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## **Remaking the masculine self and coping in the liminal world of the gay 'scene'**

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## **Remaking the masculine self and coping in the Liminal World of the gay 'scene'**

### **ABSTRACT**

This paper investigates social transitions, constructions of masculinity and coping among men in commercialised gay spaces, such as nightclubs and dance parties ('the scene'). The findings are derived from two qualitative studies involving individual samples of 24 and 12 younger (aged 19 to 36) same-sex attracted men living in Melbourne, Australia. The analysis recasts 'coming out' into the gay scene as a passage into a 'new world' and a 'new self'. On the scene, notions of selfhood are challenged and men enter various states of liminality as they (re)construct themselves. New ways of performing the self can be tried on through ritualised behaviours, including performing various masculinities. While successful performances of masculinity can promote social 'acceptance', those who express non-hegemonic forms of masculinity can struggle harder. Internalised homophobia influences rituals on the scene, and men reported feeling like perpetual outsiders, regardless of the success of their performances. The emotional dangers to selfhood lurking in performance and ritual are explored, as well as the ways that men find to prevail. Invariably, liminality ends, and the men who do well approach themselves, the rituals and the performances with insight.

**Keywords:** Gay, masculinities, men, health, qualitative research, rituals

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **Gay masculinities and homophobia**

According to reams of contemporary research men are facing difficult issues. For Australian men, the crisis is said to be showing up as a pervasive feeling of jadedness in everyday life (Lambevski et al., 2001). Men feel their personal well-being is under siege from a range of outside forces such as job insecurity and lack of control. For gay men, homophobia (prejudice against homosexuals and homosexuality) in the workforce and beyond is an additional strain. In order to better understand the challenges facing gay men in contemporary life and their ways of coping, we draw on a number of key theoretical perspectives around the construction of masculinity. Firstly, we adopt Connell's (1995) concept of hegemonic (culturally authoritative) masculinity being contrasted with culturally marginalised forms of masculinity in a social system of multiple forms of masculinity competing for dominance. Secondly, we draw on Butler's (1990) performative theory of gender, which casts gender as a repetitive performance that creates a fictional stable core gender. We also draw on concepts of social transition, homophobia, ritual and liminality to understand men's experiences.

Homophobia remains a pervasive and robust feature of society that has considerable implications for men's health (Brown, 1993; Plummer, 2001; Ridge et al., 2003). An Australian survey found that during 1999, four out of five lesbian, gay, transgender and bisexual Victorians experienced discrimination or abuse on the basis of their sexuality or gender identity (Victorian Gay & Lesbian Rights Lobby, 2000). Homophobia has been linked to poor mental health, violence, avoidance of help-seeking and substandard health care (Fergusson et al., 1999; Hillier et al., 1998; Meyer, 2001; Robertson, 1998; Victorian Gay & Lesbian Rights Lobby, 2001).

Research shows that despite wide cultural and geographical diversity, same-sex attracted men share experiences of stigma, discrimination, rejection, isolation and violence. Compared to their heterosexual counterparts, same-sex attracted people are at increased risk for a range of negative outcomes including depression, anxiety, conduct disorder, and multiple disorders (Diaz et al., 2001; Fergusson et al., 1999; Jorm et al., 2002; McNair et al., 2001; Robertson, 1998).

### **Rituals and rites of passage**

Narratives in rituals promote new ways of being, social roles and connections with the wider society. For instance, young boys in some parts of Melanesia traditionally received ejaculate from older men orally as part of boosting male power and initiating them into a warrior culture (Herdt, 1984). The all-night, high technology, drug enhanced, rapid beat dancing at 'raves' can be interpreted as ritual: 'immersion and renewal through altered (trance-like) states...' (Hopkins, 1996). Even the school ground can be read as a space for boyhood rituals that validate masculinity and broadcast male reputations (Mac an Ghail, 1994). In terms of gay men, work done on the use of ritual insult in US gay culture shows that the bitchy insult (e.g. about sexual receptivity) is ritualised through exaggeration and falsification. The ensuing verbal exchange is said to provide a necessary schooling for quick witted responses in a society where gays need to defy homophobia and victimisation (Murray, 1983). There is also some literature on the way transgressive acts such as drug taking and male-to-male sexual pleasure can be about temporarily suspending the mundane – the exhausting rationality required to negotiate the everyday (Bartos et al., 1993; Lambevski et al., 2001). For Victor Turner (1969), the creation of such periods of 'liminality' is the point at which the everyday logic gets turned on its head, even if

just for a time. As will be discussed in this paper, rituals, liminality and passages on the commercialised gay scene<sup>1</sup> are at once removing men from the perceived homophobia of the outside world, as well as allowing them to rework their identities in a more ‘homophilic passage’.

The concept of ‘community’ is vague and unhelpful (Scheff, 1990), including for analysing the experiences of gay men in the commercial ‘gay scene’ (Weeks, 1991). In this paper, the narratives of men as they encounter the commercialised ‘scene’ are recast as transitions, rituals and rites of passage since these concepts describe and explain the data well. While the anthropological frameworks of rituals and rites of passage have been used as a heuristic device to understand the coming out process for gay youth (Herdt, 1989), as well as the ‘carnavalesque’ celebrations of lesbian and gay pride parades (Kates & Belk, 2001), such frameworks have not been used to analyse participation in commercialised gay spaces and coping.

This paper takes as its starting point our contention that in the everyday world, homophobic passage works to police transgressions against what is considered hegemonic masculinity (Plummer, 2003; Plummer, 1999). In this paper, we show that when externalised homophobia is suspended – as occurs when men first become involved in the gay scene – gay rituals and homophilic passage can all play a role in initiating boys into different ways of being male, including ways of coping with life outside the exit doors of gay venues. Rituals (including drug use and performing masculinities), passage over time, as well as the ways in which men mount (or fail to mount) defences of the self are the keys to understanding the way men cope. For it is

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<sup>1</sup> The ‘gay scene’ for the Melbourne men in our studies mainly encompassed gay and ‘gay friendly’ bars, pubs, nightclubs, dance parties and sex on premise venues.

at the level of mastery of gay rituals that the ability of men to cope can be better understood.

## **METHODS**

### **Research Design**

Our original study investigated issues of sexual safety, including within the context of commercialised gay spaces (Ridge, 2004; Ridge et al., 1999; Ridge et al., 1997). Issues of social connection and coping emerged as not only key in understanding the sexual lives of the men, but also as worthy of investigation in their own right. To develop the current paper, we analysed the original data from the 1990s using the core theme of 'transition' through the gay scene, with a focus on how men cope socially. Further data was needed to deepen this analysis so a second phase of data collection, consisting of 12 additional interviews, was undertaken in 2002. While there was 5 to 9 years difference between the datasets (1990s, 2002), the framework of social transition was very similar in the two samples. However, the additional interviews refined and added to the concept of transition by contributing further to our understanding of performing masculinity, ritual, emotional challenges and resilience.

### **Sample selection and recruitment**

As already documented in the literature, originally 24 men were recruited in Melbourne Australia mainly through advertisements in the gay press, and interviewed by Ridge (Minichiello et al., 1999; Ridge et al., 1997). The ages of the informants ranged from 19 to 36, although most men were in their 20s. In the second phase (2002), advertisements were placed in gay newspapers and principles of maximum variation sampling were used to locate diverse men for interview aged 20 to 35

(Patton, 1990). These interviews were conducted by Peasley and Ridge, and lasted from 60 to 90 minutes. The sample included 4 men of Southern-European heritage, one man of South-East Asian background, one Jewish Australian, and 2 men who had moved to Melbourne from smaller cities. The original sample was also ethnically diverse and included Southern-European and South-East Asian men. We wanted to collect diverse experiences to ensure a range of experience was drawn on for a robust analysis. After the collection of 12 interviews, no new data were being collected that furthered the analysis and it was considered by the researchers that saturation had been reached. The quotes in this paper do not cover the full spectrum of informants since not all men were highly experienced in the gay scene.

### **Data gathering processes**

All interviews in 2002 (phase II) were conducted through a multistage process as in phase (I) in the 1990s. The first stage involved face-to-face meeting(s) or telephone conversation(s) in order to establish rapport and address any concerns about the study. The second stage involved in-depth interviews in which recursive interviewing (using an interview guide) was used to explore experiences on the scene and coping. The interview guide was designed to elicit stories about how men came to be on the scene, their experiences as well as impressions of life there. Additionally, in the second phase, men were questioned more specifically about positive and less positive aspects of the scene; current problems or burning issues they were facing; how they handled feeling low; where support comes from; and thoughts about helping younger men deal with the scene. All interviews were tape-recorded, fully transcribed and double-checked for accuracy. Discussions and telephone calls encouraged at the end of the interviews and between interviews made up the third stage. The fourth stage involved

disengagement with informants. Journal writing was used to record fieldwork experiences, including key aspects of informal discussions, descriptions of informants, observations, impressions and emerging conceptual issues.

### **Managing and interpreting data**

A modified approach to grounded theory (inductively interpreting concepts and themes from socially specific phenomena in the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was used in the analysis of the data. That is, general theories from the literature that shed light on the data were also incorporated into the grounded analysis (Layder, 1993). Such an approach is important in overcoming the limitation of purely grounded theory that tends to focus the attention of the researcher on the micro level of analysis at the expense of larger theoretical and macro concerns. Analysis involved moving back and forth between the data and the literature, interactive reading of the data, coding and analytical induction (Ridge et al., 1997). The NUD\*IST qualitative software package was used for management, coding, searching and retrieval of the data generated. All quotes used in this paper are identified with pseudonyms. Quotes from the first phase of research are marked with '(I)' and those from the second phase are marked with '(II)'.

## **FINDINGS**

### **Transition into a 'whole new world'**

The data shows that in the early stages of 'coming in' to the new culture, men gather their courage to enter a world that is unfamiliar. They had a range of heightened feelings about this transition, including anxiety and elation. Not surprisingly, a number were anxious about crossing the threshold from the known 'heterosexual'

world into commercialised gay spaces. Harry's vivid description of walking into the scene for the first time reveals just how time and perception can distort such a momentous occasion.

.... I reckon it's like those scenes of a film where there's just like people right in your face with that close up camera work. Where you know [there are] representations of someone who's been drinking. Or someone that's really... their vision was slightly obscured and everything was sort of monstrous and in my face. I reckon my field of vision and probably my adrenalin and stuff like that was sort of obscuring my relation to other people. `Cause of that fear, pretty intense... You know spatiality, materiality it was really out of whack. – HARRY (II)

Once over the threshold, the scene is frequently experienced as a 'whole new world' that exists somewhat apart from the realities inherent in the everyday world. There is an emphasis on ritualised behaviours and pleasures such as dancing, cruising for sex, drug use and gender performance (Butler, 1990) such as drag and hyper-masculinity. Variously, the scene was considered a place to escape and feel freer. While some men were quickly disillusioned on crossing into the new social space, most were captivated by the celebratory atmosphere.

Uhm in the beginning it was a real sense of wonder because it was... showing me the potential of what it could all be like. – JOSS (I)

Everything was new...I can't explain. Like there was this wonder....and the whole feeling of freedom. – PETER (I)

So we danced like all night long. – FRED (I)

As it turns out, the 'whole new world' is a gay, transitional (mainly) night-time celebratory space where there is a new pecking order and competition for social status.

And your other life becomes drab by comparison... And that's because of the function of the scene, which is commercially oriented towards pleasure, and it's very easy to just grab onto that. – PETER (I)

You really had to wrestle your way up or wrestle your way in or break in somehow. And you know, it could leave you on the periphery easily. – JEREMY (I)

Once in this space, men can choose to reject or embark on their rite of passage. As discussed below, at some level men are aware that choosing this rite of passage will have implications for their selfhood. The key elements of the transition include 'discovery and wonder', liminality, engaging in rituals, reworking the self, and getting out. While there is no clear linear stage model operating here, men do tend to more or less move through the rite of passage unless they reject or otherwise feel no affinity to the scene. As discussed in further detail below, men engage in the transition, try out

new presentations of self, perform masculinity, more or less cope with challenges such as isolation and make exits.

### **Transition and the self**

What is less clear to the uninitiated is that ‘coming into’ the scene does not mark some end phase of ‘coming out’ into a gay identity and ‘community’. Instead, the transition into the social space often happens at a time when men are still grappling with who they are – sexually and otherwise. Men go into this world anticipating what it might hold for them, and importantly, what it might mean for their own sense of self.

In the beginning it was a real sense of wonder because it was...it was showing me um... They were showing me the potential of what it could all be like. – JOSS (I)

Many men who initially felt captivated by what they saw reported immersing themselves in this new social space, particularly early on. There was the perceived danger here of becoming ‘over exposed’, and even being identified as a ‘scene queen’. Additionally, the risk of exclusion and addiction were prominent in the narratives.

I’d say to a friend of mine you are exposed on the scene too much you know. You need to preserve yourself... preserve your image. – MIN (I)

I think a lot of people have their confidence really zapped on the scene. So therefore they find it hard to actually break away and establish new identities for themselves. And therefore they see their only identity as being connected to the scene... even though they're unhappy there. So in the end the scene itself actually becomes an addiction. – MATT (I)

Immersion in the new gay space also involved varying degrees of dissociation from other social networks (e.g. straight friends) and meaning frameworks (e.g. the value of the work identity). When the scene becomes more meaningful than other aspects of men's lives, men can effectively become 'suspended' in passage. A real anxiety for men beyond becoming addicted was the loss of an authentic sense of self. The passage was thought to be conducive to a loss of self because the rituals were potentially about performing in ways not related to feelings of authenticity e.g. appearing happy even if you are sad, body transformation and relating through drug use. The potential for loss of self is a deep irony for men who have survived homophobia in the everyday world and found a more homophilic social space. Homophobia has contributed to some men never feeling 'authentic', yet homophilic passage can open up further divisions and distance from 'authenticity'.

...they change their whole lifestyle into the gay scene... just with the clubbing and taking drugs. And it's a bit of a fine line between those two – with being yourself and being someone who is totally different from who came before, from the beginning... – GAVIN (II)

... I ended up wearing a netball skirt, army boots and dog collar. And everyone loved it when I got there. But that's just all an act because I wasn't happy. But I put on this show to say "Yeah, I'm happy, everything's perfect in my life."... I'm thinking bloody heaps of people do that. – JOHN (II)

Clearly, there are divisions, losses and renewals of the self going on in the passage. There are associated emotional dangers to be overcome and insights to be gained when engaging in rituals. Social skills are quite handy since it was understood that men could 'fall' and become emotional casualties. It was thought that men could get ensnared in the search for pleasure and self.

Too much of the scene, it breaks people...alcohol, drugs, sex...I've definitely seen it in other people. – MICHAEL (II)

I've got a friend aged 35...We'll go to the Peel or something and dance away and have a good night but he doesn't know moderation, he goes out and buys 10 pills at a time and he's a health professional. He should know when to stop....[but] he believes in that constant clubbing action.... Just going to the clubs all the time always off your head. – BEN (II)

Interestingly, keeping sight of something else meaningful other than the scene for these men – particularly work, friendships and relationships – helped to bring them through the passage.

...the friends I've known, they've really hit the drugs and the alcohol and the constant sex. I've sort of adhered to work and that's probably why I haven't [done that] because I've got to be there and be in a particular frame of mind. But both these two friends of mine, they started off young and have both fallen into the same pattern. That's why we've lost touch. – MICHAEL (II)

While the scene can be the centre of the universe for men for a time, the external world does call men back. Whether it be the responsibilities of work after the weekend, coming to identify less with the gay world, a new relationship or feeling burnt out after virtually 'living' on the scene for years, the passage does come to some kind of resolution.

I was full on into the gay scene... Whereas lately, we sort of tended to sort of break.... I'm a bit bored with the scene actually. – TIM (I)

For most, the magic of liminality ends, the need for the rituals is lessened, frustration sets in and men demote the scene. During this time of demotion, men focus more on the limits of the gay social space, such as limited relations and restrictive codes of behaviour. There were signs of 'burn out' in the narratives, and talk of limiting involvement to cope (Lynch 1992). What really helped bring men out of the commercialised social space successfully was finding a meaningful alternative. Alternatives included less socially restrictive gay commercialised spaces, meaningful sexual relationships, supportive outside friendships and the pursuit of a career. When men found meaningful alternatives, scene passages declined in importance.

Like I started doing things like being out with friends rather than going out to a club type stuff. – JEREMY (I)

I found that I got myself wrapped up in that world and really suffered because of that...[now] I haven't got time to waste my life on people who are superficial and fake and their life basically revolves around how they're gonna get their next fuck or their next drug-fucked night out. – BEN (II)

### **Masculine displays and policing**

As all men variously acknowledged, they are not necessarily excluded from masculinity in gay spaces. The rituals around performing masculinity and displaying muscularly developed and fat reduced bodies are not only highly prized, but also obtainable by many. *The Laird* pub is considered an exception, as it is seen as more accepting of different kinds of masculinised bodies e.g. hairy, 'bear' physiques. Nevertheless, in nightclubs like *The Market*, the competitive display of the masculine body as lean, muscular and hairless is difficult to miss.

...when you go somewhere like the *Peel*, *Trade* or the *Market*, it turns into narcissism – “This is my body, adore me.” It becomes a real cult. All these gay porn stars are the equivalent of Catholic saints. – MICHAEL (II)

Being able to reconcile their sexuality with a successful performance of masculinity is a key ritual in men initially accepting their sexuality in a homophobic world. Ben, considered attractive in the gay world, has watched others. He knows the kind of masculine performance he does and does not like. In his quite conscious effort to

present his masculinity – both on the scene and in the outside world – he is well aware that his demeanour and look has eliminated markers of ‘gayness’. He and others make comparisons with more subordinated gender performances.

The way I choose to present myself to the public I don’t really come across as gay. I come across all masculine... I’m glad because I mustn’t have a typical gay look about me or mannerisms, I don’t know. – BEN (II)

I hate people that cross-dress... I mean they look completely just like cuckoos you know... wrecking the image of gay people. – TOMMY (I)

As any type of masculinity exists in competition with others (Connell, 1995), the ritual around the display of the male body is highly competitive and policed. Four men – Daniel, Mason, Joe and Andy – have experienced the consequences of falling foul of this ritual. Daniel, Mason and Joe have all been verbally criticised for being ‘overweight’. There are personal choices that men can make with responding to body policing. Whereas Mason had some difficulties fending off criticisms, the other men were better able to cognitively master the ritual by viewing the problem as residing in the critic, rather than themselves. That is, regardless of where men are situated in the masculinity stakes, mastery is about the internal story they can deploy to support their coping.

I’ve had some comments about my weight, I’m not a model person. Disparaging remarks. Basically, they’ll pick on the body and say that you’re fat, you’re a bit

big... I do go over it again and again in my mind and I start to believe it...I buy into their negativity. – MASON (II)

Once I was actually going to the Peel and I was outside lighting up (a cigarette) and a couple of guys actually came up to me and said “you can’t come in here, you’re too fat, go home” and I was just like “whatever, see you later”. – JOE (II)

### **Homophobia & perpetual outsider status**

Interestingly, none of the men named homophobia directly as an issue in any of the interviews. Nevertheless, in deconstructing their accounts it is clear that homophobia is an important social dynamic in ritualised behaviours. As noted by some men, only just outside the doors the threat of hate-related violence loomed.

The little bit of insecurity that no matter how confident you are, every gay person has got it – of being attacked or bashed when you’re leaving the gay scene... I have felt walking home on my own a little bit scared before.– DANIEL (II)

The difficulty in challenging internalised homophobia could best be grasped in the perpetual outsider narrative that was contained in many interviews. This feeling was not only related to the outside world. Interestingly, feelings of isolation were also common *within* gay spaces. As Harry revealed, feeling like an outsider is a state of mind that develops from an early age. Feeling different can be as much an issue for those who appear to ‘fit in’ as those who feel excluded.

Interviewer: Is there anything right now that you're having a problem with on the scene?

MASON: I'd say fitting in. Yet at the same time, I'm the kind of person who has never fitted in. I've always been on the outside. I've always been different. (II)

Like I feel like people still want to see me fucking trip up... I mean that might be some old left over stuff from being teased at school you know. Whatever. But somewhere I still go onto the scene.... It's about belonging. Whether you're on the inside or the outside. I don't reckon gay guys ever recover from being on the outside. As much as they might like to think they have. – HARRY (II)

Working through the 'outsider' feelings and pressures to 'fit in', and becoming more at ease with the self, is a key to coping. The tension is that engaging in rituals (such as drugs to treat inhibitions, or modifying the body for masculine display) can potentially distance men from their sense of authenticity.

[It] makes you lose your sense of responsibility to anything else other than the scene. – PETER (I)

The key thing about men who tell stories about resiliency is that they are realistic about what the scene can offer. They are in touch with their authentic sense of self, allowing them to navigate scene life and cope well.

And also I find too when they [gay men] hit a certain age and there's a lack of attention, they sort of spiral down.... And I'm not so concerned with

attention.... The scene is not a support network, it's just a night out...If you were looking at it as a support network which a lot of people do...I don't think you are going to get the real element of support you're expecting...You're there to have a good time, and you've got to expect the social dynamics. – MICHAEL (II)

### **Personal coping**

Men actively find ways to cope on the scene. There was a sense that a number of men had a preference for dealing with problems on their own because this is what they knew best.

I just deal with it myself because that's how I was taught when I grew up. Don't talk about your feelings...So I just deal with it my way, whether it's going for a run or sitting in my bedroom by myself or whatever... – JOHN (II)

I know myself well enough that I'm confident with myself in just handling it. – JOE (II)

Such autonomous approaches were reported as effective. For instance, while some self-talk is self defeating, other internal dialogue contributes to resilience. For instance, men can re-frame feeling isolated, or criticisms about their weight through self-talk.

...but it's really difficult when you don't know people and [if you approach them] they're gonna say 'what's this guy, why's he so forward?' and this sort of

thing. So I stayed there for a couple of hours and I couldn't connect so I left...  
[I] shirk it off because I've learnt in life that you don't focus too much on the unhappiness of things too much because I can get myself quite down as well.  
Anyone can focus on the unhappy or the lonely feelings...– DAVID (II)

Beyond self-talk, another way of managing challenges is through self-help strategies. Most men described self-help strategies that took on a wide variety of forms. Some of the more helpful strategies reported including writing about problems, yoga and making better choices (e.g. see Ben and Adam). These strategies were helpful because they seemed to lead to shifts in behaviour and thinking.

I deeply analyse and become very complacent...I love yoga. It forces you to look at yourself. You have to accept and let go and I have to let go of a lot of things. – MASON (II)

How do you deal with it [a lousy night out]? Take yourself out of it really quickly...Get out of there because it's going to...it will do you more damage staying there than if you get out. It can be a horrible place. It can eat you alive, the scene, if you let it.... – ADAM (II)

Some instrumental approaches were reported as less helpful, such as drug use or casual sex. These approaches were considered more reactionary than those perceived as helpful. And while there was a heavy focus on self-management strategies, there was also a good deal of help-seeking behaviour. Most men had sought help from friends, partners or relatives. Many men had also sought counselling or therapy. Only

one man, Mason, reported a negative experience. He found that a gay therapist was unhelpful because the therapy prioritised sexuality issues rather than being 'whole-person focused'. Two men had contacted the *Gay and Lesbian Switchboard*, and the results were mixed, with one man gaining useful advice and referrals, and the other experiencing 'going around in circles'.

...And I've been with gay psychotherapists as well and he was directing me what to do. Telling me what to do...He was using sexuality primarily, he was based on sexuality. He wasn't based on the whole person and the different facets that make up the whole person. – MASON (II)

There were also mixed outcomes with support groups, with some men like Adam reporting help, yet some being unable to identify with the other members.

It was pivotal [the role of the social group] because I needed to contact somebody and discuss this issue. I felt I needed to tell someone I was gay and I didn't know any gay people. Didn't think I knew any gay people. Didn't know who to turn to and I didn't have any connection to the gay community but I knew that this group existed for gay men. – ADAM (II)

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The stories of gay men show that sexuality and gender issues have not fallen into the background of their lives, and the gay scene still provides an important urban space for young men to embark on homophilic rites of passage. The passage involves entry into a new gay world; ritualized (mainly night time) celebrations and activities; the

leaving behind of the routine of the everyday; the trying on of new (usually masculine) forms of embodiment, decoration and relating; and the re-emergence into the outside world with a changed status. At the same time, men are attempting to cope with inherent risks of passage including exclusion and isolation, becoming suspended and stuck, addictions, loss of self, drugs and alcohol.

Even if ultimately unsatisfying, at least initially, life in the 'the scene' involves 'out of the ordinary' experiences including liminality; the formation of social connections with others (sometimes chemical through drugs); and the display and policing of markers of masculinity. Responding to such challenges invariably had implications for the way that men understood themselves. Commercialised gay spaces are perhaps *a key* contemporary urban space where young men are reworking themselves through ritual. In order for self-remodelling to take place, conventions must be challenged – particularly those to do with gender. Perhaps this is why drag queens and body fascism – moments when gender is at once played with, poked fun at and policed – are initially considered so 'in your face' by some. Men's sense of the old order of things *needs* to be suspended for the passage to commence. Ironically, the confronting elements of the scene are contradictory. Although there is a sense of loss and grief in many narratives about not finding a 'gay community', the scene is somewhat 'business as usual' since at some level men know they have embarked on a passage away from the familiar. Despite the pleasures, few really expected that everyday reality would cease to be important.

The rituals on the scene need to be more or less mastered if men are to benefit from the experience. A transition of the self necessarily means loss, and getting stranded in

the rituals is where emotional danger lies. There was a deeper fear of 'loss of self' detected in the narratives. This is not unexpected given that to varying degrees, people do get lost, and parts of the self do inevitably die in the passage. Common to rituals for men everywhere, participants can return to the world with new ways of being which mark irreversible change in life and self (Lewis, 1985).

The act of performing (particularly in terms of gender) is also one of the potential outcomes of ritual since 'acting ritually emerges as a particular cultural strategy of differentiation' (Bell, 1992). Performing is important as men need to rehearse and act out new selves for scene participation and deployment in the outside world. However, with the presentation of self there is a tension between the 'virtual' and 'actual' self that needs to be managed (Goffman, 1963). As Goffman argued, there is a routine need for social actors to develop a 'front' in social interactions to hide parts of themselves in order to overcome difficulties in social life. For the sake of coping socially, the key for gay men is to avoid getting stranded in repetitive, performative ritual transitions and to try develop a performance and narrative of self that feels authentic and satisfying.

There are some interesting points to make about scene rituals. First, the rituals themselves direct men towards somewhat restricted styles of repetitive gender performance (although relatively diverse compared to the wider world). At first glance, the level of policing of the male body might seem odd. Yet, through male ritual, certain uniform goals in masculinity are always encouraged, and at times even enforced, through social sanctions (Gilmore, 1990). Secondly, being framed by a relative lack of homophobia, it is clear that scene rituals are much safer than the

dangers usually associated with rituals enforcing hegemonic ideals of masculinity. Back in the schoolyard the choices in masculine rites of passage were quite bleak: humiliation or becoming a bully yourself (Rofes, 1995). Outside the school yard, the choice is about marginalisation or a narrow interpretation of what being male means (Huggins, 1997). On the scene, failure to conform might mean attacks on self-esteem, lowered sexual and social currency, but it is unlikely to result in violence.

In the Westernised world all men undergo a ‘homophobic passage’ from childhood (Plummer, 1999). The narratives of these men show that commercialised gay spaces can provide an alternative ‘homophilic passage’. That is, certain things that were ruled out of order previously (e.g. gaining masculine social status) become possible. Unfortunately, the socialisation of the homophobic passage has already done much of its work. The new homophilic passage sits alongside – and in uneasy tension with – the homophobic passage. The tension is captured in moments such as when Ben reacts badly to ‘big effeminate poofs running around’. Nevertheless, in the quarantined world of the ‘scene’, ritualised behaviours (e.g. dance, drug use, decoration) allow men space to work through some gendered transitions and their inherent tensions. And despite the relative safety of the scene, there are also *new* dangers such as the danger of internalised homophobia and associated outcomes such as becoming the ‘perpetual outsider’. A recent Australian study found that a sense of belonging is a crucial mental health support for gay men (Jude, 2003). Interestingly, it was belonging to the broader community – not the gay community – that was beneficial. The real destination of the scene passage is the re-integration of the self into the wider world.

Recognising residual homophobia on the scene is important. Research with large cohorts of gay and bisexual men in New York City have shown that two thirds report some level of internalised homophobia (Meyer & Dean, 1998). The authors of this paper conclude that internalised homophobia is a subtle but persistent self-oppressor. Crucially, they point out that internal homophobia is common among men who have apparently already *accepted* their homosexuality. Further, they argue that those with high levels of internalised homophobia may not be able to enact self-enhancing defences, and will need assistance to re-interpret negative events realistically, rather than in terms of self-blame. While the current study encountered men who were battling to enact self-defences on the scene, they were not necessarily victims. In fact, this homophilic passage – with all its obvious limitations – probably allows some men a good shot at self-determination and embodiment of a more authentic self. That is, gay men can not only survive homophobia, but prevail.

The results about policing the body resonate with British research which found that compared to their heterosexual counterparts, young gay men (aged less than 25) score higher on measures of eating disturbance, select body ideals that are significantly slimmer, and are less happy with their own bodies (Williamson & Hartley, 1998). The authors here speculate that gay male eating disturbances originate in the ‘narcissistic injury’ of homophobia, leading to bodily punishment and compensation for inferiority through perfecting the body. The current study suggests an additional dimension to the phenomenon – eating disturbances also emerge out of rituals and passage toward a *new* masculine status, involving visual displays and preening of the male body, all the while with body fascists policing the ritual. To better cope, either men have to learn to

accommodate social messages or mount an effective defence against the external (and internal) critic.

There is currently a lack of recognition in the literature about how men can do well and be resilient drawing on their own resources, experiences and strategies to support themselves, and, how such strategies can work. Helping professionals can reconceptualise 'coming out' onto the gay scene as men entering a social space where they undergo rituals that challenge them as men and their sense of self. Professionals could then provide some additional guidance. Here, the pitfalls of passage could more usefully be viewed as rituals, which if mastered, could be highly beneficial to men.

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