to uphold internal confidentiality; that is the inherent legacy of an intimate group. However, in attempting to maintain as much confidentiality as possible, what is written about the men is restricted to what was known to each other, based on my direct conversations with them at the time. What is written therefore represents my subjective interpretation of the friendship group. The depiction is my personal 'truth' (Medford, 2006); it is not intended to represent any 'absolute truth'. I accept that those depicted may remember the events and people differently: that is their truth, which is equally valid.

### 3.5 Summary

In one sense, this inquiry is doomed to fail. The experience it aims to explore, that of a 'cultic' gay male friendship group, is inherently elusive; its nuances and textures will never be wholly captured in the thesis. In this chapter, I have argued, a key ontological challenge for research that aims to examine 'experience' is how researchers can know about it and generate knowledge of it. I have described experience as 'something' made up of both past and present feelings evoked by the experiencers themselves as they think about previous experiences in the present moment.

Epistemologically, therefore, I have written about my desire to collate and then generate knowledge from the material that offers the closest depiction of the experience itself. I have argued that turning to the narration and the visual representation of experience provides such material, and that heuristics, with its particular 'adapted' (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985; McLeod, 2011) phenomenological position of forging knowledge from the intuitive world of the researcher's experiential being, offers the 'rawest' form of interpretation. In a study of a subject of which I have extensive first-hand experience, I have argued that my bodily sensations and tacit knowledge are the most suitable ways of generating understanding, rather than the production of faithful representations (Bondi, 2013). In other words, the answer to the question 'How is the experience of a "cultic" gay male friendship group?' lies within me.

In the next chapter, in a series of explicit vignettes and photographic images, I present the material from my internal world.



## 4 Depictions and creative synthesis

Through repeated immersion in, and incubation of, the sub-themes, I identified six dominant themes that I consider meaningful. The themes are: (1) Pain (2) Frustration (3) Mistrust (4) Joy (5) Disgust and (6) Confusion. Each dominant theme characterises different “qualities and constituents” (Moustakas, 2001, p. 8) of the experience of a 'cultic' gay male friendship group. In this 'findings' chapter, I start with six mind maps. Each map shows the categorisation of the free writing and photographs in relation to one of the six dominant themes. Resembling neural pathways, the maps vary in complexity and shape as they feel their way through the gathered material. I then offer a depiction of each dominant theme. Each vignette lays bare the significant thematic content and is accompanied by an image to illustrate and strengthen the writing. The images also add layers of meaning that go beyond words. At the end of each depiction I include a text box offering reflexive thoughts on an aspect of the material depicted, which is not later mirrored in the discussion chapter. Then, in the form of a short story, I present the creative synthesis of the experience of a 'cultic' gay male friendship group before ending the chapter with a summary drawing the different forms of representation – vignette and creative – together.

### 4.1 Mind maps showing the organisation of writing and images

Below are six mind maps illustrating the way the visual and written material incorporated within each major theme was organised. In the maps, passages of writing are identified according to central topic. For example, in the map depicting 'Pain', writing about my experience of a disfiguring skin condition in my teenage years is classified as 'feeling ugly'. Similarly, in the map related to 'Mistrust', writing about my time living with a group member is labelled 'drinking Prosecco in Graham's garden and feeling pampered'. Photographs are directly named according to what is shown in the image. The aim is to give a synopsis of the material, together with its organisation, included in the depictions that follow. The contents of each map are developed further in the depictions in section 4.2 of this chapter, in the order in which they are presented here.



Figure 6 Mind map depicting the embodied organisation of writing and images in the theme 'Joy'

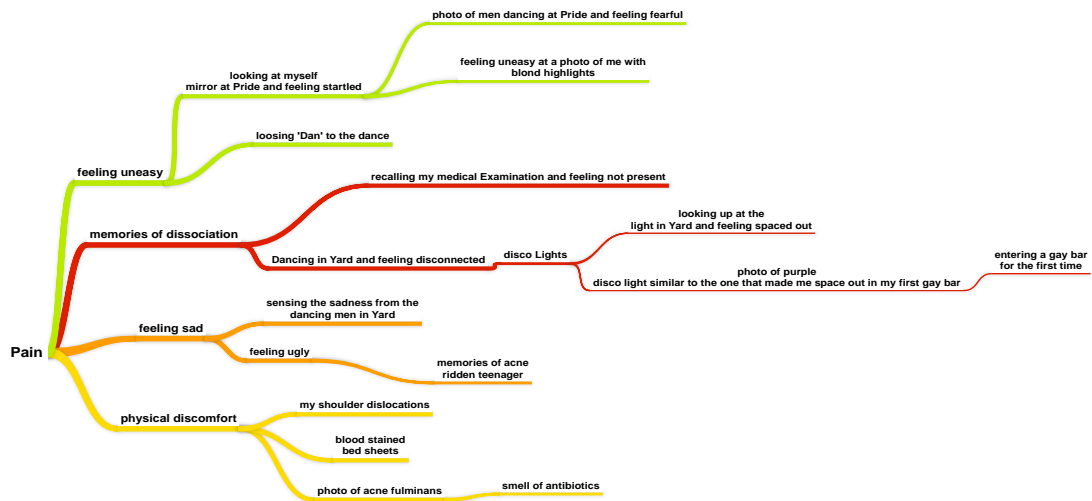


Figure 7 Mind map depicting the embodied organisation of writing and images in the theme 'Pain'



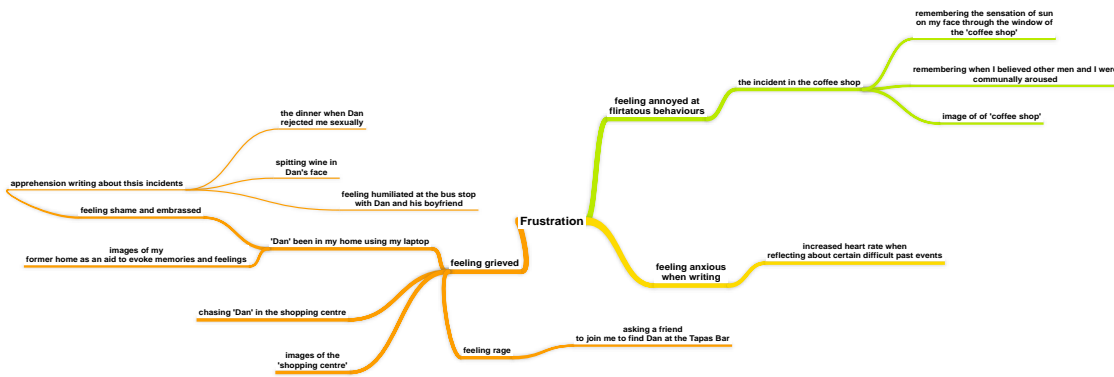


Figure 8 Mind Map depicting the embodied organisation of writing and images in the theme 'Frustration'

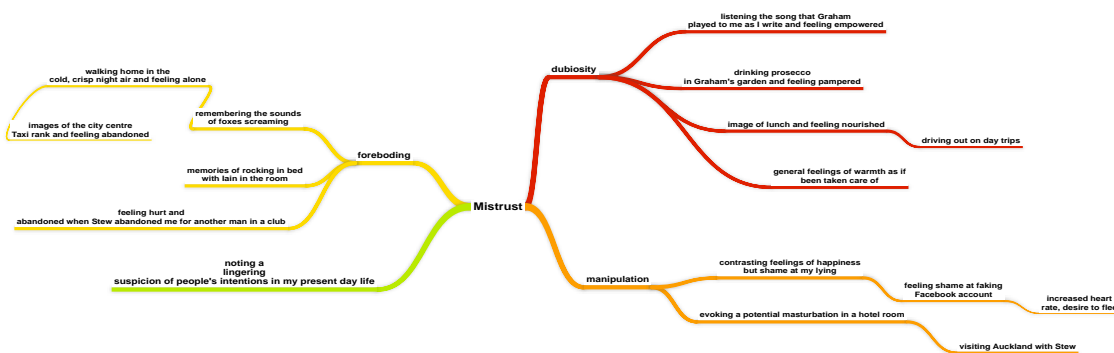


Figure 9 Mind map depicting the embodied organisation of writing and images in the theme 'Mistrust'

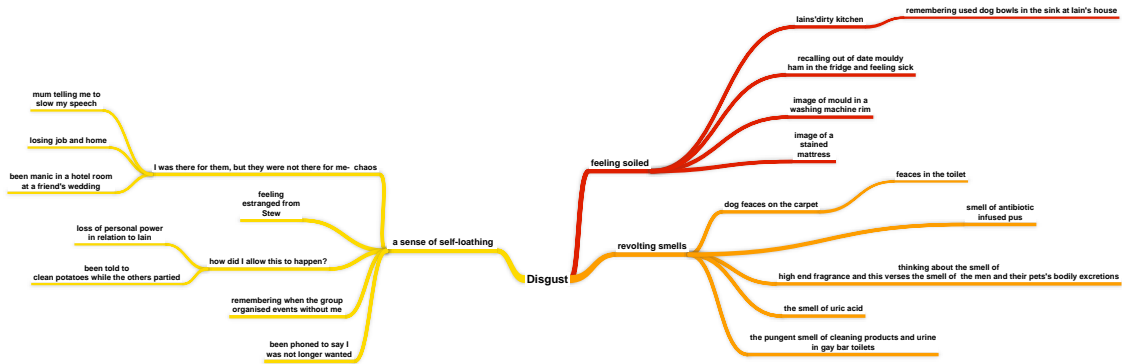


Figure 10 Mind map depicting the embodied organisation of writing and images in the theme 'Disgust'

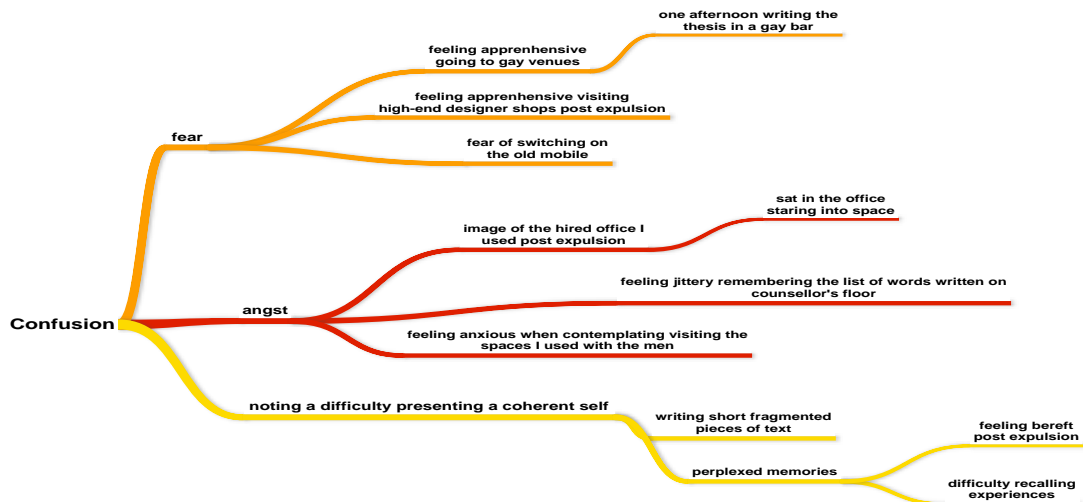


Figure 11 Mind map depicting the embodied organisation of writing and images in the theme 'Confusion'

## 4.2 Thematic depictions of one gay man's experience of a 'cultic' gay male friendship group

Drawing upon the material listed in the mind maps, what follows are depictions of the dominant themes. The depictions are written in a language, filled with colloquialisms and swearing, that in line with the ontology of HSSI, "hovers" (Adzema, 2016, p. 234) as close to the raw experience itself. Italicisation is applied, to reinforce the vernacular nature of the writing. Equally, capitalisation is used to emphasise the emotional significance of particular words or phrases.

### 4.2.1 Joy



**Figure 12 Moon on the sea [online image] (Carruth, 2015)**

*This summer is the best of my life. I'm holidaying three times. God, it's beautiful. Warm water; hot sunshine, fizzy drinks and good music. It's fucking ace. This time, I'm spending a fortnight in Auckland. It's amazing. Barefoot, we dance around the apartment to Christina Aguilera, who's all the rage. I feel so blissful and happy. In the bathroom, I smell the tropical suntan oils that Stew and I use as we relax in the sun. It's a heavenly blend of tropical flowers and the dreams of adventures in far-away tropical lands. Later, Stew, and I are going to prepare a salad with the homemade sausage we bought from the delicatessen. It's Stew's first time trying it, and he's excited. To make the evening even more special, I've made the table outside as we're going to eat the salads on the balcony while basking in the New Zealand evening sun. I feel light, like a feather in a gentle breeze. My body tingles. It is a pleasant experience – a sense of being alive.*

*After dinner, we're going to the harbour for drinks. There, I stare at the millionaires drinking and milling around their luxury yachts. I feel just as wealthy as them because I'm with Stew, the man I*

*love, sipping Prosecco while sitting on the harbour wall. I'm wearing white jeans, just like the millionaires that surround me, for the first time in my life. I feel so posh. As a working-class lad, lording it up, the phrase 'fur coat, no knickers' comes to mind. As I look down into the water, I can see exotic-looking fish swimming. It's just so fucking swanky. What's more, as they're open late into the night, Stew and I are going shopping in Gucci and Prada. God, I'm so tempted to buy one particular Prada bag. I'm earning a lot of money so that I can afford it. A sense of oneness, of peace, engulfs me. Gosh, do I feel good. Looking at the water, my thoughts temporarily leave Auckland and move to my cottage in Sydney. I'm lying in my hammock, while the others in the group chill. Similar to Stew and I in the harbour, we drink Prosecco and bask in the glow of each other's company, like babies getting drunk on warm milk. I feel an inner warmth and joy; my body feels at ease with itself. I feel secure, content. They are my family. They are the ones I call if I'm sick or to celebrate my achievements. I bloody love them. I feel anchored. They are my home. Because of them, I am someone. They validate me. I fucking love these boys.*

*On the way back to the apartment in Auckland, Stew and I go for a walk on the beach. It's the most beautiful evening. The warm grains of sand fill the gaps between my toes, and I watch the moon's reflection ripple on the Mediterranean Sea. As I look at the moonlight dance on the waves, my mind moves to Paris. I'm on a school trip, aged thirteen. It's my first time abroad. I'm on a Ferris wheel late one evening, and I'm looking at the moon high above the iconic Paris cityscape. I feel liberated – free from the constraints of my childhood. Like my time with Stew in Auckland, my body feels so alive; it tingles with excitement. I feel blissful. I want for nothing more. My mind then gently moves back to Australia. I'm twenty-four years old. It's my final night before returning home to the UK. I've been away for two years, and the friends I've met along the way have organised a farewell meal at a fish restaurant overlooking the sea at the neck of Sydney Harbour. I've not yet publicly come out, so the people who have come to say goodbye are all ignorant of my gayness, but that's okay with me. The angst of not coming out will come once I return to the UK. For now, it's an emotional evening, as it will be the last time I will see many of them. I feel tearful. I walk some way along the beach and, like Paris and Auckland, I see the moon rippling on the deep blue ocean. Inside my head I acknowledge, "Bloody well done Jason – a young kid from a small town, surviving two years on his own in a foreign country". I feel immensely proud. My mind returns back on the beach in New Zealand. This night with Stew is so fucking lovely; probably the happiest night of my life. Everything in the world is just perfect. If heaven exists on Earth, then it is this. It feels idyllic. We're two people in complete synchronicity. I feel I can read him. I experience a profound sense of connection, unlike anything I've experienced before.*

## Reflections on Joy

Thinking back, I wonder whether the need for gay men to form such insular groups has had its time, as the intensity with which we clung to each other seemed to mirror the closely-knit groups of LGBTQ scholars in the 1980s and 1990s, such as Plummer (1981) and Ridge et al. (1997) write about. Maybe these groups cropped up in response to events going on at the time. Two powerful narratives, first that of emancipation and later that of AIDS, meant that there was a necessity and a novelty in male gayness. However, in Britain certainly, those issues are no longer as pressing and I wonder whether such inward-looking groups are dissolving back into everything else. Possibly as someone who grew up in the midst of the AIDS crisis and before the proliferation of the Internet, it was unsurprising that I clung so tightly to a group formed around a part of my identity that I had long kept suppressed. It seems that contemporary British youth culture no longer rigidly defines sexuality. As one twenty-something friend told me, many young people no longer define themselves by a sexual identity. Perhaps subsequent generations of LGBTQ people won't experience the desire to attach themselves to others of a similar identity to the same degree. In many respects I believe this different way of thinking is welcome. However, as the powerful and meaningful experiences I write about show, I wonder what aspects of shared intimacy are been lost.

## 4.2.2 Pain



Figure 13 Unknown person with acne fulminans [online image] (Ozark-Dermatology, 2005)

*I'm seventeen years old, and my bed sheets are bloodstained. I'm covered in open wounds. I have acne, horrible acne. In the bathroom mirror, I see raw muscle where the hole left by a cyst has penetrated deep into the skin of my left shoulder. For the last few months, the way my face looks – covered in weeping cysts – means people are beginning to stare at me in the street, and I smell. The antibiotics infuse the pus that frequently bursts with a stale metallic whiff. I've had panic attacks too. My acne is rampant, and I'm scared there's nothing I can do.*

*A year later, and I'm stripped to my pants at a hospital far from home. I've been referred to a specialist dermatologist. I am alone. The reddish weepy mess of my skin clashes horribly with the clinical whiteness of the medical photography room. Puncturing my isolation, a man holding a camera enters the room. He's not so polite; and I note his struggle in looking at my skin. Asking me to move my body into different positions, he begins to take photographs. Occasionally, he holds a ruler close to the cysts that litter my body to record their size. I oblige. There's little chat between us. After a few minutes, he leaves. He's the first man to see me semi-naked, and all I was to him, was a diseased piece of medicalised meat.*

*He leaves, and the room goes eerily quiet again. The morning sun lights the projection screen behind me, and I stand there, a shadow of a boy. I don't know what to do. My clothes are at the far end of the room. Should I get dressed? Should I wait here? Like a slave, I wait for orders. After what seems an eternity, the doors to the room open, and ten strangers come walking in. By their white laboratory coats, I assume they are medical personnel. Fuck knows, but they walk over to me and begin to stare at my sore face and torso. My mind does what it's done since early childhood and shuts down for a while. I'm in my very skilfully honed dissociative state. It is not an unpleasant experience, but it is not pleasant either. It's like I'm under the influence of that gas dentists give when you have a filling. I just clicked back into reality when one student looks at me with a blend of sympathy and anguish saying, "Those must be very painful, thank you, for letting us look at you". The group and their white coats leave. Alone again, my mind separates from my body again. After a few minutes, the door opens, and another group enters. There are four visits that last over an hour. They tell me, I'm the fifteenth person in the world to be diagnosed with a form of acne called 'acne fulminans', and they want to see it in the rotten flesh.*

*Thirteen years later. It's the early hours of Sunday morning, and I'm in Yard, a fictional gay bar in Sydney. Some of the group are finding their hook-ups for the night. Stew is kissing a guy he's just met at the bar, and only a few feet away, although he doesn't seem keen, Dan is being chatted up. The others are either dancing or staring into their phones. As is usual for me, I'm dancing on the raised platform above seventy men dancing on the bar floor underneath. At the edges of the dance floor, older men in their forties and fifties leer. There they get a good view of the younger guys*

dancing. Like chameleons sticking their tongues out at passing prey, a few others are outside the toilets, watching young men as they pass by. My body shudders and I feel disgusted.

Suddenly, the dissociation I experienced in the hospital returns. It is a violently unsettling experience. I look up as one of the flashing disco lights flashes down on the dance floor, and my mind floats away, rising above the music and heaving, sweaty bodies. My thoughts wander to if I turn the main bar lights on and ask how many would like to be here in the mess of men or how many would prefer to be at home cuddling a loved one. I guess most would prefer the latter. It is an unsettling experience. Feelings of disconnection overwhelm me. I don't know what I am here doing here. I have to escape; I have to reconnect by being with the cold crisp outside air. I leave without saying goodbye.

I feel bloody awful. The whole group does, as my mobile is buzzing with messages from the guys telling me how forlorn they feel now the weekend is over. Steve, in particular, is having a tough time. He's crashed. The depression and loneliness he seems to me to experience when not with the group have resurfaced with a vengeance. I know what he's feeling. I am not the only member of the group to experience childhood trauma. Some of the others have too. So, being back in the office with the 'straights' recounting stories of a slowly roasted joint of meat seems dull. The seeming drudgery of their domesticity – my life outside the group – is such a sharp contrast to the excitement and happiness I felt when with my group. It's a different world from that of my childhood. With them, I'm free from the internal turmoil that plagued my early years.

Two years later. I'm in the toilets upstairs in Yard. Around me, men are drinking, and there's the distinct aroma of urine and cheap toilet cleaner, the acidity of which is hitting the back of my throat. I'm looking in the mirror at the sinks. Again, I don't know what I am here doing here. The reflection staring back at me isn't the person I think of as me. He's got his hair in a style that isn't him, and he's wearing a vest top Stew recommended. Like the night on the dance floor, it's a frightening experience. Feelings of unknowing consume my mind, taking from myself and the world around me, FUCK! The sense of disconnection is leaving me feeling petrified. Outside in the courtyard, men are dancing as if possessed in the warm Australian sun. I feel I've entered a foreign world. Their gayness consumes them, and I feel scared. I look at Dan. I haven't seen him dance before. He's manic. His fingers are pointing into the air, and he's shouting to the crowd. There's screaming in my head. 'STOP IT, I DON'T LIKE IT'. Watching him too consumed makes me scared. It's not the Dan I know. The shouting in my head goes on. "What the hell are you doing? You don't fucking behave like that". I turn to Stew to tell him how I feel. "If you don't like it, Jason, go home". His words run through me like hot butter. He too has succumbed to the ritualised dancing.

## Reflections on Pain

It's not until I looked back at this depiction that I realised how significant a part having acne has played in my life. Not only was I dealing with having to conceal my gayness from those around me; I also had a condition that left me embarrassed and ashamed. Both parts of my life rendered me desexualised at a time when most people experience sexual awakening so I wonder how much of my involvement in the group was down to me playing sexual 'catch-up'. Feelings of childhood shame because of gayness are well documented. For example, Downs (2012) suggests that boys as young as five sense that their homoerotic attractions must be kept secret from those around them. Because of my experience, I am left with questions about the impact of acne on a population already struggling with body image. Adult gay men's issues with their bodies are also well chronicled. Scholars such as Damasio (1999), Kassel and Franko (2000), Fox (2007), Duncan (2010), Santoro (2012), and Simpson (2014) all offer accounts of men who feel that their bodies fail the demands of Western gay culture. However, studies exploring the impact of acne on gay men are as far as I can see lacking. Understanding the particular affect of a debilitating skin condition someone who already feels freakish compared to those around him is not yet known.

### 4.2.3 Frustration





**Figure 14 An image of a coffee shop [online image] (Rymer, 2015)**

*I'm sitting in a coffee shop with the rest of the group. It's a balmy Sunday afternoon, the café's windows are open to the courtyard outside, and we're lazing around drinking and chatting. In the shop, Stew and I sit on a couch. Dan is lying across us both, his head resting in my lap and his muscular legs on Stew's. It's an erotic experience. My body is warm, and pre-erection juices flow in my groin and imagination. It's the first time Dan and I have touched, and the involvement of Stew embodies the imaginary threesome that we've had in my dreams many times. Stew is quiet, so I suspect he's aroused too. Andy asks Dan what he is doing. Somewhat randomly Dan says, "What can I say, I just like it up the bum". Dan knows he's a prick tease. He, too, is clearly thinking about sex. Dan is one of the most important members of the group. From my perspective, he's a flirtatious bugger; charming, always smiling, and using his cheeky playfulness to get close to the other members. Particularly me. As we lie on the couch, however, I am unaware that both Iain and Stew have held erotic feelings towards Dan too. It's a frustrating experience.*

\*\*\*\*

*Sunday morning and Dan's dropping some things off at my home. Dan and I have spent the last few weekends together, shopping, eating out and trips into the countryside. Today, he's been his usual playful self, making himself right at home, hugging, and logging into my Facebook account. I feel excited by the naturalness that exists between us but frustrated, as Dan is in a relationship with Rob, who is younger and taller than me. In my opinion, Rob's the man who makes Dan proud to have him on his arm when he enters a room. I'm angry. DATE ME! I'm the bloody one who has to listen to Dan as he bleats on about not feeling emotionally close to Rob. I'm the bloody one who laughs and cries with Dan at our adventures together. Why are WE not in a relationship?*

*Dan leaves to go shopping. In the emptiness left by his going, I'm seething. I can't go on like this. I feel Dan's prick teasing me. I'm angry. Rage takes hold, and I decide to go after him. After driving the twenty miles or so to the shopping centre, I'm running in and out of every shop in a frantic search for Dan. There he is in Tommy Hilfiger. Oh fuck, what am I doing? Dan sees me enter, and his eyes dilate with fear. "What the hell are you doing here?" he asks. "I just need you to know I like you [...] a lot [...] and Stew does too". I blurt the last bit out by mistake. Dan replies nervously, "I know". Both our bodies shake. For the first time, I feel we are fucking and long-held loads of verbal cum spray over us both. The brutality of my openness seemingly shatters the unspokenness at the heart of our intimacy. That morning, in Tommy Hilfiger, is the beginning of the end of the friendship between Dan and me. My friendship with Dan is a painful experience; one in which there is a sense of swallowing emotions; frustration is kept in abeyance for the sake of discreet arousal.*

\*\*\*\*

*A few weekends later Dan, Stew and I are in a courtyard of a gay bar on Oxford Street, the gay district of Sydney. Stew has told me how much he's in love with Dan and that he has sex with Dan tonight, or he's moving on. Get your hands off my man Stew! ARRGGGGHHHHHH. My frustration at Dan and Stew has reached boiling point. I feel furious at them both. I can be sarcastic when I want to be, and tonight they are getting it with both barrels. Because of what happened at the shopping centre, I'm particularly passive aggressive to Dan all night. "What's wrong with you?" he asks after one particularly barbed comment. "Nowt," I reply in my Yorkshire accent. "Well, fucking cheer up then". I'm so angry I can't control myself, so I take a mouthful of wine and spit it in his face. Dan's face crumbles, and instantly I feel regret. Dan goes running off. Stew tells me to go after him. After a few minutes, I find him crying in the street. He doesn't understand why I did what I just did. I can hardly bear to write it now. Forty minutes later, we're in another gay bar. The atmosphere between us is awful. Dan is crying on the inside, Stew is getting drunk, and I'm so ashamed. I can't take it anymore, and I just leave. The following morning, Stew tells me that after I went he asked Dan for sex. Dan refused.*

\*\*\*\*

*Two weeks later, I'm stood at a bus stop with Stew and a few others. The group is going for a picnic. Dan is late. I haven't seen him since the dinner a fortnight ago. I pray Dan doesn't bring Rob; it would be too painful for me to see them together. But, alas, my fears come true, as Rob and Dan come bounding round the corner, picnic baskets in their hands. I'm so fucking angry.*

\*\*\*\*

*Later in the week, Dan is having dinner with Rob at a local tapas bar. I'm at my cottage, and I don't know what to do. I feel so angry. I ask my neighbour to come with me to the restaurant for dinner, but they're tired. I pace up and down in the garden. Suddenly, the same frustration I felt when I went after Dan in the shopping centre consumes me and I drive into the city centre. Walking to the restaurant, I see Dan and Rob queuing outside. "Nice, fucking nice," I scream at them.*

\*\*\*\*

*One month later, Dan and I go for dinner. I feel nervous. I ask him if he is sexually attracted to me. He says not. My heart breaks. I feel it's because I don't have the physical attributes of Rob. The sexual inferiority I felt as an acne-ridden teenager flows as hot lava within me.*

### **Reflections on Frustration**

Remembering the afternoon in the coffee shop, I think about how Dan was seemingly using his body to communicate the affection he felt for Stew and me. It was a subtle physical expression of love, for which he seemingly felt that sex was either too crude or too obvious. I doubt his actions that afternoon were ones he carried out consciously. In so reflecting, I'm reminded of Rodríguez-Dorans (2018) when he talks about the tension between a gay

man's sexual and romantic relationships. He argues that many men experience a separation of love and sex, and within a few minutes of encountering someone new, the encounters are categorised as either sexual or something longer-term. Rodríguez-Dorans (2018) thinks that social interactions between gay men are not as open and forthright as those between other populations and are commonly rushed sexual experiences, especially early in adult life. The result is that, for many men, the sexualisation of gay relationships becomes normalised. Maybe the intense manner in which I pursued Dan was a reflection of the fact that I too had confused emotional tenderness with sexual intimacy.

#### 4.2.4 Mistrust



Figure 15 Organic Lunch [online image] (Englishtchrivy, 2017)

*I feel bereft. I loved Dan so much. I phone Graham. Hearing the breakage in my voice, he's inviting me to stay with him. Graham is the oldest member of the group. Like others in the group, he also has a penchant for the more elegant things in life. His house is filled with beautiful objets d'art, electronic gadgets and expensive drink. In my opinion Graham loves taking care of the group, becoming everyone's confidant, offering advice and mopping up relationship messes. To me, he's everyone's emotional caretaker. Actually, I think Graham likes helping people a bit too much; maybe he finds dependency attractive, I don't know, but right now I need his support. One hour later I'm in Graham's garden, drinking Prosecco. For the next week, he takes me on day trips and treats me to*

lovely lunches . Graham even brings me tea in bed. He plays the same song over and over again until it rings in my head. Graham says it's a gay anthem. He listens to me endlessly talking about Dan and tells me how poorly Dan has treated me and that he never loved me. I'm looking at my phone constantly. I cannot understand why the others aren't calling me. Graham says I need to see it as a sign that I need to move on. He is reassuring, as his kind words and caretaking offer me a respite from the chaos of my life. I feel safe, and my body begins to release the sorrow it is holding because of Dan's rejection. Graham says he has not told the others that I am here. One year later, I ask Dan and Stew why they didn't call during that painful week. They say Graham was in contact with them, disclosing my whereabouts and telling them it was best I was given space to grieve. Anger swells inside my body. I feel manipulated. I feel Graham was positioning himself as the powerbroker. In my opinion, I was his latest broken-winged project. His seemingly selfish needs made it look like he had my best interests at heart.

\*\*\*\*

Graham was not the only member of the group to appear to me to lie and manipulate. Now it's my turn. I'm in Melbourne for a meeting about work; Stew is with me. It's been two years since my dalliance with Dan, and for the last few months I've developed feelings for Stew. I've wrongly told Stew I'm thinking of relocating to Melbourne, so today we're flat hunting in the city centre. Stew is calculating the potential rent. "Fuck it's expensive," he snorts, in his distinctive dulcet tone. Stew is right; the rent is three times what I pay in Sydney, and I'm not sure I can afford it. However, the excitement I feel at relocating to Melbourne takes precedence over any financial worries. I dreamt about moving here as a teenager. Electricity runs through my body. However, something feels different. I feel wired. It is a tiring experience; one in which the body waxes and wanes between random movement and slumber.

Tonight, we're sleeping in the same hotel room but separate beds. That's fine by me, as just to be close to Stew is fab. I get to see him in his shorts; I like the way his legs look – nicely toned and covered in a fine downy hair. We chat for a while, about what a great day it's been. I want to do something sexual with Stew. I ask Stew if he'd like to watch porn. Sadly, after not having sex during our hedonistic trip to New Zealand, I've concluded that's never going to happen, but I'd like to wank with him. That would be okay, right? I crank up the laptop, and I see Stew tug to ease a bulge in his pants. He's getting slightly aroused. Holy fuck, are we going to do it? Is he going to lob his cock out and start jerking off in front of me? I harden, but not enough for Stew to see, but to make sure I roll onto my stomach. I start to dry hump the bed, making sure Stew can notice that I'm horny and up for a session. Then we stop. Stew pulls back from taking things further. What? What the hell? I guess Stew came to his senses, realising that wanking with me is maybe taking things too far. I'm gutted. I wanted a jerk-off session, and now we're back to friend shit. Stew and I sit in silence. Then

*I ask him if I should move to Melbourne or not. In my head, I am willing him to tell me not to go, that he loves me and he wants me to stay in Sydney. I need to hear he wants me, but he doesn't. In a manner I find cold, Stew tells me that it would be good for me to live in Melbourne for a while. I feel heartbroken.*

\*\*\*\*

*A few weeks later and I'm in a work meeting. My phone vibrates; it's Stew. "Is that you on Facebook?" he asks. My body floods with adrenaline to the extent I want to be sick. It's a terrifying experience, and I begin to shake because Stew has called me out. For the past week, I've been lying to him. I've hacked my mother's account on Facebook and been messaging Stew using her identity. Like her, I asked him to support me, and to hug me. FUCK! HE KNOWS IT'S ME. ARGHHHHHH. SHIT, BOLLOCKS, WANK. I feel so ashamed and embarrassed. What the fuck have I become?*

\*\*\*\*

*A bar in Sydney. It's a fab night. It's Mark's thirty-fifth birthday. I find Mark is a bright young thing. He's one of the first members of the group and a work associate of Stew. Mark's image-conscious and works hard in the gym to bulk up. On the bar's veranda, Graham is obsessively playing with his mobile phone. He's fallen for a guy twenty-five years younger than himself on Grindr. Tonight, he's incisively texting his new man, as his beau's father has just passed away. I feel annoyed, as I know what's coming. Graham will get ditched, and his depression will resurface. I know how dark his thoughts can get. I know how painfully awkward it is for him to decorate his Christmas tree alone. Stew nods at a man. "Who's he?" I ask. "We've fucked twice [laughs] I didn't even find him attractive," Stew replies in a cocky manner. Hot fluid runs through my veins. Like Dan before him, the thought of Stew having sex with other people cripples me with anger. How the fuck could we spend so much time together, be so fucking emotionally intimate, yet he can fuck a guy he doesn't even find attractive? Despite my seething, I can't walk away. My need to be around Stew is too strong. Some nights, I crash at Stew's flat. I sleep alongside him. Stew falls asleep in minutes. I never sleep. I feel honoured to be in Stew's bed, and I don't want to waste this time by sleeping. I try to get my legs to rub against his muscular hairy legs, but the sheets get in the way. I'm disappointed we don't have sex, but at least me being there stops him from having sex with someone else. Tonight, Stew is drunk. He can barely focus. I take advantage and jump on him, grabbing him around the neck and waist. He carries me around the bar, and we kiss. After a few minutes, Stew drops me. I feel sad, and we stagger into the same club as the guy Stew has fucked twice. We dance for a few minutes then Stew disappears. My body continues dancing, while my mind screams "WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU DOING JASON? WALK AWAY! LEAVE!" I go looking for Stew. It doesn't take me long to find him snogging the face of the guy from the queue. "WHAT THE*

*FUCK ARE YOU DOING JASON? WALK AWAY, WALK AWAY!" The screaming in my head overwhelms me. I walk out without saying a word. The cold night air is such a sharp contrast to the sweaty atmosphere of the club. In some ways it's refreshing. However, the change symbolises the problematic transition between being with the group and then going home alone. I weep.*

*Two hours later and I'm on my bed. Foxes scream like scared children in the garden outside while moonlight floods the room in a deep blue hue. I'm rocking to and fro. I'm not of this world. I'm the nearest to hell I've ever been. I want to do bad things. Iain is sat on a chair in the corner of the room. He appears scared of what I will do and wants to call Graham. I say no. It is a deeply violent experience. One in which the vulnerability of being an acne boy bleeding semi-naked in front of strangers is painfully visible.*

### **Reflections on Mistrust**

It is clear from the way I lied and manipulated first Dan and then Stew that I attached myself insecurely to the others in the group. Downs (2012) tells of the 'relationship trauma' (betrayal, abuse, abandonment and relationship ambivalence) many gay men struggle with and I suspect my anxiety reflected the dread I felt at the possible loss of Dan and Stew's affection. As Downs (2012) writes, many men are "wounded...desperately lacking in skills and role models [their relationships] are a tragic recipe filled with momentous highs and devastating lows" (Downs, 2012, p. 108). Maybe some others experienced the same sense of insecurity, and reflecting on this depiction, I can now see that maybe, by shielding my calls, Graham felt that he was doing the correct thing to handle my anxiety. An insecure attachment style would explain why some in the group felt compelled to control the behaviour of others (Landolt et al., 2004). Seeing my manipulative behaviour written down, I can now recognise the naivety in my actions. Most likely Stew and Dan had classified our relationship as non-sexual early in our acquaintance (as per Rodríguez-Dorans, 2018), but my strong feelings towards them had overwhelmed any sense of perspective.

## 4.2.5 Disgust



**Figure 16 Stained mattress [online image] (DCMA, 2016)**

*Monday morning. My life is falling apart. After five years, my landlady wants her place back, so I have four weeks to find somewhere else to live. I've lost my job. The government doesn't want external consultants like me working for them anymore. It means I have to leave the office, my work colleagues and my affluent lifestyle behind. My shoulder is also now dislocating every few weeks and I need surgery to stabilise it. It's an old injury that has suddenly reappeared. Finally, although the friendships survive, I feel that Dan and Stew have rejected me. My body aches. My mental state is collapsing. Where do I live? What am I doing with my life? Where's home? Everything in my life has begun to wobble. I feel confused. The terror of an existential crisis begins to spiral in every cell of my body.*

*I move in with Iain. Doing so made sense, as Iain and I were the founding members of the group. He says it will be good for him to have someone with whom to share bills. However, Iain's house is a mess. He hasn't previously invited me to visit, and now, looking around, I understand why. He's apparently been failing to clean for weeks, maybe months. Soiled crockery and discarded food litter every surface. As with the whole house, the kitchen air is laden with fumes of uric acid like a heat haze from Iain's three dogs. I'm suffocating. There's a used dog bowl in the sink and pieces of dog food float on the water. Everything everywhere is covered with years' worth of matted dog hair, while in the bathroom, dog poo lies on the carpet. I begin to clean. I wash the dishes that's he's neglected for weeks. I remove detritus from every surface. I open windows maybe for the first time in years and scrape what I assume are Iain's dried skid marks from the toilet. I clean the mattress that I'll be sleeping on. There's staining. He tells me it's semen stains from his last relationship. It's vile. I feel dirty, but I'm now too depressed to care.*

\*\*\*\*

*Eight weeks later and this morning Iain's gone to the gym. Since I've moved in, he's been feeling better about himself, and his depression has eased. He's started socialising more with the group, but he's deliberately not telling me about them. I'm beginning to feel isolated. I feel power drain away. Iain's starting to give me jobs to do around the house, and I think he's deliberately leaving a mess. This morning, like most mornings, there are skid marks in the toilet that I need to clean. Now, he's told me to peel the potatoes for when he gets back from his outing. I hear him have sex with another man. I feel trapped. I worry that this is what domestic abuse looks like. My body vibrates at a level that is hard for others to even notice. My speech is rapid, and my thoughts jump from topic to topic. People I meet are confused and worried by my heightened state of anxiety. I, too, am scared.*

\*\*\*\*

*Knowing things between Iain and myself are not going well, I sense that the group is beginning to limit contact with me. Dan and particularly Stew are seemingly avoiding conflict by ignoring me and my pleas for time together. I feel isolated. This morning, I woke up to see on Facebook that the rest of the group had dinner last night. I was not invited. I feel sick and vomit in Iain's toilet.*

\*\*\*\*

*It's Dan's birthday. He tells me it's best I don't come. It hurts. I don't know what I've done wrong. I feel abandoned and confused.*

\*\*\*\*

*I'm in a hotel room in Cairns attending a friend's wedding. I'm hyper. Someone that isn't me possesses my mind. BZZZZZ. My body moves without me. BZZZZZ. I have no control over what I say or what I do. My mum is on the phone. BZZZZZZ. She's concerned about my mental health and thinks it's best I go back home to live. I can't think. BZZZZZZZ. My mind is buzzing. BZZZZZZZZ. My body jerks involuntarily.*

\*\*\*\*

*I return home. At the airport, I get a text message from Stew. He tells me Iain wants to speak to me. I know he is annoyed with me for some reason. My body floods with adrenaline, and I begin to panic. I'm scared, really scared, and I don't know why. I'm broken. PLEASE, SOMEONE, HELP ME. ANYONE, HELP ME!*

\*\*\*\*

*The phone has gone silent; no one is calling. I'm just seeing Iain now.*



\*\*\*\*

*Today, I have to see Stew. He's been my best friend. I'm sat in my car waiting to see him and I'm shaking. I haven't seen him in weeks and I don't know what's been said to him by Iain and the others. I try to meditate but even that isn't calming my nerves. I walk down the street and there he is. He is so cold towards me. His answers are clipped and I'm working to fill the uncomfortable silences that litter our awkward conversation. I feel his hatred at having to meet me, but he's a kind soul and I suspect he's doing it out of a sense of duty. I feel others have poisoned his thoughts towards me. We have seemingly become strangers and it hurts like hell. To him, I sense I am just some crazy former friend, whose life has spiralled out of control. The shocking realisation that the intimacy of Auckland and Melbourne has died rocks my body and soul. IT'S DONE. IT'S OVER. I shake his hand; something I've never done before. I never see Stew again.*

\*\*\*\*

*Graham phones to tell me it's best I create a new life somewhere else...(see preface).*

### **Reflections on Disgust**

The vignette shows that, despite the intensity of the relationships and the frequency with which we were in contact with each other, any sense of familiarity between the members of the group was an illusion. The places we went to and the activities we engaged in meant that we were presenting a glamorous veneer, a positive side of our lives. Although believing otherwise, we actually had little knowledge of each other outside the group. So when I move in with Iain, I discover a reality that wasn't hitherto accessible, a world he had hidden. Upon reflection, it must have been hard for Iain to show me his mess, let alone to let me move in. The chaos that surrounded him I presume mirrored an internal process that was difficult for him to reveal. Intimacy operates on differing levels, so his entrusting me with this part of his life was an opportunity to deepen our relationship, a taste of true intimacy. After all, there is no more intimate space than 'home', regardless of what state it is in. However, at this point of the experience, I was so consumed by anxiety and panic that the realisation of what Iain was offering me, and how difficult it must have been for him to let me into his chaos, was lost.

## 4.2.6 Confusion

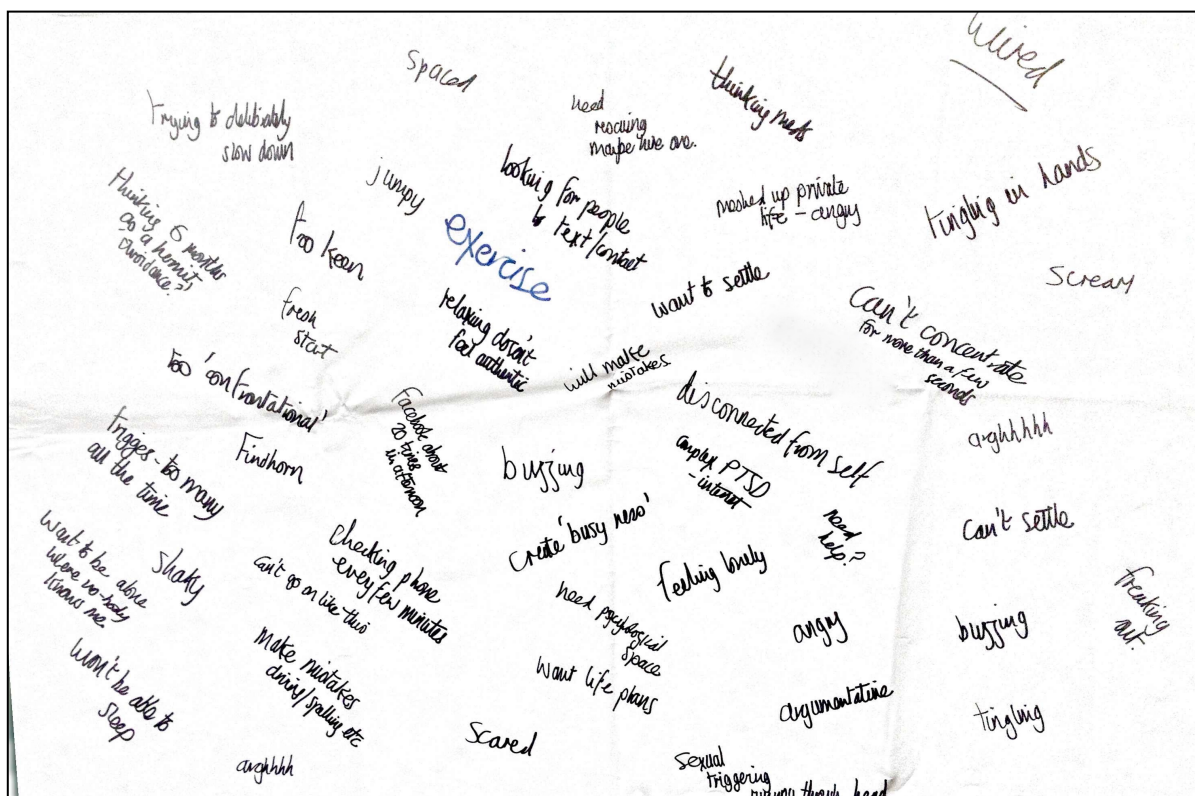


Figure 17 A jpeg of the list of buzz phrases I wrote in counselling post-expulsion

The expulsion has thrown me into a heightened state of existential crisis. I feel bereft. In therapy, I'm struggling to make sense of my experiences. As I sit on the floor of my counsellor's room writing the words shown in the figure above, my mind hums at a frequency that I consider too high to be healthy. I have never felt more energised or numb. I can't sit still; my body jerks. From his chair, the counsellor speaks of post-traumatic stress and dissociative disorders. I am buzzing; thoughts stay only for a few moments, before cutting to another; flitting images like a chewed up cine film.

For the next several years, I will be unable to focus; instead, I will gaze into space, my frantic thoughts trying to make sense of the trauma that possesses me. Anything associated with the group – places, people, smells – will catapult me back into a state of anxiety and my overwhelming distress only serves to increase my sense of existential questioning. I need to feel 'safe'. I seek sanctuary away from everything – people, places, websites – I associated with them. I change telephone numbers and avoid giving my name to anyone who knows those who have expelled me. Unlike my life in the group, I feel sullen and grey. I don't feel able to hold my head up high anymore. I haven't been shopping in the posh shops for years. I don't feel entitled to do so. I don't like Prides, gay bars or groups of gay men. I feel robbed of power and self-worth. I want to hide. I feel acne boy is back. I am emotionally bleeding. Only now I am standing semi-naked and vulnerable in front of you, the reader.

### Reflections on Confusion

Electing to include the picture of the words I created when in crisis was difficult. I found unsettling the thought that, by presenting it for others to see, I was again showing painful vulnerability for the purposes of assessment. However, unlike the medical examination, the decision to show it was my own. Indeed, I chose to remove some words because they were too sensitive for me to have published. The original piece of paper has remained folded up in a file for years. However, I wanted to include it in the depiction, as it illustrated in the most direct way what confusion looked like for me at the peak of my crisis. In so doing, I am reminded of Tamas (2009) when she recalls the difficulty of presenting a coherent narrative in writing of her recovery from spousal abuse. Tamas's (2009) struggles to offer something well thought through and connected are mirrored in the image. The muddled list of words and the brevity of the narrative that follows echoes my struggle to both recall experiences and present them in a way that made sense. I find it comforting to know that Tamas (2009) also experienced confusion in her writing and felt under pressure to offer coherence. I feel that it legitimises my crisis and that I am close to the felt sense of my experience.

## 4.3 Creative Synthesis

Moustakas (1990, p. 31) describes the aims and format of the heuristic creative synthesis as follows:

“Once the researcher has mastered knowledge of the material that illuminates and explicates the question, the researcher is challenged to put the components and core themes into a creative synthesis. The researcher taps into imaginative and contemplative sources of knowledge and insight in synthesizing the experience, in presenting peaks and valleys and highlighting the horizons”.

As such, my creative synthesis does not aim to share the whole experience of a 'cultic' gay male friendship group, as it is impossible for the reader, both "actual and imagined" (Bondi, 2014, p. 336) to have a full sense of my raw experience. Instead, after experiencing the creative synthesis, the reader is invited to reflect upon what experientially comes up for them in what Caines (2008, p. 90) considers “the inherent beauty and mystery of the power of human connection”. The study's creative synthesis is presented as a short story titled 'Dragonfly'. In attempting to broaden the study from personal experience to thinking about the experience of a cultic gay male friendship group as a whole, the creative synthesis and chapter summary are written in the third person.

## Dragonfly



**Figure 18 Blue dragonfly on a green leaf [online image] (Kratochvil, 2017)**

In the murky water of a pond, the dragonfly lives a solitary existence. The watery world of the pond is his kingdom. It is all he knows. His body is functional; moving as it does, steadily across the pond's muddy floor. For others, the dragonfly's appearance is terrifying. The pond's other creatures, even those who look similar, stare at him with fear in their bodies. All keep a safe distance, as the dragonfly's stillness confuses them. Is he friend or foe? Occasionally, something strange and watery fails to see the dragonfly sitting on the pond floor. He grabs it and, puncturing its slimy skin, the dragonfly begins sucking the juices from within. Through his watery eyes, he chronicles the life of his prey ebb away. It is a disgusting experience.

Far above, through the water ripples, strange objects, beautiful shiny objects, dance in the brightness of another world. They are objects to which the dragonfly feels innately drawn; something in the world of light and dance compels him to climb. Without drawing attention, he transcends the water, the brilliance of that which exists outside of the pond floods his body. At the pond's surface, the dragonfly exists between two worlds. Its thin film; a fringe between past, present and future. The dragonfly must climb; otherwise that which has given him life will drown him. He breaks the surface. The warmth of the sun floods his body and, opening his mouth, the dragonfly begins to swallow the air of this new world. He climbs some more, and then he stops. The dragonfly's body does not

function in the world of air and heat. Skin begins to break. It is a joyous time, as limb by limb, he leaves the old world body of fear behind.

The dragonfly is transformed. His body is beautiful, powerful and muscular. In the new world of air and heat, others do not harbour fear but gasp in admiration. To see the dragonfly is a joyous experience. The dragonfly dances in the sunlight. There is lightness; the air is bright, a myriad of dazzling hues. It is perfect. Around him, others dance in the summer sun. They, too, are beautiful. The dragonfly takes joy in the spectacle, flying as he does, gently on the breeze, surrounded by others dancing sexually above the sparkling water.

Alas, time flying in the warm summer sun is flitting. The sun cools and the dragonfly's body tires. His once impressive body is failing. The others are fading too. So, as the day ends, the world of air and heat that offered him freedom and joy is now uncomfortably empty. Slowly, and without witness, the dragonfly becomes increasingly helpless as the water that once was his prison traps him again. His body becomes smothered by the water, from which he spent much energy escaping. Through the ripples, the dragonfly looks once again at the mud on which he spent his early life, and closes his eyes. The murky water of the pond wants him back.

#### **4.4 Summary**

The experience of a 'cultic' gay male friendship group is an unsettling mix of pain, frustration, mistrust, joy, disgust and confusion. Beginning in childhood, the experience starts with the boy, awakening to difference. His body confuses him; doing things it shouldn't do and looking like something for which he's being punished. It is an isolating experience; one where the boy learns his sense of security and trust are best forged from a furnace of resilience building within him. The main feeling is isolation, as those others to whom it is expected he should be close are excluded from a growing and disturbing aspect of his identity. It is a painful experience; one where he learns it is not separation from others that threatens to overwhelm, but their unconditional love. Independence emerges as a prized quality. Now, the boy is turning inward, expanding his illusory internal world to the point it's the only space where he finds the comfort and shelter he craves. In sum, the experience of 'cultic' gay male friendship groups begins with a boy nourishing himself even though there are others who surround him offering sustenance. It is a painful experience, in which the boy's ontological security quietly and secretly ebbs away. The dominant feelings are isolation and growing sense of abnormality.

The boy prides himself on his autonomy. He has become discursively determined to live in loneliness and praises the experience of independence and autonomy. Values of individualism and achievement underpin his sense of pride. It is a powerful narrative that overestimates family and underestimates friendships. Even though he is well connected and supported, relationships with these others, with whom he does not share a strong sense of connection, are undervalued. The boy retains a sense of being on his own. It is this burning desire to ease the isolation that consumes him, that leads the boy to enter a world in which they are men who call themselves gay. The boy exposes himself to beliefs and social practices he feels no option but to follow. His lack of personhood means he is vulnerable to 'cultic' experiences. It is a sexually exciting experience, and his feelings of arousal firmly attach him to the discourse. It incubates and nurtures the boy, who emerges a discursively conversant 'gay man'.

Over time, the gay man realises many in the gay world do not evoke the feelings of trust and dependability he's yearned for from childhood. The cultural, communal performance of gayness is tolerated rather than enjoyed. The man experiences a desire not to be in the madness of the anonymity of the gay world but in the homelessness of more intimate relationships. These are the men with whom he experiences a blend of confusion and warmth; they segregate joyously in their newly found sense of belonging. For this first time in his life, the man experiences the security and trust he has been striving for since the separateness of his childhood world. It is a powerful, suctioning experience, and the man rejoices in his newly discovered sense of identity and attachment. To be with others with whom he experiences such oneness is peaceful and there is enjoyment in the unsettling haze created when sexually compatible men form intimate friendships. There is an ease of being; the body relaxes and the stomach gurgles – a sign that any tension held in the body is diminishing. At this stage, the feeling of being validated through the reflections of the others means the experience of a 'cultic' gay male friendship group is true and heartfelt. There is a shared mirroring, which bonds the group. Such mirroring is joyous, and the body feels alive. Every cell tingles as the mind fizzes with excitement. There is delight in the 'exotic'. The smells and sights of far away places a testament to the liberation felt by the man. The sense of oneness is characterised by memories of warm, ocean waves moving through the body; muscles ease, and the posture softens like melted butter. The experience is one of love and happiness, as long-held feelings of separateness and abnormality drift away. The experience is heavenly.

Like the other men, there is also a sense of joy that comes from the material aspects of the experience that money can afford. However, the pleasure the man experiences from objects of materialism sometimes means the reasons why he loves his friends get lost. There is joy

in the death of the childhood self. If heaven, with its evoked qualities of tranquillity and carefreeness existed 'on Earth', then part of the experience of a 'cultic' gay male friendship group gets as close to it as it comes. The feelings evoked remain the benchmark against which all other experiences of ease of being in the company of others are compared.

It is an experience in which the man experiences a deep sense of affection and desire. It is an unreciprocated love, which he considers perfect. His childhood separateness from his body, unsettling thoughts and from those around him means he has learnt to suppress his feelings. He has learnt he is only 'allowed' to feel affection and desire as long as he does not show; it as long as he doesn't act upon it. In the experience of a 'cultic' gay male friendship group, there is, therefore, a sense of perfection in the platonic love that exists between him and his friends. It is an experience in which the body is aroused but one where the arousal is only released through masturbation. Because of the arousal, it is an experience that both men seek to repeat. The experience evokes feelings of frustration. The body feels tight; men's muscles are solid. There is a sense of firmness.

The experience of security lasts only for a while, as the friendships become troubled. His friends – themselves boys who can only self-nourish – abandon him. The cravings for security and belonging that brought them together drive them apart. For the abandoned gay man, it is a painful and traumatic experience. Childhood feelings of insecurity, distrust and undependability come flooding back, revoking a separation of mind and body. The movement of thoughts and feelings to a hard to reach sheltered space means memories are fragmented and bodily sensations are painful to endure. The overriding sense is of anxiety. The body vibrates, at a high frequency that is barely noticeable. However, muscles are rigid, and there is a feeling of exhaustion. Thoughts are sharp, with edges like splintered glass. There is no mellow transition between memories.

In contrast to the sense of oneness that comes from the joy of the group, all that can be brought to the experience is the body. Thoughts and feelings evaporate from present experiencing, moving to a space of shelter. For the second time in his life, others whom he let his guard down for violent propel him back into the safety of his internal world. The feelings of separateness and abnormality remerge stronger than ever, justified in their existence. The abandoned gay man retreats to the sanctuary of his internal world. He must return to the universal gay world to again find others with whom he can feel secure. His personhood is discursively poisoned to the extent he cannot exist outside of it. He has regressed to the boy.





## 5 Discussion, implications and future research



Figure 19 A quilter hand quilting a quilt [online image] (Briscoe, 2017)

In this chapter, I stitch together what came out of my performative writing about the group of friends in the vignettes included in the previous chapter, now in the context of the literature on gay culture and cults. I start with a discussion of my perceptions of these gay men and contrast them with questions about a search for family, as well as about material culture, ontological insecurity, cultic relationships and institutional power. I show how my gay kinship network took on the characteristics commonly associated with cults and RIs. I describe how LGBTQ terminology, drawn from the heteronormative familial discourse – specifically, the terms ‘family’ and ‘incest’ – does not describe these relationships appropriately, and how a kinship group formed around a sexual identity can be problematic both for the network itself and for the emotional wellbeing of the men in it. Following the discussion, I write about the implications of the study for society. I discuss what the questions raised by the inquiry mean for gay men and organisations that work with them. I then move on to write about the study’s implications for counselling, in particular counselling of gay men experiencing intra-communal difficulties. Next, in a section recommended by Moustakas (1990) for inclusion in a heuristic thesis, I discuss the

implications of the study for myself professionally. I explore how my 'cultic' experiences may impact on my work as a counsellor. Then I end the chapter by writing about opportunities for future research.

## 5.1 Discussion

### *The confusing world of the group*

Describing the group as 'cultic' has been contentious. Institutional reviewers have questioned the appropriateness of the term, given that it is an expression usually reserved for quasi-religious organisations and is thus likely to offend the other men. Nonetheless, my experience of the group as described in the vignettes suggests that it can be considered cultic, in the sense of something that claimed the totality of my life (Scott, 2010). Dan's performative dancing and my dissociative staring at the mirror in Yard are examples of a group engrossed in a culturally constructed veneration of beliefs, practices and values. According to Langone's (1995) criteria of what constitutes a cult, my experience of the gay male friendship group involved an extreme level of devotion to both the other men and to the performance of a certain cultural construction of gayness. The controlling behaviour of Graham and Stew reflects an already 'vulnerable' group (as per gay men in general) demonstrating "excessive" (Jenkinson, 2013, p. 20) physical and emotional demands (Dubrow-Eichel, 2001; Kendall, 2006; Shaw, 2014). I too used forms of manipulation, such as fake social media accounts, as mechanisms of social control. As I rocked on the bed with the sound of foxes wailing in the background, there arose, as reflected in the vignettes, a bewildering combination of pain, frustration, mistrust, disgust, joy and confusion. I had allowed my emotional wellbeing to be dictated by my relationships with individual 'members' and the group as a whole (Langone, 1995). Likewise, I exploited (or at least aimed to exploit) Dan and Stew for my sexual needs and in so doing inflicted and elicited psychological harm primarily through mechanisms of manipulation, inclusion and exclusion (Langone, 1995).

My experiences reflect a move from being controlling to being someone controlled. As I moved from shopping in Gucci and Prada to cleaning faeces from Iain's toilet and sleeping on semen-stained mattresses, the demands of the group pervaded every aspect of my life. My experiences therefore echo Jenkinson (2013) decade-long involvement with a cultic Christian community. Her participation was a similarly degrading experience for which she offers the analogy: "if you put a frog into boiling water it will immediately jump [yet] if you put it in cold water and then slowly heat it up, by the time the frog realises it is in danger, it is too late" (Jenkinson, 2013, p. 18). As I drank Prosecco with the millionaires of

Auckland and entertained the men at my cottage shows, the group demanded time, money and emotion. It was therefore a “greedy institution” (Coser, 1974), and one in which I voluntarily sought to perfect a co-modified “performance” (Butler, 2011, p. 2) of the everyday dance of the discursively created contemporary gay man. Sitting on the coffee shop’s sofas, I participated in a teaching circle, dissecting and honing my ideas of how gay men relate to each other. In this situation, I learnt the art of flirtation and how the relationship between sex and emotion for some gay men seemingly involves a separation of mind and body. That balmy Sunday afternoon, we were not merely coffee drinkers, but institutional members ‘gazing’ (Foucault, 1990) at each other as we monitored our own and others’ progress towards performing the group’s notion of the “privileged, white [and] intellectual” (Altman, 1997, p. 418) discursively constructed category of gay men. As such, time spent in the coffee shop shows how my time in the group was the everyday experience of a gay male Scottonian RI.

When I danced on the stage in Yard, I bathed in the group’s Foucauldian disciplinary gaze beneath me. Indeed, as I dreamt of the group while listening to work colleagues’ stories of roasting meat, their scrutiny extended beyond any material boundary. The group represented an “insular local world” (Scott, 2011, p. 2) – a symbolically enclosed “carceral society” (Foucault, 1979) in which I was immersed. However, our gay life took place in a world very different from that of Foucault (1990). Unlike Foucault’s (1990) world and that of others such as LeBeau and Jellison (2009); (Morris et al., 2015; Ridge, Hee, & Minichiello, 1999; Ridge et al., 1997; Woolwine, 2000), the struggle to prove ‘normalcy’ and worthiness against a heteronormative world was potentially not at the forefront of our needs. Foucault’s (1990) gay world was built in the aftermath of the de-pathologisation of homosexuality and the devastation of the AIDS epidemic, a disease he himself contracted. As we enjoyed picnics and meals in tapas bars, our discrete mini gay world did not need to function primarily as a “marginal” (Foucault, 1997, p 136) sanctuary where we could be “naked amongst men” (Foucault, 1997, p 136) and from the shame and fear of society’s scrutiny. Ours was a world in which certain representations of gayness were becoming an acceptable ‘face’ of society. In further contrast to the world of Foucault (1990, 1997), ours was shaped by online spaces that I didn’t really participate in but that I knew were changing the ways the group related to me, to each other and to others outside the group. As shown by Graham’s withholding of mobile phone contact and the use of Facebook to post images of social gatherings, these online spaces represented the newly dominant way we established, maintained and ended our friendships. However, as seemingly reflected in Iain’s drunken visits to the sauna and excessive alcohol consumption, Foucault’s world still remained in the background and sometimes moved up to the front.

## **The joy of gay 'family' life**

The group represented something overwhelmingly important – something I still struggle to understand. Experiences such as drinking champagne in the harbour of Auckland and dreaming of moonlit skies and Ferris wheels in Paris suggest that maybe we actually created something quite difficult to describe; something “without terms or convenient words” (Foucault, 1997, p. 136) that expands the term ‘friendship’ and challenges the heteronormative way of understanding ‘families’. The closest I can get to making sense of it is through the term “gay kinship” (Weston, 1991, p. 5), denoting relationships that evoked the feelings of closeness sometimes present between family members. However, this term coined nearly thirty years ago is inadequate for describing the group. It was an “all-encompassing” (Scott, 2010, p. 217) world of “meaningful interpersonal relationships beyond family and kinship” (Smart et al., 2012, p. 92) existing within a postmodernist “material, discursive and symbolic structure” (Scott, 2010, page 226), that existed in the reality of Velvet and Yard, the imaginary realm of my sexual fantasies, and the in-betweenness of my friend’s teasing, which conveyed a promise of intimacy that never came to fruition. Just as the dragonfly inhabits two very different ecological environments, the group existed in a “discourse that bridged the erotic and the non-erotic” (Weston, 1991, p. 122).

Erections in coffee shops and romantic moonlit walks on beaches with erotically attractive friends describe a symbolically enclosed institutional network (Peacock et al., 2001) of forged from sexual attraction and bounded by physical geography (Dale & Farrer, 2013; Weinberg & Williams, 2013). Indeed, as shown by my drunken kissing of Stew and our viewing of porn together in Melbourne, sex (or more specifically sexual attraction) represented a more dominant aspect of our ‘family’ life than our blood-based or adoptive kinship structures. The love triangle between Dan, Stew and myself further reflects how eroticism, albeit never acted upon, represented the catalyst around which the “formless relationships” (Foucault, 1997, p. 136) gathered.

In understanding my friends as if they were ‘family’, the issues I write of remain contextualised in a patriarchal and heteronormative social structure. My exploration of the cultic experience of this group is situated in a Western post de-pathologising context, which may approach uniqueness in its capacity to begin exploring gay relationships rather than persistently vacillating between an age-old fixed dichotomy of either validating or pathologising them. In Duncan (2010, p. 446) words, I believed I had “found empowerment, through adherence to a post-gay liberation expression of ‘authentic’ (Downs, 2012, p. 5) selfhood connected with capitalism and a late modern emphasis on personal identity and

appearance to achieve a socially desirable image of gay identity". When I danced barefoot in the holiday apartment and drink Prosecco along with the Auckland millionaires, I felt omnipotent, as I had a set of relationships in which I experienced a deep sense of belonging, and I called it my 'family' because that was the only relevant term I knew.

### **The *mistrust* when vying for social and sexual supremacy**

My need for a gay 'family' was therefore apparently great. Unlike Iain, who cruised for sex in a sauna, I did not use alternate ways of sourcing sexual intimacy (for example by using gay dating websites); consequently the 'family' represented my sole source of social and sexual opportunities. As my crisis in the Dublin hotel room reflects, I couldn't perceive myself as 'existing' without it. Like an RI, the group offered an opportunity for "reinvention" (Scott, 2011, p. 41): for achievement of a "McSelf" (Scott, 2010, p. 235), a new gay identity, positively designed and modelled as a lifestyle change. It was a "one size fits all" (Scott, 2011, p. 137) identity that made me feel desirable when wearing white trousers, and loved when Graham brought me cups of tea in bed. It was a "new me" (Scott, 2010, p. 136) which was the binary opposite of the acne-ridden, melancholic self trapped inside a piece of 'medicalised meat'. As I danced wildly to Christina Aguilera, I was looking for a certain freedom to be 'myself', something that was apparently missed in childhood. After all, my childhood was one of bloodstained bed sheets and people from whom I hid my gayness. I was "a little boy with a terrible secret who [hid] his curse" (Todd, 2016, p. 16) not under "crimson velvet" as Todd (2016) suggests, but beneath layers of expensive fragrance. I grew up without knowing how to be gay, and was ill-equipped for the difficult task of forming my identity, having only the remains of the heterosexual models I was immersed in, and with few example of gayness (sometimes shown only as erotic desire) provided by society. Maybe growing up gay, and with acne fulminans, meant that I joined the group with an inherent sense of 'insecurity'. As the shoes with inbuilt heels illustrate, I was a "gay man who [wasn't] able to believe in himself, to be satisfied in himself, [and who sought] validation from the world around him" (Todd, 2016, p. 32). Perhaps my seeming difficulty in forging secure friendships with the others (Fraser, 2008; Nardi, 1999) was a consequence of such childhood vulnerabilities.

Thus the group was a 'family' in which sexual attraction between members was much more prominent than in my 'other' family. This left me struggling to accommodate the familial sexuality that Foucault (1990) suggests is a necessary perquisite of all kinship systems. As he points out, sexual attraction between family members "is also a thing that is continuously demanded in order for the family to be a hotbed of constant sexual incitement" (Foucault, 1990, p. 109). From Langone's (1995) cultic perspective, my desire for

intergenerational sex with Dan and Stew could be interpreted as an exploitation of my unofficial position as one of the group's 'leaders'. In the early days of the group, Iain and I were the ones who brought the men together. By the time I took Stew on holiday and let the men socialise at my cottage, I was the founder and social organiser of the group. Both looked up to me as an older role model. I was the "inspirational guru" (Scott, 2010, p. 216) that Dan and Stew desired to be. Because of my ability to run a flourishing business and take foreign trips I had integrated my gayness into a broader, successful lifestyle. In other words, I sensed that for Dan and Stew my performance of the cultural construction of gayness did not 'overwhelm' my entire identity. Mine was seemingly a more 'mature' performance.

### ***The frustration of a caretaking parent***

From a psychological perspective, I feel that my behaviour is driven by strong subconscious pulls. Stew leaving me for sex with another man after I'd spent time taking care of him, as a parent would a child, suggests that forging caretaking relationships was perhaps for me a practised way of being that functioned to provide safety from vulnerability. Maybe the ugliness and isolation I experienced because of having a skin disease meant that being vulnerable in relationships is difficult for me. Perhaps my caretaking unconsciously kept Dan and Stew, or myself, safe from sex itself, even though my conscious intention was otherwise. It also afforded me power. Being the 'parent' was and most likely still is something I offered in relationships as a part of the value one might bring to them, maybe even as a playing card, particularly with people who may need a parent – something that increases "social capital" (Bourdieu, 1990) in a way. Maybe I was subconsciously aware that I was not an object of sexual desire and that hence abandonment by the others was inevitable. I understand myself as representing to them a parental object with which sex was prohibited. Regardless of the psychology involved, and despite playing the secure parental role, my insecure selfhood was the catalyst for the existential crisis that consumed both myself and later, I suspect, the group itself.

My desire for sex with Dan and Stew was never fulfilled. Both men rejected my sexual advances. I was not a member of the tier of younger members; as Dan and Stew's sexual rejection of me suggests, I held low sexual capital for them (Green, 2008a, 2008b, 2011, 2013). I was 'merely' the "gracious friend [they] aspired to be" (Todd, 2016, p. 33). The depictions illustrate how Dan used his youthful sexual prowess to garner emotional support and social opportunities such as foreign holidays. In other words, Dan represented the "sexualised, athletic physique an object of desire and social status among gay men" (Duncan, 2010, p. 446). His youth, charisma, and muscular body shape became the

idealised sexual object of the group. The assertion of power within the group was therefore subtle and demographic (Dawson, 2017). It upheld the horizontal differentiation of individual sexual characteristics (the younger members were perceived as the most sexually attractive) and the vertical stratification based on group characteristics (my high social status was prioritised second) (Green, 2013). In other words, power within the group flowed in every direction (Scott, 2010, p. 48).

### **The *disgust* of 'incest'**

My sexual interest in the younger men in the group, namely Dan and Stew, represents an important element of my experience. In writing about how Dan and Stew's sexual rejection played an important part in my expulsion, I offer depictions of the occasions when the sexuality at the heart of gay 'family' life represented the catalyst for both its formation *and* its destruction. Noting that there was sexual attraction amongst 'family' members in the group does not contribute to the LGBTQ 'chosen family' literature in which the sexual attraction between 'family' members is often celebrated. As Weston (1991, p. 3) points out, "gay relationships seem to cut across [...] categories of law and nature". However, what is seemingly underreported is the linkage of non-biological or adoptive intergenerational sexual attraction between gay 'family' members to a heteronormative understanding of familial sex. Most contemporary family networks and systems work according to a heteronormativity that prohibits incest and excludes gay men (and other people of LGBTQ identities) (Young, Wolkowitz, & McCullagh, 1981). So from the "conventional perspective of kinship" (Weston, 1991, p. 2), the 'parental' role I created for myself meant that what I desired from Dan and Stew, in terms of sex, could be interpreted as incestuous. From a psychoanalytic perspective, although later modified into Oedipal themes, according to Freud's (1962) original incest theory, incestual fantasies and dynamics are a 'normal' part of family relations. In other words, according to early Freud (1962), all sexual attraction is originally incestual.

There was a time when incest was problematic (as was sexual assault) solely because it represented the sexual property (often the woman or girl) of one person being 'stolen' by another. As Foucault (1990, pp. 108-109) points out, "The family, in its contemporary form [...] ensures the production of a sexuality that is not homogenous with the privileges of alliance [...] its role is to anchor sexuality and provide it with permanent support". Put another way, familial networks - traditionally heterosexual constructs - nurture and maintain control over sexuality to preserve themselves and in the process prohibit familial incest. Incest is taboo in order to maintain traditional kinship structures (Foucault, (1990); structures to which my gay self can never belong.

Understanding of incest has however changed. In recent times the idea of consent, personhood, desire, boundaries and trauma are brought into the discussion, as individual experience becomes more important. Consequently, if family is based on marriage and marriage is based on ownership and control of sexuality, and incest threatens this, then gay relationships and more specifically intergenerational gay relationships do too. My sexual desires for the younger members in a pseudo-familial setting troubles societal discourse on incest. Intergenerational sexual relations were an accepted practice (although not actually conducted between members) in my gay family. My desire for sexual relations with the younger members, with whom I had quasi father-son relationships, broke the rules of traditional familial alliance. The three of us had forged relationships outside the constraints of any conventional familial discourse. Gay relationships between older and younger men such as those between Dan, Stew and myself function outside the prohibition against incest. Even if I did have sexual contact with either, nothing written about in this thesis was illegal; all involved were over the age of consent and none were blood or adoptive relations. Perhaps I was not sexually attractive to them, or maybe the continuing prohibition of sex between 'parent' and 'child' hung over us. Such a discursive legacy is understandable given the taboo nature of intergenerational sex in our 'other' families, of which we remained active members. Whether my sense of disgust and grief was an actual reflection of the sexual rejection itself or was discursively ingrained due to the incest prohibiting conventional familial discourse remains a question of debate.

If people turn to 'families of choice' after experiencing a sense of exclusion from families of origin, it feels only natural for them to become the source of individual power and identity. Some women change their last names after marriage through the (heteronormative) system of coverture. The new family gives a new identity and the old must be shed. In many traditional societies that narrative follows the custom of leaving one's family to join a new one. These creations of identity are often institutionalised. Perhaps the lack of formal ritualisation of an identity within the group - for example, an initiation ceremony - made the power of the group even more insidious and difficult to recognise. Thus, nights out in Velvet show how the group created and sustained my 'gay' identity at the time. It conferred identity, in much the same way as other forms of family (for instance, by giving us a name). However, instead of biological kin, my gay family was made up of "critical chosen friendships" (Heaphy & Davies, 2012, p. 311) from whom my gay identity was forged and by whom it was ultimately nearly destroyed. In other words, like the toilet mirror in the bathroom of Yard, the relationships greatly served to inform me of who I was *and* who I was not (Heaphy & Davies, 2012; Heaphy et al., 1998; Smart et al., 2012). They afforded me a sense of belonging, almost as if the other members gave me 'existence'.



The ease I felt in their company represented a deeper attraction than sexual attraction alone. Descriptions of drinking champagne in harbours and eating salads on verandas reflect how wonderfully I experienced these relationships. My relationships with the younger men, emotionally and sexually charged as they were, remain the most intense I have experienced. A relationship with others with whom I felt a strong sense of belonging and attachment – a familial one – was emotionally electrifying and deeply erotic. Perhaps the sadness over not having sexual relations with men with whom I felt a deep connection also explains some of the ‘grief’ I experienced as I sat on the counsellor’s floor post expulsion, with words such as ‘scared’, ‘scream’ and ‘lonely’ running through my thoughts. However, it seems that I failed to exist outside an embodied enactment of a particular cultural construction of gayness: something which was “not a natural feature [of my life] but a constructed category of experience [forged from my] historical, social and cultural, rather than biological origins” (Spargo, 1999, p. 112). As my crisis on the counsellor’s floor reflects, I seemingly did not perceive myself as “existing” outside my “performance” (Butler, 2011) of the discursively created contemporary gay man. In other words, any difficulty with the group I “experienced as a failure in [my] own understanding of the world” (Smart et al., 2012, p. 99). Without the others in my life, I felt lonely and sad.

### **The *pain* of ontological insecurity**

Mine was a “destructive or controlling” (Monroney, 2008, p. 4) performance in which I denied feelings of love (for Dan and Stew) and anger (towards Graham and Iain). As Todd (2016, p. 33) points out my life became “an ever vacillating seesaw between rage and gentility.” So just as I had done for the students during my medical examination, I had willingly, thoughtlessly stripped bare my “docile body” (Foucault, 1979) to avoid losing them. The argument that my devotion to a group of gay friends was excessive, to the extent I was experiencing “denigrating independent critical thinking” (Langone, 1996) and that therefore, based on Langone’s (1995, 1996) criteria, the relationship I had with the group (or at least certain men in it) was ‘cultic’ does, as far as I am aware, establish a new link between the LGBTQ, chosen family *and* cult literature. Similarly to other types of cult members, I devoted myself to it to the extent that any identity outside it was lost (Jenkinson, 2013; Monroney, 2008). I believed that the group’s collective disciplinary power, their “mutual surveillance” (Scott, 2011, p. 30), served my best interests. The men were “central to a sense of biographical continuity and a sense of self” (Heaphy & Davies, 2012, p. 319). As I drove to Blenheim Palace in Graham’s car, I considered my performed role a necessary part of the group and, what’s more, I believed it suited me according to the culturally established roles for gay men. Whether the others devoted themselves to the

group to the same extent or whether my devotion was the odd one out is difficult to determine retrospectively. Indeed, the significant amount of time and commitment shown by the others, such as Dan's many weekends with me, Graham's extensive care taking, and Iain's offer of a place to stay, suggests a high degree of dedication on the part of the group members. I do not claim new knowledge in noting such devotion. Duncan (2010, p. 444) describes how the gay men he interviewed had "lost their individuality in their pursuit of a conformist ideal".

From Jenkinson's (2013) perspective I seemingly embodied a 'pseudo-cult personality'. This was an alternative personality developed through my interactions with the group and made up of the internalisation and externalisation of the pain, frustration, mistrust, disgust, joy and confusion harboured inside the minds and bodies of us all. As I cleaned the faeces from Iain's toilet "they told me who I was and what I believed [...] all I knew was what the cult taught me: that it was my fault" (Jenkinson, 2013, p. 21). Maybe I was vulnerable to "identity loss and confusion" (Jenkinson, 2013, p. 21) and the formation of an alternate personality, because I did not believe the acne-ridden anxiety-based adolescent part of me matched the sexual or social expectations of the other men. As West (1993, p. 7) points out, "individuals subjected to [prolonged stress] may adapt dissociation by generating an altered persona, or pseudo identity". Perhaps the joy of foreign holidays with Stew and weekends shopping with Dan filled the emotional wound that Downs (2012) believes the majority of gay men harbour. As he says, "it is a wound that almost all gay men experience [...] the wound is the trauma caused by exposure to shame [...] the internalised and deeply held belief that you are somehow unacceptable, unlovable, shameful, and in short flawed" (p. 24). Certainly, the evening spent at Auckland harbour or on the dance floor of Velvet made me feel loved and desired. However, it was a personality "defined by" the other members of the group, in which I lost the ability to "think [my] own thoughts and feel [my] own feelings" (Jenkinson, 2013, p. 21). Therefore, it may not be coincidental that part of my experience of a *pseudo*-familial network involved a dissociation-based *pseudo*-personality. After all, the potential for sex with Dan and Stew ensured my compliance with the physical and emotional demands of the group's "inmate culture" (Scott, 2010, p. 3). I "desired to belong to a group" (Langone, 2016, p. 2). Hiding behind the pseudo-cult personality, I experienced the group's performance-regulating actions as "benign" (Scott, 2011, p. 242). Therefore, my time in the group, with Sunday mornings in coffee shops and lazy afternoons drinking at my cottage, reflected the everyday experience of a cultic gay male Scottonian (2010) RI.

People leave institutions for different reasons. Some leave out of choice, some to escape abuse, others are asked to leave, and some, like me, have mental breakdowns rendering

them useless to other members, who cast them aside (Jenkinson, 2013). As the depictions show, unemployment and multiple relocations within a short period reflect how, as my “social and material environments” (Bondi, 2014, p. 332) ruptured, my sense of chaos grew. As my shoulder began to dislocate, I was also experiencing “ruptures in everyday environments” (Bondi, 2014, p. 337) whereby the familiar surroundings of work and home ebbed away. No longer could I feel that my “ordinary, everyday worlds are reliable and dependable” (Bondi, 2014, p. 332). As a result, the depictions convey how my “self-identity [and] the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments of action” (Giddens, 1990, p. 92) ebbed away and how I sought to mitigate the growing insecurity of “internal experience and external environment” by moving into the homes (and thus the lives) of Graham and Iain. Put another way, the vignettes reflect the “continuous traffic between interior and exterior, self and other the movement of which produces feelings, selves and the world we inhabit” (Bondi, 2014, p. 337), as the chaos of an unsettled home life and my growing sense of anxiety became increasingly clear. Leaving meant not only losing intimate relationships but also my gay identity. It is unsurprising that my expulsion from the group therefore not only disrupted the “continuity” (Giddens, 1990, p. 92) of my *gay* identity, it unsettled a large proportion of my entire “self-identity” (Bondi, 2014, p. 333). After all it was “bound up with a sense of the external world [of the group and unstable housing] as bad and hostile” (Bondi, 2014, p. 343). The despair and desolation I experienced as I sat on the counsellor’s floor thus reflects how the expulsion rendered both the cultic gay world of the group and its internalisation in my psyche “profoundly hostile, and threatening” (Bondi, 2014, p. 231). Years of mistrust and confusion surrounding men to whom I was insecurely attached (as demonstrated by my anxiety after Stew’s one-night stand) meant nothing and no one, even myself, was ‘secure’. My ontological security as conceptualised by Laing (1959) (in a psychological sense) was ruptured.

Many gay men have to find ‘families’ elsewhere and sometimes, like me, they face equally exclusionary experiences in their new families. Despite the love that I felt, living with Iain, doing all the chores, seeing no-one other than him, showed the insecure emotionally damaging relationships formed with my gay family. As reflected in Iain and Graham’s controlling behaviour, establishing secure ‘healthy’ friendships with others who may also feel insecure proved challenging for us all. We were “wounded men [...] struggling to discover themselves and desperately lacking in skills and role models” (Todd, 2013, p. 128). However, unlike Todd who restricts this argument to between lovers, the group were friends attempting to replicate the same thing. As such, the ‘cultic’ qualities that the group developed did not come solely from the group itself or from the individuals in it, but were part of the dynamics provoked by life in a heteronormative society. Maybe finding others whom I could trust (and, equally, who could trust me) after a lifetime of ‘insecurity’ was

the cause of this family's failure. Perhaps from a psychodynamic perspective, feelings of insecurity and isolation were painful repetitions of the trauma of childhood exclusion that Todd (2016) proposes many gay men experience. Maybe it is understandable that my devotion to the group became "excessive" (Langone, 1995); that because of an inherent sense of being "unlovable and unaccepted" (Todd, 2016), I sought to "control" the group (Dawson, 2017). I needed to maintain friendships with men of high social and sexual capital, offering as they did opportunities for meeting more socially influential acquaintances and more sexual partners. Cult leaders recruit others who will be of benefit (Jenkinson, 2013; Monroney, 2008). Maybe the "drama" (Downs, 2012; Fraser, 2008; Todd, 2016) commonly associated with gay male friendships could be the adult manifestation of this unresolved childhood insecurity. Whichever way it is conceptualised, any reparative effect on my ability to trust (Smart et al., 2012) that these critical friendships offered failed to materialise.

## **5.2 Implications for gay men and organisations that support them**

"The heuristic process is autobiographic, yet with virtually every question that matters personally, there is also a social - and perhaps universal - significance".

(Moustakas, 1990, p. 15)

Even though I no longer trust or love Iain, Graham and the others, part of me does not like writing about the pain, frustration, mistrust, joy, disgust, and confusion that occurred between us. I feel a need to protect what goes on inside the worlds of gay men and find myself needing to be a 'good' gay man who does not tell 'bad' stories about other gay men. Such binary thinking is a theme running throughout the thesis. In section 3.3, I write about how I struggled to see the in-betweenness that existed in previous versions of the research question. In section 3.4, I describe the ethical difficulties of representing my former friends as either decent or not decent characters. However, after departure from something traumatic can come the need to destroy it and I find part of myself wanting to destroy both the group and the discourse that I hold responsible for creating the associated pain. However, even after expulsion, I still retain a gay identity; but perhaps one now dissociated from the group that played a big part in forming it. So maybe a part of me sees the value in protecting and saving the discourse, thus placing this thesis within the context of heteronormativity, and its implicit disregard of the experiences of gay men. I have explained my painful struggle with the identity formed by the group. And now I inhabit a post-group identity, which in itself is complex.

My protectionism comes from a perception of gay men as 'victims'. Of course, for decades gay men were, but I can see that the lived experiences of gay men are more complex than that, and that I was removing any personhood from my thinking. As per section 3.4 (Ethics), I once again find myself moving away from the idea of being decent and how it is reminiscent of and parallel to what Lather (2007) calls a crucial "loss of innocence" that is essential for new epistemological paradigms to emerge. In these new forms of knowledge the researcher is no longer the 'expert'. Instead, inquirers let go of notions of being 'good' and embrace the discomfort and uncertainty that represent an integral part of deconstructing conventional forms of research. In the case of Lather (2007) herself, she is mindful that her motives in research are not always honourable and certainly not those of a 'good' feminist. I can see this happening to me in a post-pathologising context when writing about gay men's experiences; in my case, as a defender of the minority group to which I belong. Having the personal power to tell 'bad' stories is emancipatory and enables me to move outwards into a discussion about the challenges the inquiry poses to gay men in general and the organisations that support them.

My claims that some groups of gay friends can be highly controlling and psychologically harmful and that some gay men can be disgusting, confusing, painful, untrustworthy, frustrating and joyous for each other are intentionally challenging. Both raise questions that trouble the discourses of gay culture, the discursively constructed category of gay man, and the impress of heteronormativity on gay male populations: questions that ask whether, after thirty years of LGBTQ studies and the "recent plethora of LGBTQ affirming legislation" (Bianchi, 2016, para. 1) (see Chapter One), gay men are willing and able to consider the way they treat each other.

These are questions gay men have a duty to ask. But it's a debate I don't hear or read about. At the time of completing the thesis (late 2017), no third sector or public sector organisations supporting gay men in the UK were discussing the issues raised in the inquiry. Prominent LGBTQ organisations such as Stonewall ([www.stonewall.org.uk](http://www.stonewall.org.uk)) and the LGBT Consortium ([www.lgbtconsortium](http://www.lgbtconsortium)) principally promote gay rights and deliver welfare services to the various subgroups that come under the LGBTQ umbrella. The experience dealt with in this inquiry suggests that, while such organisations may consider gay rights and welfare services a priority, they are implicitly or explicitly neglecting an issue of importance to their stakeholders.

As a gay man who has both harmed and been harmed, the fact that we are not widely discussing the phenomenon of gay men being hurtful to one another is concerning. As Todd (2016, p. 322) points out, "we [gay men] need change [...] this isn't about becoming

less gay or conforming to a heteronormative narrative – whatever that means exactly – but about looking after ourselves and treating each other with respect”. I argue that some gay men treat other gay men as fundamentally unworthy even though different populations of gay men may challenge the prejudice on the surface. I question whether, after hundreds (maybe thousands) of years of discrimination and persecution, a minority group can do this. As a friend from Asia said to me, “I see this happening in [my country of origin] all the time. We have no respect for human lives – certainly not our own. And many oppressed people begin thinking of themselves as dispensable and unimportant”. It feels as if, now that the idea that it is okay to be gay has begun to settle in, the extreme abuse and self-hatred stemming from an internalised homophobia within the community may be coming to light in studies such as this. It’s like PTSD: the danger outside may have lessened, but the demons inside remain. I think about the PTSD I experienced after being cast out of the group, and about the PTSD that Downs (2012) proposes gay men experience following rejection of their fathers (see 2.1.3). These episodes of PTSD feel somehow connected. However, after being immersed in the inquiry for many years, I do not currently have the mental capacity to understand how.

### **5.3 Implications for the counselling profession**

In writing about the pain, frustration, mistrust, joy, disgust, and confusion involved in the experience of a ‘cultic’ gay male friendship group, the thesis (as far as I am aware) offers a previously unreported account of a phenomenon that could affect a sizeable counselling client group (Bianchi, 2016, para. 1). The research, therefore, serves as a catalyst for counsellors to reflect on personal knowledge of the research topic, and as discussed in Chapter One (Introduction), supports the BACP recommendations that counsellors familiarise themselves with LGBTQ lifestyles and cultures (King, Semlyen, Killaspy, Nazareth, & Osborn, 2007). The image that many practitioners I talk to tend to have comes from a ‘glossy’ media version of gay friendships such as the television programme ‘Will and Grace’ (Burrows et al., 2007). These media portrayals are full of how things are ‘supposed’ to be rather than how they are. As Todd (2016, p. 16) points out, “Will and Grace [...] established that gay man as the perfect best friend”.

Anecdotally, counselling colleagues tell me that they agree with my argument that some gay male friendships are controlling and emotionally toxic. However, as cited in Chapter Two of the thesis when turning to academic studies, there is very little to be found in either the counselling or the LGBTQ literature that captures what I experienced. I can imagine that some counsellors, assuming that it is beneficial for their gay male clients to have a group of friends, might not question the dynamics of the friendship (perhaps from a fear of

appearing homophobic but mostly, I suspect, from ignorance). As the example of the former colleague questioning whether sexual abuse gives rise to gayness in Chapter One suggests; I think some of the unfamiliarity stems from a lack of stories and experiences of gay men that have been made available to counsellors or to LGBTQ people in general. I believe the 'real' lives of gay men are still largely invisible, especially when one looks beyond political advocacy and a certain media representation. Therefore, at the end of the inquiry, I am still left wondering whether I am alone, and my concern that there are counsellors who are seemingly unaware of these issues and are therefore unprepared to be available for a client presenting similar issues remains. Accordingly, one important outcome of the inquiry is that counsellors have the ability to recognise when the relationships of their gay male clients (or indeed any client) may have taken on characteristics associated with cults. With that in mind, I offer the following questions as an aid:

1. Does the client's gay identity feel "authentic" (Downs, 2012, p. 5) to him? Is the client participating in activities – sexual or social – he prefers to avoid? For example, is the client participating in drug taking, heavy drinking, clubbing or promiscuity because he believes such behaviours are expected of gay men?
2. Is the client able to freely express feelings in his relationships with other gay men?
3. What function does sex play in the client's friendships? Who is sexually attracted to whom? Amongst his friends, who decides who can or cannot have sex with whom? Put another way, how is sexual capital distributed in the client's gay relationships?
4. Is the client exploiting or manipulating other gay men? Or vice versa: do you sense the client is being emotionally abused or controlled by his friends (or partner)?
5. Do you feel "authentic" (Downs, 2012, p. 5) when with the client? Do you feel yourself performing as a different 'you' when working with gay men? Are you implicitly or explicitly encouraging the client to perform yours or his discursively formed role as a 'gay man'? Likewise, is the client encouraging you to perform 'something'?
6. Who is the client without his friends? Is he bereft, in crisis, lost without them? What other gay groups, organisations, social networks does the client belong to? Is his gay friendship network his sole source of actual gay expression?

7. Does the client's devotion to other gay men feel 'excessive'? How much of the client's emotional wellbeing is dependent on his involvement with other gay men?

8. Does the client believe he's a 'good' gay man? What does a 'bad' gay man look like to the client? What identity does he believe he will gain from his friendship group?

While there are scenarios in which someone might answer yes to any of these questions without necessarily being part of a cultic group, a counsellor to whom he says yes might want to consider whether any of the relational issues raised in this research resonate with the client's material. How to work therapeutically with individuals involved in controlled and controlling relationships, and cult survivors in general, is well covered in studies such as Jenkinson (2008, 2013), Langone (1995) and West & Martin (1996). For practitioners working with gay men involved in 'cultic' relationships, these studies are useful resources. A detailed reprise of their work is therefore not necessary; however from her perspective of a cult survivor Jenkinson (2013, p. 21) offers a useful introduction.

"You are likely to ask what drew me into a cult. This will leave me feeling even more foolish [...] If you had asked me 'How does that feel?' I could not have told you, because I spent years learning not to feel. I (my cult pseudo-personality) was defined by others; they told me who I was and what I believed [...] I lost the ability to think my own thoughts and feel my own feelings. All I knew was what the cult taught me: that it was my fault. You might move on to ask me about my family. You are likely to assume the cult was able to take me over because of childhood issues. That is what you are trained to do, but it just doesn't help".

Based on her experience, Jenkinson believes that counsellors need to know when they are working with the "pre-cult personality" (2013, p. 21) as introjected (i.e. defined) by others. To do this effectively, Jenkinson (2013) suggests that practitioners provide the client with information on the psychological control techniques used in cults. Doing so, she argues, allows the client to understand the psychological impact of the cultic institution, and what mental influences may remain.

## **5.4 Implications for me as a counsellor**

Knowing that I too developed a personality excessively defined by others is not only relevant to my personal relationships, but also those I forge with my clients. Having become familiar with the literature on cults, I now identify as someone with a psychopathology similar to that of individuals who have spent time inside a cult. Specifically, I identify with (a) feelings of stupidity, (b) a desire for internal (psychological) and external (social) discipline, and (c) difficulty in tuning into and symbolising one's "authentic" (Downs, 2012, p. 5) feelings. All three are presenting issues commonly associated with former cult members (Jenkinson, 2008, p. 21).



Admitting that I was involved in controlling and manipulative relationships is difficult for me. I wonder why I did not end (or at least question) the relationships when I felt my agency begin to erode. The question of why I actively created something so emotionally toxic remains an issue I struggle to make sense of. How I could have been so stupid also represented a significant portion of the “passionate concern” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 23) felt at the beginning of the inquiry. I find myself worrying about what other people will think of me. I fear they will think that I am stupid for having let the men dictate what I thought and believed, and that I did nothing to stop my agency from being eroded. Noticing these worries and the way I located myself in relation to the other men *and* myself has implications for my client work. The ways I related to Dan and Stew shows my susceptibility to adopting a caretaker role towards people with whom I desire intimacy. What’s more, my lying to Dan about relocating to Melbourne shows how I used manipulation in my caretaking role as a way of gaining the closeness I craved. However, as evidenced by my dutiful cleaning of the faeces and the mess carelessly left by Iain, I allowed others to manipulate me. The vignettes therefore show that I vacillated between willing or unwilling caretaker, forming relationships in which I prioritised the needs of the other ahead of my own. In other words, the way I relate to others (and therefore myself) was to a large extent “defined by others” (Jenkinson, 2013, p. 21). This left me feeling powerless and traumatised. Today, the need to be dutiful and submissive in relationships (including therapeutic ones) remains strong. Criticism (particularly unanticipated criticism) can leave me feeling shaky.

Despite years in clinical practice and researching ‘cultic relationships’, I find myself worrying firstly, that because of my history of forming caretaking relationships when meaning to form sexual ones, other practitioners will question my ability to work safely. Secondly, I worry that, because of a history of relationships in which the other party or I sought to control and micro-manage the other, I might draw clients (or indeed the client might draw me) into similar relationships, rendering them (or me) “helpless, dependent or traumatised” (Jenkinson, 2013, p. 20). Occasions when my mind left my body during the dermatological medical examination and years later, when I felt dissociated from the environment around me while looking at the disco light in a gay bar, recall a personal history of “learning not to feel” (Jenkinson, 2013, p. 21). Furthermore, a recent incident in which I felt disproportionately upset after being reminded not to leave glasses of water in a counselling room, shows a need for both internal (psychological) and external (social) world discipline; i.e. obedience remains strong. If I struggle with feelings of discomfort, I wonder whether adopting a caretaker role (particularly towards those from whom I seek romance or sex) is something I do to feign intimacy and to stop them from attacking: after all ‘why would you attack the hand that feeds you’. Accordingly, I question whether

positioning myself as all-knowing caretaker is something I offer my counselling clients. After all, I know everything about them and they know nothing of a personal nature about me. My thoughts go to some former clients and how my new understanding of the way I respond to helplessness and dependence in my relationships would have been useful for what I brought to these therapeutic encounters. For example, I note my desire to feel helpful when faced with some clients, along with my helplessness and erotic feelings, and how that could have been a re-enactment of my relationships with Dan and Stew.

Writing about vulnerabilities in my clinical work is difficult. Feeling stupid when considering what others may think of one for allowing oneself to get involved in cultic relationships is common amongst cult survivors (Jenkinson, 2013). Indeed, Jenkinson believes that such a feeling is a common reason why cult survivors find it difficult to reach out for therapeutic support. From a practice perspective, it reassures me to reflect that knowing that 'stupid' feeling first-hand deepens my empathy for clients who feel the same. What's more, as illustrated in this section of the thesis, given that I am deeply and reflexively engaged with the relational issues stemming from my experience and with what researching the inquiry has brought to my awareness, I feel in a 'safer' position to counsel. This is in direct contrast to someone who hasn't explored such issues in him/herself, with the result that the issues might remain unconscious. In that sense, my experiences benefit rather than hinder my ability to practice and my feeling of stupidity subsides. What's more, knowing that I am vulnerable to denial of feelings, it may not be coincidental that I chose to (a) research a topic that adversely impacted on my ability to feel, (b) chose a methodology that needed me to use my intuitive feelings as a way of making sense of the research material, and (c) entered a profession that encouraged me to develop my ability to feel as a way of understanding relationships.

Notwithstanding the personal work I have done to date, strengthening my ability to work with my feelings and mindfully managing how I am in relationships would benefit from further work. As yet, both areas remain not fully understood edges to my felt sense (Gendlin, 1962, 1981). Clinical supervision with someone who is familiar with the psychopathology associated with cult survivors, and who accepts that cultic experiences are not restricted to any particular notion of cult, is central. A good supervisor will, firstly, catch any pull towards dependence or traumatising, either by the client or myself and, secondly, note my relationship drives and how I am positioning myself in relation to the power exerted (or not exerted) by the client. Aside from the need for 'effective' supervision, personal therapy with someone who encourages me to 'stay' with my feelings and to speak about what is going on in my internal world appears beneficial. The questions of what gender and sexual orientation of the supervisor would suit me best also remain.

## 5.5 Future research opportunities

In examining closely-knit gay friendships as it does, the study encourages contributions to the growing body of research that explores occasions when gay men mistreat each other. Such work would be useful to counsellors by helping them to broaden their capacity to accept their gay male (or other LGBTQ) clients' experiences as they are. However, how the issues raised in the thesis relate to "lesbian worlds" (Altman, 1997, p. 421) other LGBTQ populations needs work. I have intentionally not extended my experiences to lesbian groups, for example. Like Downs (2012, p. 5), who, concerning the lived experiences of lesbians, argues, "the stages of their lives are the same; however the way in which they unfold is often very different". Just as do I not expect research, which explores other LGBTQ identities to be relevant to me as a gay man, I do not believe it is right to generalise across the LGBTQ spectrum. LGBTQ subgroups and the people therein warrant individual studies. Notwithstanding my belief, this inquiry may serve as a useful resource for future research exploring interpersonal conflicts 'inside' sexual minority groups.

Through establishing mine as an experience shared by other gay men, my arguments about cultic friendship groups (indeed perhaps partnered relationships too) and whether particular vulnerabilities put gay male groups at risk of developing the 'cultic' relationships written may be further developed. I imagine the sort of abuse reported in the thesis could be labelled by counsellors as 'narcissistic abuse' (emotional abuse by a narcissistic other), as emotional violence often is (Brown, 2004; Coleman, 1994; Hockenberry, 1995). If counsellors only perceive gay men as victims of cultural violence or as examples of similarly reductive constructs, it may not even occur to a counsellor that a gay client's friendship group could be cultic in its own right. Given the apparent rarity of 'cultic' gay male friendship groups, other researchers are unlikely to have personal experiences similar to mine. Therefore, methodologies less dependent on autobiography may be needed: for example, case studies. Accordingly, I encourage fellow practitioners and researchers to bring forth relevant client work. Of particular interest to me would be reading the work of gay male therapists concerning emotional abuse between gay men. I would like to understand more about the personal and professional impact on the therapist when working with such material.

## 5.6 Limitations of the study

As discussed in Section 3.4 (Ethics), the part of me that hurts from my expulsion strives to confirm gay men as untrustworthy, manipulative and vindictive. My (not entirely) subconscious desires constituted the experiential lenses through which the research topic

was perceived. It was the wounded and angry part of me that promoted my belief that I was a blameless victim of emotional abuse, and determined what material was put into the thesis. It is also the part of me that affords me my insider perspective on gay male friendship groups. With its powerful Western ideals of male gayness, it is a perspective forged from Altman's (1997, p. 420) "global gay world" and is the only gay cultural construction of gayness I know. It is a perspective in which gay friendships can freely exist. However, knowing only one way of being gay "blinds" (LaSala, 2003) me to other experiences and alternative ways of culturally constructing gayness. I assume a "commonality of experiences" and struggle "to recognise any differences" (Roberts, 2014, p. 455).

I am therefore, a researcher seeking maturity and reflexivity, and an 'injured party', politicising his victimhood and frustrated that not everything in his story of how it is to experience a 'cultic' gay male friendship group could be written down in the thesis. Institutional demands – including ethics and the practical constraints – mean that certain material and more details about our group, our backstories and our relationships, are omitted. Doing so protects those written about, including myself, and while no omitted material would change the themes I have identified or the metaphoric images and words I have used, I find it frustrating that anything or anyone which prevented me from writing freely has limited the story I can tell.

## 5.7 Summary

In this chapter, I have argued that the themes of pain, frustration, mistrust, joy, disgust, and confusion are dominant "nuances, textures, and constituents" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 31) of the experience of a gay male friendship group, because the group simultaneously functioned as an *RI*, a kinship group and of relevance to the research question, a cult. Looking at it as an *RI*, I have written about how I used the group as a way of reinventing a gay identity according to the group's specific cultural construction of male gayness. I have written about how this discursive performance of gayness dominated my selfhood to the extent that it was perceived as excessive. I have described how I saw the group's collective disciplinary power as serving my best interests (Scott, 2010). I have also written about how I was unknowingly caught in a Foucauldian "carceral society" (Foucault, 1979), and of how potential sexual encounters and controlling behaviours kept me within the physical and emotional demands of an "inmate culture" (Scott, 2010, p. 3). Then, looking at it as a *kinship group*, I have argued that heteronormative family structures and their social operation represent an unfair social system that excludes gay men from narratives of family life and in what way the experience depicted in this thesis reflects how sexual

attraction was a critical component of my gay family, but also how it was the catalyst for its destruction. I have explained the ways in which I found managing the non-erotic in these erotically charged, familiarly styled, relationships difficult. I have suggested Oedipal pulls were at the heart of my sexual attraction to the younger members with whom I enjoyed years of emotional intimacy and argued the prohibition of intergenerational sexual relations between non-related gay men is an echo of heteronormative, patriarchal familial structures. Furthermore, I have argued that the notion of 'incest' is haphazardly applied to gay kinship but that intergenerational gay friendships often stem from an erotic attraction that also can destroy them.

Finally, looking at it as a *cult* I have described how I was “psychologically dependent” (Langone, 1995) on the group, using it as the primary source of my identity and ontological security. In describing how I lied to Dan about a move to Melbourne and my misuse of my mother’s social media account, I have written about how feelings and thoughts were controlled using the manipulative techniques associated with cults (Jenkinson, 2013; Langone, 1995). I have written about how dependency amongst members was “systematically induced” (Langone, 1995) by myself and the others through controlling behaviours such as caretaking and how this fostering of emotional reliance is a common characteristic of relationships amongst cult members (Jenkinson, 2013). In summary, the group (or my perception of it) consisted of people who were more than friends, but not quite family, and that it became institutionalised to the extent of being ‘cultic’.

In the next chapter, I conclude the inquiry. I write about the personal and professional legacies of the study and describe a crucial part of the heuristic research paradigm; that is, the felt ‘transformations’ in my internal world (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985; Moustakas, 1990, 2001; Sela-Smith, 2002). The chapter is a “brief, creative close that speaks to the essence of the study and its significance to [me] and others” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 21).

## 6 Conclusion



Figure 20 Dragonfly in the sun [online image] (Smallwood, 2015)

If like me, the fear of rejection and discrimination tends to be the response that many families and society present to gay individuals, the man who chooses to defend his gayness by all means may experience it as a substantial part of his entire self because it requires lots of energy, effort, time, and determination to carry out. Thus, for these men, including myself, gay friends are an incredibly important and highly cherished resource. Arguably, groups of straight friends are acquired in an unnoticeable and effortless way (they don't need to be secret, they don't need specific places to meet, they are not scarce, etc.). All types of friendships are important, but I wonder if those who are not gay can imagine the relevance of friends with whom we can be 'ourselves' and talk about things we could not discuss elsewhere. That's maybe one of the reasons why groups of gay friends might be defended as those things in life that took so much to achieve.

For years, I defended such a group. This group was made up of erotically charged and emotionally intimate relationships, the significance and meaning of which I struggle to describe. These friendships that I found to be emotionally toxic and controlling represented

aspects of the relationships to which, having completed the inquiry, I now appreciate I contributed. These qualities are commonly associated with cults. However, heteronormative and recent LGBTQ notions of 'friends' and 'family' do not fully capture the 'cultic' nature of the relationships and its effect on the formation, sustenance and ultimately the shattering of not only my gay identity but the entire sense of who I was. Outside of the group, I perceived myself as not 'existing'. The inquiry, which sought to deepen my understanding of the significance and meaning of these relationships, was located in this existential abyss. It was a previously unarticulated world of feeling and thought, forged from the interpretive lens of my subjective psychopathology and which represented a personal "passionate concern" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 23) from which I immersed myself in an autobiographical exploration that aimed to inform others.

Academics, researchers and educators have authored the majority of previous studies on cults and LGBTQ friendship groups from the perspective of objective outsiders. While these studies achieved a level of awareness that resembles that of the experiences of a cult or gay male friendship group, I believe they have failed to bring the two together and thus penetrate the visceral everyday experiences of a gay male friendship group that I believed to be cultic. So while no established methodology exists for researching such a group, by offering a first-person heuristic inquiry into a gay male friendship group with cultic characteristics, the inquiry sought to address this scholarly gap. As such, the originality of my work is tied to my experience itself. As Clough (2017) points out, "telling one's own story breaks barriers between disciplines". In my case, by thinking about how it was to be a member of the group and about the nature of the group itself, not only did I break barriers between social science disciplines, I also 'broke barriers' between the scholarly literature and personal, tacit ways of knowing. Based on my experience, the research question I have used is 'How is the experience of a 'cultic' gay male friendship group?'

Using the feeling-steered onto-epistemological framework of HSSI, I immersed myself in a reflexive account of the group from the perspectives of researcher and experiencer. In so doing, I was an irreconcilable ontological self (Rooke, 2009), seeking to eradicate the existential angst of his trauma by the self-transformation that is implicit in heuristics (Moustakas, 1961, 1972, 1990, 2001). Prolonged immersion highlighted six dominant themes. Each captured groups of memories, feelings, bodily sensations and images that I felt stayed close to my raw experience of a 'cultic' gay male friendship group. Nonetheless, the question 'How is the experience of a "cultic" gay male friendship group?' is one that the "incarnate speaking function I think of as 'I'" (Gingrich-Philbrook, 2014, p. 23) is not 'wholly' answered in this thesis. As the ontology described in Chapter Three sets out, the depictions set out in the thesis, could never fully depict the raw experience itself. Human

experience stops and starts with every heartbeat. Consequently, the complete range of “nuances, textures, and constituents” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 31) is beyond what I can convey in metaphoric words and images. In offering depictions, all I hope is that you, the reader, will have a sense of how the experience of a ‘cultic’ gay male friendship group was for me.

That part of the experience that I label ‘*Pain*’ captures the occasion when distress in a man’s body means that he will gain more emotional security by allowing his thoughts and feelings to dissociate from it. The distress might be physical – for example, when what his body offers does not match the sexual desire of others in the cult or when what is reflected back to him through his reflexivity or actual mirrored image is upsetting. The body finds itself in a state of trauma, and the man’s mind does not consciously sit in his experiential field. ‘*Frustration*’ names that part of the experience in which unacquainted sexual desire inside the cultic group boils over into the manipulation of others or passive-aggressive behaviour. He wonders if his experience is not cultish or ‘broken’ fundamentally after all, but is inherently painful as a result of the collective trauma of exclusion. Sometimes thoughts turn to violence. The body embodies the violence and inflicts harm either on itself by placing itself in emotionally harmful situations or on others within the group by, for example, spitting wine into a friend’s face as depicted in this thesis.

Associated with frustration is the part of the experience labelled ‘*Mistrust*’. The man becomes aware that everyone in the institutionalised group, himself included, is competing for sexual and social supremacy. The man feels insecure and fearful as controlling behaviours emerge. As with ‘*Pain*’, there is a separation of mind and body as the man struggles to mentally accommodate his own and others’ acts of manipulation. The fourth theme is ‘*Joy*’. In ‘*Joy*’, the main feeling is the happiness of being with intimate others in whose company the man experiences an erotic attraction and a sense of belonging as if they were ‘family’. The dominant sensation is delight, since, in direct contrast to ‘*Pain*’ and ‘*Mistrust*’, the man’s body is relaxed as his mind and body integrate. However, the negotiation of the erotic in non-sexually active relationships is difficult and involves contact and desire with his and others’ bodily fluids. Correspondingly, the fifth theme of the experience of a cultic gay male friendship group is ‘*Disgust*’ at the sight and smell of vomit, faeces and semen and the thoughts of ‘incestuous’ sex. The bodily sensation associated with ‘*Disgust*’ is unrest as his body reacts to the close contact and prohibited desire. The sixth and final theme occurs predominantly after the experience of the group ends. ‘*Confusion*’ is the reaction to the depth to which the man has enmeshed his identity with that of cult. In ‘*Confusion*’ the man feels lost and bewildered. Any sense of ontological security is gone. The jerking movements of ‘*disgust*’ are intensified. In summary, the



experience of a cultic gay male friendship group is complicated and involves the man's entire body and sense of who he is. It is an experience few people understand.

Now the inquiry ends. Do I feel 'transformed'? The term itself reflects a certain binarism (one is transformed or not) I seek to move beyond. To say that completing the inquiry has changed me fundamentally is too much of a stretch. Yes, I feel different, more self-aware. Knowing that I can 'justifiably' identify as a cult survivor and understand more of the possible reasons why the other men and I did what we did means my processing is less 'fragile'. I feel the same sensation I get when I watch a good thriller and the end approaches; things seem quiet again, everyone is safe, the mystery has been solved. I've seemingly managed to gain awareness, survive the cult, and find my ground again. Everything is quiet now. Therefore, to say that I am not 'transformed' at the end of the inquiry is in itself a transformation. No more propensities to binary thinking. I'm okay to be somewhere in-between transformed and not. I do not have to be a good heuristic researcher, either to please you or, importantly, myself.

Maybe being okay with in-betweenness is what I craved from the HSSI. Time will tell I guess, but knowing that something has shifted in my felt sense means this particular inquiry can justifiably end. For my emotional wellbeing, my scholarly immersion in what for me was a painful topic just has to stop. Maybe then I will 'fully' grieve the loss of Dan, Stew, Iain, Graham and the others. I'm sure when I feel sad and lonely, my desire to be with them will be as strong as before, but no longer will their echoes need to puncture my daily life. The real men behind these fake names can gently begin to fade in my thoughts. I'm not ready to shake their hands in 'real life', maybe given what I now know it's best I don't, but at least I can say goodbye to them and importantly thank them for what our shared experience gave me. However I know, as their memories wane and this inquiry ends, there is space in my life for something new to begin. Let me think what I will call it...nah, no name is emerging...it's just a feeling at the moment. However, just as the villain in a good thriller strikes again and although I am not particularly looking for healthy friendships or to join another cult, I ask the following question of you, the reader.

Would you be my friend?

Word Count 48,788

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# Appendix 1: Ethics approval form

University of Edinburgh, School of Health in Social Science 04.12.14



## RESEARCH ETHICS APPLICATION (REA)

The forms required when seeking ethical approval in the School of Health and Social Sciences have now been merged into this single electronic document. The sections you are required to complete will depend on the nature of your application. Please start to complete the form from the beginning and proceed as guided. On completion the *entire* document should be submitted electronically to your section's ethics tutor using the email addresses detailed on the final page.

FORM OVERVIEW	
FORM	COMPLETION
Project registration form	: Compulsory for all applications
Document checklist	: Compulsory for all applications
Level 1 Self Audit form	: To be completed for all research studies that are not subject to review by an external UK based ethical committee.
Level 2 /3 ethical review form	: To be completed when indicated by responses on the Level 1 form.

## PROJECT REGISTRATION FORM

*NOTE FROM JASON HOLMES: AMENDMENTS FOR SEPTEMBER 2017 ARE MADE IN ITALICS*

This form is the first stage in applying for University ethical approval and should be completed prior to the commencement of any research project. Applications submitted without appropriate documentation will be returned.

Ethical approval is required for all projects by staff or students conducting research, or similar. Applicants should familiarise themselves with the School's Research Ethics Policy prior to completion.

PR <sup>1</sup> Name of Applicant: Jason Holmes
PR <sup>2</sup> Name of Supervisor <sup>1</sup> : Jonathan Wyatt
PR <sup>3</sup> Project Title: What comes after Pride? An exploration of the assumptive worlds of gay men in the UK. <i>Inside a gay world: A heuristic self-inquiry of one man's experience of a 'cultic' gay male friendship group</i>
PR <sup>4</sup> Subject Area (section of school): Counselling and Psychotherapy
PR <sup>5</sup> If student, type of assessed work that this application relates to: Professional Doctorate Thesis
PR <sup>6</sup> Planned date of project submission: August 2015 <i>31<sup>st</sup> December 2017</i>
PR <sup>7</sup> Date ethics application submitted: 4 <sup>th</sup> December 2014 <i>10<sup>th</sup> September 2017</i>
PR <sup>8</sup> (Date complete information submitted if different): N/A
PR <sup>9</sup> IRAS Approval Number if applicable: N/A
<i>The following to be completed by ethics administrator</i>
PR <sup>10</sup> <i>Date of initial response to applicant:</i>
PR <sup>10</sup> <i>Date of final approval:</i>
PR <sup>11</sup> <i>Amendments Requested Date:</i>
PR <sup>12</sup> <i>Amendments Approved Date:</i>

<sup>1</sup> Not applicable to staff members.

PR13 <b>Reviewer 1</b>
PR14 <b>Reviewer 2</b> <small>Level 2-3 only</small>
<b>DOCUMENTATION CHECKLIST</b>

1) <sup>DC1</sup> Does your research project require extraction or collection of data abroad? (✓)

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<b>No</b>	<i>If 'No' Skip to Q2</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Yes</b>	Local Ethical review needed, please confirm (✓) electronic attachment of: Application to ethical review panel in country of data collection (in English) + copy of letter of approval

2) <sup>DC2</sup> For the purposes of this research study, will you access identifiable<sup>2</sup> information on any NHS patient? (✓)

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<b>No</b>	<i>If 'No' Skip to Q3</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Yes</b>	Please confirm (✓) electronic attachment of: <b>Caldicott Guardian</b> approval for use of NHS data (or confirmation that it is not required)

3) <sup>DC3</sup> Does the project require ethical review by an external UK committee e.g. NHS REC or Social Work?

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<b>No</b>	<i>If 'No' Skip to Q4</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Yes</b>	Please confirm (✓) electronic attachment of: NHS REC (IRAS) /other application form + copy of letter of approval
<b>NOTE:</b> You are <u>not</u> required to complete University ethical review forms. <b>Skip to Q6</b>		

4) <sup>DC4</sup> Unless you answered 'yes' to 3, you must also obtain ethical approval through the University of Edinburgh process. Please submit a Level 1 form (with 'Methods' summary) and, if indicated, a level 2-3 form as well.

	<b>SHSS Ethics paperwork</b>	<b>Forms: level</b>	<b>Summary of 'Methods'</b>
		<b>1</b>	<b>2/3</b>
	Please indicate the SHSS Ethics forms completed herewith (✓):		
			X

5) <sup>DC5</sup> If you have completed the Level 2/3 form please list any additional documentation provided in support of your application (E.g. Disclosure, consent form, participant information, GP letters etc.)

Documentation Name <small>These should reflect content</small>	(✓)	Documentation Name	(✓)
Participant information sheet			
Consent form			
Schedule of questions			

6) Signatures

<b>Applicant Name</b>	<b>Signature</b>	<b>Date</b>
Jason Holmes		4 <sup>th</sup> December 2014
<b>Supervisor Name</b>	<b>Signature</b>	<b>Date</b>
Jonathan Wyatt		4 <sup>th</sup> December 2014

<sup>2</sup> 'Identifiable information' refers to information that would allow you to know, or be able to deduce, the identity of a patient. The most common examples of this would be accessing medical records or similar, or accessing a database that includes patients' names.



<b>Applicant Name</b>	<b>Signature</b>	<b>Date</b>
Jason Holmes		10 <sup>th</sup> September 2017
<b>Supervisor Name</b>	<b>Signature</b>	<b>Date</b>
Jonathan Wyatt		10 <sup>th</sup> September 2017

Please return an electronic copy of your UoE HSS Ethics Application Form (in its entirety) to your Section's Ethics Tutor, accompanied by electronic copies of additional documents indicated above. We do not accept paper documentation, please scan all documents into electronic formats. Please keep a copy of all documentation for your records.

### LEVEL 1 SELF AUDIT FORM

The audit is to be conducted by all staff and students conducting any type of empirical investigation, including research, audit or service evaluation.

The form should be completed by the principal investigator and, with the exception of staff, signed by a University supervisor.

#### SA1 Primary Research Question:

Please tick	What type of research are you planning to do?
	Study of a novel intervention or randomised clinical trial to compare interventions in clinical practice
X	Study utilising questionnaires, interviews or measures, including auto-ethnographic.
	Study limited to working with routinely collected clinical data
	Meta-analysis or systematic review
	Research database containing non-identifiable information

#### SA2 Please provide a brief summary of your proposed study. Our interest is in areas of your methodology where ethical issues may arise so please focus your detail on areas such as recruitment, consent, describing your participants and the nature of their involvement, and data handling.

This study aims to explore the assumptive worlds of gay men in the UK through the experiences of a sample group of three to six self-identified gay men.

Murray Parkes first introduced the term 'assumptive world' in 1975 as 'the individual's view of reality as they believe it to be i.e. a strongly held set of assumptions about the world and the self which is confidently maintained and used as means of recognising, planning and acting' (p132, *Br. J med. Psychol.*, (1975), 48, 131-137). Murray Parkes examined the role of these assumptive worlds in relation to psychosocial transitions. Janoff-Bulman (1985) later took Murray Parkes's ideas as a basis for her conceptualisation of trauma as overwhelm to an individual's three fundamental assumptions that the self is worthy and the world is both benevolent and meaningful. In doing so, Janoff-Bulman introduced the paradigmatic debate over the subjectivist nature of psychological trauma. This debate continues today, in regard to the objectification of trauma for the purposes of diagnosing post-traumatic stress disorder under Criterion A of DSM-5.

Both Murray Parkes and Janoff-Bulman speak of 'alternative languages' for assumptive worlds, as the working models concept located in the attachment theory of Bowlby and Piaget's concept of symbolic schema. All these interpretations have in common the rules, behaviours and expectations we expect of others and ourselves, in order to make sense of the world.

This study aims to explore what rules, behaviours and expectations gay men in the UK expect of themselves, their gay male social networks and the implications of these assumptive worlds on the mental health of gay men in the UK and their psychotherapeutic needs.

The key areas for exploration will be: -

Exploring the assumptive worlds of the participants in regard to their beliefs, rules and expectations in relation to their sexual orientation

Understanding the roles played by gay male social networks in the lives of the participants

Exploring the pre and post coming out assumptive worlds of the participants

Understanding the roles played by gay social networks at times of difficulty for the interviewees

Exploring any implications of the research in relation to the mental health of gay men and culturally sensitive psychotherapeutic practice.

The proposed methodological approach for this study is heuristic inquiry in the form of an arts based performative piece.

In order to participate in the research, prospective candidates must first self-identify as a gay male. Although the emphasis of the interview will be on the participant's relationship with their gay social groups and wider gay cultural relations, they should be sufficiently robust enough to talk about any personal traumatic experiences they feel is relevant to the topic and wish to self-disclose. They will be advised not to participate if they are actively experiencing traumatic events, overwhelming mental ill-health or easily overawed when discussing personal traumatic experiences. Meeting these criteria will be by participant self-assessment.

Recruitment criteria for participation are as set out in section ER10 of this submission.

Should these individuals express an interest in participation, they will be sent a copy of the information sheet and consent form for their review. Should they agree to the terms set out in these documents, a mutually beneficial time will be arranged to conduct the interview. Participants will be required to sign two copies of the consent form prior to the interview. One copy for retention by the researcher, the other for their records. Signing will be required to sign ahead of conducting the interview either by snail mail or face-to-face at the time of meeting to hold of the interview. No interview will be conducted without signed consent. No fee will be payable for the interview.

The interviews will be either face to face (preferred) or via Skype, depending on the preference of the participant, and other practicalities such as distance and time. Audio recordings will be taken using a hand held dictation device. No other people will be present at the interview other than the researcher and anyone the participant feels should be present, although this will be discouraged and unlikely given the age of the participants and relative neutrality of subject matter. The interview will be held somewhere and in a manner where the participants feel 'safe', so that they feel their confidentiality is securely held.

The interview will last for approximately one hour and will be audiotaped. The researcher may also make notes during the interview. If you do not wish to be recorded, participants will not be able to take part in the study.

The interview style will be relaxed and informal. No preparation will be required and the interview will be conducted in English. This will be made clear to the participants in the information sheet.

Participation in the research will be voluntary. Participants will be at liberty to withdraw at any time without prejudice up to the point the research is submitted to the University for assessment. No payment or fee will be made for participation.

Audio recordings of the interviews will be transferred to the University network as soon as practical after interview and all other copies of the recording will be destroyed. Other data handling arrangements will be as set out in this ethics submission form.

All of data handling and confidentiality arrangements will be in accordance with the description set out in this ethics submission form.

*The revised inquiry is a heuristic self-inquiry (HSSI) of how it is to be a member of a group, whose sense of being gay, characterised by specific places, customs, and practices, I argue is 'cultic'. It is an inquiry based on my involvement with an intimate friendship group of seven men between 2003 and 2010, from which I was expelled due to both sexual and non-sexual tensions within the group.*

*I will no longer be using interview data; instead research material will stem solely from my personal experience. For the previous approach to this study, I interviewed five men in 2015. To conclude the project, I plan to contact the*

participants and notify them of the end of the research in its current form. I'll inform them that the inquiry has shifted to one in which my experience is the primary focus, and that interview material will be destroyed.

Regarding the revised project, I do not plan to seek consent from the other members of my former friendship group. Deciding not to gain permission from those written about is not a comfortable decision and I appreciate there are arguments for and against my stance. However, I want to demonstrate not only the cognition aspects/consequences of the decision, but also the key emotional aspects too. At heart, it is a decision I make based on my self-care needs and not one I take lightly.

The men I will reference in the thesis and I have not been in contact for seven years. The thought of trying to find their email addresses and having to rake through old messages elicits anxiety, as does the thought of checking my inbox to see if they have replied. The thought they may ignore any email further worries me. If as a heuristic researcher, I focus on my intuition, then every cell in my body says no to consulting with them.

Importantly, I no longer consider these relationships as either intimate or 'alive' in the sense there is not contact. Therefore the risk of relationship breakdown is minimal, as there is no relationship to break. What is in danger, however, is the potential for reconnection, but the extent to which the relationships fractured at the time of breakdown I do not see this as a possibility or a desire. None of us have made any attempt to re-establish contact in the intervening years and it is not something I seek. I like myself not been in relationship with these men. What's more, the anxiety I experience concerning the group is settling, and I do not want to reignite feelings of turmoil that I cannot handle arising from reconnecting for the purposes of seeking consent. In other words, my not consulting does not stem from a position of privilege or arrogance. For me, I am comfortable knowing that I do not want to extend the relationships beyond their natural end. The 'unspokeness' that exists between them and me affords me the space I need to undertake the process of working through the emotional impact of what happened to me. There is sufficient discomfort in my exploration of the experience without the distress of having to reignite contact with people who are fading in my mind.

I am aware this leaves me with thinking about issues of representation possibly even more so than if consent was afforded. Despite a significant degree of interpretational and authorial power, I do not seek to punish nor do I seek revenge over what happened. What's more, I do not strive to skew events to support a hypothesis. As a heuristic self-search inquiry, there is no assumption, no theory on cults or LGBTQ friendships I seek to perpetuate. As with the majority of studies, names will be falsified. However, I am aware; this will not prevent members identifying each other. There is nothing I can do or write to uphold internal confidentiality; it is the inherent legacy of an intimate group. However, in attempting to maintain as much confidentiality as possible, what will be written will be restricted to what was known among us as a whole group, i.e., matters that were openly discussed in a group setting. I will repeat experiences and dialogues as I remember them. Consequently, the material should not come as a surprise to the men should they access the thesis. In the thesis, it will be made clear the material represents my subjective interpretation of the friendship group. It's my personal 'truth,' and not held up as 'absolute.' I accept those I aim to depict may remember events and people differently; that will be their truth, which is equally valid.

Given the personal nature of the inquiry, of course, on-going self-care is important. Counselling colleagues familiar with working with difficult feelings and open to discussing what will come up in the course of completing the study remain of great assistance. Likewise, family and friends unaware or frankly uninterested in the study, but who are interested in me as a family member and friend provide much-needed relief. The joy of being away from the study, not dwelling on my thoughts and feelings, is a helpful and productive distraction. Such weightlessness serves as a reminder to switch off (or indeed switch on) and that there needs to be light to balance darkness. I will seek out such 'distraction'. Furthermore, I've decided to step away from my counselling practice until the thesis is completed. Subsequently, I ended client work in the Spring 2017. I do not have the mental resources to immerse myself in the inquiry, meet deadlines and also be emotionally available for clients. Specifically, my feelings of impotence as a researcher are currently clouding my ability to be with the impotence of clients. In the meantime, the benefit of already undertaking self-care, through regular long walks and a fridge filled with nutritious food, is a reconnection with my body. At the heart of my self-care, I've learned to actually and metaphorically look up at the sky as well as down to my feet.

Please circle your answer as appropriate: (ANSWERS IN RED)

ETHICAL ISSUES			
SA 3	<b>Bringing the University into disrepute</b> Is there any aspect of the proposed research which might bring the University into disrepute?	No	

	For example, could any aspect of the research be considered controversial or prejudiced?		
SA 4	<p><b>Protection of research subject confidentiality</b></p> <p><i>Will you make every effort to protect research subject confidentiality by conforming to the University of Edinburgh's guidance on data security, protection and confidentiality as specified in: <a href="http://www.ed.ac.uk/schools-departments/information-services/services/research-support/data-library/research-data-mgmt/data-security">http://www.ed.ac.uk/schools-departments/information-services/services/research-support/data-library/research-data-mgmt/data-security</a></i></p> <p><i>For example, there are mutually understood agreements about:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(a) non-attribution of individual responses;</li> <li>(b) Individuals, and organisations where necessary, being anonymised in stored data, publications and presentations;</li> <li>(c) publication and feedback to participants and collaborators;</li> <li>(d) With respect to auto-ethnographic work it is recognised that the subject's anonymity cannot be maintained but the confidentiality of significant others must be addressed.</li> </ul>		Yes

SA5	<p><b>Data protection and consent</b></p> <p><i>Will you make every effort to ensure the confidentiality of any data arising from the project by complying with the University of Edinburgh's Data Protection procedures (see <a href="http://www.recordsmanagement.ed.ac.uk">www.recordsmanagement.ed.ac.uk</a>);</i></p> <p>For example</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(a) Ensuring any participants recruited give consent regarding data collection, storage, archiving and destruction as appropriate;</li> <li>(c) Identifying information<sup>3</sup>, (e.g. consent forms) is held separately from data and is only accessible by the chief investigator and their supervisors;</li> <li>(e) There are no other special issues arising regarding confidentiality/consent.</li> <li>(f) That where NHS data is being accessed Caldicott Guardian approval has been obtained.</li> </ul>		Yes
SA6	<p><b>Duty to disseminate research findings</b></p> <p>Are there issues which will prevent all participants and relevant stakeholders having access to a clear, understandable and accurate summary of the research findings should they wish?</p>	No	
SA7	<p><b>Moral issues and Researcher/Institutional Conflicts of Interest</b></p> <p><i>Are there any SPECIAL MORAL ISSUES/CONFLICTS OF INTEREST?</i></p> <p>Examples include, but are not limited to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(a) Where the purposes of research are concealed;</li> <li>(b) Where respondents are unable to provide informed consent</li> <li>(c) Where there is financial or non-financial benefit for <i>anyone</i> involved in the research, or for their relative or friend.</li> <li>(d) Where research findings could impinge negatively or differentially upon participants or stakeholders (for example when selecting an unrepresentative sample of a larger population).</li> <li>(e) Where there is a dual relationship between the researcher and subject? E.g. Where the researcher is also the subject's practitioner or clinician.</li> </ul> <p><i>Note – the Sept 17 amendments have changed SA7 from no to yes.</i></p>		Yes
SA8	<p><b>Potential physical or psychological harm, discomfort or stress</b></p> <p>Is there any foreseeable potential for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(a) significant psychological harm or stress for participants</li> <li>(b) significant physical harm or discomfort for participants?</li> <li>(c) significant risk to the researcher?</li> </ul> <p>Examples of issues/ topics that have the potential to cause psychological harm, discomfort or distress and should lead you to answer 'yes' to this question include, but are not limited to:  <i>Relationship breakdown; bullying; bereavement; mental health difficulties; trauma / PTSD; Violence or sexual violence; physical, sexual or emotional abuse in either children or adults; feedback of results from the project's assessments.</i></p>		YES

<sup>3</sup> 'Identifiable information' refers to information that would allow you to know, or be able to deduce, the identity of a patient. The most common examples of this would be accessing medical records or similar, or accessing a database that includes patients' names.

SA9	<p><b>Vulnerable participants</b> Will you be <b>recruiting</b> any participants or interviewees who could be considered vulnerable?</p> <p>Examples of vulnerable groups, the inclusion of which should lead you to answer yes to this question include, but are not limited to: Clients or patients of either the researcher OR the person recruiting subjects; Children &amp; young people; people who are in custody or care for example, offenders, looked after children or nursing home resident; persons with mental health difficulties including those accessing self-help groups; auto-ethnographic researchers examining distressing topics.</p> <p><i>Note – the Sept 17 amendments have changed SA9 have from no to yes.</i></p>		YES
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**Assessment outcome:**

SA10 **Have you circled any answers in BOLD typescript?** Please tick as appropriate

- No**  (i) Your responses on the completed self-audit confirm the ABSENCE OF REASONABLY FORESEEABLE ETHICAL RISKS.  
(ii) Please now read the guidance below and provide the required signatures.  
(iii) You are NOT REQUIRED to complete a level 2/3 application form.  
(iv) Please submit the UoE HSS Ethics Application Form electronic document (in its entirety) along with ALL additional required documentation, failure to do so will mean that your form is returned to you.
- Yes**  (i) Your responses on the completed self-audit indicate that we require further information to consider your application.  
(ii) Read the Guidance below and provide the required signatures.  
(ii) You **ARE REQUIRED** to complete a level 2/3 application form.  
(III) Please continue to page x of this document where you will find the level 2/3 form

Subsequent to submission of this form, any alterations in the proposed methodology of the project should be reviewed by both the applicant and their supervisor. If the change to methodology results in a change to any answer on the form, then a resubmission to the Ethics subgroup is required.

The principal investigator is responsible for ensuring compliance with any additional ethical requirements that might apply, and/or for compliance with any additional requirements for review by external bodies.

ALL forms should be submitted in electronic format. Digital signatures or scanned in originals are acceptable. The applicant should keep a copy of all forms for inclusion in their thesis.

<b>Applicant Name</b>	<b>Signature</b>	<b>Date</b>
Jason Holmes		4 <sup>th</sup> December 2014
<b>Supervisor Name</b>	<b>Signature</b>	<b>Date</b>
Jonathan Wyatt		4 <sup>th</sup> December 2014

<b>Applicant Name</b>	<b>Signature</b>	<b>Date</b>
Jason Holmes		10 <sup>th</sup> September 2017
<b>Supervisor Name</b>	<b>Signature</b>	<b>Date</b>

Jonathan Wyatt		10 <sup>th</sup> September 2017
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\*NOTE to Supervisor: Ethical review will be based only on the information contained in this form. If countersigning this check-list as truly warranting all 'No' answers, you are taking responsibility, on behalf of the HSS and UoE, that the research proposed truly poses no ethical risks.

### LEVEL 2 / 3 ETHICAL REVIEW

- Complete only if indicated in the conclusion of your level 1 form.
- Applications will be monitored and audited to ensure that the School Ethics Policy and Procedures are being complied with and applicants contacted in cases where there may be particular concerns or queries.
- Research must not proceed before ethical approval has been granted. For this reason it is particularly important that applications are submitted well in advance of any required date of approval.

If the answer to any of the questions below is 'yes', please elaborate and give details of how this issue is will be addressed to ensure that ethical standards are maintained. The response boxes will expand as you complete them. Forms that do not contain sufficient detail will be returned incurring delay.

RISKS TO, AND SAFETY OF, RESEARCHERS NAMED IN THIS APPLICATION	
ER1	Do any of those conducting the research named above need appropriate training to enable them to conduct the proposed research safely and in accordance with the ethical principles set out by the College?
	NO
ER2	Are any of the researchers likely to be sent or go to any areas where their safety may be compromised, or they may need support to deal with difficult issues?
	NO
ER3	Could researchers have any conflicts of interest?
	NO
RISKS TO, AND SAFETY OF, PARTICIPANTS	
ER4	Are any of your participants children or protected adults (protected adults are those in receipt of registered care, health, community care or welfare services – please refer to <a href="http://www.disclosurescotland.co.uk/guidance/infoforindivid/chap2_regulatedwork/2_3_step_2_define.html">http://www.disclosurescotland.co.uk/guidance/infoforindivid/chap2_regulatedwork/2_3_step_2_define.html</a> ? Anyone who will have contact with children or protected adults requires approval from Disclosure Scotland at <a href="http://www.disclosurescotland.co.uk/">http://www.disclosurescotland.co.uk/</a>
	Do any of the researchers taking part in this study require Disclosure Scotland approval? (✓)

Not applicable	X	*Ethical approval will be subject to documentation confirming Disclosure Scotland approval with this form.
Relevant researcher/s has current Disclosure Scotland approval through a current NHS employment contract		
Yes*		
ERS <b>Could the research induce any psychological stress or discomfort?</b>		
YES – risk of distress to the researcher inquiring into painful personal experience. Self-care and supervisory monitoring arrangements discussed in SA2. Risk of distress to those written about in the thesis also covered in SA2.		
ER6 <b>Does the research involve any physically invasive or potentially physically harmful procedures?</b>		
NO		
ER7 <b>Could this research adversely affect participants in any other way?</b>		
NO		
<b>RESEARCH DESIGN</b>		
ER8 <b>Does the research involves living human subjects specifically recruited for this research project</b> <i>If 'no', go to section 6</i>		
No other than the use of researcher, Jason Holmes, own experience as research material.		
ER9 <b>How many participants will be involved in the study?</b>		
Three to Six One –the researcher only		
ER10 <b>What criteria will be used in deciding on inclusion/exclusion of participants?</b>		
<p>Participants must</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Self-identify as a gay man</li> <li>Be 18 years old or over</li> <li>Be willing to discuss areas of research interest (for example their relationship to gay culture), relevant to this study and based on the information sheet provided to the participants prior to the interview</li> <li>Not be currently living through trauma and be sufficiently robust to discuss any experiences of trauma (self-assessed and declared)</li> <li>Be able to meet at a mutually agreed time and place in the time frame required to meet the requirements of the study (currently the first quarter of 2015)</li> </ol> <p>Participants will be excluded if they cannot meet in the timeframe required for the data collection exercise (currently the first quarter of 2015).</p> <p><i>Note – criteria now not required. Only participant is the researcher – Jason Holmes</i></p>		
ER11 <b>How will the sample be recruited? ( E.g. posters, letters, a direct approach- specify by whom.)</b>		
Request poster advertisement/email flyer in Doorway 6 of the University, the Edinburgh LGBT centre, and Stonewall Scotland (national gay rights charity) and the researcher's professional network (directly approached via email from the researcher), advising them of the research and inviting enquiries.		



<b>ER12</b>	<b>Will the study involve groups or individuals who are in custody or care, such as students at school, self-help groups, residents of nursing home?</b>
	NO
<b>ER13</b>	<b>Will there be a control group?</b>
	NO
<b>ER14</b>	<b>What information will be provided to participants prior to their consent? (e.g. information leaflet, briefing session)</b>
	YES – information sheet and consent form (draft attached)
<b>ER15</b>	<b>Participants have a right to withdraw from the study at any time. Please tick to confirm that participants will be advised of their rights, including the right to continue receiving services if they withdraw from the study.</b>
	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<b>ER16</b>	<b>Will it be necessary for participants to take part in the study without their knowledge and consent? (e.g. covert observation of people in non-public places)</b>
	NO Note – the researcher will write about his former relationships with gay men with whom no contact has been had for seven years and from whom consent will not be sought. The ethical considerations of this decision are discussed in detail in this form.
<b>ER17</b>	<b>Where consent is obtained, what steps will be taken to ensure that a written record is maintained?</b>
	The original signed consent forms will be stored in a lockable cupboard and separate to both the audio recordings and transcripts. Duplicate copies signed by both the researcher and participant. Signed copy given to the participants prior to the interview.
<b>ER18</b>	<b>In the case of participants whose first language is not English, what arrangements are being made to ensure informed consent?</b>
	Participants are requested on the consent form to ensure they understand the terms and conditions of both the information sheet and consent form. This will be verbally validated by the researcher prior to interview. Participants must speak English to a level they can conduct an hour interview in the language.
<b>ER19</b>	<b>Will participants receive any financial or other benefit from their participation?</b>
	No
<b>ER20</b>	<b>Are any of the participants likely to be particularly vulnerable, such as elderly or disabled people, adults with incapacity, your own students, members of ethnic minorities, or in a professional or client relationship with the researcher?</b>
	NO
<b>ER21</b>	<b>Will any of the participants be under 16 years of age?</b>
	NO
<b>ER22</b>	<b>Will any of the participants be interviewed in situations which will compromise their ability to give informed consent, such as in prison, residential care, or the care of the local authority?</b>

NO
<b>DATA PROTECTION</b>
<b>ER23. Will any part of the research involve audio, film or video recording of individuals?</b>
YES NO
<b>ER24. Will the research require collection of personal information from any persons without their direct consent?</b>
NO
<b>ER25. How will the confidentiality of data, including the identity of participants (whether specifically recruited for the research or not) be ensured?</b>
<p>Audio recordings will be erased from the recording device as soon as transferred to a university PC.</p> <p>Signed consent forms will be securely kept separately (locked cabinet) to the audio recordings and transcripts.</p> <p>Electronic copies of both the audio recordings and transcripts will be filed using filenames that protect the identity of participants.</p> <p>All identifiable information will be anonymised upon transcription.</p> <p><i>Updated Sept 17 measure to protect the identity of former friends</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All names other than the researcher will be falsified.</li> <li>• Dialogues will be quoted verbatim.</li> <li>• Material will be restricted to what was openly discussed when all 7 men were present.</li> <li>• Passages will be emphasis my thoughts and feelings that lead me to construct the others as I do, rather than depict people in a violent way and without justification. Example: rather than call a former friend 'manipulative' I will concentrate on what in my life made me construct them as such. This is a key aspect of heuristics, in which it is the response of the researcher from which understanding of the research topic is forged. This differs to other forms of self-inquiry, in which is the depiction of experience rather than the response that generates the understanding.</li> <li>• Personal material will be moderated by supervision</li> </ul>
<b>ER26. Who will be entitled to have access to the raw data?</b>
<p>Named researcher, supervisor and participant (upon written request) only</p> <p><i>Named researcher and supervisor only</i></p>
<b>ER27. How and where will the data be stored, in what format, and for how long?</b>
<p>Audio recordings will be stored in mp3 format on the personal storage space of the researcher on the university network only under a filename that does not identify the participant.</p> <p>Transcripts will be stored in password protected word document format on the on the personal storage space of the researcher on the university network only under a filename that does not identify the participant.</p> <p>Both the audio recording and all copies of transcriptions will be held for no later than 12 months after graduation.</p>
<b>ER28. What steps have been taken to ensure that only entitled persons will have access to the data?</b>
<p>Audio recordings and transcripts will be hold on the personal storage space of the researcher on the university network. Password will only be known to the researcher.</p>

<b>ER29. How will the data be disposed of?</b>
Both the audio recording and all copies of transcriptions will be digitally erased and physically shredded no later than 12 months after graduation.
<b>ER30. How will the results of the research be used?</b>
For the purposes of completing the professional doctorate qualification. Possible presentation at a research conference and/or publication in an academic journal.
<b>ER31. What feedback of findings will be given to participants?</b>
Either a copy of the full thesis or a clear understandable summary will be available upon written request by the participant.
<b>ER32. Is any information likely to be passed on to external companies or organisations in the course of the research?</b>
NO
<b>ER33. Will the project involve the transfer of personal data to countries outside the European Economic Area?</b>
NO
<b>ER34. An application at this level is likely to require additional documentation, for example consent forms or participant information sheets. Please return to the Documentation Checklist on page 2 to list your supporting documentation.</b>
<b>BRINGING THE UNIVERSITY INTO DISREPUTE</b>
<b>If on the level one form you have answered 'yes' that some aspect of the proposed research "might bring the University into disrepute", please elaborate alongside how this might arise, and what steps will be taken by the researcher to mitigate and / manage this, to minimise adverse consequences to the University.</b>
NO

Subsequent to submission of this form, any alterations in the proposed methodology of the project should be reviewed by both the applicant and their supervisor. If the change to methodology results in a change to any answer on the form, then a resubmission to the Ethics subgroup is required.

The principal investigator is responsible for ensuring compliance with any additional ethical requirements that might apply, and/or for compliance with any additional requirements for review by external bodies.

ALL forms should be submitted in electronic format. Digital signatures or scanned in originals are acceptable. The applicant should keep a copy of all forms for inclusion in their thesis.

<b>Applicant Name</b>	<b>Signature</b>	<b>Date</b>
Jason Holmes		4 <sup>th</sup> December 2014
<b>Supervisor Name</b>	<b>Signature</b>	<b>Date</b>

Jonathan Wyatt		4 <sup>th</sup> December 2014
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<b>Applicant Name</b>	<b>Signature</b>	<b>Date</b>
Jason Holmes		10 <sup>th</sup> September 2017
<b>Supervisor Name</b>	<b>Signature</b>	<b>Date</b>
Jonathan Wyatt		10 <sup>th</sup> September 2017

\*NOTE to Supervisor: Ethical review will be based only on the information contained in this form. If countersigning this check-list as truly warranting all 'No' answers, you are taking responsibility, on behalf of the HSS and UoE, that the research proposed truly poses no ethical risks.

<small>ER35</small> ISSUES ARISING FROM THE PROPOSAL
<p>I can confirm that the above application has been reviewed by two independent reviewers. It is their opinion that:</p> <p>a) Ethical issues have been satisfactorily addressed and no further response from the applicant is necessary, OR</p> <p>b) The ethical issues listed below arise or require clarification:</p> <p>The applicant should respond to these comments in section 8 below.</p> <p>Signature:</p> <p>Position: Professional Doctorate Researcher – Counselling and Psychotherapy</p> <p>Date:</p>
<small>ER36</small> APPLICANT'S RESPONSE (If required)
<p>Signature:</p> <p>Date:</p>
<small>ER37</small> CONCLUSION TO ETHICAL REVIEW (if required)

The applicant's response to our request for further clarification or amendments has now satisfied the requirements for ethical practice and the application has therefore been approved.

Signature:

Position:

Date:

ER38 **AMENDMENT/S: REQUEST FOR APPROVAL**

Subsequent to receipt of ethical approval above, I, the applicant, would like to request the following amendment/s to my original proposal.

I request an amendment from studying the assumptive worlds of other gay men to researching my experience of a gay male friendship group. It involves a methodological shift from using interviews as the primary research tool to personal vignettes.

Signature:

Date: 4<sup>th</sup> October 2017

ER39 **CONCLUSION TO ETHICAL REVIEW OF AMENDMENT**

I can confirm that the above amendment has been reviewed by two independent reviewers. It is their opinion that:  
a. The ethical issues listed below arise and the following steps are being taken to address them:

There are two elements to this amendment.

First, to discard all previous data gathered from interviewees and to inform said interviewees that their interviews have been excised from this research. Second, to analyse personal experience within an intimate friendship group over a number of years from which the researcher was expelled, without gaining the consent of the other persons in the group.

Both amendments entail high risk and require further work from the applicant (resubmission). In particular:

With regards to the first amendment: The interviewees willingly gave very personal accounts of their lives, in good faith, and on the explicit contractual understanding that their narratives were to be used for the researcher's doctoral thesis. The researcher owes them a duty of fidelity to honour what they have given him. Had the researcher approached the ethics committee to interview these men on this topic with the understanding that he may later entirely discard the interviews, he would not have received ethical clearance. Such action would have been considered disrespectful and unethical. The fact that his research has taken a different course is not in itself a problem, but he must find a way of honouring the stories he has heard, witnessed and worked with up to this point. To entirely discard and excise them from his work leaves him as a researcher and the University, under whose aegis he has collected this data, open to complaint.

The reviewers suggest that the applicant **does not contact interviewees** to inform them of change of focus. Instead, he incorporates a discussion in his thesis where he, first of all explain the methodological shift and his rationale for this, as well his consideration of the ethical implications of this change; and where he acknowledges these peoples' contributions and his work with them so far. Standard practice usually entails methodological details with some reference to general themes but no 'data analysis'. In some cases, the shift in methodology actually stems from the data itself, so this may be a way of honouring interviewee contributions.

**In your resubmission, please state whether you will be complying with this suggestion.**

Yes, I will comply. I have met my supervisor and agreed to insert a section in the methodology chapter covering the points you have raised regarding honouring the participants, their stories, their on-going influence on the research and the ethical implications of the shift. As per your request, interviewees will not be contacted.

As regards the new heuristic self-inquiry, the applicant plans to reproduce and analyse direct verbal exchanges and recount events and actions involving others without the knowledge or consent of the other persons. By his own account, these are highly intimate and private matters and his relationships with the other parties he will be analysing has entirely broken down. Although the applicant gives a thoughtful discussion around relationship breakdown, self-care and wellbeing and he acknowledges the positions he will be writing from, the potential to cause offence to those other parties is extremely high and could result in court proceedings for defamation of character. Even the fact that he refers to this specific group as 'cultic' could be offensive, let aside reproducing specific dialogues.

If the applicant wishes to proceed with this enquiry, he should follow one of two courses of action: 1. Obtain direct consent of the other men in this ex-friendship group for his planned study as outlined; 2. Conduct this analysis with absolutely no information about any person other than himself, presenting his account in such a way that no other person could recognise themselves or anyone else in this friendship group as being described or referred to in this work.

Based on this proposal, the reviewers understand that the applicant is not willing to obtain consent and that he will be opting for the second course of action. In this case, we recommend that no specific information about the group is included in the thesis (date, size, members, location, how the group was formed/dissolved etc.); that he writes about experiences in a way that does not expose specific events; and that he refrains from reproducing dialogues between group members. We recognise that this is a difficult task, but we feel that such precaution will protect the University and the applicant from possible dispute.

**In your resubmission, please respond to this recommendation and also include excerpts from your writing where you demonstrate your ability to write in this way.**

The need for specific and identifiable information to be excluded from the thesis is noted and agreed. All personal writing is been reviewed and amended where necessary. Names, locations, venues, settings (for example an apartment has been changed to a coffee shop) and dates will all be removed or changed. Any specific dialogues are also been removed. Two of the four revised vignettes are included with this document. In the first example, the individual's name, the year, the country, the food type, the singer, have been changed. The first vignette also demonstrates where I restrict the writing to myself. The second example also shows the focus on the self in the writing.

**\*ALSO, ENSURE THAT SECTION ER38 ON THIS FORM IS COMPLETED\***

Noted and completed.

Signature: Lorena Georgiadou

Position: CPASS REC co-Chair

Date: 3/10/2017

Acronyms / Terms Used

NHS: National Health Service

SHSS: School of Health in Social Science

IRAS: Integrated Research Applications System

Section: The SHSS is divided into Sections or subject areas, these are; Nursing Studies, Clinical Psychology, Counselling and Psychotherapy and Interdisciplinary Social Sciences in Health

**CONCLUSION TO ETHICAL REVIEW OF AMENDMENT**

The applicant's response to our request for further clarification or amendments has now satisfied the requirements for ethical practice and the application has therefore been approved, **ON CONDITION** that ongoing monitoring will continue to take place by the applicant and his supervisors, in relation to the reviewers' feedback on writing respectively, not including information about others etc.

Signature: Lorena Georgiadou

Position: CPASS REC co-chair

Date: 31/10/2017

**Example Vignette One**

*This summer, the one of 2003, is the best of my life. I'm holidaying in Italy three times. God, it's wonderful. Warm water; hot sunshine, fizzy drinks and good music. It's fucking ace. This time, I'm spending a fortnight with Stew in Portofino. It's amazing. Barefoot, we dance around the apartment to Christina Aguilera, who's all the rage this summer. I feel so blissful and happy. In the bathroom, I smell the tropical suntan oils that Stew and I use as we relax in the sun. It's a heavenly blend of tropical flowers and the dreams of adventures in far-away tropical lands. Tonight, Stew, and I are going to prepare a salad with the Italian sausage we bought from the local supermarket. To make the evening even more special, I've made the table outside as we're going to eat the salads on the balcony while basking in the evening Italian sun. I feel light, like a feather in a gentle breeze. My body tingles. It is a pleasant experience - a sense of being alive.*

*The reference to Italian sausage is important as it highlights the delight of been both with Stew and the 'foreign' nature of the holiday. My love of the fennel flavoured sausage remains. Buying it brings me joy; the smell when cooking it, takes my thoughts to this happy holiday. The experience is one where I am filled with love and joy. The foreignness writes to the liberation felt when experiencing experiences far removed from those before I met the group. Been with Stew, experiencing a lifestyle so unlike my Northern English working class upbringing elicits a joy in the death of the childhood self.*

*After dinner, we're going into town for drinks. At the harbour, I stare at the millionaires drinking and milling around their luxury yachts. I feel just as rich as them because I'm with Stew, the man I love, drinking champagne while sitting on the harbour wall. I'm wearing white jeans, just like the millionaires that surround me, for the first time in my life. I feel so posh. The phrase, fur coat, no knickers comes to mind. As I look down into the water, I see fish swimming. It's just so bloody swanky. What's more, as they're open late into the night, Stew and I are going shopping in Gucci and Prada. God I'm so tempted to buy one particular Prada bag. I'm earning a lot of money so that I can afford it. Gosh, do I feel good. A sense of oneness, of peace, engulfs me.*

#### **Example Vignette Two**

*I'm seventeen years old, and my bed sheets are bloodstained. I'm covered in open wounds. I have acne, really bad acne. In the bathroom mirror I see raw muscle where the hole left by a cyst has penetrated deep into the skin of my left shoulder. For the last few months, the way my face looks – covered in weeping cysts - means people are beginning to stare at in the street and I smell. The antibiotics infuse the pus that frequently burst with a stale metallised whiff. I've been having panic attacks too. My acne is rampant and there's nothing I can do.*

*A year later, and I'm stripped to my pants in front of a projection screen at a hospital far from home. I've been referred to a specialist dermatologist. I am alone. The reddish weepy mess of my skin clashes horribly with the room's clinical white. Puncturing my isolation, a man holding a camera enters the room. He's not so polite; he's more practical than the nursing staff or the consultant dermatologist I've just seen but I note his struggle in looking at my skin. Asking me to move my body into different positions, he begins to take photographs. Occasionally, he holds a ruler close to my cysts to record their size. I oblige. There's little chat between us. After a few minutes, he leaves. He's the first man to see me semi-naked, and all I was to him, was a diseased piece of medicalised meat.*