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Liquid Citizens?

Towards a sociology of lesbian and gay intimate citizenship in the Republic of Ireland

Sean Nicholas George Reynolds

A Thesis submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy to the Department of Sociology, University of Dublin, Trinity College

April 2008
Declaration

I declare that this thesis has not be submitted in whole or in part to this or any other University and that it is entirely my own work. I hereby give my permission for the Library of the University of Dublin to lend or copy this thesis upon request.

Sean Reynolds

Dublin, April 2008.
Thesis Summary

‘... ‘Stories’ have recently moved centre stage in social thought ... a clear ‘narrative moment’ has now been sensed [by sociologists]...’ (Plummer, 1995: 18-19).

In this thesis, I argue that we can usefully explore Irish sexuality within the emergent frame of analysis that is known as sexual or intimate citizenship. While ‘citizenship’ has tended to be theorised as pertaining to public sphere rights (Marshall, 1950), recent sociological attention has been directed to how citizenship can be extended beyond T.H. Marshall’s tripartite model (social, political, economic citizenship) to include arenas of social life that were considered to be arenas of private life, including sexuality. Juxtaposing the private (sexuality) and public (citizenship), sociologists have become interested in how sexual stories can be told, and how power underpins everyday dilemmas about being able to tell sexual stories in the public sphere (Plummer, 1995; Weeks, 1998).

Such stories, which could not be publicly told barely a generation ago in Ireland, are important ways in which we tell ourselves (and others) who we are, who we want to be. This is an edgy embodied experience, which is reflected in the thesis title of ‘liquid citizens’. The title is evocative of Bauman’s (2000) liquid modernity, as I suggest revision of sexual story scripts is a liquid phenomenon. My findings suggest that a break from the supposedly fixed gender roles of yesteryear is well underway, but we might consider Bauman’s (2000; 2002; 2005) concept of liquidity as a useful metaphor to capture the revisable, ongoing dilemmas about intimate life. We seem to be in sustained liminality where (supposed) certainties about Irish sexuality have been challenged, but no ‘new certainties’ replace the old ones and this lends a particular embodied intensity to concerns of some informants. As old certainties and traditions about sexuality seem to dissolve before
our eyes (but are within living memory for my generation), we find ourselves having to rely upon our own stories to re/make our selves. I posit that we need to explore further the centrality of and materiality of human agency as a resource for what Giddens (1991) terms life planning as a way of coping with detraditionalization. My findings demonstrate that biographical experience becomes central to ongoing reflexive dilemmas about sexuality. In this light, my work contributes to intimate citizenship as an arena of dilemmas where:

'... people may have to make decisions around the control (or not) over one's body, feelings, relationships; access (or not) to representations, relationships, public spaces, etc.; and socially grounded choices or not about identities, gender experiences, erotic experiences. In line with the general features of life politics... there can no longer be an expectation that blueprints pure and simple will be found. Intimate citizenship does not imply one model, one pattern one way. On the contrary, it is a loose term which comes to designate a field of stories, an array of tellings, out of which new lives, new communities and new politics may emerge.' (Plummer, 1995: 151-152).

Taking the Irish context as my chosen domain, I focused on lesbians and gay men who had been implicated in activism/sexual politics in particular. Using data that was gathered through a mix of qualitative research methods, I focused largely on how a politicised sample of Dublin-based narrators articulated intimate citizenship concerns in a number of social settings. My research supports the view that 'lesbians and gay men present a challenge to Ireland's traditional social ordering as a result of their distance from that order and their simultaneous proximity to it' (Flynn, 1997: 493). I contend that the prime way in which they/ we 'present a challenge' is through stories. One commentator recently noted, 'speakings-out' serve to problematise 'the silences that held the old Ireland together' (O'Faolain, 2006). Beginning with 'speakings-out' constitutes a fertile aspect of a complex terrain from which to begin addressing how intimate citizens want to live together.
Acknowledgements

In preparing this thesis, I would like to take the opportunity to express my thanks to many people for their support over the years. I am most grateful to Barbara Bradby, who has been a supervisor par excellence, mentoring my professional development and guiding me expertly through the intellectual journey that is a doctoral thesis. Likewise, I am grateful to the kindness of the women and men who contributed to my work in their capacities as research informants. I would like to acknowledge the support I received under the aegis of the Trinity Postgraduate Awards, the IRCHSS postgraduate scholarship and the TCD Broad Curriculum Teaching Studentship. I would like to thank Ronit Lentin, Evelyn Mahon and Hilary Tovey at the Sociology Department (TCD), for playing crucial roles in encouraging me. Indeed, women have played a critical role in my wider pedagogic development. From Miss Rose Thompson, who taught a late developer how to read in St John’s Primary School (Jersey), through to Principal Nolan, who made a migrant boy welcome at Borris Vocational School, and Dr. Maggie Gibbon (formerly DCU) made me feel ‘at home’ in academia, I sincerely thank you, one and all. This thesis topic has something of a genesis in some masculinities research I was involved in at UCC (1997-1999), for which I am indebted to Harry Ferguson (now at UWE).

During my postgraduate studies, I have been fortunate enough to meet a number of leading sociologists whose work has been central to the development of my thesis. In particular, I count Ken Plummer, Jeffrey Weeks, Zygmunt Bauman and Raewyn Connell as being such inspirational figures. While leading sociologists often meet and talk with many students, I wonder if they always appreciate how crucial their embodied presence, their interactions and encouragement, however fleeting, can be? Their endeavours fired my imagination and their books, like companions, have never been further than arms-reach away in my library. As anyone who has done a thesis knows, you rely upon many personal friendships and acquaintances to sustain you in academia, from within and without the campus. I am especially indebted to Suzy Byrne, Aisling Heath (Cape Town), and Christian Gheorghiu (Japan). I am grateful to the very lovely Mischa Kroes-Seery, and to his parents Judy and Peter, for providing some occasional escapes to The Hague.

The American writer Armistead Maupin (2007) has recently distinguished our relationships between family of birth and of choice by referring to ‘bio’ and ‘logical’ to reflect a Cartesian ‘split’ I can live with. So, my thesis would not have been possible without the unstinting, loving support of my amazing bio-family, my parents, James and Pamela, and my sister Fiona and her partner Paul. Likewise, my late uncle Peter, and my sprightly 83- year old aunt Moira, took much amusement over the years in their ‘lefty’ nephew the sociologist! My work would be as nought without my -logical family: Alan, my irrepressible soul mate of almost two decades, has been there for me all along. I cannot end my acknowledgements without mention of the ‘most excellent’ company of Cleo, Buffy, Cordelia and Gandalf, who slept through most of it - as only cats do.

Dedication

For Alan, with love

and

in memory of my uncle,

Peter Thomas Jarrett (1921-2007)
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Chapter One: Introduction

Beginnings

In this thesis, I explore struggles over contemporary Irish lesbian and gay sexuality, with a view to recasting them in the context of late modernity. We might argue that the study of sexuality in general has been somewhat neglected a topic within Irish sociology (Tovey and Share, 2000), with writings about sexuality emerging from other academic disciplines such as history and feminism. I posit that we should seek to develop and reframe the sociology of Irish sexuality within emergent work around sexual or intimate citizenship (Plummer, 1995, 2003; Weeks, 1998) as a way of interrogating how our sexuality cuts across the personal and political. My position emerged in a grounded way from an engagement with literature on Irish lesbian and gay sexuality and with a professional experience of researching the intimate lives of a range of Irish men. Through my work, I began to ‘know my place’ (to allude to a famous 1960’s British television comedy sketch), or rather, I started to become critical of how gay men were placed within the social order and I put that down to how we know normatively about sexuality. Too often, non-heterosexual sexualities are either made ‘Other’ - or erased from history entirely.

My rationale for suggesting a turn to intimate citizenship, following the work of some British sociologists, is to redress what I suggest is an imbalance in the Irish sexuality canon and to position sexuality within a late modern standpoint. I argue that the Irish sociology of sexuality should be viewed as ‘a product of social and historical forces’ (Weeks, 2003: 67). We should also recognise how sexuality is changing; as Simon (1996: xvii) reminds us, it is a ‘profoundly variable’ topic and ‘all discourses of sexuality are inherently discourses about something else.’ More specifically in terms of this thesis, there is a need to explore beyond Ireland’s
progress on gay rights, which can be seen predominantly as a *rhetoric of progress*, and consider the issue of how people live as non-heterosexuals.

There has not been commensurate attention given to embodied experience, to political claims and to interpersonal relationships (the interactional). I maintain that demands for lesbian and gay equality would be *enhanced* by attending to how inequality is made manifest in narratives, discourse and interaction, and acknowledging the historicity of sexuality. In short, there is a need to incorporate *sexual stories* as an 'empirical social process(es)' that are imbued with power (Plummer, 1995: 24, 26) and which signal to us that our understanding of sexuality is changing quite profoundly.

In this chapter, I seek to accomplish a couple of things. Having stated what this thesis is about, I will briefly describe how I came to develop this research focus, and to see how I came to identify my research dilemma within the emergent literature on linking sexuality with citizenship (Plummer, 1995, 2003; Weeks, 1998).

**My intellectual journey to a research focus**

I describe my experience of finding my focus as a 'journey', because it captures the process of discovery implicated in my work. As a cumulative process, what began with personal interest in gay masculinity became paid employment as a researcher on a project about masculinity politics (Reynolds, 1998b). In turn, this experience raised how to explore the sociology of sexuality. With no *a priori* map to guide me (and partly because I had originally intended to do a thesis that was quite separate from my ‘day job’ researching masculinities), I found that progress through postgraduate life was a particularly messy, but incredibly stimulating lifeway. It is fair to suggest that my approach is data-driven. The way I have linked
methodology, theory and empirical data is innovative, and bears testament to starting researching sexuality from the ground up with lapsing into relativism. My approach has been highly influenced by a bricolage of symbolic interactionism, critical masculinities research (Connell, 1995) and late modern (Giddens)/ liquid modern (Bauman) social theory, which helps me relate to the fleetingness of contemporary sexuality (Kong et al, 2002). There are other ways of exploring the sociology of sexuality, but this is mine. Next, I want to briefly outline how my experience of researching masculinities provided an impetus into to interrogating lesbian and gay intimate citizenship. Thereafter, I will explore how I position myself in terms of social theory and lead onto how my research problem can be explored as a form of citizenship.

Masculinity Politics as my research catalyst

My research focus emerged from prior research into Irish masculinity politics. This project, framed by the lead researcher (Harry Ferguson) through a Giddensian view of the world, led me to become interested in social change as an underlying sociological issue in terms of both social theory and research methodology.

After reading for an undergraduate degree in Sociology, for which I completed a pilot study on gay men’s lives (Reynolds, 1997), I took up a two-year post as a research officer at UCC. The project was aimed at exploring ‘Gender and Identity in the Lives of Irish Men’ and sought to explore through life-history research how men coped with changes in their personal lives and relationships (Riessman, 1990; Charmaz, 1994, 2002). Prior to joining the project, contacts had been established with a men’s group initiative, which had been set up to provide support to men who were experiencing social isolation. Along with running several men’s groups, the network held an annual three-day workshop for men (the Irish Men’s Summer School [IMSS]), during which time I made contacts with potential interviewees.
Focusing on how men dealt with change inevitably meant addressing an embodied sense of the ‘loss’ of men’s traditional gender role (Real, 1997; Willott & Griffin, 1997). Detraditionalization is an important way in which the analysis of Irish sexual culture is framed, and I situate this term within the context of my overall theoretical position. But first, I want to outline how my experience of researching masculinities was disrupted by sexual politics.

**Masculinity and (Homo) sexuality: categories and choices**

When I noticed that gay men did not participate in masculinity politics, I ended up doing some interviews with them. Through this experience, I started to consider that gay men who were politically-motivated were knowledgeable interview subjects. A number of interviews with gay activists (I refer to just one here) led me to feel that interviewing some ‘intellectuals’ could provide me a route to explore the personal and political.

As we (Harry and I) established some rationale (Goffman, 1989 [1974]) for choosing a research sample of men for interview, I began to notice the absence of gay men in this (otherwise enlightened) arena of masculinity politics and I became alerted to a struggle over sexual knowledge at play that was largely unspoken. While heterosexuality understandably was dominant (given the social setting), I became concerned that gay men could not be, to cite the ethos of the men’s initiative, ‘unconditionally heard’. Likewise, it was puzzling that gay men were not actively involved with masculinity politics. There were differing knowledge claims about homosexuality. One heterosexual interviewee claimed he never knew any real homosexuals until he began working in the arts:

‘When I was working in the theatre you had a number of people there who were gay, this was only kind of a theoretical thing as a child. But here I was actually coming across it
like. And I remember I'd heard about this but I thought it was some sort of abstract thing. But no this actually does exist.'

This informant could not articulate what the 'it' he referred to was 'sexuality'. When I asked another man if he had known any 'queers' at school, he informed me, 'we were all queer bastards', explaining how they all had a school prank where they wrote 'I am a queer bastard' on each other's exercise book. As no teacher could scold such language without mentioning homosexuality, this informant was telling me that little (heterosexual) men knew about the power of staying together (Poynting et al., 1997).

I also encountered mundane levels of homophobia at a personal level, which illustrated some underlying vulnerabilities in engaging with masculinity politics. Another heterosexual interviewee commented:

'I don't mind if it's the genuine person that that really wants to join a men's group or get value off a men's group even if he is gay. But he's not going to bring his gay life into it like, you understand what I mean? You know what I'm getting at, you know what I mean? His personal life is his own personal life to me'.

I was reminded of how another academic felt like a 'travelling diva', the pointed comment to me evoked the idea of 'please do not stay' (Matsuda, 1996). It brought home to me how 'patriarchal culture has a simple interpretation of gay men: they lack masculinity' (Connell, 1995: 143). Manliness was shown to be 'fundamentally an ideological category ... [and] instrument of patriarchy...' which is predicated upon heterosexuality (Valente, 2006: 67, my italics) but within which heterosexuality was assumed rather than seen as socially constructed. More generally, I noticed that gay men were not openly participating in masculinity politics – I was the only gay in the village, as it were - hardly a position of privilege.
My uncertainty and inquisitiveness led me to conduct several life-history interviews with gay men, who were located through snowball sampling, in two regional cities. While these interviews were (as a category of study) intended to be life-histories, I did interrogate how these gay men felt about masculinity politics. What I found was a sexualized asymmetry in relation to what counted as politics in terms of activist style (Melluish & Bulmer, 1999).

In an otherwise insightful, soulful, reflexive life story about growing up in an abusive family home and paedophilic relationship, one gay activist teased me, in a feigned camp voice, about how masculinity politics was just ‘tree hugging’ (perhaps a riff on the mythopoetic men’s movement). ‘Would you join a men’s group?’ I asked him. ‘Oh no’ he squealed (as if offended) ‘I couldn’t go hugging trees and all that!’ He used minstrelization (Goffman, 1959), to soften his critique of contemplative masculinity politics, but he was clear ‘contemplative politics’ could not to be taken seriously when gay men have to struggle for their rights and counter discrimination. He also expressed fatigue about having to make time when engaging with heterosexuals to constantly disclose his sexual orientation. While the idea of ‘fatigue’ is a metaphor that softens political dissent, his interview was a presentation of self (Goffman, 1959) as a gay man.

Talking about ‘being tired’ is also a way of avoiding the social stigma and millstone of disclosure (O’Neill, 1988; Green, 2007). In an artful fashion, I learned from this narrator that his life story was an agency-formed weave between his activist life and his life history, which went some way to transcending the Cartesian mind/ body dualism (Williams and Bendelow, 1995). His reflexive account about his life demonstrated how masculinity is onto-formative (Connell, 1995). In short, this narrator’s embodied experience as a gay man made the reality he lived in.
At the time (1997-98), the lack of gay activist participation in masculinity politics made me puzzled about how Irish LGBT politics and masculinity politics compared. However, noting how we knew little about gay activists’ lives, I initially opted to frame my doctorate around activist lives over opting to research a social movement. I had consulted one or two published historical studies that provided excellent analyses of the gay movement (Rose, 1994; Hug, 1999), but I noticed that neither account explored much about the lived experience of activists. In keeping with wanting to ‘do interviews’, I felt that I could fill a research ‘gap’. Interviewing activists (politicised gay men) would be a good ‘theoretically relevant’ focus (Glaser and Strauss, 1967: 49) and I could explore the nexus between ‘life’ and ‘politics’ (Snow and McAdams, 2000), while focusing on life political dilemmas. As activists that I had interviewed (versus ordinary narrators) were more ‘independent’, I also thought I would be able to remain ‘detached’, not too emotional as when you interviewing the more vulnerable informants about life-changing issues (Reynolds, 1997; Moonwoman-Baird, 2000; Lentin, 2000a, 2000b). So I thought interviewing gay activists might be a fertile terrain to explore because ‘coming out’ is definitely disruptive to biography and might link to ‘politics’. Giddens reminds us that disruption to the biography leads to reflexivity:

‘Where large areas of a person’s life are no longer set by pre-existing patterns and habits, the individual is continually obliged to negotiate life-style options. Moreover – and this is crucial – such choices are not just ‘external’ or marginal aspects of the individual’s attitudes, but define who the individual ‘is’. In other words, life-style choices are constitutive of the reflexive narrative of self. (Giddens, 1992: 75).

The other side of my thought was about how and in what ways did I want to look at collective identities (selves and social movements). Giddens (1991) tends to neglect how collective identity operates in relation to the reflexive project of the self. (Should that be selves?) While I was coming from a position of some concern about how masculinity politics excluded gay men, the IMSS setting did demonstrate that
personal fulfillment is a cultural accomplishment that happens in group settings' (Lichterman, 1995: 277) when men shared their stories about social life. A small amount of available social movements literature led me to note how 'selves' were seen as being peripheral to the study of 'movements' (McAllister Groves, 1995; Snow and McAdam, 2000; Broad, 2002). As my research developed, I began to feel such social settings informed sexual stories in that people were drawing upon the biographical solutions of others to make 'bricolage biographies' or learn about how others reformulated their biographies within a context of detraditionalization.

Theorising Social Change: engaging with late/liquid modernity

I mentioned, above, that detraditionalization (Heelas, 1996) was a lynchpin for the men's group initiative I researched. While productively (for me) noting how gay men were excluded from masculinity politics, I also thought about how I understood modernity, postmodernity and late modernity. I conclude this section of the chapter with a call to consider some concepts in Bauman's work on liquid modernity in the context of Irish lesbian and gay sexuality.

If sociology, as Tovey and Share (2000) suggest, is the study of modern society, then Ireland's rapid social transformation would make us question modern concepts of progress and social order. By 'modern', we are referring to the emergence of modern society that came with Enlightenment thinking. Modernity was characterised by Baudelaire (1965: 13) as being 'the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable'. While writing about art and aesthetics, we can take up a more generalised understanding of modernity as about 'the eternal and immutable' in terms of how society became 'solid' through the application of legislation, regulation and planning. Bauman argues that:
'Modernity, as we remember, is an age of artificial order and of grand societal designs, the era of planners, visionaries, and - more generally - "gardeners" who treat society as a virgin plot of land to be expertly designed and then cultivated and doctored to keep the designed form'. (Bauman, 1989: 113).

In case you doubt the 'gardening' metaphor and modernity, at the 2007 Irish Nurses' Organisation conference, its president, argued the health services' priorities were wrong, and she took both the Minister and administration to task for wasting money, and she used an interesting metaphor:

'I think it is right that senior managers would consider, in a time of fiscal pressure deferring the replacement of office furniture and PCs. Equally, it is not an unreasonable suggestion to defer landscaping projects until next year. I cannot imagine a patient dying or suffering because the gardening is not done.' (Spiers, 2007: 3 – my emphasis).

What this speaker was interrogating was the wisdom of trying to maintain order in a chaotic world. It is evocative of how, in modernity, the quest for order and progress, was 'largely unquestioned' (Tovey & Share, 2000: 20), and there was 'an obsessive march forward' (Bauman (1991: 10) in the name of seeking out more planning, regulation and control over social life. However, the mechanisms through which the 'solid' aspects of modernity are made into a fixed reality (e.g. through policy and law for example) serves to illustrate the antimonies of modernity's melting social order. Giddens captures this idea in his metaphor of a 'runaway world' (Giddens, 1991: 16), expressing the dynamism that emerges, as traditionally-established practices lose hold as ways of organising social life.

Theoretically, there has been a pluralisation of perspectives about social transformation. Social theorists today grapple with a number of perspectives on modernity, which reflect how it is 'easier to see that 'modernity'... is an ambiguous concept whose meaning depends on your 'value stance' (Weeks, 2000: 13). Echoing
this point, Tovey & Share (2000) suggest to us that the 'value stance', as Weeks puts it, can be viewed in terms of either postmodern or reflexive sociological approaches to social theory. My value stance is late modern, with a hint of liquid modern. We can see that there has been a retreat from postmodernity. Informed by Lyotard's (1984: xxiv) call for incredulity towards metanarratives, postmodernity is problematic (Tovey & Share, 2000: 22) because it supplants problems with certitude with other epistemological dilemmas and carries the risk of a 'do your own thing' relativism. Postmodernity, like Queer Theory, has been critiqued for a tendency to rely upon debates about expert knowledges rather than accounts of lay perspectives (Wynne, 1996: 44), but, more substantially, postmodern theories 'cannot answer very basic questions about how and in what ways everyday lives and professional fields are being transformed' (Beck, 2000: 211; Tovey, 2001).

Bauman, who identified with postmodernity (Bauman, 1995), has revised his attachment to it, arguing that it was 'a stop-gap' term while theorists grappled with modernity's reflexivity, adding that '... "Postmodern" thinking could not but adhere to the agenda set by the 'modern', limiting itself mostly to the rearrangement of plus and minus signs'. Additionally, Bauman adopted liquid modernity as his preferred metaphor for capturing this period. He feels 'late' modernity signals an end of modernity rather than its intensification and reflexivity, and thus opts for 'liquid modernity' (Bauman and Yakimova, 2006). Likewise, the postmodern turn that led to queer theory (see Jagose, 1996) can also be seen in this useful 'stop-gap' light. Its optimism led to a tangle of categories and exclusions (Hostetler & Herdt, 1998) but it has helped to renew sociological interest in sexuality and stigma. My methodology could be considered as a 'queering' (Honeychurch, 1996) of social research in that I have taken a potpourri of methods and turned them to interrogate an issue. However, at a wider level, postmodernity and queer theory can be criticized for their part in taking sociology further away analysing how people
experience social transformation, make sense of how to live, etc. My stance is that we need to maintain close to the reality of the human condition, and that makes me an adherent of 'late' or 'liquid' modernity.

The sociological perspective advocated by Tovey & Share (2000) rests on the view that modernity has not been 'displaced' or that we are in a period of 'post' modernity. Rather, theorists argue our self-understanding of our relationship to modernity has changed. According to this view, we are living in a late modern world (Giddens, 1990; 1991; 1992), which requires us to rethink the metaphors we use for describing society and social change. For Giddens,

'In conditions of late modernity we live in the world in a different sense from precious eras of history. Everyone still continues to live a local life, and the constraints of the body ensure that all individuals, at every moment, are contextually, located in time and space. Yet the transformations of place, and the intrusion of distance into local activities, combined with the centrality of mediated experience, radically change what the 'phenomenal world' actually is. This is so both on the level of the individual and the general universe of social activity in which collective social life is enacted' (Giddens, 1991: 187).

Central to Giddens’s perspective on late modernity is how we are engaged, as active, self-authorial subjects. At the heart of Giddens’s work is a turn to life politics:

'While emancipatory politics is a politics of life chances, life politics is a politics of lifestyle. Life politics is the politics of a reflexively mobilised order - the system of late modernity - which, on an individual and collective level, has radically altered the existential parameters of social activity. It is a politics of self-actualisation in a reflexively ordered environment, where that reflexivity links self and body to systems of global scope. (...) Life politics concerns political issues which flow from processes of self-actualisation in post-traditional contexts, where globalising influences intrude deeply into the reflexive project of the self, and conversely where processes of self-realisation influence global strategies' (Giddens, 1991: 214).
Giddens argues that we are engaged in what he terms the 'reflexive project of the self', wherein we inspect the assumptions about our subjectivities, and we view identity as a work-in progress under the guise of asking 'how we want to live' in social context. While older social cleavages persist, Giddens (1991: 6) argues that it is 'differential access to forms of self-actualisation and empowerment' that becomes critical to late-modern self-identity. A central element to our changing relationship to the self is 'set off' by the ways in which our lived experience is less ordered by tradition that it was, and we have to fill this 'gap'.

For social theorists, as society moves away from being ordered by tradition, people 'are themselves called upon to exercise authority in the face of disorder and contingency' (Heelas, 1996: 2). How this occurs in practice is culturally-specific. While it appears that traditional values are closed off, it is also important to note how, for example in regard to sexuality, that loosening of 'traditional' values around reproductive sexuality plays an important role in allowing non-normative sexualities to enter the public sphere.

Our changing relationship to 'tradition' is a central issue in Giddens's account of late modernity, as it becomes a way of reflexively thinking about our lived experience and our multiple relationships to the past. In Ireland, 'tradition' is a particularly important element in the lived experience of people of my generation (broadly narrators in this research), given how Ireland has been transformed over the past fifteen to twenty years through social changes stemming from the rise of the Celtic Tiger economy and from globalization.

We can note that how people relate to social change is somewhat age-specific in stories that people tell to researchers. For instance, in prior research with Irish men, I noted how older men (over 50 years) talked about how they had seen their
way of life disappear. Most middle-aged men (aged 30-50) had experienced the full force of detraditionalization in their own lived experience (e.g. through experience of marital breakdown, unemployment, etc.). Younger men (late 20's-late 30's) were more adept at negotiating their intimate lives (perhaps having grown up in the recession-hit 1980's?). Young men (17 to late 20's) felt change was normal, and deftly negotiated their way in life, but they tended to lack life experience upon which to draw. The general point I would make about why social change and the decline in tradition figure so much as themes in Irish social research is because enormous and complex social change is occurring within living memory. The focus on 'change' or 'tradition' depends on the context. For example, researching an Irish masculinity politics project, I found that men focused on how their 'traditional' jobs had declined but how they related to social change depended upon their age cohort. While collective masculinity politics enabled some aspects of detraditionalization to be contextualised and examined as part of the social world, heteronormativity was mostly undisturbed.

Lesbians' and gay men's accounts do suggest to us that heterosexuality is being 'disturbed' by late modernity. In their accounts for this thesis, many of them felt there was a (more welcome) decline in tradition as oppressive attitudes towards homosexuality declined. Thus, this thesis supports Giddens in his view that Ireland is in a 'post-traditional order, [is] not one in which the sureties of tradition and habit have been replaced by the certitude of rational knowledge' (Giddens, 1991: 2, my emphasis). Giddens (1991) suggests that sureties of tradition act as a 'protective cocoon', which wards off social uncertainty and helps to shape social life. But when the cocoon unravels, we are left problematising our material lives: there are a host of dilemmas for lesbians and gay men at play here, principally about coming out, and about finding an intimate other.
Thus, Giddens maintains that 'the more tradition loses its hold, and the more daily life is reconstituted in terms of the dialectical interplay of the local and global, the more individuals are forced to negotiate lifestyle choices among a diversity of options' (Giddens, 1991: 4-5). In short, people engage in reflexively monitoring their biographies and making up new rules for their lives.

The Meaning of Tradition in the Irish Context

'Tradition' is made intelligible in the Irish cultural context through the way in which it sustains Irishness and Irish nationalism. This operates in gendered ways for men and women, but it also shapes sexuality. Political and religious discourse has long drawn upon functionalist notions of gender roles to construct an imagined community of 'traditional' Irish people in an effort to bind the nation together in an imagined community. Such a discourse assumes that we are universal subjects (read: heterosexual male subjects) with rational rather than emotional bodies that are supposed to fill prescribed roles. The imagined community is also predicated upon blind trust, in that:

'It is [an] imagined [community] because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the images of their communion' (Anderson, 1983: 15).

In late modernity, when Giddens argues tradition is waning, he does not mean it vanishes. Rather, he is arguing that our understanding of the meaning of tradition is transformed. As we adopt a reflexive understanding to knowledge claims, we no longer accept traditions unquestioningly as truths but see them as intellectual resources (Giddens, 1994: 5; Gellner, 1992).
In the Irish context, however, we still find important traditional nationalist symbols (Anderson, 1983; Brubaker, 2004) in everyday life that appear timeless. For example, RTE's daily *Angelus* broadcast, which 'depend[s] heavily on traditional, pre-modern themes for identity' (Cormack, 2005: 286), is one of several constant symbolic, moral reminders of 'constructed certitude' (Beck, 2000: 67) – and of Catholic social control.

While the Angelus might be an exceptional case, more reflexive interpretations of Irish historical materials is an important way in which our understanding of 'tradition' is changing. For instance, we could argue that there has been a degree of essentialist misreading of early Irish sociological studies (such as Arensberg and Kimball's (2001 [1941]) study of 1930's rural life, even Messenger's work (Messenger, 1971), which has helped to perpetuate the stereotype of Irish traditional family life as some *idealised* past from that era (Seward et al, 2005).

We might locate the origin of the silences about Irish sexual practices as a legacy of post-famine Catholic fervour. It is suggested that religiosity helped to re-shape the Nation in the aftermath of the trauma of the 1840's famine in which so many people perished or had to leave Ireland. Drumm (1996: 94) suggests to us that:

>'After the Famine people married later in life many never married at all; the Catholic Church preached a message of temperance and sexual abstinence and... the newly emerging Catholic middle class rejected the raucous religious expression of an earlier age in the embrace of personal scrupulosity, individual ambition and religious rigour. The latter was facilitated by frequent recourse to the sacrament of confession whilst the dominance of Victorian values in a wider context reinforced an atmosphere of sexual repression'.
The twin process, of famine and religiosity, shaped sexual values and norms, but we later enshrined in legislation and policy when Ireland attained independence in the 1920’s.

Sewell et al (2005) suggest that older analyses tend to portray the past as the truth, whereas some more recent works historicize stories about sexuality and gender. From a range of sources, history, literature and traditional popular culture (Chessser, 1998; Connolly, 1996; Eyerman & Jamieson, 1998; Hanafin, 1998a, 1998b; O’Crualaoich, 2003; Walshe, 1997), we have some examples of new critical studies of Ireland’s ‘gay’ past. These reflexive analyses, in fragmentary ways, can enhance the reinvention of ‘tradition’ from an essential truth of our identities into an intellectual resource by which we reflexively imagine how ‘things’ have changed.

So when one commentator suggests that ‘traditional masculinity in Ireland was essentially rural, based heavily around the family, marriage and celibacy’ (Ferguson, 2002: 120), it is imbued with implicit knowledge that encapsulates more than 1930’s Ireland. Reflexively, we can relate Ferguson’s comment to our historical understanding of how masculinity was constructed via both pre- and post-independence nationalist discourses, in which rural idylls were invoked to secure control over gender, sexuality and bodies, and to prevent another calamity like that of 1847.

The ‘traditional’ image of Ireland, as I mentioned was perpetuated by political parties in the early years of the Irish independent state, but this discourse had two sides to its story. While in public discourse, De Valera waxed lyrical about rural life, the material implications of ‘tradition’ were hardly benevolent in practice. In seeking to establish a secure State, De Valera’s early administrations attempted to ‘fix’ Irish tradition through a range of Catholic-infused legislation and familial
policies around sexuality and morality during the 1930's. While the impact of these ideas can be felt today, historical research about sexuality, as Seward et al suggest, is opening up a reflexive reading of sexual regulation.

In the 1930's, an ‘architecture of containment’ around sexuality, which was implemented to prevent disease, protect morals, etc., also served to close off any public discussion of sexuality (J. M. Smith, 2004), which in Giddensian terms is a ‘sequestration’ of sexuality. The Carrigan Committee (1931) considered the problem of sexual crimes, and was instrumental in both sequestering sexuality from public discourse, and making marital heterosexual hegemonic:

‘The Carrigan Report, I propose, was a formative moment in establishing an official state attitude toward ‘sexual immorality,’ and the subsequent legislation authorized Ireland’s containment culture. In its concrete form Ireland’s architecture of containment encompassed an array of interdependent institutions: Industrial and Reformatory Schools, mother and baby homes, adoption agencies, and Magdalen asylums, among others. These institutions concealed members of society who had been marginalized by a number of interrelated social phenomena, including illegitimacy, incest, and infanticide. In its more abstract form this architecture comprised both the legislation that inscribed these issues and the numerous official and public discourses that resisted admitting to the existence and function of their affiliated institutions. In arriving at a hegemonic discourse that responded to perceived sexual immorality, the Carrigan Report and the Criminal Law Amendment Act not only sanitized state policy with respect to institutional provision but also disembodied sexual practice, concealing sexual crime while simultaneously sexualizing the women and children unfortunate enough to fall victim to society’s moral proscriptions. Moreover, this official discourse helped construct an illusion of political non-partisanship against the backdrop of post–civil war divisiveness. Finally, it helped to engineer widespread public consent by way of the legislative agenda, even while the operative functions of the institutional response to sexual practice were shrouded in secrecy’. (J. M. Smith, 2004: 209).

While this sexual regime had built upon Free State concerns about sexuality and disease (Howell, 2003), it remained embedded until the 1970’s. It framed much of the sexual order in twentieth century Ireland and shut down most other discourses
about sexuality that developed from the post-war period in other countries. This regime would have operated as the ‘truth’ about sexuality. As I will demonstrate later, it was possible to postulate an alternative viewpoint (but only just).

Most information about sexuality, which might have questioned this ‘truth’ was, simply, not available because of censorship and Catholic morality. One narrator for my thesis, who studied at university in the 1960’s, remarked how books on her course were unavailable to read because they were banned by the censor, while she wanted to know about ‘it’, she did not want to confront authorities by asking for naughty books. Another informant told me how whenever he holidayed in the UK as a teenager in the late 1970’s, he used to try to buy medical books, which would actually have information about sex and ‘H&E’ magazine, for the pictures. Only as the culture of containment start to be questioned, did Micheal MacLiammoir use his position as a theatrical personage to create a ‘sensibility’ (and we might call it no more than that) about homosexuality [I will allude to this in chapter two]. It is only, however, in more times has the ‘truth’ (above) been turned into the dominant form of sexual knowledge. In Weeks’s (1995) terms, his idea of ‘myth’ might have become a little closer to being viewed as a ‘fiction’. J. M. Smith’s (2004) work, above, is part of a process of turning the ‘truth’ of this sexual regulatory regime into what Weeks (1995) terms a ‘fiction’, but it is a necessary fiction that brought order to his life.

The loosening of controls around sexuality (Kearney, 1982; 1988) coincides with Ireland’s shift from poverty to relative prosperity. From being a country of persistently high unemployment, with dependence of direct foreign investment, little industrialisation, and large-scale net outward migration throughout much of its existence as an independent State, by the late 1980’s and 1990’s, there was a marked turnaround in Ireland’s economic success. From modernisation/
dependency theory debates (Coakley & Gallagher, 1992; Webster, 1988; O'Hearn, 1989; O'Malley, 1989), which were used to theorise Ireland's economic exceptionalism, we now find we are careering towards some sort of convergence with leading global economies. Ireland's economic success is not without its critics, such as Marxist sociologist Kieran Allen (Allen, 1999), who mourns the social costs under which the Celtic Tiger economic and social consensus was forged. Ireland's economic transformation has been accompanied by a loosening of sexual regulation, a loosening of family lifestyles and an explosion of discourses about intimacy. It continues to be an intense, liminal period of change, where sexuality and gender, which were previously sequestered issues, reappear as a public concerns. The emergence of these concerns has had important ramifications for gender and sexuality, resulting gender vertigo (Risman, 1996).

Women, who had actively policed as women, now have to confront and juggle multiple demands. Men had to confront loss of their 'imagined' gender role (Lindsey, 1997) and experienced feelings of loss. No longer real or putative patriarchs in 'local informal system' of social control (Messenger, 1979: 7; Mahon, 1994), the loosening of social control left them with more choices but little in terms of enhanced emotional literacy to cope with dilemmas.

The disruption of tradition's 'cocoon' under late modernity has led men to question how they should live as men. The men's initiative was designed as a life planning tool to help support men to attain mastery over their lives (Giddens, 1991) as it was considered that men were unable to 'exercise authority' over their identities (Heelas, op. cit.). Within this maelstrom, heterosexuality is (still) not openly problematised.
Giddens, or Bauman or Both?

While Giddens’s work appeals (greatly) to me, I feel that it could be enhanced by drawing on some concepts from Bauman. My rationale for looking to Bauman stems from some criticisms of Giddens in the literature (his optimist stance, his neglect of collective politics over the idea of the generative other in a pure relationship). Likewise, ‘liquidity’ captures much of late modern gay life.

Jamieson (1999) argues that Giddens is too optimistic about the pure relationship and does not support the concept empirically (Giddens, 1991: 89-97). If he did, Jamieson claims, then he would have a more nuanced viewpoint. However, I would argue that it might be fairer to suggest Giddens does allow for sites of ‘struggle’ over ‘differential access’ in his theory, which could be worked through in a particular (empirical) context. More recently, Giddens (2005) accepts the need for grounded research on this point. I would also have some sympathy with Jamieson’s criticism of Giddens’s ‘pure relation’ being too stark, even atomistic, were it interpreted as a normative alternative to ‘fixed’ roles, it could be more helpful to interpret the ‘pure relationship’ as an important tendency in late modern relationships (where some relationships are ‘purer’ than others). We might suggest that intimacy is shaped in more complex ways by risk avoidance than Giddens allowed. Reflecting in 2005 on his own work, Giddens (2005) admitted to not having theorised the ‘negative’ side of his position empirically, which would give a more nuanced account of selves in context (as per Jamieson, 1999). This viewpoint might be extended to Giddens’s hopes for sexual democracy:

'Sexual emancipation, I think, can be the medium of wide-ranging emotional reorganisation of social life. The concrete meaning of emancipation in this context is not, as sexual radicals proposed, a substantive set of psychic qualities or forms of behaviour. It is more effectively understood in a procedural way, as the possibility of the radical

As I alluded above, one issue that is missing from Giddens’s 1991 work is how collective identity might fit into his schema of the reflexive project of the self. It is largely taken as given that Giddens assumes that the reflexive project of the self is relational to a generative other (in terms of intimacy). There is also some suggestion of a social ‘project’ of self in terms of how he frames sex addiction (sex with strangers, public spaces) but Giddens does not, for example, fully take up Goffman’s idea on public interaction (Goffman, 1963a; 1967). Giddens recently highlighted this shortcoming about collective identity (Giddens, 2005) while reflecting upon his work in a public lecture. I would suggest that exploring collective identities (such as groups) might also go someway to turning Giddens’s project of the self into something closer to the ‘project of the social’ (Lash and Urry, 1994: 38). However, I think, in many respects, there is flexibility in Giddens’s work to allow for this: collective politics waxes and wanes... in a rather liquid way.

In my research on masculinities, I saw how an annual forum of men talking about their lives [with no duties on participants to ‘keep in touch’ as it were], was, constitutive of the reflexive project of the self. So, I suggest Bauman might be helpful on collective identities, but he also might temper some of Giddens’s ‘optimism’. In positing that we might draw upon Bauman, I note how Giddens (2005) flatly dismissed Bauman’s ‘liquid individual’, but I would argue that some concepts in Bauman’s work can help us think about gaps in Giddensian theory. So perhaps I can briefly sketch out where Bauman is helpful to me. Plummer suggests that ‘most of us were and probably are living simultaneously in traditional, modern and postmodern worlds’ (Plummer, 2003: 8). I would argue that Irish lesbians and
gay men are somewhat more oriented to Bauman's *liquid modern* but also draw upon traditional, modern and postmodern sexual discourses *in particular contexts.*

Taking ‘liquidity’ as a sensibility or metaphor, Bauman suggests that modernity, which is marked out by the ‘melting of solids’, has taken on a new meaning where ‘the task of constructing a new and better order to replace the old and defective one is not presently on the agenda’ (2000: 5). In Bauman’s view, under modernity - think of that gardening metaphor - that which liquefied was worked upon to become solid [or hold a shape]. In liquid modernity, Bauman (2000: 6) postulates that:

> *The solids whose turn has come to be thrown into the melting pot and which are in the process of being melted at the present time, at the time of fluid modernity, are the bonds which interlock individual choices in collective projects and actions – the patterns of communication and co-ordination between individually conducted life politics on the one hand and politics actions of human collectivities on the other.. ’*

The implications of Bauman’s stance is that patterns and configurations of social life are no longer a ‘given’. Rather, Bauman argues, life politics precedes emancipatory politics, in that we choose ‘who we want to be in’ as individuals, and the struggle then comes to try to maintain one’s life politics choice as an ongoing accomplishment in the face of ‘melting powers’. This idea is quite interesting in relation to Irish lesbian and gay sexualities.

In some respects, Irish LGBT sexualities may have never been terribly ‘solid’. They have been hidden from public discourse; they have become contested in recent years, but have not become embedded within culture. (We might suggest the only ‘solid’ features have been ‘The George’ and ‘Front Lounge’ pubs and the AIDS clinic, but they are not quite what Bauman may have meant; older bars, for example,
'Rices' and 'Bartley Dunnes', have vanished in time). In some other cultures, there has been a 'solid' modern era for homosexuality, which we might associate with the sodomite/homosexual as a (stigmatized, criminalised) personage (to draw upon McIntosh's (1968) work). I note how British theorists, for example, have posited that a proliferation of sexual discourses in 1960's Britain disrupted 'settled patterns of sexual life' (Weeks, 2007: 163). Part of this 'unsettling', surely, was confronting the spectre of the homosexual (Plummer, 2003: 116). This confrontation made the homosexual visible (if criminal), but I would suggest that in contemporary Ireland this public confrontation did not begin in earnest until the late 1970's/early 1980's.

So, we might argue that there has not really been much time for 'gay identity' to settle as 'solid' in Ireland. Indeed, (some) lesbian and gay men only became disruptive identities in the 1980's, but for most of the time before then, it was nigh impossible to openly problematise heterosexuality. Irish feminist, Ailbhe Smyth, noted how difficult speaking out was for lesbian writer Mary Dorcey:

'It would be hard to overestimate either the difficulty or the importance of Mary Dorcey's writing against the heterosexual grain was, for all practical purposes, during the 1980's she was a lone voice. 'It was not in the light we lived, but in the spaces in between – in the darkness'.' (Smyth, 1994: 6).

In the present day, it might not be exact to suggest that lesbians and gay men are exactly 'lone voices' anymore. More Irish lesbians and gay men have come to terms with their sexual orientation, but still struggle with disclosing their sexuality and find a 'home' through a 'Babel of voices' (Weeks, 2003: 7) in order to artfully remake their own lives and find 'home' (Carrington, 1999). So what I would say about the Irish experience is that we have gone from deep levels of stigma (Goffman, 1963) about lesbian and gay life, to one that compares with global transformations in contemporary sexuality, within the space of a generation. There
is an appeal, even a reassurance, in Bauman's liquid modernity, therefore — gays don't have to do much gardening!

I am not as pessimistic as Bauman about the human condition, nor do I regard lesbian and gay critique as 'toothless' (Bauman, 2000: 23) - in fact, Irish politics of lesbian and gay activism has been quite successful (see chapter four). In focusing, as I do in this thesis, upon the lived experiences of what Bauman (1995: 228) terms 'critical intellectuals' (intelligentsia on the civilizational periphery), I am seeking to explore the place of political critique in relation to life politics.

More widely, I have some sympathy with liquefaction: the rapid unravelling of Ireland's modernist culture of containment (J. M. Smith, 2004), has led to a sustained liminal period in which lesbians and gay men have had to adopt individualized life strategies to cope with what are now cultural constraints (F. Smyth, 1998). In this period of what might be seen as acute liminality (Little et al, 1998), we may, as Bauman suggests, feel impotent, or as he puts it, experience unsicherheit (uncertainty).

Bauman frames this uncertainty in terms of living a liquid life, through a 'succession of new beginnings', which makes for:

'... a precarious life, lived under conditions of constant uncertainty. The most acute and stubborn worries that haunt such a [liquid] life are the fears of being caught napping, of failing to catch up with fast-moving events, of being left behind, of overlooking 'use-by' dates, of being saddled with possessions that are no longer desirable, of missing the moment that calls for a change of tack before crossing the point of no return.' (Bauman, 2005:2).

The constant uncertainty relates to sexuality in that we have dilemmas about what we are missing, or is our experience limited; what 'precious kinds of sensations
have been missed'? (Bauman, 2001: 232). New skills are required to cope with liquid life, we need to be able to travel light and move swiftly, work at not 'settling' on something for too long and discarding that which is no longer required. We accomplish this in the knowledge that we need to avoid thinking in panoptical ways. In a post-panoptical era, where the powerful are 'out of reach', there is nomadic aspect to how power operates which leaves the individual alone:

'... the prime technique of power is now escape, slippage, elision and avoidance, the effective rejection of any territorial confinement with its cumbersome corollaries of order-building, order-maintenance and the responsibility for the consequences of it all as well as the necessity to bear the costs' (Bauman, 2000: 11).

While precarious life is individualized and here to stay, Bauman seems to point out how there is a felt need for collective politics to bridge what he terms the 'yawning gap', between the desired and reality. Underlying his assessment of individualization is the consequences of freedom:

'Individualization brings to the ever-growing number of men and women an unprecedented freedom of experimenting – but ... it also being the unprecedented task of coping with their consequences. The yawning gap between the right of self-assertion and the capacity to control the social settings which rend such self-assertion feasible or unrealistic seem to be the main contradiction of fluid modernity - one that, through trial and error, critical reflection and bold experimentation, we would need collectively to learn to tackle collectively.' (Bauman, 2000: 38).

Bauman (2000: 200) posits a type of community relationship in which 'common cause' is supplanted by collective 'spectacle' in liquid modernity. He terms these as either 'cloakroom communities' or 'carnival communities', which are explosive communities, which Bauman (2000: 201) defines as 'events breaking the monotony of daily solitude'. Cloakroom communities appear and disappear, as required for 'the occasion'. Cloakroom communities, Bauman tells us:
...need a spectacle which appeals to similar interests dormant in otherwise disparate individuals and so bring them together for a stretch of time when other interests – those which divide them instead of uniting them – are temporarily laid aside, put on a slow burner or silence altogether... [they] do not fuse and blend individual concerns into ‘group interest’... [or] acquire a new quality ... spectacles have some to replace the ‘common cause’ of the heavy/ solid/ hardware modernity era – which makes a lot of difference to the nature of new-style identities and goes a long way towards making sense of the emotional tensions and aggression-generating traumas which from time to time accompany their pursuit.’ (Bauman, 2000: 200).

He continues that cloakroom or carnival communities offer:

‘temporary respite from the agonies of daily solitary struggles, from the tiresome condition of individuals de jure persuaded or forced to pull themselves up by their bootstraps... let off steam and allow the revellers to better endure the routine to which they must return the moment the frolicking is over .... [They are as indispensable a feature of the liquid modernity landscape as the essentially solitary plight of the individual de jure and the ardent, yet on the whole vain efforts to rise to the level of individuals de facto.’. (Bauman, 2000: 201).

The struggle between the individual de jure and individual de facto is central to how Bauman understands liquid modernity. While Bauman has some misgivings about the potential of ‘cloakroom communities’ to achieve anyone’s de facto status, he paints a picture of collective politics that is missing in Giddens’s work (1991, 1992). While I think Bauman (Bauman, 2002) is not quite correct that critique is ‘toothless’, his attention to space in which politics is done, as in Ailbhe Smyth’s (2001) work on lesbian spatiality, seems to suture over Giddens’s omission.

In my reflections about doing masculinities research, I noted how gay men were not considered to be ‘real’ men and were constrained from telling their stories. Looking at this in a wider context, we might note Bauman’s (2000, 2002) contention that a central liquid modern struggle between de jure and de facto individuals. This insight led me to start thinking about how seeking rights and being denied them
would lead to a struggle over sexual knowledge. Bauman's usage of de jure / de facto led me to think about how citizenship underpins these struggles over the shape of imagined communities, of who is in and who is not included (Anderson, 1983, Berriss, 1996).

While my early exploration of 'citizenship' led me to politics (rather than sociology per se), I started to become inquisitive of how some fragmentary literature framed struggles over sexuality in terms of citizenship. Writing about the Caribbean, Jacqui Alexander (1994: 12) comments that much of the effort to establish and to police a sexual regime involved making respectable citizens; she could have been writing about the Irish government and Catholic Church's tactics up until the mid 1970's when she notes that:

'...respectability emerged in alliance with sexuality and helped to shape middle-class beliefs about the body, sexual (mis)conduct, normality and abnormality, about virility and manly bearing. The control over sexuality evidenced in the triumph of the nuclear family was vital to respectability...'

The undoing of the sexual regime in liquid modernity could be viewed as the 'afterlife of colonialism' (Wright, 2005), but I am more inclined to suggest that it is part of the fallout from the disruption of nationalism. In an early commentary about homosexuality in Ireland, David Norris clearly problematised how the Irish State assumed citizens' homogeneous identity, stating:

'It's well to remember that there is little that is unique about the Irish experience ... apart from the unusually homogenous nature of our society and the tacit assumption that to be Irish is to be white, heterosexual and Roman Catholic' (Norris, 1981: 31).
From Stories to Citizenship

As my postgraduate research focus emerged from my experience of researching men, I had been trying to theorise how stories, citizenship, and ‘gay’ sexuality were connected for some time. It felt heretical to suggest ‘stories’ were sociology. Stories, one friend told me, are journalism. I attended a guest lecture by Ken Plummer, who spoke on ‘Inventing Intimate Citizenship: choice and change in a late modern world’ in TCD on 2 March 2000. In terms of content, the lecture foreshadowed his book, which was published in 2003. I would describe this moment as formative in my sociological career. I had an experience that I can only think comes close to a Pauline conversion – or perhaps I should cite Denzin (1989) and suggest it was a sociological epiphany!

Plummer’s lecture made me aware of how there was a reasonable-sized research community, mainly in the UK and USA, who members had started to take up the idea of citizenship, move it on from its Marshallian roots, and link it to debates around sexuality and the transformation of intimacy within the context of globalization. The lecture was a tour through the key aspects of this framework and graciously, Ken provided a handout and an extensive reading list! In the discussion after the speech, I noted how he signalled that ‘citizenship’, although a ‘wobbly word’, offer a way to focus on the centrality of stories being told about sexuality. I noted that a key challenge in researching what Plummer called the terrain of intimate citizenship was to find methods that would help to analyse the central dynamic of who is/ is not able to be an intimate citizen. What this lecture did for me was ‘square’ my experiential knowledge and social theory: stories were central to understanding the citizen/not-citizen dilemma. We can think of sexual stories operating in two inter-related ways, as symbolic interactions and as political
processes in specific cultural contexts (Plummer, 1995: 14). My experience from researching masculinities was that stories could be thought in a number of ways.

We might suggest that ‘complete’ narratives, for example, life stories or lengthy monologues are detailed accounts, which are then transcribed and analysed. This form is widely appreciated (Riesman, 1993). Within these types of stories we can notice – if we have a chance to hear the telling and re/telling of a story – to see how the ‘telling’ is dynamic over time. At an intermediary level, we find brief descriptions of social life. These, we might call social practices:

‘Practices are often little fragments of daily life which are part of the normal taken for granted existence of practitioners. Their significance derives from their location in wider systems of meaning.’ (Morgan, 1996: 190).

But more often than not, in my experience, ‘stories’ that had an emotional impact on me (as a listener or researcher) were tiny, brief allusions that captured the mood. By this - and there are many permutations - I mean they were snippets, things said off-the-cuff, quips, points, or something that was not actually meant to be disclosed. As researchers, we rely upon interpretive sociology to analyse their importance. I think these stories are below the usual waterline of narrative analysis – but the little snippets might be thought of ‘units’ of analysis.

They are interesting because they reveal insights not only into a substantive topic (which might stigmatizing, for instance), but we get to see how the story is told (in group settings) and how selves are presented or displayed (Goffman, 1959; Finch, 2007). These snippets are important as symbolic tokens (Giddens, 1991), that is, they are ideas and information that are circulated, shared, developed and elaborated upon, and which help reshape political meanings in context.
From American feminist folklore, we can note how Susan Kalcık (1975) refers to such stories as *kernel stories*, which are defined as:

'Most often a kernel story is a brief reference to the subject, the central action, or an important piece of dialogue from a longer story. In this form, one might say it is a kind of potential story, especially if the details are not known to the audience. It might be clearer to call this brief reference the kernel and what develops from it the kernel story, keeping in mind that many of these kernels do not develop beyond the first stage into kernel stories. Kernel stories lack a specific length, structure, climax, or point, although a woman familiar with the genre or subject may predict fairly accurately where a particular story will go. The story developed from the kernel can take on a different size and shape depending on the context in which it is told. The structure of the kernel story, therefore, is fluid' (Kalcık, 1975: 7).

Looking at an interaction as a kernel story, then, allows us to attend to a story as a symbolic interaction. Tamara Burk (1996) has developed this point and calls our attention to how kernel stories can be collaboratively shaped by a number of story tellers (three generations of women in her work). Kernel stories, and other fragments, however coded, serve to allow us to research how people’s claims (for intimate citizenship here) are circulated in social settings. Sometimes they emerge quickly; sometimes it takes time for their relevance to be understood.

In time, kernel stories become ‘public identity narratives’, which are readily understandable shared social meanings about social life that stand for stories and state that an idea’s time has come (Plummer, 2003: 104-108). Thus, kernel stories are nascent public identity stories that get take up, circulate in cultures, and develop to become part of the moral fabric of social life.
Conclusion

In this chapter, I have outlined the intellectual journey that has led me to my thesis. My research questions emerged from an accident of 'biographical situation' (Lofland & Lofland, 1995: 18) while researching masculinities. This raised questions for me about Irish lesbian and gay sexuality within the wider shift to late modernity. During my literature review, a key moment – or epiphany – occurred wherein I was alerted to the burgeoning literature on intimate citizenship by Ken Plummer. As I was becoming more interested with the intellectual dilemmas about sexuality, I chose to focus specifically on some lesbians and gay men who were implicated in sexual politics as an exemplar of a critical intelligentsia.
Thesis Chapter Outline

In chapter two, I shall comment as to how sexual stories (of citizenship) were shared in a more coded political era, as a way of leading into how I favour exploring dilemmas about sexuality as a form of citizenship claim. I begin with a vignette about how a sexual story was transmitted in a more ‘coded’ time, where sexuality was not publicly discussed. MacLiammoir’s political and personal story, however, can be seen to have had an intergenerational impact, and I argue that he was an activist avant la lettre. I shall then allude to how intimate citizenship has evolved from the Marshallian model of citizenship and consider how some leading theorists understand this contested, emergent concept.

In chapter three, I set out how I implemented a flexible, multi-strand research methodology, which generated a rich data set and findings and the dilemmas I faced. While I do not consider this thesis to be focused on the study of a social movement, in chapter four I examine the historical phases of Irish lesbian and gay sexual politics as a story. Since the ECHR on the Norris Case, which foreshadowed the decriminalisation of homosexuality, a small activist group has come to the fore and professionalized as a lobby group around equality politics. While equality politics is the dominant viewpoint on the organisation’s politics, I consider that they have been remarkably successful, in terms of emancipatory politics, in developing policies and critical awareness of discrimination. In some ways, their focus on policy implementation makes it difficult to ‘do’ life politics.

In chapter five and chapter six, I explore how dilemmas about coming out and the consequences of disclosing one’s sexual orientation has affected a sample of gay men and lesbians who have been drawn into activist politics.
In **chapter seven**, following Bauman’s (2000) reference to ‘cloakroom communities’, I explored how we might consider some occasional activist forums, held in Dublin (1999-2003). Here I found there was new interest in sharing sexual stories, although this was stymied by Irish prudery (in public political settings) about talking about intimacy.

From one aspect of public discourse, I took up another. In **chapter eight**, I look at how Ireland has begun to deliberate about how to implement same-sex partnership legislation. This chapter is largely based on a paper that was published in Sociological Research Online (Reynolds, 2007). I supplement this with a synopsis of how policy discourses are now playing a part in creating a story about how same-sex couples need civil partnership law.

I conclude this thesis (**chapter nine**) with a call to develop our understanding of Irish lesbian and gay intimate citizenship with a critical affinity to Bauman’s work on *liquid modernity*. Taking Flynn’s comment (1997: 493) that lesbians and gay men are hybrid citizens who, ‘... present a challenge to Ireland’s traditional social ordering as a result of their *distance* from that order and their simultaneous *proximity* to it’, I would say: you sometimes need to discard what is ‘too close’. Making something new is messy, liquid and untidy. Nevertheless, we have to ‘deal with it!’ Being and doing intimate citizenship is predicated on being able to constantly negotiate or ‘dance’ between being ‘pink’ consumers and *covering* (Goffman, 1963; Yoshino, 2006) the pertinence of sexuality, depending on social context. This ‘dance’ is done, not so much due to stigma; rather it is in order to maintain ‘authentic’ sexual identities.

Ireland is particularly interesting as a public culture around sexuality and intimacy has emerged in a relatively short space of time. To use Sweetman’s ‘blanket’
metaphor, throwing off the covers untidies a bedroom. We can see that some disclosures around ‘sex’ in Ireland have been painful and fraught (Inglis, 2004), but my position is that it does demonstrate just how people have the ability to rise above their personal troubles in new, imaginative ways. ‘Speakings out’ occur in uneven, fragmented and gendered ways, which suggests that hegemony weighs heavily (Mahon, 1994; O’Connor, 2000) but normative assumptions are more open to question and new subjectivities are able to operate somewhat more openly in Irish society.

While the ‘blanket of silence’ has, thus, been thrown back, Ireland is experiencing an uneven, sometime fraught shift to a more open, egalitarian society, where social rules and norms are neither so fixed, nor so oppressive. While people can more openly resist hegemonic sexual norms – and some lesbians can speak out about their troubles with marriage – the State appears to be starting to acknowledge that an ‘ideal intimacy situation’ (Beck, 2002: xxii) can no longer be simply bound up with heterosexual marriage. The rise of debates about same-sex marriage illustrates more willingness on the part of the State to imagine pragmatic solutions for non-heterosexual relationships, and eschew contemporary society’s ‘gender vertigo’ (Risman, 1996). I welcome this move, in spite of its conservatism, but suggest it is a harbinger of a wider need to adopt a more ‘liquid’ (Bauman, 2000) approach to governance, and to recognise that Ireland’s cherished children (Flynn, 1997) are growing up!
Chapter Two: From Lone Voices to Intimate Citizenship

Introduction

In this chapter, I shall set out how I understand intimate citizenship and point out its relevance to social theory as a sensitising concept by which we can explore increasingly complex arenas of intimacy and sexuality. Following Weeks (2001), we might suggest that dilemmas over sexuality are the 'unfinished revolution of our time' but I want to get at how we look at this through the dilemmas and lifeways (Hostetler and Herdt, 1998) that people take in the Irish context.

I will begin this chapter with two vignettes about homosexuality. My rationale for detailing the story of Micheal MacLiammoir is to exemplify how, in a time when it was not possible to be open about 'queers', some sexual stories could be told in a coded manner by lone voices. While this coded manner may not seem salient to readers today, within the context of Irish draconian censorship, it was revolutionary to speak out on sexuality in a culture shaped by sexual prudery (Inglis, 2005). I connect this tale to contemporary society by noting how aspects of this vignette are consumed as a sexual story. While this is a lovely story (and a story about love and death), and a story about visibility, it is not the dominant way in which gay or lesbian politics have been advanced in recent times.

The second vignette draws our attention to how gay rights have been deeply implicated in significant political and legal struggles with the State. The emergence of a gay rights movement in Ireland led to a ground-breaking legal challenge to the criminalisation of homosexuality was mounted by Senator David Norris. I suggest that, as most sexual stories involve pleas for recognition, we can locate struggles for 'gay rights' as part of the turn to sexual /intimate citizenship.
Contemporary work on citizenship tends to take its lead from the work of British sociologist T. H. Marshall. I will explore his contribution to citizenship but then move on to note how his work has been criticised. Criticisms of his work focus two broad but inter-related issues. First, we can find analyses about citizenship, which focus on whether it is a salient concept (Turner, 2001). Secondly, and of particular interest to me is how contemporary citizenship itself is being understood differently from Marshall’s work. Various omissions or shortcomings have been identified, and many writers have urged us to reframe the scope of Marshall’s tripartite model. One strand of this second argument relates to how intimacy and sexuality, ostensibly a private (non-citizenship) concerns, are now part of public culture. It is within that body of work, on sexual or, my preferred term, intimate citizenship, that my thesis is framed. Let me begin this chapter by outlining the story of Micheal MacLiammoir’s contribution as an activist avant la lettre to the idea of Irish intimate citizenship.

Micheal MacLiammoir: performance and life

While in Irish society, there is a multiplicity of gendered struggles to claim lesbian and gay sexual identities today, it is a novel focus for sociology. Although coming out as lesbian or gay seems relatively common today, disclosure of one’s sexual orientation is relatively recent and, prior to the 1990’s, there was little public discourse about homosexuality.

I want to make a special mention of a literary figure that played a key role in creating sexual consciousness. The actor Micheal MacLiammoir played an important part in raising our consciousness about ‘the Irish homosexual’ but did not ‘come out’ as a gay man. In reality, MacLiammoir was an English born actor
named Alfred Wilmore. Wilmore came to Ireland and adopted the identity of MacLiammoir, which he played his entire life, which 'showed just how much of a fiction an Irish identity was; but it was a fiction that he and others believed in' (Flynn, 1997: 499). But this performance/life is important because as an actor and 'Irishman', he played an important activist role.

**Oscar's Revival: MacLiammoir as an activist-performer**

I shall say something about MacLiammoir's death a little later, but in life, MacLiammoir played a critical part in political consciousness raising – as an activist avant la lettre – by taking a one-man show about the 1895 trial of Oscar Wilde on tour in 1960’s Ireland. MacLiammoir's served to challenge a national silence about Wilde. The 1963 show, 'The Importance of Being Oscar', allowed a form of sexual knowledge about homosexuality and Oscar's fate to be circulated as a presentation of self (Goffman, 1959) to a new generation of Irish men and women.

The play, performed a few years after the Wolfenden Report in the UK, but before the 1967 decriminalisation of homosexuality in England, helped, in *a coded way*, to recover knowledge that had been marginalised, and had been unspeakable in Ireland, in the sixty years since Wilde's death. In part, MacLiammoir's performance may have been a more personal riposte to his own father's to Wilde's crime and who burned Wilde's books to warn the Wilmore children about sodomy (MacLiammoir, 1995). On stage, MacLiammoir deployed symbols and allusions to Wilde's crime, to protect sensibilities, and used silence to dramatic effect to convey the events, and problematise the trial outcome.

On the published script for the end of Scene 1, we find that only a stage direction alludes directly to Wilde's conviction for sodomy (thus overt mention was avoided):
'The actor, in silence, takes the green carnation from his coat, regards it for a moment and lets it fall to the ground as the light fades out.

The curtain falls.

The trials of Oscar Wilde are presumed to have taken place during the interval'.

(MacLiammoir, 1977: 45).

Nothing is spoken to convey what happened (but the audience would know what the performance conveyed) and so references to sex crimes are coded. But in the Second Act, MacLiammoir is much more political by 1960's Ireland standards. He wonders aloud 'what if' Wilde had been allowed to speak up for himself at the end of the Trial. Would things have been different, he asks? Why, he asks, does Oscar Wilde's name evoke stigma today? Here, I quote from the script:

'... Oscar Wilde and Alfred Taylor, the crime of which you have been convicted is so bad that one has to put stern restraint upon oneself to prevent oneself from describing, in language that I would rather not use, the sentiments which must rise to the breast of every man of honour who has heard the details of these two terrible trials - it is no use for me to address you. People who can do these things must be dead to all sense of shame, and one cannot hope to produce any effect upon them. It is the worst case I have ever tried... that you, Wilde, have been the centre of a circle of extensive corruption of the most hideous kind among men it is impossible to doubt... I shall, under such circumstances, be expected to pass the severest sentence that the law of England allows. In my judgement, it is wholly inadequate for such a case as this. The sentence of this Court is that each of you be imprisoned and kept to hard labour for two years'.

'There was a brief silence with some odd cries of 'Shame! Shame!' and suddenly Oscar Wilde cried out: 'And I? May I say nothing my lord?'

Mr Justice Mills in reply flapped an impatient hand at the warders who hurried the two prisoners - the poet and the pimp - out of sight. Out of sight and out of mind, and outsider the Old Bailey, on the paving stones of Fleet Street, London, prosperous citizens and public prostitutes danced together in virtuous triumph. The Nineties of the Green Carnation were dead and done forever: the mood of The Yellow book was destined now to make way for the reign of the Yellow Press.

And yet... one cannot help wondering if Wilde had been allowed to speak at that moment what would have happened? Would he have delivered from the dock some speech comparable in eloquence and in power to that of the Irish rebel leader Robert Emmet: a speech that, independently of his own fate, might have revealed the strange and uniquely
Anglo-Saxon quality of the law that had sentenced him? It is impossible to say. Indeed, to my mind, the only tragic surviving remainder of the whole saga is that still today, and still to so many thousands of people today, the name of Oscar Wilde merely conjures up an immediate image of shame and scandal'.

(Mac Liammoir, 1977: 47-48).

Here, MacLiammoir (1977) 'conjures up' a forgotten and neglected historical sexual story as a historicized phenomenon. To my mind, even though he felt unable to discuss his own sexuality openly, he might have been signalling that in the UK the Wolfenden Report might be bringing changes. Importantly, in the script, he is calling for us to rediscover Oscar Wilde in a critical way and see the monstrous injustice that was done under British rule. Asking 'what if' Oscar had been allowed to speak, invites us not to simply re-read Wilde's story in terms of current gender roles, or suggesting that we could know 'how people knew about homosexual love in the past' (Weeks, 1981: 101) as a universal or timeless homosexual experience. For Weeks, homosexuality was an under-developed concept in Victorian public discourse, with 'neither the police nor the court [being] familiar with the patterns of male homosexuality' (Weeks, 1981: 101).

I rather suspect that MacLiammoir (1977) was calling for us to understand Wilde's story, which marks a bridge between the sodomite and the homosexual, as a historicized concept, which has deeply felt present-day ramifications.

As an aside, a brief scan of archival sources reveals one instance of how sexual knowledge may have circulated in 18th century intellectual/legal circles (as the text was published in Dublin). In The Select Trials at the Sessions House in the Old-Bailey (Smith, Faulkner & Nelson, 1743) a synopsis of law trials for that year includes an account of some UK sodomy trials. One of these is the infamous Mother Clap Molly House case. An informant, called Samuel Stevens, reported: 'I have been
[to Molly Clap's] several times, in order to detect those who frequented it: I have seen 20 or 30 of them together, kissing and hugging, and making Love (as they called it) in a very indecent manner. Then they used to go out by Couples into another Room, and, when they came back, they would tell what they had been doing, which in their dialect, they called Marrying...

The excavation of lost/forgotten historical sexual knowledge is important as a present-day legacy, which may endure long after a concept is no longer used (e.g. the 'sodomite' in legal and political discourse). MacLiammoir's (1977) performance is accomplished also without mentioning present-day politics or 'sex', and through 'not doing politics' (Eliasoph, 1998), MacLiammoir did a valuable job in helping to recover the past - but his performance is also remembered and interpreted by some of today's gay men who witnessed the maestro.

For example, in Colm Toibin recalls seeing MacLiammoir's performance of 'The Importance of Being Oscar' as a boy in his native Enniscorthy (Toibin, 2001). In his 'Goodbye to Catholic Ireland', Toibin writes of what he saw of MacLiammoir and how he interprets his experience:

'I remember his voice and his presence on the stage; I remember him reclining like a large sleek cat on a chaise-longue, world-weary, and knowing and infinitely melancholy, and then standing up and looking at us all, caressing us with his narrowed eyes and speaking as though he was telling us fresh gossip, insinuations he would be asking us to keep secret at least until we had left the theatre. It was strong stuff for a small boy... A one man show about Oscar Wilde was surely dangerous territory in a provincial part of an overwhelmingly Catholic country. It was not as though the town was especially liberal. I remember that in these same years two men in their twenties who worked together in the same small shop were also living together. I remember someone whispering to me that they were queers, and then later hearing that they had been packed off to jail again for misbehaving. Their lives were ruined. It was clear to me that being gay in this country would require care and attention'. (Toibin, 2001: 264-265).
Toibin's recollection has been formative in his own life. Importantly, he realised the value of maintaining discretion (prudery) about homosexuality. As a boy, he soaked up MacLiammoir's story about Wilde as a *performance*. Richard Bauman argues that performance is:

"A mode of communication, a way of speaking, the essence of which resides in the assumption of responsibility to an audience for a display of communicative skill, highlighting the way in which communication is carried out, above and beyond its referential content". (R. Bauman, 1986: 3).

Central to Toibin's reflexive description is how MacLiammoir's [performance] message was communicated by more than the words alone and had implications over time. Toibin suggests that, in terms of life planning, he reflexively weighed up what Giddens refers to as 'a package of risks' (Giddens, 1991: 125) in the Irish context about his sexual orientation and took his time to come out. Thus, we should note that performance - as interpreted by knowing, and therefore experiencing, actors - is imbued with power.

**Death and the actor: ‘Sorry for your trouble, Hilton’**

Care and attention were a watchword in MacLiammoir's personal life in life and death. While quite flamboyant as a character (Walshe, 1997), he was cautious about disclosing his sexuality. However, when MacLiammoir died in March 1978, the nation mourned a 'national treasure' (Toibin, 2001). It is only in death, however, that we get some insights in the actor's life.

At the funeral, an *alleged* utterance occurred and, whether true or not, it has become part of Irish gay folklore. We should note that the phrase 'sorry for your trouble...' is an Irish expression of condolence. It is normally (but not exclusively) reserved for the family of the deceased, notably to the surviving spouse or close
offspring. Allegedly, the story goes that at MacLiammoir’s funeral in March 1978, the President of Ireland is alleged to have said ‘Sorry for your trouble, Hilton’ to MacLiammoir’s male partner of over fifty years.

Only in death did we see some sort of public declaration of their relationship. A few days after MacLiammoir’s funeral, his partner, Hilton Edwards wrote to the letters page of the *Irish Times* on 14 March 1978 and he publicly acknowledges their relationship as a couple:

‘May I beg that you will allow me, to reach through your column, the many people that otherwise but hope to contact, and to thank them for the love that they have ungrudgingly poured out at the passing of my dear friend and partner Micheal MacLiammoir, and equally for their great tenderness and kindness to me – a Sassenach in their midst – who was much moved by their overwhelming expressions of sympathy as by personal loss. Now work is the word, and it will be hard without Micheal’s help. And perhaps I will not be so much in the foreground as hitherto, but be assured that like an old spider in a dark corner, I will never cease, while I am able, to spin a web for your enjoyment, so please go easy with your brooms. I would beg that this open letter will suffice to express my gratitude to my dear friends and to all those new ones whom this occasion has discovered to me. Micheal’s niece, Sally and his great-nephew Michael Travers join me in their thanks’.

Apparently, early Irish gay rights activists had sought to involve MacLiammoir in their cause. The actor refused to publicly ‘come out’, which is most understandable, given the social stigma that would have been attached to being criminalised; c.f. the McClure case (Irish Reports, 1945). More recently, we can note, from biographical research, that MacLiammoir was actually pre-occupied by concerns the bear considerable similarity to present-day same-sex couples but these arrangements remained private at the time. In his biography, *The Boys*, Fitz-Simon (1994: 309) notes that ‘Michael MacLiammoir and Hilton Edwards had written mirror-image wills, each leaving the other his possessions to the survivor.’
It was only shortly before Edwards himself died in 1982, that he re-wrote his will 'in which he made a number of bequests to friends and professional colleagues... his estate was shown as £101, 192.11'. Fitz-Simon continues: 'At noon in St Fintan's graveyard, on Monday 22 November 1982, the boys from East Finchley and Kensal Green were reunited in the shadow of the Hill of Howth'. In life and death, MacLiammoir did play an important role in re/creating political consciousness about how society had viewed homosexuals, which implies to me that he saw sexual politics as being far more than performance, marching in parades and transgressive acts, his concern was to change minds — and that was his homosexual role (McIntosh, 1968). In Toibin's reflections (above), we can see how MacLiammoir was an individualized activist of sorts. But more fundamentally, he established the idea of the 'gay couple' as part of Irish sexual politics, and the 'couple' has come to be a significant political concern in the early 21st century.

When MacLiammoir died, a nascent gay rights movement was emerging in Dublin. A few years later, a legal challenge was mounted to seek decriminalisation of homosexuality. In contextualising how Norris's case was politically successful (if legally disappointing in the short-term), we should note the significance of how British debates about homosexuality from the 1950's led to early Irish gay rights setbacks.

**Whispers of Wolfenden: scientific discourse and Irish homosexuality**

When news of how the British Government was having to deliberate about homosexuality emerged in September 1957, Ireland was hosting a major science conference that coincided with the country's move to a more open industrial policy after decades of protectionism. *The Irish Times* was also reporting how the Pope's latest Encyclical urged the clergy to police television: 'instructing them to protect
Christian morals by setting up immediately international machinery to supervise films, radio and television' (*The Irish Times*, 1957: 3) - ironic given that Ireland did not yet have a domestic television network. However, buried with these daily news items and issues of this day, one can find a brief media report on the Wolfenden Committee. In the 'London Letter' column of *The Irish Times* of 13 September 1957, there was a 182-word item simply entitled, 'The Wolfenden Report':

"The[British] Cabinet has also been considering its attitude to the controversial Wolfenden Report, and here the reaction of public opinion may make the Government's task easier than one might have expected. The startling recommendation on homosexuality, which it hardly can be said to have been received with widespread approval by ordinary people, has, nonetheless, gained a surprising amount of support. Members of the Cabinet may, however, still have qualms about putting public opinion to the full test by introducing their own legislation to comply with the committee's suggestions on this point.

On the other hand, no such considerations [above] apply to that power of the report, which dealt with prostitution. The overwhelming majority of people would approve of heavier fines and imprisonment designed to clean up the streets. There would also be support for legislation designed to curb the activities of landlords and others who make money out of vice. The Cabinet doubtlessly has weighted carefully the reaction to the Wolfenden Report, and it would be surprising, indeed, if some reference to it was not made in the Queen's Speech from the Throne'. (*The Irish Times*, 13 September 1957, 5).

This brief report is, to my mind, a surprisingly accurate snapshot of this time. It does accurately reflect how Wolfenden was not so much a landmark per se but foreshadowed the decades of struggle for gay rights that was to come in the UK (Home Office, 2002).

As former British MP, Leo Abse (who steered the 1967 reform legislation through the Commons) recently reminded us, the struggles for gay rights and the emergence of the contemporary LGBT movement followed Wolfenden rather than preceded it.

Rather than mythologizing about Wolfenden, Abse suggested:
...its importance has been exaggerated. People talk sloppily about Wolfenden, which was not by any means a key turning-point. A myth has grown up: the myth of pre-Wolfenden and after. It was only a staging post. When I arrived in the Commons after Wolfenden, the vote against it was overwhelming. Ten years of struggle came after'...’ (Bedell, 2007).

Nonetheless, we may suggest, following Weeks, that the Wolfenden Report 'conjured' the homosexual into being and a 'way of being in the world’ (Weeks, 2007: 55) and made a gay identity imaginable. It was another step in distancing from the idea that sexuality was 'natural’. It ameliorated the viewpoint about sexuality that had been advocated by the early sexologists, such as Havelock Ellis. (The work of Havelock Ellis was less salient in Ireland, where Irish Catholic social teaching remained hegemonic).

What is less appreciated is how the Wolfenden Report had something of a (contradictory) second life in Ireland. While some limited Irish literature had started to map out the needs of homosexuals (Gallagher, 1979; In Touch, 1980; Boyd 1986), 'science' returned to the forefront in a legal context when Wolfenden was used in evidence by Norris in his legal challenge to have the law on homosexuality declared unconstitutional. However, the Irish judiciary interpreted Wolfenden in a quite selective manner. In the 1984 Norris Case, O'Higgins J. quoted the Wolfenden research as evidence how marriage could be harmed by homosexuality. His comment helped to establish a dominant discursive claim in Ireland about the pre-eminence, even naturalness, of heterosexual marriage:

‘...It has to be accepted that, for the small percentage of males who are congenitally and irreversibly homosexual, marriage is not open or possible. They must seek such partnerships as they can amongst those whose orientation disposes them to homosexual overtures. But for those so disposed or orientated, but not yet committed, what effect will the acceptance of such overtures be likely to have on marriage? Again, precise information in relation to Ireland is not available. One can only look to what the Wolfenden Committee said in its report (para. 55) before the changes in the law occurred in the United
Kingdom:—"The second contention, that homosexual behaviour between males has a damaging effect on family life, may well be true. Indeed we have had evidence that it often is: cases in which homosexual behaviour on the part of the husband has broken up a marriage are by no means rare, and there are also cases in which a man in whom the homosexual component is relatively weak, nevertheless, derives such satisfaction from homosexual outlets that he does not enter upon a marriage which might have been successfully and happily consummated. We deplore this damage to what we regard as the basic unit of society.' That view was based on the limited experience available to the Committee prior to any changes in the law. It indicates, however, that homosexual activity and its encouragement may not be consistent with respect and regard for marriage as an institution. I would not think it unreasonable to conclude that an open and general increase in homosexual activity in any society must have serious consequences of a harmful nature so far as marriage is concerned'. ([1984] IR 36: 62-63).

We can note the discursive claim about marriage's privileged position, or homosexuality being a threat to marriage, is made in other jurisdictions (c.f. O'Donnell, 2004). In the Irish context, McWilliams J. signalled that change must come from the political arena and not through any legal challenge:

'Although I accept that the traditional attitudes of the Churches and of the general body of citizens towards homosexuality are being challenged and may be successfully challenged in the future, it is reasonably clear that current Christian morality in this country does not approve of buggery or of any sexual activity between persons of the same sex'. ([1984] IR 36: 46).

While the judiciary did not want a role in law reform - a lesson that seems to be lost on activists (Zappone case) at times – Justice McWilliams's advice, to seek gay rights through amending legislation, has helped to shape Irish gay rights activism well into the present day.

On foot of this judgment, the activist strategy led to the establishment of a dedicated lobby group (GLEN), which focused on campaigning for gay law reform (and now focuses on developing GLBT equality policies). At a supra-level, a further legal challenge, mounted by David Norris, put pressure on the Irish government to
decriminalise homosexuality. After winning his case in the European Court of Human Rights in 1987, there were considerable delays but the Irish Parliament passed the Criminal Law Amendment Act in 1993 without a vote, ending the criminalisation of homosexuality.

Thus, my analysis suggests that, in part, the Wolfenden Report helped to reframe both how the judiciary viewed ‘homosexuals’ through a normative lens, and how lesbian and gay activists became more aware of, in more social constructionist terms, for the need to counter the ‘nature’ argument through an argument that became more materially-focused. Through the Norris Case, the ‘Irish homosexual’ became an Irish personage – who was arguing that there was nothing ‘natural’ about homosexuality but was actively seeking recognition of his rights. At the core, this was a claim for the recognition of sexual rights that was predicated upon citizenship. For the past fifty or so years, citizenship has been largely interpreted through the work of T. H. Marshall (and through critical analytical stances in relation to his theory). I shall turn now to Marshall and then consider the criticisms of his work.
T. H. Marshall and Citizenship

Marshall’s (1963 [1949]) work stems from a paper he published in the context of moves towards the establishment of the Welfare State. The intellectual roots of this work are widespread; while his article ‘Citizenship and Social Class’ is developed from the ideas of Alfred Marshall, we might also note how T.H. Marshall worked for Beveridge while in university, and he was a deeply religious English man. As Halsey (1984: 6) notes in his appreciation of Marshall’s life and work, the ideas on citizenship were shaped in no small measure through the lens of Alfred Marshall’s maxim that ‘every man is a gentleman’ but that did not mean everyone had equal status.

While T.H. Marshall’s work is considered by Ellison a ‘key point of departure for any discussion of contemporary citizenship’ and it:

‘... stands as the quintessential expression of post-ear optimism about the capacity of the modern nation-state to act as a force for social cohesion, defining the relationship between the state and individual citizen-members in terms of the institutionalised paternalism of state welfare’ (Ellison, 1997: 698).

Marshall defines citizenship in the following manner:

‘Citizenship is a status bestowed on those who are full member of a community. All who possess the status are equal with respect to the rights and duties with which the status is endowed. There is no universal principle that determines what those rights and duties should be, but societies in which citizenship is a developing institution create an image of an ideal citizenship against which achievement can be measured and towards which aspiration can be directed’ (Marshall, 1963 [1949]: 87).

In terms of rights, Marshall (ibid. p. 86) identified three elements. In his view, civil rights emerged first and pertained to principally legal rights that are:
'necessary for individual freedom – liberty of the person, freedom of speech, thought and faith, the right to own property and to conclude valid contracts, and the right to justice' Marshall, (1963 [1949]: 74).

The second element of rights to develop related to political rights, which related to the franchise. The third element of rights related to social rights:

'By the social element I mean the whole range from the right to a modicum of economic welfare and security to the right to share in the full social heritage and to live the life of a civilized being according to the standards prevailing in the society. The institutions connected with it are the educational system and the social services' (Marshall, 1963 [1949]: 74).

Over time, the rights endowed to citizens developed as did a series of social institutions to 'give these rights social expression' (Turner, 2001: 190) by way of a legal system, educational establishments and trades unions, etc. While there is much credit given to Marshall, it is fair to suggest that most of the criticism of his work over the years stems from his vagueness about just how social rights were to be developed in relation to his theory. Curiously, however, I came across a glowingly, supportive article by an Irish author who praised Marshall's contributions – it read as if that author had not seemingly engaged with any critique since the late 1980's (Lister, 2005) but indicates how Marshall's work has not enjoyed the same critical acclaim in Ireland as in the UK. We might, however, distinguish two basic strands to criticisms of Marshall's work. The first strand relates to the meaning and scope of citizenship as a concept and the adequacy of the Marshallian model, while the second (more fruitful) seeks to redress its omissions.

Ellison (1997, 2000) argues that problems with Marshall's concept (how citizenship is viewed in terms of power) stem from its roots in the civic liberal tradition. Ellison
identifies civic republican and pluralist as other frameworks. As Marshall's position
is based on the civic liberal tradition, it places an emphasis on the delivery of goods
and services to 'relatively passive recipients' (p. 699) in order to ensure the
betterment of society. Arguably, this view of society is of a modernist generation of
citizens, where 'mostly individuals knew where they belonged, but did not have the
impression that they had a major role in defining this place' (Wagner, 1994: 159;
Turner, 1990; Edmonds and Turner, 2002). For Ellison, the civic republican and
the civic republican models both have a weakness as both assume the continuation
of the providential state, which risks two dangers: globalization and the emergence
of a 'politics of difference and identity' (Delanty, 2000, 2002).

For Ellison, these issues lead to a 'decline in the 'organising capacity' of the state,
which has important implications for theory and practice (Ellison, 1997: 700). Ellison
mentions how poststructuralist writers argue that 'variegated' citizens
should be recognised and a 'less hermetic' view of citizenship should be imagined.
While multiple subject positions recognise greater complexity, they also raise the
potential danger of 'the privilege of the decentred subject' (ibid. 710) outweighing
the centrality of solidarity in citizenship. Hence, where Marshall tended to view
citizens as passive subjects, it is possible that the balance could shift too much in
the other direction. Overall, Ellison's (1997) contribution highlights how the calibre
of both state and citizen has transformed since Marshall's era. In late modernity,
the distinction between formal ideas as to what citizenship means, and the more
substantive issue of 'belonging', has 'virtually collapsed' according to Delanty
(2002: 60) — although that may overstate the situation — as new demands are
framed in terms of citizenship rights. While we might see in some sense that
citizenship is being eroded (Turner, 2001), it might be more exact to see that it is
being recast around consumption (Evans, 1993; Turner, 2003) with new
configurations implicated.
Ellison feels that we have a situation where increasingly critical social actors are confronting a changing public sphere. In terms of the public sphere, that is defined by Habermas as:

'...a domain of our social life in which such a thing as public opinion can be formed. Access to the public sphere is open in principle to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere is constituted in every conversation in which private persons come together to form a public... Citizens act as a public when they deal with matters of general interest without being subject to coercion, thus with the guarantee that they may assemble and unite freely, and express and publicize their opinions freely... We may speak of a political public sphere (as distinguished from a literary one, for instance) when the public discussions concern objects connected with the practice of the State.' (Habermas, 1989: 231).

However, this position is shifting (McAfee, 2000; Outhwaite, 1994) and the public sphere is now regarded not so much as:

'... a physical space as it is an occurrence: any time two or more individuals come together to discuss matters of politics the public sphere takes place. Otherwise, 'private' individuals create a public sphere where they talk together about public concerns. In this respect, the public sphere is neither part of the private realm of the household and or individuals, nor is it part of the official structures of governance. It occurs in a third, intermediate space'. (McAfee, 2000: 83).

McAfee argues this intermediate space is not only distinguishable from Habermas's clear division between 'public' and 'private,' but it can also be viewed as being temporary and shifting, liquid space, with implications for the lifeworld (Habermas, 1989: xxv; 1995). Citing Holub, McAfee accuses the state of weakening the public sphere through becoming embroiled through the deployment of Public Relations ('political spin'). But while Habermas's ideal public sphere declined as a reality from the 1700's, it persists as an ideal type. The term 'public sphere' has found application in media studies (Cunningham, 2001), and more widely in cultural studies.
Diane Richardson (2000c: 74) notes 'the concept of cultural citizenship has also been part of recent debates on citizenship', where a concern has been how to reframe citizenship. For example, Delanty argues that the: 'real challenge, it would appear, is to bring about inclusion in the [public] sphere of identity and belonging' (Delanty, 2002: 61; Stevenson, 2001). Delanty comments how problematic rethinking citizenship is, noting how Kymlicka & Norman (2000) try to extend citizenship to excluded or marginalised groups, but neglect theorising citizenship as a frame.

A more helpful approach, Delanty argues, to get closer to the cognitive aspect of culture might be through *cosmopolitan citizenship*, which:

'...shifts the focus of citizenship onto common experiences, learning processes and discourses of empowerment. The power to name, create meaning, construct personal biographies and narratives by gaining control over the flow of information, goods and cultural processes is an important dimension of citizenship as an active process... thus citizenship as cultural citizenship is about the status of culture as discursively constructed... as a constructivist process... [and is not] entirely about rights, but it is a matter of participation in the political community...' (Delanty, 2002: 64).

Thus, we can see that theorists have problematised the evolution of the public sphere and have considered how a reflexive citizen is implicated, rather than Marshall's passive citizens.

**Linking Citizenship and Sexuality**

If I was to summarise what concerns many of these authors, it is that, as Delanty argues: 'citizenship had been held to be based on formal rights and had relatively little to do with substantive issues of cultural belonging' (Delanty, 2002: 60). Thus, as well as the Marshallian citizen being male (Walby, 1994) and English, citizenship
theory has been predominantly about public issues, rather than private/personal problems. While it seems contradictory to posit that sexuality should be an issue as citizenship (Weeks, 1998), we can see how in Mulally’s work on abortion rights that citizenship was helpful to her in tackling a controversial subject. In Mulally’s research into abortion, we can see how Marshall’s framework is ‘too simplistic’ (Richardson, 1998b: 85), as it neglects the agent’s personal account (Merry, 2003).

Mulally (2005) posits that the autonomy of the Irish Republic (as a State) risks being weakened from above and below across a range of sexual rights issues, not solely abortion (c.f. Inglis, 1998; Robinson, 1988; L. Ryan, 1984; F.W. Ryan, 2000; P. Ryan, 2006; Scheper-Hughes, 1983, 2001; Smyth, 1988). It is her view that abortion might be implicated by international arrangements and laws (e.g. EU law; 1998 Good Friday Agreement, etc.) as an instance of the globalization of sexuality (c.f. Binnie, 2004). Struggles such as abortion, are bound up with late modern struggles about coping with diversity and complexities of Irishness, wherein ‘Irishness could no longer be defined as simply ‘not English’ ... [but required] searching for an identity that would allow greater space for diversity’ (Mulally, 2005: 104).

More generally, and without further digression on abortion per se, Mulally’s work suggests to me that the rather naïve usage of ‘consensus’ to mean ‘to do politics’ is no longer a useful shorthand. Mulally appears to suggest that ‘consensus’ has to be seen more in Scheff’s (1967) sense of the term, as a negotiated accomplishment. On moral issues, it implies a citizenship discourse is at play in relation to the ‘private’, and that consensus is discursively made. We learn these talk and negotiation skills, which are gendered, from an early age (Messner, 2000). By extension, new work around sexual citizenship seems a productive way of analysing claims for rights and entitlements.
As Ireland moves into an era where ‘sexual politics’ is being publicly – if intermittently – debated, I posit that the emergent framework of intimate or sexual citizenship is a useful way of deepening our critical understanding about sexuality. As people, in various debates learn how to negotiate (coming from an earlier period of silence about moral issues), we enter a liminal period where social issues seem highly problematic as they enter public discourse. I suggest ‘citizenship’ as a frame could help us to analyze such problematic issues. From how to impart sex education to children in Irish educational settings (Inglis, 1998; O’Carroll & Szcalachi, 1998) to how we might examine how academics write about sexuality / sexual politics (Dunphy, 1997; Hug, 1999), the framework of intimate citizenship can help us to explore how people put language on intimate issues. Intimate citizenship is a useful way of looking into longstanding Irish debates, such as mental illness and sexuality (Schepers-Hughes, 1983, 2001; Kingston, 2004), where documenting ‘the personal’ has been highly contentious (Schepers-Hughes, 2000).

In my own research, I noted how lesbians used the metaphor of ‘invisibility’ to gloss over their sexual stigma, and gay men would talk about needing to feel ‘safe’ as a way of covering (Yoshino, 2006) personal safety concerns. Often non-heterosexual sexuality is denied through ‘dehumanising processes of exclusion’ (Richardson, 2000c: 82). When, in 2004, it was reported that the Irish Farmers’ Journal would stop its print-copy ‘Lonely Hearts’ column and start an online service in 2004, its editor Kay Kevlihan, told The Irish Times it would not cater for the gay community either: ‘we never did cater for gay people and we believe there are outlets for them elsewhere. Ours is a general service’ (Mac Connell, 2004). Here, we see how language fails a newspaper editor when she is unable to utter the word ‘gay’. Thus, I argue that one aspect of framing sexuality in terms of citizenship would be to
enable researchers to 'get close' to how people want to live, and discover how and why they cannot say 'gay', for example.

**Making Intimate/Sexual Citizenship**

Within the sociology of sexualities, intimate citizenship has become an arena of exciting and innovative work linking various aspects of sexuality and citizenship. Most contributions to this field are written in an applied way, that is, that add substance and context to its key tenets through exploring particular facets of the arena (O'Donnell, 2004). Many more works look like intimate citizenship but do not, to use an older term, label themselves so. In this regard, for example, Whisman's (1996) *Queer by Choice* comes to mind, and there are others, who write about what I consider sexual citizenship (Graham, 2004; Ridge, 2004; Santos, 2004). We might even go back into 'prehistory' and find works such as Jacqui Alexander's (1994) work on sexuality and colonialism. But taking a 'purist' view, we can see that there are a limited number of theoretical contributions to intimate or sexual citizenship. From my own reading, I envisage there are significant amounts of 'loose ties' (Granovetter, 1973) between authors who have written something about sexuality and citizenship or belonging. Part of the reason for my dilemmas about who should, (should not be in) rests with Ken Plummer (2003).

Plummer (2003) insists that intimate citizenship is best understood as a *sensitizing concept*. Van den Hoonard defines a sensitizing concept as:

'... a starting point in thinking about a class of data of which the researcher has no definite idea and provides an initial guide to ... research. It may be dropped as more viable and definite concepts emerge in the course of ... research'. (Van den Hoonard, 1997: 2).
Sensitizing concepts are provisional, emic (analyst) terms that help us to excavate an analytical terrain, and sometimes when we read studies we infer 'that's intimate citizenship' because we see connections, affinities, which resonates with the intent of Plummer's definition to have a way of capturing a diverse field. One of the first books on sexual citizenship (Evans, 1993), it did not actually have a definition of 'sexual citizenship' but ventured that:

'gay citizenship issues are disparate and vary in specificity and levels of support but they cluster around... core disputes... legal status [age of consent]... law enforcement and police practices... censorship of gay-oriented materials... anti-gay media coverage; anti-discrimination employment rights... and infringement of rights related to AIDS... and sex education...' (Evans, 1993: 118).

His work heralded a research interest in consumption and sexuality, which is framed more generically as 'access' in Plummer's (1995; 2003) definition. Personally, I find Evans's work is too ambitious, trying to cover too many 'citizenships' when we need to explore each in more depth.

I feel a similar uneasiness in relation to Bell and Binnie's *The Sexual Citizen* (2000); they seem to begin with an *ad hominem* view towards sexual citizenship, where they claim that this term:

'... forecloses or denies aspects of sexuality written off as 'unacceptable'... this tends to demand a modality of sexual citizenship that is privatised, de-radicalised, de-eroticised and confined in all senses of the world...' (Bell and Binnie, 2000: 2).

Bell and Binnie want to emphasis 'sex' more as they consider it is overshadowed by the attention given to struggles for 'rights' and to 'intimacy'. While they argue that citizenship is 'a useful device for thinking' (p.9), they take particular issue with Weeks's idea that sexual citizenship is the 'proper home' for sexual difference, basing their critique on the idea that the erotic and public sex are downgraded. Likewise, they are critical how 'citizenship continues to be anchored in the nation
and the nation remains heterosexualised' (Bell and Binnie, 2000: 26; Hubbard, 2001). They argue that we need to look beyond issues such as the self and relationships to the ‘landscape’ of sexual politics, which leads us back to queer geography. Their position, which is routed in poststructuralist thought runs into the same problems as those identified by Ellison (1997), where a privileged, decentered (queer) subject takes priority. Likewise, Bell and Binnie are criticised by some feminists because:

‘queer lifestyles are not equally accessible to all, not even to all lesbians and gays, but only to those with the economic and cultural capital necessary to access the increasingly commodified cultural spaces that queer inhabits’ (Jackson and Scott, 2004: 234).

One feminist who has written about ‘sexual citizenship’ is Diane Richardson. Richardson’s focus has been on sexual citizenship in terms of how we might categorise sexual rights (Richardson, 1998a, 1998b; 2000a; 2000b; 2000c; 2001; 2004). In her paper called ‘Constructing Sexual Citizenship’, she argues that we can consider three categories of rights: conduct-based, identity-based and relationship-based but they are heavily circumscribed (Richardson, 1998a: 88) by heterosexuality and hegemonic male norms. More recently, I feel that her critique of heteronormative power has become more pointed (Richardson, 2004). While the homosexual was quite a subversive figure in the context of struggles for gay rights and was castigated by the state, sexual politics celebrates the respectable gay couple (as the good gays), and attempts to normalise their lifestyle. She takes up the view, from American sociologist, Steven Seidman, that good gays are hegemonic in theorising about homosexuality. Seidman defines ‘good gays’ as being:

‘...associated with specific social behaviours. For example, the normal gay is expected to be gender conventional, link sex to love and a marriage-like relationship, defend family values, personify economic individualism, and display national pride’. (Seidman, 2002:133).
In Ireland, establishing the ‘good gay’ as a category is a key site for sexual politics in the context of Irish equality politics, as a counterpoint to social conservatism (A. M. Smith, 1994). While Richardson’s work delves into how we can categorize and establish rights (a legal/political process), my interest is in how life politics claims and dilemmas are elucidated through sexual stories and, more widely, how we are making intimate, sexual history.

Two key contributors to sexual or intimate citizenship for whom dilemmas around life politics and intimacy are central concerns, are Jeffrey Weeks and Ken Plummer, and I shall allude to each of them in turn. Jeffrey Weeks’s interest in and contribution to sexual citizenship stems from his extensive work in mapping a social history of sexuality, with a view to ‘understanding the interconnections between the social and the sexual’ (Weeks, 2004: 27). In his 2000 book, Making Sexual History, he states that:

'We are the makers of sexual history in our everyday lives, in our life experiments, in the tangle between desire, responsibility, contingency, and opportunity. We may not make it in circumstances of our own choosing, but we have more choice than we often believe or seize [and our task is to] ... explore how sexual history is written because its contribution to how sexuality is lived is central... to fully understand the web in which we are entangled' (Weeks, 2000: vii; 2).

Central concerns in his writings are how we manage and live with difference and moral values. More attention in some of his recent writings (Weeks, 2001, 2004, 2007) have been around how we value (and not just cope with) sexual diversity. Likewise, he has written widely on how the transformations of intimacy and sexuality have been remade (Weeks, 2007). In contrast to many voices who lament a decline in contemporary society’s values, Weeks’s interest is firmly in how values are being recast, for example through a tension between discourse of myth and (necessary) fiction in accounts of or struggles over self-identity (Weeks, 1995). His
interest in sexuality and social change can be seen to bear the imprint of the sexual historian:

‘Identities... are less about expressing an essential truth about our sexual being; they are about mapping our different values of autonomy, relationships, of belonging, of difference and diversity. They provide continuous possibilities for invention and reinvention, open processes through which change can happen’ (Weeks, 1995: 100).

This reflexive agent is the sexual citizen. For Weeks:

‘... this new personage is a harbinger of a new politics of intimacy and everyday life... [and is] ... a hybrid being, breaching the public/private divide which Western culture has long held to be essential’ (Weeks, 1998: 35-36).

In his work on the sexual citizen (Weeks, 1998), Weeks considers three aspects: the democratisation of relationships, the emergence of new subjectivities, and the development of new narratives and stories about personal life.

Firstly, he notes relationships have been democratised through a combination of detraditionalization (decline in traditional family norms); more egalitarianism (commitment/ responsibility) in relationships; and the rise of more autonomy (independence) between individuals in a relationship. Secondly, taking Giddens’s (1991; 1992) work into account, Weeks suggests that detraditionalization leads to scope for more cultural creativity through the reflexive project of the self. Thirdly, the rise of new stories:

‘... about the self, about sexuality and gender, are the context of the emergence of the sexual citizen because these stories telling of exclusion, through gender, sexuality, race, bodily appearance or function, have as their corollary the demand for inclusion: for equal rights under the law, in politics, in economics, in social matters and in sexual matters...’ (Weeks, 1998: 47).
He concludes by insisting that the articulation of sexuality and citizenship in this manner, through the emergence of the sexual citizen is ‘at the heart of contemporary politics because they are centrally concerned with the quality of life’ and marks the start of an engagement with ‘the body politic’ not the end in itself (Weeks, 1998: 49). The often messy debates about same-sex intimacy in Ireland are exemplars (Mishler, 1990) local beginnings of engagements with the body politic.

Turning to Ken Plummer’s work, we can note how his definition of intimate citizenship has become widely used within this field of study. Plummer locates three set of concerns to intimate citizenship, as an arena in which:

‘... people may have to make decisions around the control (or not) over one’s body, feelings, relationships; access (or not) to representations, relationships, public spaces, etc.; and socially grounded choices (or not) about identities, gender experiences, erotic experiences. In line with the general features of life politics... there can no longer be an expectation that blueprints pure and simple will be found. Intimate citizenship does not imply one model, one pattern one way. On the contrary, it is a loose term which comes to designate a field of stories, an array of tellings, out of which new lives, new communities and new politics may emerge’ (Plummer, 1995: 151-152).

The challenging definition is quite broad, as a sensitising concept; I have found it helpful to have the definition on my office wall, blown up large and I have regularly contemplated it. In my view, it is a call to explore particular contexts where intimate citizenship occurs through sexual stories. Plummer (2003: 139) is the first to recognise that his position is a ‘work in progress’, which is aimed as a call to broadening the (conventional) scope of citizenship and developing public policy rhetoric.

Plummer, along with other commentators, is seeking to find a ‘frame’ for thinking about our personal lives and placing the personal within a citizenship context. Plummer (2003: 12-13) suggests to us that the idea of ‘intimacy’ has had a long
history from being about a physical space in which people are close (an intimate space), through to a romantic meaning (romantic love), and more recently to be about 'a partnership in the search for truth' (Plummer, 2003: 12). He considers the term intimate to be quite broad and to have the possibility for a dystopian side (KP had done earlier work on domestic violence).

While Richardson (2000c) queries why he opted for choosing the term 'intimacy' over 'sexuality', we can see – reflecting his symbolic interactionist sympathies – that Plummer wants to be close to the doing of intimacies:

'The term 'intimate' has no unitary meaning but may be seen as a complex sphere of 'inmost' relationships with self and others. Intimacies are not usually minor or incidental (although they may be transitory), and they usually touch the personal world very deeply. They are our closest relationships with friends, family, children and lovers, but they are also the deep and important experiences we have with the self (which are never entirely solitary): with our feelings, our bodies, our emotions, our identities. We do intimacies when we get close to all these feelings and emotions' (Plummer, 2003: 13).

The collapse of separate public/private spheres (mentioned by Ellison (above), has led to a 'plurality of multiple public voices and positions' (p.71), which is an 'empirical reality' (p.72), where intimate citizenship is done:

'Intimate citizenship refers to all those areas of life that appear to be personal but that are in effect connected to, structured by or regulated through the public sphere. They are rarely, if ever, simply a matter of the personal... public discourses on the choices that cluster around personal life, which are themselves not just personal but political and social. We are no longer talking about the separation of private and public spheres, but of continuums, pathways and intersections between them.' (Plummer, 2003: 70).

Suggesting that there really was never a bourgeois public sphere, he doubts the view that there has been a decline in community (in Putnam's sense). Rather the public sphere has moved into 'interactive spheres' (p.74), which seem like Bauman's (2000) cloakroom communities. Plummer distinguishes between:
'The non-interactive spheres – found in books, in the press, and on television programmes – are available to the general public and they confined argument and debate within themselves: theirs is a one-way path of communication ...

[cont'd] The interactive public sphere allows for direct and personal communication around public issues; we can find these in the active debates of social movements, in conferences in schools and universities, and maybe more problematically on Web sites. People debate and discuss (and sometimes scream and shout) at each other. Often the interactive public sphere has links to and draws upon the non-interactive sphere...often the two forms merge... (Plummer, 2003: 74).

In Plummer’s view, as the public sphere declines:

'... we find a world of ‘subpolitics’ emerging wherein political issues becomes part of everyday life talk... in these arenas we find different kinds of public debate – from the highly deliberative and rational voices of the so-called ‘public intellectuals’ to the more day-to-day voices of people telling moral stories.' (Plummer, 2003: 74-75).

In these forums, organic intellectuals ‘participate actively in both political and practical life as organizers and spokespersons...’ (Plummer, 2003: 75).

More recently, Plummer has urged social scientists to adopt a more applied way of researching those who are implicated in campaigning for sexual rights in terms of embodied/ lived experience. This suggests to me that he is trying to bring sexual rights more comprehensively into the analysis in a more grounded way. At another point in his 2006 article, he alluded to, but did not clarify, making more use of concepts from Goffman. Plummer suggests that:

'... the task for sociologists is to become intimately familiar with the crusaders, their claims and the social processes through which rights emerge. They need to see ‘rights’ as part of the day-to-day world of lived meaning, and not simply belonging to the theoretical and philosophical or even legal heavens' (Plummer, 2006: 153).
Conclusion

Following Spradley (1980: 3), for whom 'ethnography is the work of describing culture', my interest in developing Irish lesbian and gay intimate citizenship stems principally by focusing upon lived experience as a basis for nascent political claims. This raises some the methodological dilemmas, and I will explore them in the next chapter.

In this chapter, I began by noting how 'telling' about sexuality was problematic in Ireland, and early crusaders, such as MacLiammoir, had to adopt a 'coded' way of transmitting sexual knowledge, about Oscar Wilde, in the context of distant debates about homosexuality in the UK. Over the past generation or so, we have seen an increase in the sexual stories that can be told in Ireland that both bear testament to the liberalisation of Irish culture, and call for sociological imagination to interpret how stories are being told.
Chapter 3: Researching intimate citizenship

Introduction

In chapter one, I charted, at some length, how I became interested in lesbian and gay sexuality while doing some research into the lives of Irish men. The intellectual journey I experienced was made into a concrete research terrain through happenstance when I heard Ken Plummer’s lecture on intimate citizenship at TCD (Plummer, 2000).

In chapter two, following on from my ‘discovery’ of intimate citizenship, I explored and read up widely on how sexual stories had been transmitted in the Irish context. The story (almost a fable now) of how Micheal MacLiammoir operated as the first stately homo in Ireland was inspiring, and I summarised a vignette about his life and death as homage of sorts. My reading of MacLiammoir’s story and my analysis of theorists, who had helped to develop the field of intimate citizenship, led me to decide that I needed to focus on Irish lesbian and gay sexual stories.

In this chapter, chapter three, I will outline what I accomplished by using a multiple-pronged research approach. My initial phase of research led me to be cautious in my approach, as problems of scale and the politics of getting access created some ethical dilemmas for me as a researcher. Thereafter, I started to do some life-history interviews, and I realised how the experience of coming out formed a central focus for lesbians, bisexuals and gay men alike. I started to attend the occasional activist forum, and I later took up some analysis of how a single case of mediatized reaction to ‘gay marriage’ took hold.
In the initial period of doing exploratory research, I began to notice another aspect of intimate citizenship. While Weeks (1998) points out how people do not go around wanting to be a 'sexual citizen', there is an analogous dilemma for a social researcher who wants to 'come out' as a researcher of intimate citizenship. The incredulity of such a disclosure weighs heavily in terms of methodological design, research ethics and data presentation.

In terms of my researcher role, I felt a bit dis/eased as I could not readily describe my research focus. I could not readily 'recycle' chapter two for potential informants. Many interviewees would be confused if asked: 'do you feel like an intimate citizen?' Likewise, I could not ask people to 'tell me a kernel story' or even readily whittle down 'what practices' (Morgan, 1996) are salient in your life? Could I tell them I was interested in narrative analysis (Riesman, 1993), or in 'slices of life' (Goffman, 1974) or finding exemplars (Mishler, 1990)? Could I really ask whether Bauman's work would help clarify or would displace that of Giddens? Mostly, the answer was NO.

I felt there was a heavy dilemma for me in terms of accounting for my research 'rationale (Goffman, 1989) when key analytical terms and ideas could not be shared. Reading Plummer's (1995) schema on stories led me to decide that the simplest approach in terms of presenting myself as a researcher would be best. I became a 'listener' and 'coaxer' in seeking research subjects and remain close to the data and to soliciting stories as data from 'tellers', which built on my earlier masculinities research role, and was aimed to work the sociological imagination (Mills, 1959) from a symbolic interactionism viewpoint. I began to see stories in their wider context (Turner, 1980) where milieu and social structure were at play. The arena of gay politics, to use that term loosely, quickly led to me seeing how politically fraught 'the field' could be, rather like in masculinity politics.
As I commenced my thesis, I conducted a 'stream of consciousness' exercise about 'what am I thinking of doing'. While this task tended to confirm my preferences about my work. It also served to allow me to think through and discard some possible alternative directions that might be exciting, even 'cool'. For instance, I eschewed the idea of taking myself into risky, exotic social settings like gay saunas or cruising/cottages. In part, I thought it was not viable to spend all that money on going to 'Incognito' or the Boilerhouse', but I also thought it would make me more 'suspect' from a professional viewpoint (Plummer, 1975).

Thus, my 'stream of consciousness' exercise also made me think about the linkages in my theorising and research methodology. While Anthias (1999) notes there were experiential, inter-subjective, organisation or representational levels to researching identity, most research on masculinities had been based on in-depth interviewing out of a position of pragmatism, and I would have to be pragmatic also, about how and where I could obtain my own data.

There was strong support, methodologically for doing interviews in my case. As Schwartz & Jacobs (1979: 61-62) maintain: 'there are many important aspects of people's lives that cannot be duplicated experimentally, or easily or morally observed in a direct way, for instance, sexual relations...' [and personal accounts often are] 'the best way (perhaps the only way) to gain access to such phenomena'. We need, following Connell (1995) and Giddens (1984, 1991), to recognise how the analysis of interview research was also situated from the standpoint that gender is structurated, recursive and interactional. Most interactionist work on masculinities can be placed within critical humanism (Plummer, 2001; 2002) or interpretive interactionism (Denzin, 2001). From earlier research experience (Reynolds, 1997), I liked the way interview analysis enabled me to delve into the dilemmas of
someone's lived experience. As Denzin (2001: 59) puts it, stories 'speak to turning point moments in peoples lives... although many narratives can be told only by the persons who experienced the events... significant biographical experiences are told and retold in narrative form'. But while interviewing predominated as form of data collection in my mind, I reflected upon how I had used other methodologies (Schwalbe, 1996; Schwalbe & Wolkomir, 2002; Vale de Almeida, 1998). I had used observation research, and so I explored how helpful interactionism might be for me in my thesis work. My reflexive deliberations, led me to believe that I was 'doing' more than one method from masculinities research. Even though I had some sort of a 'reputation' for interviewing as a postgraduate student, I felt it necessary to defend an unnecessarily 'overdrawn' and 'invidious comparison' (Lofland & Lofland, 1995: 18; Weber, 1949) between methods at times. I started to take a more sanguine approach: finding stories was what mattered.

I also came to see my (not terribly happy) experience of masculinity politics also from the viewpoint of another experience it had given me: I gained firsthand experience of the sub-politics (Beck, 1994: 22) of Irish masculinity politics. Even when it was fraught, difficult or homophobic, I learned something (Kimmel, 1995; Schwalbe and Wolkomir, 2002). As I went through this reflexive process, I wondered if C. W. Mills was not quite right in his description about men and consciousness. Men, Mills noted:

'... live in immediate acts of experience and their attentions are directed outside themselves until acts are in some what frustrated. It is then that awareness of self and motive occur' (Mills, 1940: 905).

My body and bodily presence as a gay researcher had been implicated in my trouble with masculinity politics. But I came to understand that my transgressive status
only led to better self-understanding, being transgressive was not an end in itself. More widely, I became quite sceptical of anything to do with queer theory and its supposed transgressivity – which perhaps accounts for my reaction to Bell and Binnie's work, above. But I also came to insist that sociology should have the ‘tools’ to tackle the challenge of researching intimate citizenship, and the interactionist tradition. Below, I outline the key research activities I had undertaken and the dilemmas implicated. But first, I will outline my ethical stance, which is quite important, given how I conducted research in within a small culture, in a small-ish city.

**Ethical considerations**

Given that my research has been not solely focused upon a minority within a society, but, largely on a sub-set within that minority, ethical issues are critical. I want to briefly indicate what steps I have taken in order to ensure that my work adopts an ethical approach, which involved taking a ‘guarded’ approach to protect privacy.

**Informant Anonymity and Protection**

Firstly, all informants have been given pseudonyms from virtually the start of the process. At the start of the research, while the first interviewee was willing to give consent to be named, she felt that her partner would not be happy about such openness. A second interviewee had a wife, and his neighbours did not know he was gay, and so he asked quite freely to me by wanted to remain ‘anonymous’. In light of this, and my general concern that the world of Irish lesbian and gay activism is small, I took the following measures.
Along with giving interviewees pseudonyms, which bore no relation to their real identities, I also amended some personal information that might lead a knowledgeable reader to identify informants. This extended to when an informant mentions their partner or a family member. While is not easy to do so, I have tried to disguise the organisation that informants work for, by keeping the comments to, 'getting into activism...' or 'works in HIV/AIDS' (as that could mean being a nurse in a hospital unit). I have also amended where people mentioned they lived (to 'abroad', 'down the country', etc.). While, for the purposes of examination for this thesis, I have left the tables (3.1 and 3.2) intact, but I would envisage that the tables would not appear in the final version of the thesis unless presented in the style of 'Appendix 2' of Same Sex Intimacies (Weeks, et al. 2001). In terms of my data, I have held onto all the transcripts on micro-cassette, but will erase these when my work is completed. The transcripts were 'worked upon' on the screen, and paper copies have been shredded already. The PC files with the transcripts will be removed from my hard disk once this thesis is published.

Observation Data

As an adjunct, to my research, I conducted a small sample of jottings in public settings. These memos, which I turned into fieldnotes, are notably oriented towards a short analysis, in chapter seven, of whether or not we can claim that the occasional activist forums represent Bauman's (2000) description of cloakroom communities. In commenting, as I do in chapter seven, my focus is on processes, phrases said that operate as kernel stories (Burk, 1996), rather than individuals per se. Doing such fieldwork, on the 'hoof', involved some risk. My role as a note-taker put me inadvertently into the arena of covert research, although only this aspect of my thesis fell into this category in a limited way.
I checked with both the Irish and British Sociological Association web pages and ascertained that covert research is acceptable only when it is “not possible” (SAI) or “impossible” (BSA) to obtain the data in other ways. While this data did not represent the whole focus of my thesis, my interpretation is that these forums were public spaces. Nonetheless, I adopted the role of ‘potential insider’, which minimised my impact so that I could obtain some data in the only manner possible (Miller and Tewksbury, 2001) as the forums did not attract any media coverage. All source that I consulted on this point, argued me to ensure participant anonymity, which I have done. Had my thesis focus been more about the activist gatherings – and there is much research potential there – then I would have required a more formal (negotiated) access. As it was, the gatherings I visited, were open to the public, and I was mindful of confidentiality in my analysis. Over time, I have become more ambivalent about the salience of observation research to this thesis (can intimate citizenship be observed?). But observation research did allow me to notice how claims are both voiced and policed in the public sphere, which constitute both an interesting finding and a potential topic for future analysis. I shall now outline my methodological approach.

**Interviewing Activists**

I conducted a total of fifteen face-to-face interviews (see table below) for my thesis, mainly with lesbian and gay activists. As a mode of gathering and analysing interview data, I relied on Riesman’s (1993) approach to narrative analysis and Denzin’s (2001) work on interpretive interactionism.
Table 3.1: Summary information on interviewees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Phase:</th>
<th>Pseudonym and Description:</th>
<th>When interviewed:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Exploratory phase (late 1998)</strong></td>
<td><strong>Joe</strong>, GM activist, (47); <strong>Mos</strong>, GM counsellor (33); <strong>Patrick</strong>, S, M social welfare adviser at a regional office (36)</td>
<td>May 1999 May 1999 Nov 1999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Initial interviews (2000-2001)</strong></td>
<td><strong>Janet</strong>, B, F; postgraduate student, middle-class (27); <strong>Willow</strong> – L, activist, middle-class (28); <strong>Frank</strong> – GM (36) service sector. <strong>Greg</strong>, GM activist; refused to meet me after much negotiation. <strong>Barry</strong>, MGM ex-educator and counsellor, middle-class (47); <strong>Zach</strong>, GM, student and community volunteer, working-class (31); <strong>Harriet</strong>, LF, disabled student, ex-white collar professional (34);</td>
<td>Sept 2000 Sept 2000 Oct 2000 Late 2000 Nov 2000 March 2001 March 2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interviews with Lesbian and Gay Activists (2001-2002)</strong></td>
<td><strong>Jean</strong>, LF, married with five children, feminist and working class (50’s); <strong>Peter</strong>, GM HIV activist, middle-class (35); <strong>Constance</strong>, LF, middle-class, divorced with child, educator and feminist activist (late 50’s); <strong>Malcolm</strong>, GM, activist, civil servant, middle-class, college educated (28); <strong>Julia</strong>, LF, activist, lecturer, middle-class (35); <strong>Mary</strong>, LF, HIV activist, working class background.</td>
<td>Sept 2002 Sept 2002 Sept 2002 Nov 2002 Nov 2002 Nov 2002</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Legend: M = male; F = female L = lesbian; B = bisexual; G = gay; S = straight

Attending to ‘who’ to interview (Riesman, 1993) was a product of my pathway through data gathering and my experience of the field. I did not start out with the intention of researching activists, rather this aspect of my research focus emerged from the initial interviews and I decided to undertake ‘selective sampling’
(Plummer, 2001: 134) with those who were implicated in activism in the community in the formal sense at one point or another in their lives. This stems from my belief that active agents are well-placed to articulate their life experiences:

"The social conventions produced and reproduced in our day-to-day activities are reflexively monitored by the agent as part of 'going-on' in the variegated settings of our lives. Reflexive awareness in this sense is characteristic of all human action, and is the specific condition of that massively developed institutional reflexivity spoken of in the preceding chapter as an intrinsic component of modernity... In other words, agents are normally able, if asked, to provide discursive interpretations of the nature of, and the reasons for, the behaviour in which they engage" (Giddens, 1991: 35).

I came to understand how determining 'who' to interview can be so time-consuming from a couple of perspectives. Having originally begun my research with the idea of focusing on my own generation of gay men, who had lived through the era of decriminalisation, I became aware of how a 'male' focus was neglectful of women's experiences. This issue was brought home to me when one research contact told me how 'loads a' women' (to use her term), had been quite upset that a book about lesbian and gay Ireland (Rose, 1994) had virtually ignored lesbian activist work around the 1988-1993 campaign for decriminalisation of homosexuality. My gut reaction to this was initially to research beyond the scope of solely gay men and, for a time, I tried to go from one extreme to the other. From one category, I was intent on doing the four basic dimensions of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered! When I did two early interviews with women I railed back a bit, realising that I would have 'loads a' data' from lesbian and gay. After reading, Garber (1992) made it evident, 'trans' was another category completely.

The first interview, with a bisexual woman named Janet, helped me to see how 'different' women's experiences were from the men I knew. Janet's comments connected with Irish sociological literature about gender. While I decided not to
pursue research with bisexuals, I took out of it the importance of compulsory heterosexuality. A second interview, with a married gay man called Barry, came in response to an appeal for interviewees that I made in a local gay newspaper. Barry's story, as a married gay man coincided with some Irish media attention about married gay men. Both of these initial interviews were useful and sensitised me, in a data-driven manner, towards confirming a lesbian and gay focus.

More widely, I learned to take political 'contingencies' of interviewing in my stride. I also came to notice how personal motives could sometimes be behind reasons for an interviewee not wanting to talk, or delaying in meeting with me. For example, I initially met Zach around town in late 2000 and periodically met up with him on the street. I would allude how 'we must get together and do this interview' or such. This process went on for a number of months and I remember moaning to another informant (Janet) that a potential interviewee seemed to be avoiding me. Janet suggested that 'the time has to be right, Sean, even people who are political have to be ready to talk to you. Don't take it personally'. This was a lesson that I had long known from the arduous task of seeking interviews with men for the masculinities research project. But Janet was right! When Zach finally sat down and talked to me, he told me how his life had been turned upside down when his relationship fell apart. Zach had been completely devastated – so it was little wonder that he had not been ready to talk with a researcher!

I had to also face lesbians who were genuine puzzled as to why a gay man wanted to talk to a dyke. I was respectful and careful in approaching women, in order to demonstrate my genuine interest in including lesbians' views in my work. To demonstrate my good faith, I went to the 2000 Lesbian Lives conference and made a point of talking to the presenters and being visibly present as a gay man in a lesbian environment in the hope of developing some leads.
On occasion, I did find obstacles recruiting lesbian informants. For instance, Harriet (a lesbian interviewee - who later asked that I should not include her in my research) had tried, on my behalf, to refer me to a couple of lesbians working in healthcare but neither woman would talk to a ‘stranger’. Likewise, Jean, a working-class feminist would only meet me when another woman friend of my vouched for me – so I was not in quite the same terrain as Oakley (1981)! After the interview to note Carol Warren’s bracket of time after the completion of the interview but before the interviewer leaves the setting (Warren, 2003), Jean told me as I was leaving that ‘if it wasn’t for XX, I would not have talked to you at all – off you go now!’ During the interview, Jean had been quite blunt towards me and took control of the discussion: she did not want to talk about her marriage at all and upon asking me if I wanted anything to drink and I asked for a glass of water, she replied “we don’t have glasses here. I can put some water in a mug”. When I reflected upon her behaviour, it was not really attacking me, but it was trying to mask her nervousness about talking with me by covering her nervousness with a sort of ‘tough, no nonsense working-class mother’ act. Although it was not comfortable at the time, I did get a good interview because I respectfully listened to her. When I reflect on my overall experience of interviewing lesbians, what made me ‘acceptable’ as a male interviewer was the way in which I listened and ‘did not talk too much’. Denzin (2001: 66) puts it as follows: ‘a good listener doesn’t talk, rather he or she lets others talk’. This echoes Constance’s compliment to me at the end of our interview, where she praised me for being a good listener who had made the experience easy for her. This implied there was some nervousness on both our parts.

The third issue in relation to interviewing relates back to the development of my research focus. My experience of researching interviewees who were not activists, had been interesting but it was clear that both ‘non-activists’, who had been invited
to talk to me through my social network, were extremely nervous. While one lesbian, Harriet, had been immensely helpful in sharing her account, she then backed out of wanting to participate. A second non-activist started an interview, became somewhat distressed about disclosing details and, at his request, the interview (which I was not permitted to tape) was ended. While I was not disheartened by the regular interviewees (even the reticent one) I noticed how involvement in activist activities put those particular interviewees into a particular position where they had a combination of personal, social and political concerns that provided rich data about the intellectual dilemmas. But in addition to that, I felt the interview dynamics were more equitably-balanced in terms of power.

This brings me to what Riesman (1993) refers to as ‘telling’ of narratives – what and how are you being told something? Moreover, how can this be conceptualised, captured as a ‘social fact’ and isolated [bracketed] for analysis? More than ‘accidents of biography’ (Lofland & Lofland, 1995), there were emergent aspects to the stories that activists had related, and I came to see this nexus of concerns in terms of what Kalčik (1975) refers to as a kernel story:

‘Most often a kernel story is a brief reference to the subject, the central action, or an important piece of dialogue from a longer story. In this form, one might say it is a kind of potential story, especially if the details are not known to the audience. It might be clearer to call this brief reference the kernel and what develops from it the kernel story, keeping in mind that many of these kernels do not develop beyond the first stage into kernel stories. Kernel stories lack a specific length, structure, climax, or point, although a woman familiar with the genre or subject may predict fairly accurately where a particular story will go. The story developed from the kernel can take on a different size and shape depending on the context in which it is told. The structure of the kernel story, therefore, is fluid’ (Kalčik, 1975: 7).

There were two inter-related aspects to the Irish lesbian and gay kernel story in the activist narratives. Activist dilemmas about coming out as lesbian or gay carried enormous importance to the re/shaping of the biography and relations with the
social, which is fundamental to lesbian and gay life (Seidman, 2002). Time and again, narrators’ stories about coming out are reflexively revisited as anchor points where a barrier was ‘broken through’ (Giddens, 1991: 114) with all its biographical consequences. While people turn and return to their own situation, we can note that ‘coming out’ is out there, as an ongoing, important topic of discourse in the media (for instance, coming out was a theme of a recent Oprah Winfrey show).

The second, related kernel story that interests me is about how the same-sex couple should be recognised. While it was mainly lesbian narrators who told me explicitly that they had either been in heterosexual marriages that failed, or that politically they did not want to become wives, there is a wider fragmenting of the heterosexual norm of the ‘family’ for both men and women. Within the small sample I used for this study, men were at pains to tell me how they sought to renegotiate their relationships with their birth families as gay men and sought to find a partner in life. While dilemmas about same-sex marriage – as an illustration of how rapidly this debate is moving – did not figure in the interviews, this topic began to appear in media discourses in which people told their (kernel) stories, and it has since become the issue for LGB sexual politics. I posit that civil partnership/gay marriage is related to coming out (see chapter eight).
While coming out, generally speaking, is framed in male terms, which rests on an appeal to rational thought, the issue of ‘gay marriage’ requires more attention to emotional life. While one element of ‘gay marriage’ is changing the law, the overarching issue is life political (Giddens, 1991, 1992), and focuses on how we want to live. In chapter eight, I consider this issue through the lens of media coverage about ‘gay marriage debates’, and I note how there is a key struggle to put language on intimate life.

In relation to kernel stories about coming out, the gendered experience of coming out is a crucial underpinning of same-sex sexuality. There are gendered specificities associated with how people can come out and disclose their sexual orientation. Early on, I began to notice this as a theme, which I would term as the ‘gay kernel story’. Women, claims one narrator, are much more concerned about abandoning compulsory heterosexuality than men. Janet was infuriated as to how other women, heterosexual women in particular, oppressed her into behaving like a good wife’ because she lives with a man. She blamed them, in a rather personal way for restricting her lifestyle:

‘If I present for all the world, as a straight woman of 27 years of age, in a relationship, they resent the fact that I am not going down the mortgage, kids and marriage route, never mind the fact that I’m bi. The level of (um) the only word I can describe it is animosity how dare you not do what we’re doing. How dare you not get married and not have a rake of children, we’re tied down, you’re bloody well going to be tied down too!’ (Janet).

While Janet’s particular embodied frustration was immediate and palpable, I found some of the men telling me how accomplished they were in coping on the gay scene. Yet for one of the men, who was out, disclosure returned as a problem in relation to how his overseas partner could or could not remain in Ireland, and whether the said partner should mention his sexual orientation to the Irish authorities.
Coming out was an ongoing dilemma for Barry, who was married and gay:

“Well my name is Barry. I am 47, male, gay. Married for about the last 23 and a half years, which is half my life, mostly very happily. I've two children... And er, I suppose in some level, I have always known that I’m gay but because it was something that I knew from so early on, I just thought that it was the way I was. It took a very, very long time for me to accept that I was gay and not either straight or bisexual. And in fact, I really only accepted that 4 or 4 ½ years ago. So, then I came out ...’.

Barry went on to relate how he was ‘passing’ to maintain both his married identity and his secret gay identity. His presentation of self (Goffman, 1959; Kanuha, 1999) however, told me that men were not subject to the same socio-political constraints as women (like Janet). While Barry endured this ‘passing’ identity, another activist who came out in 1980, remarked how coming out was less important today because it is more individualized (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). The coming out kernel story, then, is a power symbol of the lesbian and gay life experience. Even if lesbians talk about coming out in different ways to men, it became clear to me that this ‘issue’ could provide an ‘anchor’ for my work. Overall, the data I framed around kernel stories were not available by other means (e.g. publications) and hence interviewing was the only way to proceed.

In focusing on coming out dilemmas (chapters five and six), I had it in mind to present my findings so as to engage the reader around how we consume this story as lesbians and gay men. While coming out is often viewed as finding certitude in an uncertain world - that there are other “like-minded people” (an Irish euphemism for ‘gay’ in the era before decriminalisation) – coming out is becoming an ongoing individualized dilemma, a negotiation, rather than an act associated with public coming out in the era of gay liberation, and is a story about consumption. It is also
an important motive for being in activist work and participating in debates about sexual politics (chapters seven and eight). While the activists in interview settings – perhaps rather self-evidently – talked about activist work as part of their ‘life history’ or as their ‘career’, I found in analysing the interview data that the talk about activism both served as an historical moment about the social movement, as a presentation of self (Goffman, 1959). Whether people remain as activists is linked to changes in the Irish voluntary sector (Curtin & Varley, 1995; Meade, 2005) but activists’ biographies are also a crucial deciding factor about whether they remain in activist work.

When activists told their intimate stories about activist work, this was a way of being reflexive about their relationship to politics. I noted how women were more critical than men about the world of activism. Thus, this dimension of the kernel story evokes a fragile basis of sexual politics. In terms of future research, this insight offers me scope to further explore the meaning-making activities implicated in social life. Again, I would side with Eliasoph and Lichterman that, given activists’ familiarity and articulacy with ‘doing interviews’, ‘the interview setting is just like settings in which people normally discuss an issue’ (Eliasoph & Lichterman, 2003: 743). Focusing on kernel stories enabled me to capture how sexuality is anchored in fleeting ways in the discursive contours of interviewing (Kong, Mahoney & Plummer, 2002). This ‘normal interaction’ tells a story and creates a narrative that can be reproduced. The narrative ‘speaks to turning point moments in people’s lives... although can narratives can be told only by the persons who experienced the events... significant biographical experiences are told and retold in narrative form’ (Denzin, 2001: 59). This reiterates Kalčík’s point about the richness of kernel stories, when she notes how:
'The kernel story, then, is a conversational genre of folklore in two ways. First, conversation can become art of the story, and, second, it is structured in part by the conversational context from which it emerges. Kernel stories form part of the repertoires of [story teller]... but, when known to others, they can become part of the group's repertoire as well' (Kalcik, 1975:8-9).

Getting to a deeper understanding of the significance of kernel stories was achieved through the process of *transcribing* the interview data and reading and re/reading the material. This is not just a technical question of 'typing' but an interpretive process is also involved. Focusing on coming out and disclosure emerged, in a grounded way, from reading and re-reading the transcripts and listening to the tapes on several occasions. Transcripts 'fix' words into linear texts, making life visible and while I chose not to pay attention to pauses and inflections (associated with ethnomethodology), the process of reflection and contemplation, accompanied by comparative analysis and writing made the interview data a valuable information resource.

The ongoing focus through the two kernels that emerged led me to become interested in two issues of sexual politics. In the first case, I reflected upon what I had observed (chapter seven) about the ways in which occasional public forums operated. Secondly, when media debates about same-sex marriage in the *Irish Times* (August – September 2001) appeared, I decided to track what was going on as an exemplar (Mishler, 1990) of the rise of a fragile Irish lesbian and gay intimate citizenship debate (chapter eight).
Making fieldnotes about political forums

The second main element of my fieldwork was doing observation research at a series of occasional forums held for the public to disseminate information or galvanise support on an issue.

Table 3.2: Activist Forums, Dublin (1999-2003)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Organiser/venue:</th>
<th>Topic:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feb 1999</td>
<td>Labour/ TCD</td>
<td>LGB families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov 1999</td>
<td>IQA/Ormond hotel</td>
<td>Preserving history</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 2000</td>
<td>Equality Authority</td>
<td>Civil partnership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 2000</td>
<td>IQA / Outhouse</td>
<td>Presenting archive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 2001</td>
<td>Equality Authority</td>
<td>Disabled GLB rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 2002</td>
<td>UCD/Outhouse</td>
<td>Married/Queer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feb 2003</td>
<td>Young FG/TCD</td>
<td>Gay couples’ rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 2003</td>
<td>Labour/LGB</td>
<td>Civil partnership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 2003</td>
<td>Outhouse</td>
<td>Queer/Disabled</td>
</tr>
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</table>

One aspect of my research has stemmed from observation of a loose series of ten political forums that I have observed. The sessions that I observed are set out in the above table. The public events were aimed at keeping politically-inclined members of the LGBT community in Dublin informed about politics and soliciting their views about civil partnership, gay rights and maintaining community solidarity. The set of meetings were occasional and were often, although not always, held in the run-up to gay pride celebrations in late June.

I was exposed to the public meetings culture by chance in January 1999. A TCD branch Labour Party advertisement on a TCD noticeboard mentioned that a public meeting was planned for early February 1999 and I visited Dublin from where I was working in Cork to observe the event. The forum was exciting and the conversation was interesting. One attendee at this first forum told me how these meetings occurred periodically, and added, with a grin, that they were attended by people who were ‘political animals like me’. I enjoyed the first meeting and made some
notes about it. But it seemed that some (at least) of the participants knew one another and I decided, after Cicourel & Kitsuse (1963), to 'track' whatever other meetings I could and see what I could see, as it were. My jottings were usually after the meetings were over, either sitting in my car, or at home. Only one time, did I sit taking notes, and someone made eye contact with me (but did not appear concerned), and I realised I had violated my own researcher role status. Overall, I followed Lofland & Lofland's advice on taking notes and splitting what I observed from questions, or myself:

'... fieldnotes are a running description of events, people, things heard and overheard, conversations among people, conversations with people. Each new physical setting and person encountered merits a description. You should also record changes in the physical setting or people. Since you are likely to encounter the same people again and again, you need not repeat such descriptions, but only augment them as changes occur' (Lofland and Lofland, 1995: 93).

At each forum, I usually positioned myself at the mid-right of the room, so I could clearly see and hear participants and could, without too much discomfort, turn to see most contributors around the meeting venue. Throughout the forum, I would take jottings, often keywords to remind myself, and then write these notes out longhand, as a descriptive memo, quite soon after the event. The memo would describe the forum's progress in as much detail about the scene as I could recall. This was then rewritten as a full fieldnote that dwelled more on the stories being related and the discussions about the tales told.

While some ethnographers, such as Emerson et al. (1995: 37) allude to how inexperienced researchers 'feel deeply ambivalent about jottings,' I welcomed my focused researcher role as someone who went home as a 'note maker'. It afforded me some security in these settings (as a 'non-activist') and made me focused about listening work. My role was less prone to feelings of investment or ambivalence
than seems to occur with extensive ethnographic studies (Emerson et al, 1995). I was, by my own choice of research design, focused upon relatively few social settings and the important aspect for me was to gather data.

While there was an element of my choice here that wanted to focus on actively listening to ideas, and not to participate as an ‘expert’ or ‘academic’, I did feel that I have got my opportunity to ‘say something’ when I turned my jottings into fieldnotes and subsequently theorised about activist forums for this thesis (chapter seven). I could imagine that a reader, or another researcher, might take up my ideas and continue theorising; the fieldnotes remained mine and remained confidential. So I could find my voice in the writing of the fieldnotes, critically thinking about what I had observed. At the same time, the data that was created (Emerson et al, 1995) or represented (Lofland & Lofland, 1995) through my observation research at a particular juncture and it constitutes one representative account:

‘the ethnographers’ text creates the subject: subjects exist only insofar as they are brought into our written texts... justifies treating each document as a separate story. It also renders fruitless ... debates over who got the facts right’ (Lofland and Lofland, 1995: 68)

Becker is quite right to suggest that the process of writing ideas down ‘fixes’ ideas into textual form, contra the visual (Becker, 1986, 1998). But the process of contemplation about fieldwork is more creative and thus there is a ‘dual’ feeling to doing fieldnotes: there is an ‘objective dimension and a social constructivist interpretation and my intellectual journey is the weave between the two paradigms implicated.
Answering questions about 'what are people doing in these forums and how are they doing it?' is not simply a matter of taking notes and summarising who said what. A creative tension is at play. Emerson et al (1995: 167; 2001) suggest that ethnographers are implicating in creative work through their analysis rather than 'discovery' (which is the position of grounded theory). Anyone can 'discover' what is going on by being there, but seeing the role of activist forums in the Irish context necessitates some degree of creativity, in order to reflexively read connections beyond the social setting in question. What I discovered was that these forums were 'the field' – or at least were part of the picture of how sexual politics was made and remade. What I created was an analysis of how people interacted in these settings: sharing ideas, floating concepts and possibilities, and conveying news. Thus, I shifted in relation to my emerging data to understanding that the political forums were fertile terrain for sociology and I continued 'tracking' the forums, when I could, until this phase of politics ran its course.

In terms of analysis of the fieldnotes (chapter seven), I took Richardson's position, that writing is a method of inquiry, to heart and thought about how I interpreted my observations and how I viewed my researcher role (L. Richardson, 1998). The rough draft of chapter seven initially started as an extended fieldnote, composed of all the fieldnotes I had made. There followed a period of reading and re/reading this material and thinking about how people conducted themselves in these settings, which is a central concern of cultural sociology. Fundamental to this, as Richardson (1998: 349) suggests is how language is implicated in social life, language produces social reality and meaning rather than reflecting it, and the thrust of her writing approach is to unpack our assumptions and critically engage with how we know about the world.
I began to notice from observing but also from analysing and writing how '... people use collective interpretations to make meaning together in everyday life' (Eliasoph and Lichterman, 2003: 736). While my analysis of these forums could be linked to social movement literature (Polletta, 1997) or to Habermas's (1989) public sphere, my main concern was how stories were presented and shared, how they were received/consumed and how people related their private/intimate dilemmas in a public setting and within a particular cultural context. These stories were sexual stories (Plummer, 1995) that were circulated between activists, academics and motivated lay members of the community. I noticed a some degree of division between how there was talk about 'politics' on one side and 'everyday experience' on the other, with the latter seeming to motivate people much more than 'politics'.

While the forums only were very occasionally reported upon in the gay press (GCN), and their significance is not widely appreciated in the Irish context because of an absence of media coverage, I consider that there is much potential for this form of activist work (I say that compared with men's groups). Thus, gathering some data using fieldnotes, and writing something about these ephemeral forms of social movement activism, seemed better to me than saying nothing at all, and having no record of these events. One obvious dilemma, as I mention above, is researcher ethics, because I was exploring an idea, that was not my original focus, but my hunch was to be inquisitive.

I had to be careful in writing Chapter Seven to protect confidentiality – and to contain myself when I felt emotional about some statements, as it is easy to get caught up! Likewise, while it is sometimes confusing to a reader to report the minutiae of how 'one person says, then another...', this style has to be balanced against trying not to divulge any identifying symbols. Where someone made a significant contribution, I labelled them in non-descript ways as, 'The Divorcee' or
'Divorced Mum'. I have kept my overall fieldnotes and jotting confidential (as it the usual practice for anthropologists and sociologists). My overarching concern stemming from these observations is whether we can consider activist gatherings as examples of Bauman’s (2000) ‘cloakroom communities’, which returns my ‘fieldnotes’ to a more theoretical standpoint. More generally, I would suggest more research could be done in the Irish context about observing how various social movements operationalize.

**Doing intimacy in public: doing gender and the ideological**

The final element of my research methodology (chapter eight) relates to how I did an analysis of contributions to an Irish newspaper about same-sex marriage.

What triggered the newspaper interaction and interest about ‘gay marriage’ was the publication of photograph (in the *Irish Times* newspaper) of two German gay men on their celebration of their civil partnership (2 August 2001). Taking up the idea of ‘tracking’ (c.f. infra.), I followed the chain of *letters to the editor* in response to this photograph. The correspondence lasted from 14 August 2001 to 7 September 2001 (the cycle of letters about gay marriage was ended, in no small part by the events of 11 September 2001). I found the letters fascinating. In part, some contributors disclosed their sexual orientation and antecedent life political dilemmas about lack of rights. I noted how the claims were becoming more ideological and I felt that the exchanges were starting to align around a progay/antigay axis (following Smith and Windes, 2000).

In order to do a content analysis of the letters, I took up some earlier Irish sociological work on the analysis of media that had linked media and ideology (Peillon, 1982; 1984). More sociologically, I would argue that Peillon’s framework
helps us to link the interactional and institutional levels of analysis (Anthias 1999). Following Peillon (1982), the cycle of Letters to the Editor constitutes a research frame for theorising Irish (local) specificities of wider (global) debates about same-sex intimacy (generally) and the extension of rights to non-heterosexual couples (specifically).

The 2001 Irish debate on gay marriage was a local reaction but it has global connections (Binnie, 2004) in that the same photograph and the political debate have been cited in other places. For instance, campaigners lobbying in support of civil partnership in South Korea cited the German case. In a legal opinion, Judge Chung Jae-oh of Jeju District Court, argued for the introduction of same-sex unions. An article in the online South Korean newspaper Digital Chosunilbo (consulted 13 December, 2005) specifically alludes to the influence of the German experience on gay marriage. A crucial element of Justice Chung's legal argument calling for Korean law reform was his reading of legal changes in Germany. The following vignette reflects a global/local linkage in this aspect of sexual politics:

'A judge argues Korea should permit legal unions of gay couples: In a recently published paper, Judge Chung Jae-oh of Jeju District Court says Korea needs to discuss legislation for a framework for same-sex unions. Chung calls for a legal basis for the union of same-sex couples that protects their rights and contributes to ending discrimination. Germany has recognized same-sex unions since 2001, with a law stipulating conditions for partnership, support for the partner and ways of dividing property. In a recent suit filed by a woman who sought division and alimony from her female partner, the Seoul High Court ruled against the plaintiff, saying cohabitation of same-sex couples could not be regarded as a virtual marriage'. (Digital Chosunilbo, 2005)

Peillon's (1982; 1984) work on the ideological underpinnings of media discourse had argues that the ideological is "a system of ideas, beliefs, and preferences [which defines] the atmosphere and cultural climate of a society" (1982: 134). He used the
term *ideology* in lieu of the term *culture* because that term had been ‘used in anthropological works to refer not only to the beliefs but also to the behaviour of groups or societies’.

In his analysis of how to explore the ideological, Peillon suggested that of “various forms of ideological expression... the more complete, the most revealing” is newspaper discourse. And this is a rich data source where “the writer is unhampered by strategic considerations [and can] express ideology in a more spontaneous form, since it is not transformed by being censored or polished for political or polemical ends” (Peillon, 1982: 134). Peillon also suggested ‘ideological unity is ... realised not by a consensus of views but by the mobilisation of a few underlying principles ... as an intellectual and moral framework within which cultural orientations develop’. (Peillon, 1984: 56). On the issue of whether the newspaper editor exerts an *ideological role*, Peillon (1982) thought not. He accepted that the participants’ letters to the editor were more likely to be middle/upper class and, while the selection of letters is subject to editorial control, Peillon posited that any ideological content intended by contributors is not “distorted”. More recent academic research about *letters to the editor* seems to support Peillon’s view that there is not ideological censorship of letters, rather the editors’ motives for selecting letters are those that are more emotionally charged by individuals who tend to make for an engaging reading experience or which enhance ongoing issues of public concern (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2001, 2002; Raeymaeckers, 2005).

Thus, by focusing on a mediatized social interaction in the *Irish Times* I sought to think about the wider ideological dilemmas expressed about gay marriage. My analysis consisted of three inter-connected processes. First, I considered the image used in the photograph. As an image, it did not seem to be “disturbing, shocking,
and/or tasteless and insensitive" as the protagonist of the correspondence, Vera, suggests. Secondly, I collected the stories that were shared through these contributions to the newspaper, and were in reaction to the image. Thirdly, by analysing the newspaper talk as a drama I sought to theorise about the broader social context of this photograph and reactions to it (Boyd-Barrett, 1995).

While my focus was a single case or story, I follow Schwartz & Jacobs’s standpoint (Schwartz & Jacobs, 1979: 69) that an in-depth analysis of a single case, an idiographic approach to qualitative research, “contends that it is scientifically valid and methodologically correct to study” because of the richness of the analysis. There are many instances in social research of studies based on either one individual or on single cases, such as Riessman’s (1994) study on a single case of domestic violence.

I followed Turner’s call to explore two broad levels of analysis, which he termed as the relations between stories (the content of a specific case) and dramas (the wider social, political and discursive claims) (Turner, 1980). My analysis, then, involved a period of reflection between the ‘story’ (key themes in reaction to the photograph), and the wider ‘drama’ (about ‘gay marriage’), and ‘how’ the story is told in a recursive way (Giddens, 1984; 1991).

Likewise, I followed Riessman’s (1993) advice to think about stories as the object of investigation and reflect upon embodied claims made as a form of doing intimacy (Plummer (2003: 12). Plummer (1995: 22) insists that stories are not abstract but are ‘grounded in historically evolving communities of memory, structured through age, class, race, gender and sexual preference’. How the story was told was interesting, and that it has circulated as a global sexual story is even more so.
Correspondents would express their *embodied* feelings around intimacy in a social context still dominated by prudery (Inglis, 2005).

Methodologically, then, sensitizing concepts are *emic* and therefore codeable terms (i.e. words that are used by research subjects). For Glaser and Strauss (1967: 27; 28) coding involves 'the discovery and naming of categories' via examining interview transcripts, fieldnotes, etc. to 'produce concepts that seem to fit the data'. Exploring sensitizing concepts can be accomplished by 'observation, interviewing, life histories, and the study of official and personal documents' and 'sedulously seek participants in the sphere of life who are acute observers and who are sell-informed' (Hammersley, 1989: 158). Concepts that are deployed can be catalogued, dimensionalized (relationships outlined), related to the wider social contexts in which terminology is used and associated with similar (families of) terms.

At this point, I want to point to the work of Eliasoph and Lichterman (2003) who suggest the need to look at *culture in interaction*. They argue that a 'fundamental task for sociological studies of culture, then, is to conceptualise how people use collective interpretations to make meaning together in everyday life' (Eliasoph and Lichterman, 2003: 736). The authors propose that group style is a useful concept to understand group behaviours:

'Actors make meaning with collective representations, and they do so in a way that usually complements the meaningful, shared ground for interaction. We will conceptualise this shared ground as 'group style'. We argue that style filters the collective representations and the result is what we will call culture in interaction.' (Eliasoph and Lichterman, 2003: 737).

Eliasoph and Lichterman argue that to 'understand how collective representations become meaningful in everyday life, social researchers need to observe how groups
coordinate themselves, not only how individuals or texts conceive of action ...' (Eliasoph and Lichterman, 2003: 740).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I outlined how, taking cognizance that I enjoyed some level of privileged access, I went about framing a multi-method research strategy, using a combination of interviewing, observation research, and discourse analysis.

The goal of these methods, following Plummer (2006), is to try to get close to what activists practice as intimate citizens. I found the interviews to be remarkably successful, but would be wary of doing observation research on an ad hoc basis in the future. The exploration of The Irish Times discourse, although a fragment, heralds an important arena for debates. I did not consider researching the internet at all, but with the rise of the individual blogger, I suggest that there is fertile terrain, in this regard, for future research.
Chapter Four: reflections upon the story of Irish lesbian and gay activism

'Ireland is currently at the cutting edge of the global economy. Diversity and economic success go together. This has been recognised by some of the leading companies in the world and in leading technology driven economies in Europe and the US. Ireland has demonstrated this too with progressive economic and social policies powering our economic success. High ambitions and expectations for both are necessary if we are to sustain prosperity into the future. Nowadays young lesbian and gay people, like their heterosexual peers have high expectations for themselves and their society and see no reason why their horizons should be limited' continued Kieran Rose. The Taoiseach has set high ambitions for Ireland, as can-do country benchmarked against the best. GLEN shares these ambitions and high expectations'.


Introduction

In this chapter, drawing upon an historical periodization of the Irish lesbian and gay movement (Rose, 1994, Hug, 1999), I briefly outline the development of this new social movement in which four phases to the development of the movement can be identified. The first phase is a foundational phase (from 1974-1982), during which time its scope and guiding concepts were set out. The second phase (1982-1988) is marked by its politicization and a period in which legal means were used to argue for gay law reform and by AIDS activism. I would suggest that the third phase of the movement (1988-1993), which may be thought of as a developmental phase, is distinguished by the professionalisation of the movement and its turn (largely through the emergence of GLEN) to a policy-led activist approach. Since 1993, we may discern the most recent phase as being concerned with deepening lesbian and gay equality in Irish society. More latterly in this period, we have the emergence of a discourse about what is often termed as 'same-sex marriage', but refers to same-sex partnership/ civil unions.
While it is simple to think of the Irish lesbian and gay movement's story as history, my focus here is to consider the 'cultural effects' (Bernstein, 2003: 356). Drawing upon ideas from New Social Movements literature (Bernstein, 2003; Melucci, 1989, 1995, 1996; Rose, 1994, Ryan, 2006,), I posit that the story of the Irish lesbian and gay movement presents many of the characteristic of a new social movement. In this chapter, my focus is drawn particularly upon the beginnings of the gay rights movement (Ryan, 2006) and upon the more contemporary phases of activism (Rose, 1994).

**Beginnings of the contemporary lesbian and gay movement (1974-1982)**

This phase of the movement is characterised by the emergence of an activist core under the Irish Gay Rights Movement (IGRM). While, to all intents and purposes, there had been no earlier Irish social movement oriented towards homosexual liberation, this movement was a first brave step towards consciousness-raising and marks the emergence the gay new social movement (NSM). Male homosexuality was to remain proscribed under Victorian era legislation (the 1861 Offences against the Person Act and 1885 Labouchere Amendment) until the early 1990's. For gay rights campaigner David Norris (1979: 140) homosexuals were the abject modern subjects:

"Most homosexual people are forced at an early stage to find their own inner reality. They are forced to be loners; either they crack up or find the strength to go on... you are always outside... you should be with someone whom you can share these experiences, to learn to share your inner life in a civilised manner with somebody else whom you can love deeply. But you are absolutely forbidden to do that."
In historical terms, there are only hints at an earlier homosexual subculture in Dublin (Rose (1994: 3) and globally fragmented tales of earlier same-sex behaviours (Chesser, 1998). In the early years of the independent State, Irish homosexuals were controlled by a combination of legal/judicial sanction and medicine. Rose (1994: 9) points out how there was concern in the 1930’s about ‘gross indecency between male persons’ and how ‘in 1946, a Labour Party report on Portlaoise prison stated that “homosexuals constituting 30 per cent of the total are kept apart from other prisoners”...’ Our knowledge of these men is scant, as is any knowledge of how these men coped in jail. From Goffman’s work in a USA asylum where ‘homosexual relationships were officially forbidden, although cliques of paroled homosexuals quietly sustained their special solidarity on the grounds’ (1961a: 246), we might wonder if there was any network available to the stigmatised. It is not impossible to investigate this topic, but it requires the passage of time. Elsewhere (Reynolds, 1998a), I presented a paper about Nazi persecution of homosexuals, and I noted how it was only years after the war that the few surviving gay men started to tell their stories.

In the Irish context, it also occurred to me that legal process was the ‘public’ side of sexual regulation (as mentioned in reference to the 1931 Carrigan Report). We seem to know little or nothing about how medicine, through ‘aversion therapy’, operated in Ireland. I suspect that it must have been still in use in the early 1980’s, because one of the informants in this study alluded, in passing, to having thought about doing it. Likewise, in a related issue, it is only in recent years that we are finding gay men with disabilities coming out. Stories that I have heard leads me to suggest that many homosexuals with disabilities vanished into Irish asylums, or were ‘controlled’ at home in a back room of a house.
So the emergence of the IGRM started the process of disrupting the power of the State over men's sexuality. While in the UK and USA, sexuality had found some expression, however tentative, through intellectual endeavours (e.g. UK sexologists like Havelock Ellis or the US homophile movement); we can only surmise that there was some appreciation of these sexual knowledge claims, although Ryan (2006: 89) claims 'no such tradition had existed in Ireland.'

The emergence of the IGRM occurs, more contemporaneously, in the wake of discourse about the Wolfenden Report and the subsequent decriminalisation of homosexuality in the UK (in 1967) and rise of wider civil rights movements that had arisen in the late 1960's. Likewise, the timing of the emergence of the IGRM coincides with the growth of third level education, which allowed new forms of expertise around identity politics, and new middle-class intellectuals, who power NSM more generally (Melucci, 1995 1996) to start to appear. Trinity College, of course, was a liberal canopy for 'symbolic dissent' (Melucci, 1989).

Founded by David Norris in 1974, the IGRM was based at premises in Parnell Square, just north of O'Connell Street, where social events, including discos were held. Having originally emerged from a nascent Sexual Liberation Movement, Ryan (2006: 89) recounts how Norris became tired of discussing heterosexual sexual politics 'these bloody heterosexuals rule the world they ought to be able to look after themselves'. Ryan (ibid.) argues that:

'Calling the organisation the Irish Gay Rights Movement was significant in itself. It was a direct challenge to the construction of nationalist sexuality as exclusively heterosexual and the relations of homosexuality to a marginal other in Irish society. It would also assert the constitutional right of all men to equality under the law... [and] would bring their everyday gay lives into the public gaze where they would be examined, contested, defended'.
According to Ryan (2006), the founding activists, David Norris and Edmund Lynch established the IGRM in order to live more openly as gay men, and to help other gay men do likewise. Their *vocabularies of motive* (Mills, 1940) for getting involved in gay politics, then are associated with personal needs, which characterises NSMs. This, as Melucci argues, means that: 'participation in collective action is seen to have no value for the individual unless it provides a direct response to personal needs' (Melucci, 1988: 49).

The root of Norris's argument, above, is an attempt to disrupt the 'culture of quietude' (Vale de Almeida, 1997), the ideological underpinnings of hegemonic masculinity, the silences about sexuality, the allegedly benignity of Victorian legislation on homosexuality, and the wider impact of Ireland's moral monopoly on sexuality (Inglis, 1987, 1988). The IGRM supported men who were prosecuted for gross indecency offences by providing them with legal counsel to defend them, with 100% success (Ryan, 2006: 91, 93). Rose suggests the 'de facto law reform was a major achievement' by the IGRM (1994: 11). The organisation also developed a fluid, participatory outreach network around the country, which put the activists in contact with many gay men. My informants tell me that many of these men were farmers, labourers, priests, etc. and so we can note that there was not a particularly class-based cleavage implicated in this network. Ryan (2006: 93-94) posits that Norris's 'fame' as a gay academic was resented by many IRGM members who were deeply closeted. The idea of direct action and presenting a legal challenge was too much for some members to bear. When divisions over the organisation's strategy led to conflict, Norris was removed. He then established the Campaign for Homosexual Law Reform (CHLR), and for a time, there were two rival gay rights groups, one on either side of the city. Neither Rose (1994) nor Ryan (2006) goes into details, but they both suggest there was significant tensions between the two centre of activism. Eventually, the National Gay Federation was established, and
this subsequently became the National Lesbian and Gay Federation (NLGF). Early activist work was characterised by finding ways of trying to make sexual politics visible and coping with a hostile body politic. To this end, the first National Gay Conference was held in Cork in 1981, which served to generate much media publicity.

The NGF set up premises at the Hirschfeld Centre, on Fownes Street. There was a disco, a small cinema and it housed the first collection of gay archival materials. It operated as a resource centre until a fire destroyed the premises and with it most of the materials. Archivist Tonie Walsh told me:

'I cry over some of the material that's been destroyed. When the Hirschfeld Centre was burnt down, we had made elaborate precautions about storing materials. We didn't have an archive, and we didn't have a charter for it. It was a lot of good intentions, and some people working and keeping stuff, but not necessarily sorting it. We photocopied all the press cuttings, kept the photocopies upstairs, for everyday access, and put all the originals, nicely pasted up on A4 sheets, titled in fabulous cabinets in the basement. They survived the fire, but the water from the fire brigade soaked the basement and a lot of it ended up as Papier Mache!'

On an internet bulletin board, by chance, I cam across a discussion about the 'Hirsch' as it was nicknamed. While some people waxed lyrical about the Hirsch, one contributor reported to how fraught Irish gay politics was at the time:

'For the first 18 months to two years, any time the centre was open, there was a police car outside the door and at least 2 police men on duty. On Friday and Saturday nights, when "Flickers" the upstairs disco was on, there were up to 5 squad cars and 15 officers on duty. They stood around in little groups, never said a word, watching everyone who came and went. The weekend nights were special, because there was always a high ranking officer in the group, guys that wear the pale blue uniforms with the gold pips on the shoulders. They would patrol the surrounding blocks and take note of all parked car registration numbers'. ['K', www.gaire.com, August 2004].
The early Lesbian Movement

While lesbians were not criminalised in the same way that gay men were, Irish culture at the time placed women under intense sexual regulation generally. So to be a lesbian was deeply stigmatising.

Women were expected to adopt one of two basic gender roles in Ireland: become mothers/wives or become nuns. Any other ‘type’ of woman was suspect, even stigmatised, most wrath was reserved for single mothers or for single women (Hyde, 2000). Within this context, it was highly problematic to promote more supposedly radical ideas about lesbian sexuality.

Reflecting on the dilemmas around this time, lesbian feminist Joni Crone (1988) argued that the problem facing women was in terms of Rich’s compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1984). For Crone, the absence of written law did not lessen social stigma about lesbian sexuality.

Ireland’s emergent lesbian movement persisted, however, because it operated within the safe space of the 1970’s Irish feminist movement. In spite of the constraints, many of lesbian activists played an active role in early strategies about abortion rights (e.g. the high risk that was taken in the establishment of a telephone line). Structural weaknesses constituted impediments in promoting feminist ideas. Literature, such as the occasional free sheet publication Banshee (1974-1975), appeared and vanished.

The first ‘visible’ lesbian in Ireland was when Joni Crone herself appeared on Ireland’s prime time television show, The Late, Late Show in 1980. This occurred a full ten years after an obscure article appeared in The Irish Times entitled the
female homosexual (The Irish Times, 1970). Many younger Irish lesbians found that Crone's appearance on the show was a 'lesbian watershed'. Even if somewhat hazy about the interview, many women recalled seeing an embodied lesbian, even before some of them identified in that way. In interview with Deirdre Walsh (2002: 1), Cork lesbian Ger Collins states 'I remember being glued to the T.V. when Joni Crone came out as a lesbian on the Late, Late Show'.

This story has become an important folktale in lesbian history - along with the lesbian nuns interview - which I have seen work as a collaborative kernel story. At a women's event that I attended - the 2000 Lesbian Lives conference - I remember how, one woman mentioned 'Joni on RTE' (a kernel story) during a seminar session and a number women joined in about where they had been when they saw her. Crone's appearance also illustrated how the Irish lesbian and gay movement was not only successful at 'political change', but also served to render symbolic dissent visible at a cultural level. The innovative use of live television, which could not be 'cut' or censored like publications, served as an unconventional but memorable form of direct communication with women. Television 'opened minds to greater cultural relativism and liberalism in relation to sexual conduct as compared with the prescriptive approach which formerly characterised the lives of Catholics' (Nic Ghoilla Phadraig, 1995: 596-597), but more specifically, it played an instrumental role in opening up a challenge to the dominant ethos about sexuality and morality in Ireland (Inglis, 2000; Tovey & Share, 2000).


I tentatively suggest that a second stage in the development of the community began in the early 1980's and lasted until the establishment of GLEN in late 1987. It is marked by a more complex understanding of sexual politics, which can be seen
through the challenges that were confronted around homophobia, the politics of HIV/AIDS, and the reorganisation of sexual politics itself.

As Ireland moved into the 1980's, the rise of homophobic violence against gay men along with the Gardai's reaction during the course of investigating antigay crimes served as a radical stimulus that politicized the community. In 1982, a number of murders of gay men galvanised the community into one of few large-scale gay protest (direct action) marches ever seen in Ireland (not counting gay pride).

After the murder of a journalist, Charles Self, and separate homophobic assault on Declan Flynn in Fairview Park, the Gardai adopted rather heavy-handed interrogation tactics in order to try to apprehend those involved in the crimes. The murder cases threw into sharp relief not only how the State dealt with gay men, but it marked a turning point in how the gay community decided to no longer put up with the behaviour of the Judiciary and the State. Galvanised into action in what became known as the Fairview March, various elements of the Lesbian and Gay movement marched in unity to protest how this case had been managed by the State (Kamikaze, 1995). Despite the appalling tragedy, I feel that the idea of needing a unified gay community took root through this process, and it is held up as a key moment of emancipatory politics (Giddens, 1991) although it was carefully managed as a political event.

Hayley Fox Roberts (2001) point to complex reasons for presenting a united front. She argues the community had to be cautious in its public protest as homosexuality was still illegal, and people could have been open to public prosecution for 'going public'. A critical way in which 'illegality' was tackled was by strategically de-emphasising gay sexuality and focusing on how anyone could be murdered. The parents of the victims were persuaded to march, although:
'It was not known to what extent his parents were aware of his sexuality but they supported the march on the basis that 'homosexual panic' could be used as an excuse for murdering anyone' (Fox Roberts, 2001: 127).

Thus, Fox Roberts (2001) highlights how sexual politics was avoided (Eliasoph, 1997, 1998) in the name of mobilising opinion and making a symbolic, and therefore, cultural statement. Yet, the victim’s sexuality was managed through minimizing its salience, or covering (Goffman, 1963; Yoshino, 2006), which indicates to me how difficulties of coping with the politics of diversity can be assuaged, instead of being addressed outright.

During this time also, a second element weakened the advance of lesbian politics. From the early 1980’s, campaigns around Irish abortion rights, gay law reform, and the non-availability of contraceptives or divorce, were quite often bruising and exhausting. Underlying these struggles was the rise of a well-organised right-wing movement in the guise of ‘family values’ groups such as SPUC (Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child), Youth Defence, and Family Solidarity, which sought to hold back the liberalisation of Ireland. The battles over sexual and reproductive rights were particularly oppressive for women and many felt the struggle consumed their mental energies.

Reflecting in 1995 on her experiences of that time, Irish lesbian feminist academic and activist Ailbhe Smyth remarks how destabilising these political issues were for her both personally and publicly:

‘... to be vociferously ‘pro-abortion’ in Ireland, even in 1992, is not a wise route to brownie points of power, privilege, voice and credibility. A ‘pro-abortion’ academic politicises what is ‘outside politics’, and thus becomes a displaced person in the academic world. (Its ok to be anti-abortion: that’s ‘natural’ not political). Of course, feminism has never been acceptable – only a little light women’s studies (gender studies is preferable), Nothing too
serious or extensive. My home is in the Women’s Liberation Movement – but my job (yes, I know, I have one) is in academia, seriously and extensively in women’s studies. Will I ever get from work to home?’ (A. Smyth, 1995: 200).

Smyth notes that while progress was made, there was an incessant backlash at the micro-level (about the validity of feminism and women’s studies in academia) and at the macro-level in Irish society (which maintained women’s exclusion from power and preserved men’s dominance). However, Smyth concludes that for all of the discrimination experienced by Irish women ‘women are not lying down and giving up the struggle’ (Smyth, 1995: 203). Likewise, while Rose (1994) notes a degree of exhaustion by these fraught campaigns against the right-wing, the experience did help the movement anticipate conservatism in the run-up to decriminalisation.

Through this experience also, women became more public and did begin to challenge the norms of hegemonic masculinity and the ethos of the Catholic Church. Importantly, women began to organise and become activist in a manner that reflected and developed feminist principles. The onus on activist work became linked to common ground and common goals.

As a concept, unity took greater precedence over diversity in sexual politics (Power, 1995; Gibney et al, 1995; Smyth, 1995). However, there was an undercurrent of working-class lesbians (Kamikaze, 1995) and Republican men (Quinlan, 1996), who tried to maintain the salience of class politics. While such tensions exist in the present day, I would posit that more specialised activism (in terms of a division of labour) predominates. There is much concern today about the decline of the lesbian and gay voluntary sector since the mid 1980’s through mass out-migration from Ireland, by changes to EU funding (Fahey, 1995) and the wider issue of weaknesses in Irish voluntarism generally (see Meade, 2005). Against the depressing set of
economic circumstances that prevailed in Ireland during the mid to late 1980’s, Rose (1994) notes that activists had to tailor their goals and address small-scale tasks. This echoes Melucci (1995) who writes about the organisational shifts in social movements, between periods of intense activist mobilisation, and latency where activism goes into hiatus.

These years are characterised by two key activist issues, the AIDS pandemic and David Norris’s success in the European Court of Human Rights in 1987-88. I will take each of these in turn.

In terms of AIDS activism, the Irish lesbian and gay community have played a significant role in establishing the networking infrastructure to provide counselling about the pandemic and dissemination information about HIV/AIDS. It also developed a coherent moral argument about the need to combat the disease, which both mobilised opinion and helped to change sexual practices. In terms of negotiation with the State, Dr. Rory O’Hanlon, the Minister for Health and the Health Education Board would not, following legal advice, fund any promotional literature that would suggest State support for criminal acts (Rose, 1994). So as the AIDS crisis developed, the Gay Health Action [GHA] group [a forerunner of the Gay Men’s Health Project and Johnny, peer action group], which was highly praised for being able to mount a campaign to disseminate information about HIV, took some funding from one of the saunas to pay for advertising. Political opposition from the Northern Ireland Gay Rights Organisation ensued. Whereas activists in the Republic would try to vent their criticisms about the State in private (Rose, 1994), there was considerable embarrassment from NIGRA’s move. In a letter to ‘The Gay Press’ (the forerunner of Dublin’s Gay Community News), the Northern Ireland Gay Rights Association (NIGRA) wrote:
Much of the debate at the recent Gay Health Action Conference Dublin 17/18 August 1985) concerned the formation of 'Safe Sex' guidelines, and the urgent task of providing information to the community on health matters. Those who attended agreed unanimously that GHA must stress in its campaigning the need for Gay men to avoid casual sex as it has been proven beyond doubt that those who have the greatest number of sex partners are the most likely to develop AIDS. In view of this unpalatable but simple fact, we were appalled by GHA's decision to accept financial support from the 'Gym' a so-called 'sauna', which is in reality a licensed brothel. It is our view that both this establishment and the 'Incognito' should be closed forthwith in the interest of Gay men's health and their proprietors should be branded as morally and socially irresponsible. It does not require a medical expert to point out that these 'saunas' generate an intolerably high rate of STDs and also facilitate the transmission of the AIDS virus. Viruses tend to live longer in the artificial heat and humidity of saunas, and the owners of these premises actively encourage casual sex, thus flying in the face of current medical knowledge. The greedy capitalists who own these 'saunas' care not a whit for the welfare of the Gay community. Their donations amount to nothing more than protection money and it is utterly shameful that GHA accepted them. We, the undersigned, call on GHA to return this blood money and to actively campaign for the immediate closure of these health hazards.

Activists in the Republic never supported calls to shut the saunas. NIGRA's letter not only mirrors the AIDS panic around saunas in the USA but also a rather critical view of gay business owners, which ran counter to an adherence to 'consensus' in Dublin's gay politics. The call to shut saunas would also have been resisted because it had echoes of the containment culture era of the 1930's. I also surmise GHA and 'the gay press' wanted to avoid alienating any supporters who helped to fund HIV activism at a time when the State refused health funding for 'illegal' sexual practices (this situation only ameliorated after decriminalisation in 1993). Kieran Rose (1994: 22-25) notes how difficult getting adequate resources for HIV/AIDS activism was during this time.

In the context of the AIDS crisis, and the activists that emerged from it, there was a focus in discourses on rational, biomedical knowledge. An alternative form of sexual knowledge about AIDS can be found in terms of literature but it was down-
played by the movement. In his biographical account, *Deep End*, Ger Philpott (1995: 66-67) related how his partner died a lonely death from AIDS in an Irish hospital:

‘I saw Paul alive last – if you call it alive – the following morning. I arrived at the hospital with his younger brother to find his mother with him. He was extremely distressed and, though sedated, he was not unconscious. He was incoherent: struggling to say something. He didn’t make any sense. He looked miserable and unhappy as his eyes moved from one of us to the other... it was as if his brain wasn’t in gear... lost in a sea of bed linen... We looked into each other’s eyes. His large and shiny, bathed in tears, were scared. I hoped mine wouldn’t give away my terror... He died the following day before I got to the hospital. He died alone. No one there to hold his hand, to give him permission to go ... Paul died, distressed and abandoned, in a hospital.’ (Philpott, 1995: 66-67).

Philpott’s account is raw, a close-up look at the reality of how gay men were denied HIV treatment in 1980’s Ireland. But at the time, as homosexuality was illegal, literature about the dilemmas and horrors of dying and disease from AIDS were too complex and even too painful to convey, when the ‘big struggle’ was trying to get a simple message across while being denied State support. There was also recognition of how difficult it was to try HIV/AIDS activism through personal accounts (I recall going to an 1988 AIDS seminar in Cork, and hearing a haemophiliac weeping over his condition, and retreating from the event). While we might think personal stories could help to ‘clinch’ a message, using a biomedical/rational argument about the dangers of HIV/AIDS is easier to formulate from the viewpoint of social policy. Indeed, Matthew Waites (2003; 2005: 547) notes: ‘fluid understandings of sexual subjectivity and identity were extremely rare in public debates’. Thus a ‘factual’ model of activism is favoured over more emotional ‘selling’ of HIV prevention work, but I would note that there is a complex weave between rationality and subjectivity underpinning both discourses, with important undertones of generative politics implicated within the Gay Health Action group’s strategy (Rose, 1994: 24).
In terms of strategy, emotional sexual knowledge is suppressed to achieve relatively easy transmission of the safe sex message (Bernstein, 1997) but it is an indicator of more widespread cultural constraints on AIDS prevention strategies in Ireland (F. Smyth, 1998) and in relation to sexuality more widely (Inglis, 1998; 2005).

Turning to decriminalisation of homosexuality, David Norris took a case through the Irish courts, arguing that he had been denied a right to privacy because of the law on homosexuality. Having been rejected by the Irish courts, he took his case to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) and won. The 1987 ECHR judgment over the Norris Case over-turned Irish court rulings on homosexual rights. While the Irish High Court and the Irish Supreme Court had ruled that Norris’s right to privacy had not been violated, the ECHR found that his right had. As a result, the Irish government would have to decriminalise homosexual acts between men, or face legal consequences. The community had to wait for close on five years until the Government implemented a law reform bill in 1993. During this time, lesbian and gay activism started to professionalize and reorganise in anticipation of both gay law reform and whatever policy measures would ensue from decriminalisation. To this end, the Gay and Lesbian Equality Network (GLEN) was established in late 1987.

1988-1993: The professionalisation of activism – the rise of GLEN

On foot of Senator Norris’s achievement at the ECHR in 1987, the Gay and Lesbian Equality Network (GLEN) was established to advocate the decriminalisation of homosexuality and to lobby for LGB equality. From 1988 onwards, a professional approach to sexual politics led to a host of legal and policy reforms. GLEN’s strategizing approach made it the dominant activist group (Lichterman, 1998). Its strength has been to rely upon professional knowledge and insightful application of
policy. GLEN members are experienced activists who have been able to bring an attractive mix of skills and prior (e.g. HIV work, Trade Union rights, gay groups, political institutions nationally, human rights lobbying organisations, political parties, etc.) experience to a campaign for law reform. Additionally, activists' worked assiduously at building new links with other organisations and deploying members' expert knowledge of the Irish context, thereby adopting a coalitional approach to gender politics, which is an advocated approach in other national contexts (Connell, 1995, 2002). Thus central to the organisation's success has been the design, provisions and dissemination of information resources (Melucci, 1995). Given the organisation's scale and resources available to GLEN, the successes have been remarkable – indeed, at a seminar in TCD some years ago, one speaker from GLEN mentioned how everyone thought they were “mad”, trying to lobby for decriminalisation at that time because the government and the conservative right wing were quite was hostile.

Over the period leading up to the 1993 law reform, the arguments advanced by the conservative right seemed to become more emotional, even vindictive. On television debates, I remember seeing leading commentators from groups such as Youth Defence become somewhat hysterical as they found that people could no longer be frightened by notions that gays were a ‘threat’ to the family (although the Catholic Church continues to castigate gays as inauthentic (Planetout, 2003). GLEN's language in such public debates remained calm, focused on inclusion and fairness and network members posited the problem of inequality in Irish society; thus activists' prior personal and professional experience of right wing campaigns (about divorce, abortion, and women's reproductive rights), the lesbian and gay movement was able to effectively challenge the right wing.
From GLEN's Archives (to which I have had some privileged access), I can note that the organisation's objectives were bold. The organisation was tasked with lobbying for an equal age of consent and with the promotion of the inclusion of lesbian and gay measures into legislative bills. The central aim, however, was to repeal the 1881 and 1885 British legislation but not replace it with an Irish version of the UK 1967 act, which was recognised as only partial decriminalisation. From my analysis, GLEN's letter-writing strategy consisted of five identifiable tactics that were designed to persuade:

(a) begging letters (encouraging people and institutions to support decriminalisation);
(b) maintenance letters with GLEN's "champions" (those who support their cause);
(c) confirmatory letters (to those who spoke favourably, encouraging them to keep on supporting gay rights);
(d) information-giving letters (e.g. distributing reports, data, to members of parliament, to allies, decision-makers, etc.)
(e) globalisation letters (disseminating Irish news in international gay media and contacts with overseas activists to highlight the Irish situation, exchange ideas, information, etc.)

The language of the correspondence with government policy-makers in particular shows how adept GLEN was (and continues to be) in being able to use a register of language to which officials relate. Letters are reassuring, polite and respectful in tone, but were intensive in scope. From examining some exemplars of the writing campaign, I felt that people were being intensively targeted. The content of the writing campaign sought not solely to appeal to politicians' sense of fairness; it also pitched GLEN's activism as an appeal to universal rights, equality and human rights. The thrust of the correspondence (and verbal campaigning) sought to re-orient the law. The way in which reorienting the law was cast, however, was
interesting. GLEN deemed it necessary to give lesbians and gay men the same sexual rights as everyone else (Byrne, 2002).

GLEN argued that the lack of gay rights was inconsistent with equality in a modern country: thus, it reflexively played with politicians’ morality and sense of fairness. By promoting the idea of ‘fairness’, it side-stepped the need to discuss biomedical aspects of sexual practices at that point (contra Waites, 2005). An excellent example of fending off the right wing’s family values argument was Robson’s (19 July 1991) letter in the Irish Times proclaiming that ‘Homosexual acts should not be crimes’, which was a robust response to an earlier letter by Family Solidarity’s Joseph McCarroll (30 May 1991). Interestingly, Robson, in his newspaper article, sets out an ambitious agenda for lesbian and gay rights, which is still to be completed fifteen years on. But the balance in GLEN’s argument, between an appeal to universal rights, equality and to fairness on one hand and avoiding “sex” on the other, made the campaigners seem reasonable, responsible and made it safe to support law reform.

Ireland decriminalised homosexual acts between men in 1993. Law reform was implemented in June 1993, with 17 years set as the Age of Consent. The Bill was steered through parliament by Ireland’s first (and so far only) female Minister for Justice, Ms. Maire Geoghan-Quinn (Fianna Fail). The reform was unanimously adopted by the houses of parliament and the amendment was signed into law by President Mary Robinson who, in her previous legal career had been Senator David Norris’s barrister in his legal battle for gay rights.

A range of equality policy enhancements have been implemented to extend social protection on grounds of sexual orientation. The introduction of legal and policy protections on grounds of sexual orientation emerged under the aegis of the
establishment of the Equality Authority, which is charged with oversight over equality policy. This organisation was established on foot of key equality legislation. Central to this was the Employment Equality Act (1998) and the Equal Status Act (2000), which together established nine grounds upon which discrimination was prohibited under law (gender, marital status, age, disability, race, sexual orientation, religion, and membership of the traveller community).

Assessing GLEN (to date)

In my view, these activists' experiential knowledge – as 'social movement selves' in Broad’s (2000) terms – shaped GLEN’s intellectual practices and this development was crucial to the success of the law reform campaign. Likewise, GLEN activists are keenly in touch with the issues confronting lesbians and gay men in their lived experience – thus underpinning their drive towards ‘policy’ is concern with the self in a world of ‘going concerns’, as Gubrium and Holstein (2000) put it. This constitutes an embodied, reflexive understanding of activism in the Irish context. Contra earlier work on Irish lesbian and gay activism (e.g. Dunphy, 1997) the success of GLEN’s strategy cannot be understood as ‘politics’ alone. GLEN’s approach must be understood as being informed by activists’ intellectual biographies, by the impact of the rise of human rights law on Irish culture and by the role of the Irish State as an ambivalent ally to activism. This reflexive approach to activism has positioned GLEN activists as experts in their field (Byrne, 2002). When allied with how the State reacts to well-organised interest groups that advocate citizenship issues (Powell, 1992; Peillon, 1995: 361; D’Arcy, 1999), GLEN can be viewed as an exemplary possessor of a ‘strategic and scarce resource’ with which the (weak) State will collaborate.
Writing in the ‘foreword’ to *Towards a Vision for a Gender Equal Society* (The Equality Authority, 2001) the Equality Authority Chairman stated that ‘the urgent need for change cannot be denied’. I sense that this ‘urgency’ was, in no small part, *constructed by GLEN* and, in turn, it has helped to develop a *culture of equality*. The ‘nine grounds’ have become an integral part of legislative framing. For example, the 2001 Health Insurance (Amendment) Act, Social Welfare (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2004 and the Parental Leave (Amendment) Act 2006 all include ‘sexual orientation’ within their ambits. Consistently policy inputs supported law reform initiatives. These various policy measures – and there are others, of course - have had the effect of slipping ‘sexual orientation’ into legislative processes without too much notice – or ‘ire’ (Scheper-Hughes, 2000).

**Post-1993: the rise of Policy-Led Citizenship**

Stemming from the adoption of an equality-based approach to social inclusion issues, a government agency was established to develop this field. The Equality Authority was formally established under the Employment Equality Act (1998). It monitors discrimination across nine grounds (gender, marital status, age, disability, race, sexual orientation, religious belief, and Traveller Community membership) where inequality and discrimination is experienced in regard to “employment, vocational training, advertising, the provision of goods and services, and other opportunities to which the public generally have access” (The Equality Authority website). As well as dealing with cases of discrimination, The Equality Authority has produced a wide range of research publications (available in pdf format through its website) policy guides, resource packs, studies of the bases of inequality experienced, etc. and it has a specific research methodology, which focuses on policy-led theorising (Barry, 2000).
Having determined that there was a dearth of policy documents on lesbian, gay and bisexual issues (Crowley, 2002), two reports were commissioned with a view to developing equality policy for lesbians, gays and bisexual citizens. This step has given the Irish lesbian and gay movement significant access to political circles.

In the first exercise, two legal experts were commissioned to map out the inequalities facing same-sex couples (Mee & Ronayne, 2000). This document brought all the issues about legal rights for couples together in a single place, providing insights into Ireland's heteronormative family law system.

Secondly, Irish LGB activists were invited by the Equality Authority to participate in a bespoke lesbian, gay and bisexual sub-committee to develop a policy document. The report, which emanated from the sub-committee's work, was published, after much effort to coordinate members' interests, as *Implementing Equality for Lesbians, Gays and Bisexuals* (The Equality Authority, 2002). It sets out the sub-committee's consensus view as to the bases of inequality experienced by LGB people across the nine grounds. Subsequent to both of these documents being produced, the NESF (National Economic and Social Forum, 2003) published an audit of how LGB equality was being implemented by government departments.

Included in this document is a call for the recognition of same-sex unions in Irish law and this has led to considerable discussion of same-sex unions in activist meetings, in the media and more broadly in social life, as I will suggest later. However, as the NESF report (2003) was written with a deliberate methodological tactic of disregarding 'policy areas where major policy changes had been agreed to only after considerable difficulties' (NESF, 2003: 27), the claim for some sort of same-sex union (or 'gay marriage' in everyday talk) had to be taken seriously as it was a 'consensus' viewpoint. I did feel a concern about what happened to policy
ideas that did not have a 'consensus' as it was not clear to me if discarded ideas could be recuperated. However, in a queering (Honeychurch, 1996) of social policy and gay politics, the Ahern government has been made into the lobbyist for same-sex partnerships (see his quotation, below).

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have analysed how the Irish lesbian and gay movement has developed, as a New Social Movement. However, evidence suggests that exploring and trying to defining the success of the movement is contested (Bernstein, 2003) as it develops over time. The significant progress that has been achieved has occurred within wider changes in the Irish family where ‘...unquestioned tenets of Irish family and sexual values have lost their traditional fixity and have entered into period of flux from which no new consensus has yet emerged’ (Fahey, 1995: 228).

While GLEN, in particular, has been highly successful in lobbying for political change and designing policies, I share something of Waite’s concern about whether ‘campaigns for equality have succeeded largely within the terms of a liberal rationale of containment, of which we have now reached the outer limits’ (Waites, 2005: 558). By this, I suggest that the equality framework, as commendable as it is, has an emancipatory politics tone to it (Giddens, 1991). GLEN, and its predecessors, could not take a hand in life politics (because of the legal status of gay men), and this leads me to signal some uncertainty ahead. This was voiced in a recent document about plans and achieving future activist goals (GLEN, 2006).

I noted that the organisation proudly catalogued its **past** achievements, while future plans were loosely couched in terms of progress:
'GLEN have developed a 5-year strategic programme called 'Building Sustainable Change' which reflects this ambition, setting out feasible actions based on high expectations of what can be achieved. Funded by The Atlantic Philanthropies and the Irish Government, 'Building Sustainable Change' describes a strategic planning programme of coherent actions which will deliver greater equality and participation for lesbian, gay and bisexual people so that they can continue to benefit and contribute to a future which we hope will be a different, but even more equal, empathic and exciting country'. (www.glen.ie).

As a theme, 'high expectations' does not appear to be a strong-enough argument to counter the dilemmas and uncertainties over how Irish same-sex partnership reform should occur (see chapter eight). When hopes were raised when the Taoiseach Bertie Ahern addressed the gay community saying:

'Our sexual orientation is not an incidental attribute. It is an essential part of who and what we are. All citizens, regardless of sexual orientation, stand equal in the eyes of our laws. Sexual orientation cannot, and must not, be the basis of a second-class citizenship. Our laws have changed, and will continue to change, to reflect this principle'.

(An Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern TD, speech to lesbian and gay activists, Dublin, 3 April 2006).

But this statement led many in activists to believe that same-sex civil partnership would soon follow. Then an Opposition-sponsored Bill to introduce Civil Unions was rejected by the government in February 2007 during an angry Dáil debate. At time of writing, the 2007-2012 Agreed Programme for Government for the new Fianna Fail/ Green Party coalition government states:

'This Government is committed to full equality for all in our society. Taking account of the options paper prepared by the Colley Group and the pending Supreme Court case, we will legislate for Civil Partnerships at the earliest possible date in the lifetime of the Government' (Department of the Taoiseach, 2007: 86).

While I do not doubt that some reforms will emerge, I suggest that both parties to this debate eschew talking about lived experience. Both the activists and the
government seek some reforms around same-sex partnership law, but their discourses tend to be ahistorical, resting upon the belief than legislation will change everything – and there is a need to look beyond legislation alone. The discourse here is close to Zygmunt Bauman’s idea of the *legislator*. Bauman states that ‘legislators cannot imagine an orderly world without legislation; the ethical legislator or preacher cannot imagine a world without a legislated ethics’ (Bauman, 1987: 36). But GLEN does not, as an activist group, have the power to be a ‘legislator’, nor does it operate as an ‘interpreter’ (a role where social change is explicated). In my view, GLEN might consider positioning itself a ‘mediator’ (Osborne, 2004), were it to operate more openly and communicate more effectively about social life and the changes facing Irish society, and seek to negotiate a role based on the ‘world we have won’ (Weeks, 2007).

While GLEN has made wonderful progress, and I am sure that civil partnership will come in due course, is the next step in Irish LGBT sexual politics to ally more with the ‘grass-roots’ of the movement and listen more to new sexual stories? I posit that this would enhance the movement, and democratise it. I understand how political ‘splits’ occurred in the past, but I would argue that the new terrain for the Irish lesbian and gay movement is no longer about sameness, but difference. Central to this epistemological shift is where from where ‘sexual knowledge’ emanates. Jeffrey Weeks argues that:

‘...a profound shift in the locus of sexual knowledge construction: from the scientific expert to the politicized grass roots ... those who were talked about in the pioneering works of sexologists are now speaking for themselves’ (Weeks, 2000: 8).

In the Irish context the grassroots (including the activists who I interview in the next two chapters) feel like they are in Big Brother’s Diary Room (Gamson, 1999, 2000), speaking to themselves about sexuality, but left to fashion (Wilton, 2004)
their own biographical solutions. Is there a way of opening up a dialogue between policy, politics and life to enrich the future of the movement? Can we start to move on, and give people tools in an individualized society?

In the following two chapters, I take up the example of dilemmas of disclosure in the lived experience of a series of Dublin-based lesbian and gay activists. In chapters five and six, I focus on two overarching issues in the lives of a selection of Dublin-based lesbian and gay activists, disclosing one’s sexual orientation and the politics of seeking ways of living as a non-heterosexual in a society that privileges heterosexuality. Chapter five explores gay men’s accounts of disclosing their sexual orientation in their everyday life and how they are implicated in gay activism, and Chapter six focuses on lesbian activists’ experiences of coming out and their relationship to activism. Men and women are concerned with dilemmas about disclosing their sexual orientation, but the focus of their concerns varies by gender.

My rationale for this particular focus stemmed from what I perceived as a gap in the Irish literature about sexual politics. Given that much of the contemporary focus of Irish lesbian and gay activism has been in the realm of politics and policy-making, it seemed important to understand more about how disclosure and the claiming of intimate citizenship manifests itself in the Irish context. While much attention, out of political necessity is given to policy and politics, it is important to also explore what lesbian and gay people were dealing with in their lives. I would venture to suggest that, while the dominant political paradigm attends politics and policy, this policy gaze tends to overlook ‘the real-life implications of inequality’ (Anderson and Snow, 2001: 395). Anderson and Snow’s (2001) use of the term ‘real life’ is not perhaps altogether the best word, as policy and politics (in the sense of law reform) are also real. Perhaps the more helpful way of describing politics and
policy as the institutional level and that 'real-life' refers to the inter-personal level of social life, i.e. our relationships with family and friends, our working lives, and relationships with experts. While there has been considerable institutional reform in Ireland, I suggest that the inter-personal level has been somewhat neglected.

For lesbians and gay men, a central feature of those real-life implications stems from the uncertainty around the processes of coming out and disclosing one's sexual orientation to others in a heteronormative society. An important part of this chapter was establishing a lesbian and gay focus, trimming my overly ambition research scope from GLBT. Along this intellectual journey, I carried out an interview with a bisexual woman, which pointed out similarities around eschewing compulsory heterosexuality but important differences around sexual orientation from my own embodied experience as a gay man. I became concerned, however, about the danger of being drawn towards too 'categorical' a viewpoint within the scope of this thesis. While recognising bisexual intimate dilemmas around power and powerlessness (Janet's feeling of exclusion as a bisexual woman), I also noted how Janet seemed to express these issues through a lens about 'being bisexual' (a category) rather than charting her (life politics) dilemmas about 'choice, doubt, strategy, planning, error and transformation' (Connell, 1987: 61).

Around that time, I also was informed by interviewing Barry, a married gay man. In the course of his life, he had become implicated in activist work both with a married gay men's group and with a charity for those with mental health problems. While I was concerned about the 'category' problem (how to square married/gay), I felt that his story attended to gender politics much more substantially. Barry's story about being married/gay and his lifestyle seemed to be both relevant to the times in Ireland as the MGM minority flourished in the media and seemed to be variant of gay identity.
So while I was concerned about how to include bisexuality, I came to feel that MGM could manageably be situated within an overall focus of lesbian and gay men's lives because Barry's embodied story resonated with my own experience and those of other gay men I had interviewed over the years. Barry's story - and his limited involvement in activist work - was also significant in theorising which people to interview. I recalled how earlier I had noticed a distinction between the stories told my 'ordinary' gay men and by those who had become or had been gay activists. Ordinary gay men told their stories, but activists, who had become implicated in more formal intellectual practices, were able more reflexively see their politics of location (Rich, 1986) in the world. Revisiting the literature, I noticed there was little attention given to the 'real life implications of inequality' of lesbian and gay activists. Literature seemed to divide between studies of social movements and about 'gay history'. There seemed to be something of a gap for a study about people!

My focus, as it emerged, was to talk with activists about their lives and their experience of being in the world of activism, in order to open up this terrain. This focus emerged or crystallized from the initial interview phase, from reflections upon my earlier work and from my dissatisfaction that 'gay history' and the policy turn in Ireland seemed to be neglecting embodied experience. So it seemed that there was a gap in the literature worth exploring. My interview focus then crystallized around a range of activists who were largely of my own age cohort and whose experiences of living in Irish society were contemporaneous to my own.
Chapter Five: Gay Male Activists’ coming out stories

“We are storytellers seeking meanings that help us cope with our circumstances.’

Introduction

At the start of this thesis, I posited the idea that Ireland is in the process of moving out of a period of silence and censorship about sexuality that has been shaped by modernity towards a late modern culture of sexual stories.

While I will discuss my data about women in the next chapter, I focus here on the dilemmas flowing from coming out for some gay male narrators. Likewise, in some of the men’s stories, albeit that the sample is small, I found my attention turning to some concepts around self-renewal that bears resemblance to liquid modernity’s discarding of what is no longer required (Bauman, 2000).

Coming out is understood as becoming a ‘good gay’, and constitutes an important ongoing dilemma for lesbians and gay men. Just to remind ourselves and amplify the point, Seidman defines the good gay as being:

‘...associated with specific social behaviours. For example, the normal gay is expected to be gender conventional, link sex to love and a marriage-like relationship, defend family values, personify economic individualism, and display national pride. Although normalisation makes it possible for individuals to conduct lives of integrity, it also establishes a moral and social division among gays... the normal gay implies a political logic of tolerance and minority rights that does not challenge heterosexual dominance’ (Seidman, 2002:133).
I would agree with Seidman et al. (1999: 9), who suggest the closet 'has become a central category for grasping the history and social dynamics of gay life'. While, he has offered the view that American society was beyond the closet (Seidman, 2002), I had noticed that there was an edgy relationship with the closet in the Irish context. One reason for Ireland being different is how recently the decriminalisation of homosexuality occurred (UK in 1967, Ireland in 1993) and this gives rise to different concerns because of the 'closeness' of the closet to Irish gay life. Rather than seeing the 'closet' as something to be devalued, it is an important intellectual resource for lesbians and gay men, as both a refuge and shared experience.

Amongst other things in my research was a resistance to identity/identity politics and declaring oneself 'gay'. While in some quarters, coming out is problematised as a cul de sac of identity politics, where identity becomes 'fixed' (Butler, 1991) through the performative of 'I'm coming out'. Granted coming out has to be authentic (Kessler & McKenna, 1978), but my focus is to locate 'coming out' as a performance (after Goffman's dramaturgy), which is concerned with reflexively examining self-identity (Giddens, 1991; Connell, 1995). Raewyn Connell (1995) has framed gay masculinity as a form of self-identity that is subordinate to hegemonic masculinity. She suggests that whereas medical science considers gay identity as the 'wrong' sexual object choice, attention to the embodied dilemmas about sexual orientation and same-sex desire can help to highlight the interplay between the self, desire and social institutions in national contexts.

Likewise, there is ample evidence to suggest that sociological assessments also offer a more positive view on coming out. Seidman et al (1999) offer the view that coming out is a crucial site of analysis. While Ken Plummer recognises that coming out is a “the most momentous act’ (Plummer, 1995: 82) in a lesbian’s or gay man’s
life. While Plummer suggests that coming out is most closely associated with modernist gay (identity) politics, he has more recently noted its continuing significance within the context of the turn to intimate citizenship (Plummer, 2003). For Plummer, coming out stories can be viewed as stories about identity, but rather than suggesting that coming out ‘fixes’ identity, he posits that identity stories are tales: ‘in which new identities take us beyond the limiting categories of the past, and start forming identities which are forged around relationships and conscious choices over the life one wishes to live and who one wishes to be’ (1995: 160). In short, Plummer is suggesting that coming out is a life politics issue rather than a primarily emancipatory politics claim. It is a politics of choice rather than a politics of freedom. This viewpoint emerges from over thirty years’ work into sexuality ans stigma (Plummer, 1975, 1992, 1995, 2000, 2002a, 2002b, 2003, 2003a, 2006).

This viewpoint reflects how gender roles (Lindsey, 1997) are now more fluid, choice-driven, negotiated lifestyles but the power of gender roles is still implicated (Giddens, 1991; 1992; Connell, 1995, 2000; Bauman, 2000). While we might welcome the decline of the ascription of gender roles, the emergence of more fluidity brings new concerns or gender vertigo (Risman, 1996). Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002: 5-6) advance the viewpoint that: ‘as people are released from roles, especially gender roles ... they are encouraged more and more to build up a life of their own’.

Gender roles play an important part in how or whether lesbians and gay men can or cannot disclose their sexual orientation. In regard to the informants I talked with (men and women), disclosing their sexuality (or not) to their family was the critical issue (Valentine et al, 2003). More generally, in Ireland, from disclosing little or nothing about one’s homosexuality (as in the case, earlier, of MacLiammoir and Edwards) an important change is underway. While Ireland has only had a brief
period where coming out has been framed by emancipatory politics [and for a small minority, particularly gay men prior to decriminalisation], we are now firmly into an era where coming out is about life politics and attendant dilemmas. Ireland is a particularly interesting case in relation to the transformation of gender roles because the shifts that have/are occurring are within living memory. What I am arguing is that people know 'how things were' from embodied experience rather than from abstract knowledge. I argue that the cohort of activists who acted as informants for my research (and who were broadly my age group) is part of Ireland's liminal generation who are experiencing this rollercoaster of social change. My interview focus, as it emerged through the research, with a selection of Irish gay and lesbian activists, represents my attempt to cast some light on disclosure in this context of social change through a series of exemplars (Mishler, 1990). My findings from these exemplars leads me to suggest that coming out and disclosure of sexual orientation was an ongoing predicament because these informants were struggling with both the legacy of traditional (heterosexualised) social norms and they were having to artfully develop life strategies where there were no predefined templates for 'how to live'.

An issue that long concerned me was how to operationalize Plummer's terrain of intimate citizenship and think about how to organise my findings, and I chose to focus on kernel stories (Kalcik, 1975) about coming out, and on its implications for life story coherence (Moonwoman-Baird, 2000) more widely.

I started to notice how references to coming out could be brief, even cursory remarks – even quizzical queries, wondering why I needed to ask that, yet I felt such references were imbued with meaning and significance. For instance, in one of the first interviews that I carried out, with Barry a married gay man (MGM), I was told a succinct coming out tale. However, not all such tellings were personal. In
Constance’s story (see chapter six), I was told how embodiment frames the social conditioning of lesbians (generally) as she was attempting to clarify an intellectual point for me. Both of these ‘vignettes’ or ‘self conversations’ (Plummer, 1995: 57) were crucial to self-identity. Thus, from Plummer’s framework of intimate citizenship, I argue that thinking about kernel stories as an intellectual resource represent one way to explore the ‘how’ of intimate citizenship is given life. As researchers, we become attuned to when people start to tell us when they do/ do not have access to intimate citizenship.

**Talking with Barry**

One of my initial exploratory interviews was with a married gay man, who responded to my notice in the Gay Community News. Having already conducted an interview with a bisexual woman, I did have anxieties as to whether exploring married/ gay would be simply another category-driven problem to analyse. In our email interaction, Barry had described himself as a married gay man in his late forties who was ‘half out’ and frustrated with his lot in life. “Am I of any use to you?” he asked. I agreed to meet up with him, and we talked in the Department Common Room one Friday afternoon. My assumption had been that married and gay might have meant that he’d left the family home and ‘half-out’ might have signalled that he was coming out as gay. In fact, he had been out to his wife for about four years, but was still married and living at home. He was dividing his life between being at home (with his wife, Polly, and two grown-up children) and exploring the gay scene. While on the gay scene, he had become involved as an activist with a married gay men’s group and he was working as a volunteer counsellor with an unspecified charity.

Barry began recounting his life story:
“Well my name is Barry. I am 47, male, gay. Married for about the last 20 plus years, which is half my life. Mostly very happily. I’ve two children. I suppose in some level, I have always known that I’m gay but because it was something that I knew from so early on, I just thought that that was the way I was. It took a very, very long time for me to accept that I was gay and not either straight or bisexual. And in fact, I really only accepted that 4 or 4 ½ years ago. So, then I came out to my wife.

I recognised the salience of Barry’s kernel story in two ways: as a political story about breaking the stigma and silence as a married gay man and as an intellectual journey, exploring spaces where sexual relationships could be had and attempting to come to terms with his sexual orientation. Initially, I thought that Barry was simply trying to exert information control over our interview. But I realised it was a device for trying to organise how he told his coming out story in more depth and so I see it as being closer to a presentation of self (Goffman, 1959). Framing his story as being about ‘was married’/ ‘now gay’ and ‘four years ago’ does point us to a particular point when he came out to his wife, but the kernel story also remains fluid by foreshadowing his deep personal troubles (over time) about being married and gay. There are two elements shaping Barry’s intimate citizenship story. On one hand, he presents himself as being married and gay (a rational discourse) and, on the other, as engaged in a reflexive project of the self (Giddens, 1991), he is learning about his embodied sexual identity.

His rational argument is centred upon his ongoing dilemma to break free from modernity’s moral order, as represented by his mother. Barry’s parents are characterised as being ‘simple’, accepting formulaic truths of authority figures (government, priests, teachers, etc.). While his father is invisible in his discourse, Barry’s mother is portrayed as the enforcer of discipline, which supports Inglis’s view of the role of Irish mothers in modernity (Inglis, 1988). Barry criticises how his mother thought these experts were ‘automatically right’ as they imparted
codified knowledge and provided a protective cocoon. He resented his mother's moral teaching over issues such as 'no sex before marriage' and her intolerance of how he used to question things. But at the same time, he would really love to have a better relationship with her now and to be able to disclose his sexual orientation, but she 'won't change' and they continue periodically to argue as usual. Barry's story about the fraught relationship he had with his mother, we can see how he is embedded in a process of reflecting on a key 'fateful moment' in his life. For Giddens, 'fateful moments are times when events come together in such a way that an individual stands, as it were, at a crossroads in his existence; or where a person learns of information with fateful consequences'. (1991: 113). Barry is stuck at this 'crossroads' of existence, as struggles with a more reflexive life planning.

We see this in his description of a struggle with rationality (if only his mother had been more understanding, then he would not have been so alienated, might have been openly gay, etc.). Competing with this rational discourse is his embodied experience of being sexually attracted to men and becoming aware of his gay body (Giddens, 1991: 77). Thus, there is an ongoing tension between the two perspectives (desire and body image), which are underpinned by a more complex knowledge of masculinity and male power.

Barry grew up knowing that the norms of Irish society were neither really fixed nor compulsory in practice for men. I argue this because he reported having some sexual contact with his peers right up to a few days before his marriage to Polly. He had hoped that marriage would 'cure' him (a medical discourse) from being stigmatised and enable him to become a respectable married man, but his embodied experience of heterosexual intercourse was disappointing, even a turn off, and he started to 'stray'. Five years of marriage passed before he ventured into any sort of adult same-sex relations. When he started to explore homosexuality, he
discovered gay cruising and became adept at living a double life. In the interview, he made a point of telling me 'how much' he knew about where to go looking for gay sex. His structural position as the breadwinner and head of household gave him the licence to go cruising under a respectable guise (for instance, leaving the car for a garage service and slipping off to a well-known cruising ground). But these gay trysts are what Giddens (1991: 95) refers to as convenience relationships, where the parties tend to settle for what the encounter offers without committing to intimacy proper. Barry settled for these encounters and he did not come out. Cottaging and cruising become an anonymous sexual compulsion (Jeyasingham, 2002), but Barry rarely enjoyed any gay sociality (making friends). It is through this asymmetry between heterosexual marriage and gay sex that he remained the good provider but became increasingly unhappy. Gay sex was wanted, but it left him feeling stigmatised, wanting to 'scrub myself with a brillo pad to get everything off me'. While the 'everything', which Barry feels the need to scrub off, is not named explicitly (bodily fluids, sweat, someone else's aftershave, betrayal), he describes his stigma as being bodily experience, i.e. his body and what he can do with it. What he can do runs counter to what married men ought to do; I noted how he did not focus so much on lying to Polly. But he goes back for more, because he also enjoys the thrill. The thrill evolves, however. A fellow-cottager, Jeff, brought Barry to a gay bar and handed him the GCN newspaper:

'Jeff said, 'here you take one of those, you might enjoy reading that'. It was an early GCN. And I remember thinking 'My God! They have a newspaper'. So very slowly, I was introduced to the idea that there was such thing as a community and that there were other gay people, it was not just me being a pervert. But it was too slow for me to save myself from being wracked with guilt for all those years. Now I am still guilty, still hugely guilty'.

Accepting the logic of the more experienced gay man, Barry absorbed this information voraciously. I note how his comment that 'they have a newspaper'
suggests that Barry still did not entirely identify with the gay community. The mediatized information, however, helps Barry start to identify with the gay community and to find safer locales for gay sex. An advertisement in GCN taught him about the world of gay saunas, and he became a regular client:

'It's a safe space in some ways, it's not entirely safe of course but, it's safe in the sense that nobody is going to say 'Oh my God you're gay!' And I can take off my clothes and be naked, or be almost naked, and nobody minds. And it doesn't matter whether I have a shite body, you know, I'm just naked. And I like that. I like being able to watch, I like being able to touch other men. You know, it's nice. Um, so it represents an opportunity to do those sorts of things that I want to do... (but sometimes) I have a worse time there. Having said that, the last time I went in there, there was guy who gave me a blow job, which is very unusual. I find that I usually do the work and they just, sort of enjoy it. This guy was fantastic. And I thought my head was going to explode. So, sometimes you can meet someone really nice and so on, and that's what keeps me going back I suppose'.

While, because of his age and looks, he is 'nobody's fancy' in the bright lights of a gay bar, he is much more at ease and in control of his body in the relative safety of the sauna. There he can look at and touch other men's bodies with ease and 'do things' on occasions. His comment, however, still demonstrates how he is not confident in the sauna and he later admits that while he could find someone there, 'it's not my home'. Again, however, he chooses sex over intimacy and persists in having a liminal life.

His adamant hegemonic attitude as a man (that he should not have to leave his wife and 'go gay') comes undone when he comes out to Polly. When he started cottaging, he had experienced a great deal of stigma, but kept cruising for sex anyhow. As the initial feelings of guilt about cheating on his wife and family were supplanted by ongoing dilemmas about covering his sexual orientation (Goffman, 1963), he started to find it increasingly difficult to manage a double life and avoiding 'messing with Mr. in-between'. He found that without a moral compass of
modernity that was evocative of his mother's era, he was in a liminal phase where the certitude of hegemonic masculinity was in question. In turn, this generated health problems, which meant that he had to give up working, and so he felt he had to be more open.

The manner in which he disclosed to Polly demonstrates how messy disclosure can be. To the last, he tried to adopt a rational approach to telling Polly, by choosing a gay-themed film for his birthday and using this opportunity to come out to his now suspicious wife. After watching 'Jeffrey' (video film), Barry told me that:

'She just said 'you're interested in a lot of gay things these days and I knew that was my chance or my threat. You know, which it was going to be. And I just took the opportunity and said 'well, that's because I am gay'. And you know, those words are out, you can't go and grab them again and shove them back in you mouth. And say 'oh shit, did I say that out loud?' Anyway, the words were out there and there was a pause. And she said 'I've thought that for 20 years'. And I thought 'well FUCK me pink! Why didn't I say it twenty years ago?'

The disclosure led to the couple experiencing many problems, but they did talk their way through these issues. Polly agreed to Barry being able to explore his gay side, but he was not to bring this aspect of life home. Since that time, some four years ago, Barry has made some friends on the scene, including a young friendly guy called Buddy. Summing up his personal situation (the other end of his kernel story) Barry concludes:

'Here I am at 47 been gay for ever and still never had a boyfriend (pauses) and it gets (pauses) a bit much sometimes you know, you think, God (pauses) I would like that so much. So I'm in a situation that my wife is in love with me. I don't think I am in love with her. I'm in love with Buddy. Buddy is not in love with me. Buddy is in love with his ex­boyfriend, who's not in love with Buddy. It just goes on and it's tiresome'.

While Barry fantasises about having a gay relationship, he is still caught between traditional gender norms and the newer climate, where there is more choice about intimacy. Barry, however, refuses to choose one lifestyle or the other (as gay norms might advocate) and he is attempting to reflexively integrate his heterosexual life with Polly and his gay life under the aegis of his identity as a married gay man. This life strategy is, however, subject to ongoing dilemmas about disclosing his sexual orientation and attempting to link two gendered aspects of social life.

Gender is deeply implicated in sustained liminality. As a term liminality emerged from anthropologists (e.g. Turner), more recent work has posited a distinction between 'acute liminality' (when a situation happens) and 'sustained liminality' (managing a situation on an ongoing basis). Barry’s position is that of sustained liminality, being caught between the supposed norms of heterosexuality and of gay lifestyle. While Barry struggles with both his gay and straight identities, he seems to experience ongoing dilemmas about disclosure of his sexual orientation, but is quite clear about wanting an MGM identity as a gay married man who lives with his wife.

Barry was able to forge this identity through support from an MGM support group, which acts as a forum for listening to other MGM’s sexual stories. Hearing other men’s stories has made him realise that he is not alone, that there are a multiplicity of ‘experiments in living’ at play (Weeks, 1998). Barry has been able to find a community and a political voice because the MGM issue had arisen in the mainstream press. Media reports rendered visible how gay married men have more scope and choice as men to come out and live openly (Holmquist, 2002; Harrington, 2002).
Non-heterosexual women who do not want to be wives (like bisexual Janet and lesbians – c.f. chapter six), by contrast, are excluded and stigmatised in Irish society. Lesbians and bisexual women are more likely to have to either emigrate or adopt covering strategies (Goffman, 1963) than men. Non-heterosexual men, like Barry, can assert their agency and autonomy more because of their position as men in society. Barry’s claim for intimate citizenship as a MGM is not without contentious elements. But he is adopting a reflexive approach to life politics, if in an isolated fashion. We can see that his struggle for mastery (Giddens, 1991) is bound up with his own embodied sexual stigma.

**Joe’s story of coming out: the emancipatory moment**

In contrast to Barry’s intense, ongoing dilemmas about his sexual orientation and the implications of trying to live a double life, an earlier interview with another activist seems to be emblematic of the conventional coming out story. There were some identifiable phases to Joe’s coming out story. He firstly realised his sexual orientation, a period of being in the closet followed. This was followed by a public coming out process, where he went about disclosing his sexual orientation and then he became politicized into gay politics. After interviewing Barry and doing an in-depth analysis of his story as a case, I returned to an interview that I had done with Joe. In light of Barry’s acute and then sustained liminality, had I missed liminality in Joe’s story?

Joe, an activist in his late forties, recalled a strong ‘political ethic’ around coming out in the late 1970’s. He had been raised by his widowed mother in a medium sized Irish city. Coming of age as a teenager in the early 1970’s, he recalls that heterosexuality was hegemonic. Like other teenagers, he stated ‘we were all experimenting’ with girls, which he did regard with some retrospective shame. As
he was starting to question his sexual orientation, he was *passing* as heterosexual (Goffman, 1963) by having girlfriends but did not intend to remain in the closet.

While returning to Ireland from a summer job abroad, Joe recalls how he had met an older man, and had a first same-sex experience. He recalls this encounter with some regret because he did not use the experience to immediately go on to explore his sexual orientation. He deliberately chose to postpone coming out as gay until later. Concerning his initial experience, he admits that he was ‘uninnocent’ (he used a term that was not grammatically correct) about the episode. While he adds that he may not have been fully aware of what sex between men actually entailed, he notes how he ‘hadn’t the slightest bit of guilt’ about having sex with a man. Throughout, Joe tended to resist talking about his embodied feelings and experiences, favouring a rational discourse about progress. Joe was quite puzzled in the interview as to why I was interested in his coming out experience, but he outlined how, upon his return to Ireland after the encounter, he continued his education. He felt that he should decide to postpone doing anything about his nascent homosexuality and he did not come out until he had moved to the relative anonymity of the city.

While, like Barry, Joe refers to his fears about being labelled as a homosexual or getting a criminal record, he frames his dilemmas as being *necessary* for the times. In order to get to a point where he could do something about his sexual orientation (i.e. come out), Joe argued that he had to be *careful* in Ireland in the late 1960’s/early 1970’s. Joe named his fear as either ‘getting a name for being queer’ or being caught (by the police) for cottaging and thereby causing distress to his elderly mother. Drawing attention to his homosexuality would bring shame too close to home (Eliasoph, 1998). Doing nothing was, in Joe’s words, a ‘very conscious decision’ and staying in the closet was about being safe for the time being. Being
prudent, or careful, is a well-worn Irish way of sidestepping sexual politics (Inglis, 2005). It is not the same as saying ‘nothing’ but it is designed to avoid ‘offending the innocent’ (Inglis, 2005: 9) such as his family, through disclosing his sexual orientation.

Joe went along with ‘the lads’ by having some heterosexual relationships that allowed him to remain invisible. In retrospect, Joe states that he ‘wasn’t terribly proud’ trying to pass himself off as a heterosexual, but he adds ‘I suppose we [the college lads] were all experimenting at that stage’. This phase of passing was displaced when he moved from home. Once he was doing postgraduate studies and living away from home, he decided (following his earlier plan) to come out and he went through an intense period of disclosure:

‘I just rang up the gay switchboard and then went up to Parnell Square and met them there. I never had any guilt like about it. Or I never had any fears in that sense... I kind of met a really nice group of people... you paid a pound or two...whatever... Like it was a really nice way of meeting people. I met a lot of people through that. ... I wouldn’t have stopped talking about it. Well, it depends what you mean by sexuality. I mean I would have talked about being gay ... I wouldn’t have been talking about my sexuality in a sense of my sexual behaviour’.

This is brief period of emancipatory politics where Joe shouts aloud ‘I’m gay’, as it were. However, Joe does switch into a mode that is closer to Giddens’s life politics. From being in the closet and having to pass as heterosexual, Joe came out as a gay man, but adopted a strategy of covering (Goffman, 1963; Yoshino, 2006) because of the legal situation at the time. So he is telling us that he embraced his identity as a gay man, but he tried to distance himself from being ‘an illegal’ or focusing on illegal sexual acts.
The campaign for decriminalisation later sought to change the law so that people were able to make better lives (life politics/equality), rather than arguing so much that people would be able to have sex (emancipation). Prudently, Joe identified as a gay man and sought to build allies for social change, but there was no emancipatory discourse about not being able to legally have sex. (Rather the discourse moved towards a focus on equality and human rights). Right through the campaign for decriminalisation, Joe and other activists of the time were insistent that homosexuality was not about sexual practices but about free choice. So, rather than seeing prudery as negative and totally constraining, I would argue that it is constitutive of Irish gay sexual politics at that stage.

After college, Joe focused more on activist politics and it became his passion. Joe remarked that he had enjoyed a series of relationships, but did judge that he had always placed politics ahead of having a personal life:

'I think I probably prioritise politics, my political activity, rather than my personal life and relationships at this stage. Um, and there’s always, you know, where you’re talking to people about your life eh, so obviously there’s a choice involved somewhere along the line, you know. That, when you get to a certain age, you can’t just say well it’s an accident, I haven’t met somebody or, you know, it’s an accident that I haven’t been in that kind of one to one relationship for a long time now. And on the other hand, I’m doing a lot of work in the political area. I mean they seem to be kind of related'.

There is a degree of regret here about the price Joe has paid for being involved in sexual politics but he admits to not looking for intimacy, but was what, in more traditional times, used to be called a bachelor. Joe suggests that he is single by conscious design, but he does not elaborate the point further. Whereas women who are single are subject to stigma (Hyde, 2000), Joe presents himself as a ‘regular guy’.
Peter: progress comes at a price

Peter is a gay rights activist in his late thirties who has worked in the voluntary sector for several years as an AIDS prevention educator. Settling down in Peter’s office, I begin by asking him about when and how he came out as a gay man. Like most of the gay men I interviewed, he was surprised that I asked how he had come out. He used some self-deprecating humour to describe his rationale for coming out some seventeen years previously:

‘I’m a gay man, middle-class, educated, active gay man [Peter breaks into a fit of giggles and we both laugh at ‘active’] (Sean: So when did you come out Peter?) Err, 1985, February 85 to be correct. It was just before my 20th birthday, I was born _______. I’d read somewhere in a magazine that gay men, er MEN were at their sexual prime at 19, so I thought I better hurry and get out! (More laughter). At that time, there was very little about anything gay, in the media. I was convinced I was the only gay person in the country. You heard about the Village People and San Francisco. And gay clubs in London all right, but for there was nothing happening here. But I read about the Hirschfeld Centre and the National Gay Federation in ‘The Herald’ of all places. And I kept it for months and finally one night, I rang up and they suggested that I go to Saturday’s befriending group, which I did. There were just a few groups of guys there. About only 4 or 5 guys there. And they were filling me in on, like, a talkshop going on and a film, and clubs that are on, and there’s a disco and that’s on, on Friday, and Saturday night. But whatever you do, don’t go to the disco, yet, until you’ve met some people or whatever! So of course, saying not to go made me want to, so I went in that night. It was a bit of a shock, like, a whole building full of gay men. Two gay men kissing when I came in the door, I couldn’t believe it. I was terrified, absolutely terrified. But those days are gone (bursts out laughing as if nothing would terrify him).

While Peter jokes about coming out, and plays on the stereotype of a gay man, I did immediately note that there was an identifiable kernel story as being a moment in time when he came out. Part of Peter’s jocularity is that he knows that his story bears a relation to mine (coming out in the city and going to ‘Icebreakers’ to meet gay men). Peter mentions how felt the need to come out in order to be sexually
active. He used this word playfully, to emphasise his sexual preference and parody the voracious gay man/predator.

His life before coming out is not described and he did not discuss how he struggled with disclosing his sexuality to his family. While open and friendly, Peter keeps his private life as private. He does not allude to keeping things private, rather prudery is performed as information control (Goffman, 1959). I only get a glimpse into his personal life when he refers to his education and alluded to being bullied at school. While he is very public about coming out and its political importance, the private sphere is censored and he presents himself as a single gay man.

In his sexual story, coming out acquires a late modern turn because Peter tells about coming into an existing gay community in a mediatized age (newspaper clipping, knowledge about gay icons and places). He relied upon a media article for information about how to come out, where to get information and used this knowledge to make contact with a support group. The support group (an expert system in Giddens’s (1991) terms) helped him to find his way into the gay scene and to become proficient at socialising with other gay men.

Unlike Barry’s story (with much stigma) and Joe’s somewhat emancipatory politics tale, Peter’s story is much more oriented towards life politics. His decision to come out when he did is much more oriented to finding intimacy. Behind Peter’s jovial attitude is a serious political commitment that goes all the way back to his schooldays in a tough, working-class neighbourhood of the city:

‘I went to the Greytowers Comprehensive, and, you know, if you were in anyway different, you got called queer, poof, or whatever. And you either sank or swam. So I learned to stand up for myself at a very early age and I’ve been doing that all my life’.
Sink or swim is a masculine metaphor, which emphasises hegemonic masculinity's tenets of being strong, not vulnerable, and 'standing up' for yourself. Coming from a working class family – which his gentle, well-spoken, middle-class accent disguises – Peter advocates that gay men should be tough and independent, standing up for themselves. His 'salt of the earth' attitude applies to gay men who think 'nobody knows' about them:

'In a society like Ireland, there is a price to pay for being anything other than white, Roman Catholic and heterosexual. And I think that if you threw yourself into believing that you can be different from that norm and not pay some sort of price, then you're deluding yourself. I think that some gay men are deluded. There are many gay men who are living what they think are very closeted lifestyles and everybody around them knows that they are gay. But they have somehow deluded themselves into believing that nobody knows'.

The opening of this quotation mirrors the sentiment in a publication by David Norris. But Peter is quite scathing about deluded gay men, who are struggling with the closet. This criticism is not a sanctimonious view of an activist; rather it is based on Peter's embodied experience of trying to pass as normal. He explains that he chooses to live on his own terms due to experience of being removed from a teaching post because of his sexual orientation:

'I live on my own terms and I think I've always been like that, I think because of coming out in the 1980's and having my first job in 1984. And um, being fired eight months later because I was gay. And having to fight for my job and being re-instated in my job and, you know. That was the reality back then. You could not be openly gay. And I, you know, in a certain sense, I was lucky I had that fighting spirit and I was someone who wasn't going to be told 'you can't do this and you can't do that because you're gay. And at the time, the NGF was very supportive and provided me with a solicitor to fight my case. And they were very strong and very influential in getting me my job back. So from that experience, I've always lived on my own terms. I've never hidden who and what I am'. 
After he got his job back, he became politicised as a trade union representative at work and by an early engagement with gay youth activist work. He made a point about going public about his sexual orientation through ‘writing to the newspapers’ on gay youth issues at a time when homosexuality was still illegal. So unlike gay men of the 1960’s and 1970’s who often left Ireland in shame, or who lived closeted/ double lives, gay men, like Peter, were starting to challenge discrimination against gay men in the 1980’s and live openly as gay men. However, in relation to how many gay men present themselves (Goffman, 1959) on the gay scene, Peter argues that many men are constrained by prudery (Inglis, 2005) and sexual stigma (Goffman, 1963) and he points to the necessity of gay space and politics to fight for gay rights. An important element of support for gay men, in Peter’s view is that safe spaces are needed for socialisation. His own experience of politicisation fed into his view that gay men’s intimate citizenship is sustained by access to safe social space on one hand and by having the ability to make relationships in public (Plummer, 2003).

He was part of a cohort of gay men who experienced the old Hirschfeld Centre in Dublin and he recalls it fondly as being:

‘... very, very special. First of all, it was a community centre. I did go to the Tuesday talkshop and the film club. And people I met then are good friends today, twenty years later. You had to be a member, to get into the nightclub. There was great security. There was a great sense of ‘you were safe’. There were times when the doors were banged down and there was trouble, but you felt safe. And it being the mid-80’s the music at the time was very liberating. It was great fun, I thought I’d died and gone to heaven’.

Peter does romanticise his experience of ‘the Hirsch’ but he is pointing out how valuable the space was for socialising and developing self-identity in a hostile
world. He contrasts the past with the present but being critical of men who still lead double-lives, when there is no longer a political need for secrecy. He is critical of how some men create identities, by leading double lives on the gay scene/everyday life, and—in turn—these same gay men who adopt a ‘cocoon’ of identity are not very tolerant of effeminate gay men.

Peter is highly critical of gay men who are disparaging to effeminate gay men because they do not fit into the model of a ‘very straight gay’ (Connell, 1995). Peter notes how:

‘Gay men will try to be like straight men. And um, er, anybody who is camp, effeminate, or openly gay is almost sneered at, and made a joke of. And um, I think it’s just, er, again it goes down to the idea that a lot of Irish gay men like to just hide themselves. Like from Monday to Friday they are Joe Soap and from Friday to Sunday they are gay men. And they compartmentalise their lives like that and never the twain shall meet. And they have fooled themselves into believing that they can be different people. And they are not going to be gay at work, you’re only gay at the weekend when you go to The George and The Pod or Front Lounge. And um, so they, in trying to hide what they really are, they revert to this normal image of what a man should be and they look down then on anybody that um would highlight their situation like. You know if you’re in town, with somebody. You know I’ve often seen guys that I know from the pubs or whatever and you go to say ‘hello’. You may not know them very well, but you know then to see around the clubs and they are terrified that somebody will see them saying hello to you. Therefore, they’re gay and all that. Shite! ... Then there’s a rumour about someone being gay. What that says is that is should be hush-hush, that there is a reason why it is kept quiet. And this person cannot come out and say ‘Yes I am – big deal’. So all it does is underline oppression and continues to maintain this mystique and this I suppose dirtiness around sexuality and being gay that all it does. It leaves you in the closet.’

What Peter is suggesting is how fears of disclosure and of difference shape gay men’s social interaction on the scene. He argues that there is hierarchy of gay masculinity, with the very straight gays (Connell, 1995) in a position of dominance over more effeminate gay men. The persistence of a hierarchy of masculinities and
a consumer-driven scene has, in Peter’s view, substantially weakened gay solidarity and weakened the supportive capacity of gay spaces (compared to the Hirsch). Peter argues that commercial gay spaces (which are not political) leave homophobia intact, and he alludes to how many straight people come into ‘The George’ bar these days. This is an interesting point in light of how a couple of gay men had been assaulted near this gay bar, and one woman had been raped in the toilet.

After returning from a vacation abroad, where he was able to be open in public as a gay man, he reports how he caught himself being cautious and careful once back in Dublin. This kernel story illustrates how he feels that he does not have equal access to public space as a gay man. He is not free to be an intimate citizen because of homophobia, and he argues that the need to be careful is ultimately toxic, stamping down on gay men’s freedom. He thought there would be trouble the other day:

‘Even going to the shop the other day, there were a couple of guys coming out of an apartment and I could tell from the way they were looking at me they thought I was gay and they were just sniggering and stuff, I thought, God. I hadn’t had any major incident against me until then and I hadn’t realised that. You become something that you learn to ignore. Until you’re put in a different situation. When I found that someone would try to hold my hand in the street I would automatically flinch and I would think ‘what the hell am I doing’. I wouldn’t have noticed that before. So, at the moment, I don’t see myself staying here, because I don’t want to fight anymore, you know. I’m out for nearly 20 years, and I just want to live and be it’.

Peter’s plea to “be it” resonates with me as suggesting he is life political – and Political!
Zach: looking for love

The centrality of coming out moves into a more complex area in Zach’s story: it is bound up with relationships. Zach is a gay man in his thirties, who I interviewed when he was reading for a degree as a mature student and doing voluntary work in a gay community centre. He had recently endured the breakdown of a relationship with Gordon, an overseas worker, whose visa had run out and who has had had to return to his native Canada. Zach was left behind, confused and politicised by the experience and he now wanted to become more involved in activism as a result. The crux of his dilemma is that his relationship had recently fallen apart because his overseas partner could remain in Ireland and he could not join Gordon and live abroad:

‘And I know I am blaming fucking politics for that you know; in the sense that, you know I couldn’t go as his partner even though we had spent 4½ years together and we were a very stable couple and probably had a better relationship than a lot of married couples. But simply because I couldn’t go illegally to [Abroad]. There was more to it than that, but that was one of the biggest reasons why we split up. And that was really hard, really, really hard to take, and I’ve been wandering around a bit aimlessly since (exhales cigarette) then. You know, just getting my head together now, you know.’

Later, Zach told me, however, that there was a ‘backstage’ (Goffman, 1963) issue, which had destroyed his relationship. Zach’s current dilemma leads him into recounting how cumulatively he has been unable to claim intimate citizenship because of ‘politics’. His current pain made him go back and explain how he had spent many years coping with homophobia in school (O’Carroll and Szalacha, 1998), dealing with his sexual orientation and coming out to his family. He felt that, having done everything to have ‘a better relationship than many straight people’, this struggle had come to nought because of ‘politics’. His language, and the
argument he makes is evocative of how younger gay men have a more articulate sense of self in late /liquid modernity (O'Connor, 2006).

As we were conducting the interview in the aftermath of Gordon leaving, I found that Zach revisited his experiences of coming out in his discussion with me, and perhaps it was therapeutic to do so, or it was a way of keeping himself grounded in a time of insecurity. This re/turning to coming out at a time of insecurity supports my contention that coming out is an ongoing and therefore life-political concern. Zach alludes in his story to what Goffman (1959) terms the front stage and backstage dimensions of coming out. He described himself as having been a 'very camp' boy, who, in a tough working-class area of Dublin, was isolated and bullied a lot at school between the age of nine and eighteen because he was gay. Homophobia eventually led Zach to quit school. To sidestep stigma, he went abroad for a while, adding 'moving away from my family' meant that he couldn't hurt them by being gay' and it also gave him space to deal with his head being 'wrecked' and to come to terms with his sexual orientation. Upon returning to Ireland, he started a gradual process of telling friends that he was gay. The last step in this process was coming out to his parents, and it is around this that Zach's kernel story about coming out is centred.

Coming out to his parents enabled him to openly renegotiate his relationship with his family as an agent (Valentine et al, 2003). After a party one night, his mother remarked how she had been taken aback by an openly gay man's coming out story, which was disclosed there. We might suppose that Zach's mother, Biddy, seemed to be taking this moment to draw her own son out of his closet. Zach recalls walking home from the party with his mother and she said to Zach:
‘Did you hear that fecking eejit, I’m Conor I’m gay?’ Like anyone gives a shit and I said ‘yeah, I know, like, ma, by the way I’m gay as well’. And she said ‘yeah I kind of know that Zach’.

In this briefest of interactions (a kernel story), Zach comes out to his parents. Within the kernel story is the moment when his life changed, the fateful moment (Giddens, 1991: 113-114) and when he actively began to renegotiate his family relationship as a gay son. Zach’s story is presented as if his parents were both accepting of his sexual orientation. I would argue, however, that both son and parents are actively involved in doing gender (West & Zimmerman, 1987; Fenstermaker & West, 2002; Finch, 2007) and managing stigma (Goffman, 1963). Recalling that night, Zach states:

‘And we went home and we sat up talking like until about 5 o’clock. She cried, like, you know, she was sad but she wasn’t sad because I was gay but I think she was crying because, well, she was obviously worrying about AIDS. That was a big concern for her. And I remember even saying to her that my brother, who, I knew my brother was heterosexual, my older brother, who I knew was quite promiscuous, more promiscuous than I was and I said if you want to worry about someone with AIDS you wanna worry about Eric not me, like you know. But I suppose, that was the early 80’s, so the whole AIDS thing was quite new. Um, there was a double hysteria attached to it, sort of about whole gay plague like you know. But generally and ultimately, it wasn’t a problem for her like, you know. And it was the next morning, my dad was driving me into town. I didn’t tell my father, I just couldn’t. I couldn’t tell him. I asked her if she would tell him. I said like listen, I can’t tell him. I just couldn’t. And (long breath) the next morning my dad was driving me into town. I got into the car, it was about 7 o’clock in the morning, half seven, and me dad said to me ‘so you told you’re mother that you were gay last night?’ (We both laugh at this). And I said ‘sh*t like, she told you already like?’ And he said ‘no she didn’t tell me, but you sat up talking with your mother until 5 in the morning and the only reason I can think that would be happening is that you’re telling her that you’re gay like’. And he was so cool about it; there was never any problem from the start’.

Zach’s mother, Biddy, is presented as the arbiter of morality in Zach’s family with whom he does the emotion work, echoing Inglis (1998), and his relationship with his father is much more discursively restrained. His mother’s fears for Zach are
focused around the HIV pandemic (rather than how actively sexual or not Zach might be sexually). Thus, sexual behaviour is skirted by his mother, but it is also minimized by Zach, when he points to how another (heterosexual) brother is more at risk of HIV than he is because of his sexual escapades. Nonetheless, HIV shapes how he negotiates his new identity and coming out is more multifaceted (Byrne and Larkin, 1994; Dowsett, 1996).

Zach could not cope with talking to his father, Mick. Instead, he relied on his mother passing on news of Zach's disclosure. Zach reports how his father's attitude was 'so cool' and coming out was 'never any problem', but the degree of silence between father and son, however, illustrates how they relate as men. Both men engage in covering difference between hetero/homosexuality (Goffman, 1963), and the emotional engagement is mediated through the Irish mother. Zach reverts to a rational standpoint, telling me how he feels that his parents were able to take the news of his coming out well because there were already grandchildren and there was, perhaps, no pressure on him to have kids (normalising discourse):

'I often wonder if I was an only child, would it be a problem. Because by the time I told my parents, they already had 3 grandchildren. So I don't think it would have been a problem but I wonder if that made it easier for them. That might be wrong of me to say that like but, I don't know. So there was never a problem with that at home. And then as soon as I told my parents I just didn't care, because they were the last people I told. The last people I told in my family, well I suppose you could say that coming out is a continuous process I suppose you could argue that you're telling people. But they were the last people I told that I wanted to tell that I cared about. And once I told them, I didn't care it was just a process of me accepting my self and coming to terms with myself and that took a couple of years, you know. A year or two. I suppose you know the stage theory and all that. When I reached synthesis or whatever the final stage is, I guess I was about 22. So it would probably fit in with the old stats'.
His coming out kernel story to his parents is a prudent sexual story, which spares them from many of the ongoing dilemmas that Zach had encountered (around his sexual history). Also, he tries to be a normal gay, in terms of fitting into the statistics.

Zach’s experience of coming out on the gay scene is more explicitly sexual but demonstrates how he took bodily control of his sexual practices. Zach carefully distinguishes between the social aspect of the gay scene, which is an environment, where, as a gay man:

‘You can express yourself completely... where you can express yourself freely as a gay person, without fear of hindrance. And um if there is any kind of hindrance, the bouncers are going to get rid of them. You know what I mean; they’re going to be ejected out of the bar. It’s safe, it’s safe, and it’s fun’.

But coming out on the gay scene was something of a rollercoaster or a ‘sexual rampage’. For Zach, his initial period on the scene was like:

‘... A baby in a candy shop who has never had candy before. You know, yeah. I went out it was novelty, yeah. It was like, it was the ability to freely express yourself sexually and emotionally with a man. And that was a novelty. And also, I mean I dunno, I don’t know if I thought about it like that, or if I even thought about it. Maybe I thought it was just the done thing, that everybody was doing, so you just do it like, you know. And to be honest I was searching for love, like. Definitely, I was looking for love, but I was looking but looking back in retrospect, I don’t wish to be cynical about it I was probably looking in the wrong places. I think there are obviously exceptions and you can’t find love anywhere, but that’s because I’m a complete romantic I mean (bursts into giggles). That’s why nobody, that why I’m still single I am too romantic. Erm, but, yeah. So yeah. I think it was expected of me, and I enjoyed it, sexually I enjoyed it like, it was fun, it was fun to be wanted. When you spent ... well up to the age of 18 from about 9, up to the age of 18 kinda being victimised and bullied (pauses) and being taunted and not having any friends. And all of a sudden you’re in this area and it’s an environment where people want you. Whether that even if that want is only sexual um, it’s good, it’s good for your ego, it’s like ‘wow, yeah
people want me now, I’m not being stigmatised, I’m not being victimised, I’m not being slagged off. People want me. And I’d say definitely that was an aspect of it as well, you know, definitely.

Zach highlights how, as a young gay man, he became desirable to other men and while having sex with men ‘was expected’, he became more confident in himself as a man. He enjoyed the closeness with other men and he openly explored his sexuality.

After this initial period on the gay scene, Zach retreated into a period of celibacy as he felt ‘confused’ and the scene ‘did mess my head about’. Giddens makes this point exactly: ‘Celibacy is a form of bodily denial prized by some religious orders, but it can also be an expression of personal difficulties, as can sexual obsessions of different sorts’ (Giddens, 1991: 63).

So for about a year, Zach did not have any sex, and tried to take stock of his life. His friends on the scene nicknamed him ‘Sister Zee’ because he would not sleep with anyone:

‘Being with so many men and having such a, I suppose you might even say, transient kind of existence on the gay scene in the sense of I didn’t have any roots. I was always moving between men, from man, to man, to man, to man. And that wasn’t what I wanted. And it took me a while to realise that. That’s that wasn’t what I wanted and its funny, when I realised that that’s wasn’t what I wanted. When I stopped having sex, I didn’t stop going on the gay scene. I had gay friends and I continued going on the gay scene. It’s funny I kinda got a name on the gay scene as a prissy queen, cos I wouldn’t sleep with anyone! Cos I wouldn’t have sex!’

Zach was nicknamed with a feminine name, because he would not behave like a ‘normal gay man’. But during this period, he was reflecting about how he wanted to live, and his concerns focused on life politics around who he wanted to be. Then he met and settled down into a pure relationship with Gordon:
'And we talked about it and we talked about whether it was going to be an open relationship or a monogamous relationship, uh what type of, like, sex we were into. It was actually quite, it was the first time I'd ever had a relationship with a man where we actually discussed these things that are important... Generally, you don't talk about, you don't say like OK. You and I are going to be a couple, OK? OK, how do you feel about monogamy? How do you feel about open relationships? What type of sex are you into? Do you like S&M? Do you like this? Do you like that? It was the first time I'd discussed this with a man that I was dating. It was refreshing, it was great, like.'

In this relationship, Zach felt that he had found true love but still experienced some dilemmas around the embodied 'limits' to sexual practices:

'It was lovely, he was gentle, he was kind. He made it very nice and it was lovely. You know. But even to this day, as far as anal sex is concerned, it's not something that I don't enjoy but it's something that I can only do with someone. No, I can fuck a guy, I can pick him up and fuck him no problem, that's grand; but to let someone into me, I have to be - there has to be something there, like, you know. There doesn't have to be love, but there has to be a context. There has to be certainly, definitely trust.'

Trust did not last in the relationship and, as in pure relationships, Gordon and Zach went their own ways as loyalty and different sexual desires drove them away:

'... The reason we broke up is basically because he wanted to have sex with other men. And he was telling me that having sex with other men didn't affect how he felt about me. But I don't understand that, I don't get it. Maybe it's my own insecurities in that I can't think about the man that I am with [being] in bed with another man. I couldn't accept that, I wouldn't take it. And it took us about a month to kind of finally break up. And then we had a serious falling out. Just last Friday (giggles, nervously admitting it). And we haven't spoken since last Friday and I don't know if we will speak again. But, ah, we will, we will! He just fucked up big time, like you know. But that's a different story'.

We should how, while Giddens (1992) argues that we stay in a pure relationship as long as it works, Zach's case alludes to how care and effort are implicated in ending a relationship. We might suggest that there is an 'afterlife' to Zach's relationship.
here, which points to more *asymmetry* in 'pure relationships' than Giddens allows, or a hint of *liquid love* (Bauman, 2004).
Malcolm

Through Peter, I made contact with Malcolm, who is a 25 year old marketing executive and part-time men's health activist. He offers a very different view on coming out and the way in which gay men should live, and his view is guided much more by a rational view of the world. He talked at length about doing activist work and using an advocacy approach. But while Malcolm still tells a *kernel story* about coming out, he is keen to argue that sexual orientation matters less and choice is increasingly central to gay men's social lives:

'I don’t think that sexual orientation today is a major issue... It is a lot about choice. I didn’t feel and I have a lot of older friends and I have spoken to them, and in one way I feel like that I'm at the medium. A generation that's between two poles. Um, you've got the older generation for whom it was illegal essentially, there was a bonding, and there were community aspects, cos they were all eventually being oppressed by a society. There's my stage where that had changed and society had started to open up and now there's the next generation which you couldn't shut off. They're like, 'what is your problem, you shouldn't have any [negative] thoughts' and they're perfectly right. They're assertive, they're vocal, they want their rights and that's fantastic. I'm from the hinterland where it was semi-OK. Certainly in '99 I wouldn't have thought, I don't believe, after 1993 or date that Ireland is a very open and embracing society by any means. And in 1999, there wasn't that much (openness). There was the start of a movement or, not a movement, um how to say that, a sort of a mass communication of icons I suppose. It was sort of cool to be gay when I came out which was a breaking point. Queer as Folk was on, that mightn't sound like a big thing to some people in the world but Queer as Folk to me was like 'wow 'and to most of my friends was like the first time we had seen true enough to life representations of gay people and their interactions. Um, or predominantly sexual interactions'.

This quotation is interesting and shows a reflexive understanding of sustained liminality and generational shifts. While we might like to problematise the argument that sexual orientation is not a 'major issue', Malcolm is aware that there is a rapid social transformation underway. He sees a more assertive, open and consumer-driven intimate citizen emerging in Dublin. In his own experience, he
did not have any 'peer or role models' around coming out, but he points to the crucial role of the media. Unlike some of the older gay men, Malcolm did not feel the same level of religious pressure to adhere to gender roles:

'I didn't feel any inherent religious pressure. I did feel that it was wrong. Now why I felt that it was wrong is another thing. I don't think I specifically have one key factor that said that's wrong... I'm sorry that I can't be more factual about my personal life. How does one say? I think that I realised that I was not going to achieve or potentially achieve the most in my life if I was not to follow a certain path. At least the basic path. And that was a heterosexual path. And anything else could be limiting'.

While Malcolm felt that there was no 'planned model' for his life or pressure from his parents, other than a generalised level of compulsory heterosexuality. He experienced coming out in adulthood. In the aftermath of a family bereavement, Malcolm embarked on a total re-evaluation of his life, which represents a disembedding process (Giddens, 1991). From this intense reflection, he decided to come out as a gay man. This is surely was Bauman (2000) meant by liquid modernity's melting powers, where people have to start anew and I sensed Malcolm's heterosexual identity being cast aside as he started to come to terms with being gay. Literally in the space of several days, he broke up with his girlfriend, feeling that the relationship was meaningless. In a drunken night out with his mates, he remembered noticing how some guys at a club seemed attractive, but Malcolm was also ready to explore his newly identified sexual orientation. Indeed, the metaphor Bauman (2000: 77) uses seems to capture this moment about being fit, that is 'to have a flexible, absorptive and adjustable body, ready to live through sensations not yet tried, and impossible to specify in advance'.
Feeling unencumbered by his heterosexual past life, Malcolm felt 'fit' to take up and explore his new sexuality. Under the influence of alcohol, he met a guy on the bus home. He recalls how they started snogging when they got off at their destination:

'I got the Night 'bus and that's when I met [xx] who lives in L____. And subsequently I got off the Night 'bus there and I started snogging him. Not the safest thing to do at the best of times. That was the first time I absolutely realised that this was perfect for me. So if you want a specific turning point that is the specific turning point. He would have been the first guy I've ever kissed. And from talking to my other friends, this isn't the case. All of my other friends seem to have some sort of an encounter at some stage during adolescence, or puberty, or whatever the case may be. Or they tested the field for a while, they went undercover possibly on the gay scene for a year or so, to make sure that they were fully comfortable with themselves before they came out. For me it was that initial encounter told me that everything I was doing was wrong, because it had felt so right for me and within 7 or 8 days, I'd broken up with (girlfriend). Mainly, because I am not the kind of person who believes you can do the dirt on people to some extent... I then went to Mexico with friends and went there as a gay individual whatever the hell that meant'.

We can see that Malcolm was still, evidently, coming to terms with what 'being gay' means, which we can see in how he reflexively attends (Riesman, 1990) to what he did. Even at this stage, he was already ready [fit] to disclose his sexual orientation to his family, although we can surmise it was not entirely a pre-planned 'coming out' announcement. He told me how it occurred, in a flash, over Sunday lunch:

'I think I'd come back so confident from that trip... I knew I was gay. My parents, well my father and his fiancée and the rest of the family had asked how the holiday (to Mexico) went and then they said it well it'll be a month since (finished with girlfriend) and it'll be time to find yourself a new girlfriend. It was that slight remark that then I used to say 'Oh no, I'm gay'. I know I was going for impact, and I didn't get it (voice feigns disappointment) (SR giggles) No-one was surprised. Bar my dad's fiancée. And that was coming out ... to my parents'.
And that was it! Out in one fell swoop! Malcolm’s kernel story situates coming out to his family before any engagement with the gay scene, with relationships and there is no evidence, in his case, of prudery (Inglis, 2005) or concern about renegotiating his familial relationships.

He does not report feeling any stigma or dilemmas about coming out, although it appeared to be early in his lifestyle choice. However, Malcolm did briefly allude to having ‘culled’ any friends who might have had a ‘difficult’ reaction in advance to minimise any difficulties. Strategically then, Malcolm avoided any stigmatising situations by design, in a rational way. His entry into gay politics – and all other major decisions - came rapidly after coming out.

Malcolm joined a gay activist group and ended up running the organisation because of his business training. The breakneck speed of Malcolm’s coming out and politicisation is breath-taking. Socialising and being seen is crucial, and there is no let up in this ‘always on’ presentation of self (Goffman, 1959):

‘My current role in the voluntary group, on a personal role, and a few other factors (means that) I do know a hell of a lot of acquaintances in the sense that I have to. I have to nod and wink to so many people from different organisations. I don’t inherently know them, but they know me and I know them and we’ve been at events, and you have to keep relational contexts going. And some nights you have to wonder what bloody context you’re in. Are you in a voluntary capacity tonight or are you in a social capacity? And that goes with everything I suppose, whether it’s career-wise or whatever, you still have to make those judgments... So essentially key friends developed from the initial relational context with [boyfriend] then more relational contacts, groupings of friends, and the period that we were in um some friendships developed and some didn’t. There was no complexity, most of, or all of my initial friends on the scene were drawn from socialising on the scene, they weren’t drawn from any other context. And this was in the first three or four months. They were busy months’. 
Becoming involved as an activist illustrates an equally hectic pace in Malcolm’s story. He describes how the style of activism is kept brief and light in style:

'We sit down in a group session, and we start off with the usual ‘how’s your life going’ for 10 or 15 minutes, and give us an update. And then we’d go through what happened in the last meeting. Not essentially minutes, but gives us a quick overview, and then the agenda for the night, and then we go through the areas that the people are in, or their thoughts. And that in essence that’s every meeting that we’d have. So new members that come along, don’t want to through that. We deem that they don’t want to sit through it because we’ve had people who did and they got bored, and they left. So we don’t ask them to come to it. And every meeting tends to end with going for a drink afterwards, which is a bad thing, I think, at this stage'.

So, contra other cases of often lengthy periods in the gay closet, Malcolm’s story is an exemplar (Mishler, 1990), which illustrates an absence of the closet. A short period of deliberation, is followed by a period of re/negotiation and engagement with the gay scene as an activist ( politicization). Malcolm is critical of more modernist activists, like Joe and Peter, who are both nostalgic about the scene and how it has declined/ changed. Malcolm’s view is that the younger generation are totally into consumption and, as a marketing executive, he can relate to this mentality and argues that we have to live with it:

'The [younger generation] are living their life, their enjoying their life, that’s it as far as they’re concerned. But everything else has come with regard to interactions on the scene, it’s now a case of ‘I don’t know you; I don’t want to know you, goodbye’. And the way I summed this up on the list was, for an experiential basis, the people view it as in the case of, they are participating in all their planned social experience, someone’s coming up to talk to them, they are interrupting this experience: number one. The person then has to make a split decision as to towards whether the other person will enhance or augment the experience or are they just going to drag from it. Or are they drawing or wasting on their time. And that’s how it is viewed now, it is completely, it’s like time is money'.
Malcolm talks about consumption as if it is a compulsion (c.f. Bauman, 2005) when he notes that 'time is money', and he feels at home on the gay scene because he can assess how people interact as a businessman would. But I feel that he had yet to encounter any real obstacles to his belief in progress, which is evident in the other gay male narrators' stories. His view of the world, of coming out and socialising is based upon rationality, and his account of his coming out experience is rather matter-of-fact. Likewise, Malcolm's analysis of the contemporary gay scene represents a sign of progress not decay from an idealised past. The existence of gay consumerism supports Malcolm's training and knowledge of consumer society. He recounts how rapid social change on the scene is and he compares the brand-driven new generation in 'The George' (pub) to his own peers as being a group of loosely associated dedicated followers of fashion who are even more adept at navigating a changing world:

'The generations below me ... I've talked about with my friends [about them and] we termed it generation X on the gay scene, we're not too sure about what is going on. But below us, its playstation generation and they don't give a toss. Um they want what's theirs, and they want everything. But they also don't have any realisation of effort, or grafting to get what you want that's completely not there. And there is no respect for what's gone before or any basic sort of interaction... what brand are you wearing is going to say more to them on the gay scene now than who the hell you are, um which is funny because it works the opposite way in life. There are a lot of young people I know through the voluntary group and Out Youth and the rest. They are brand-oriented so much, it's unbelievable. But they just do seem to forget that just because some of them might be wearing certain brands, doesn't necessarily mean that they have anything to do. Whatever connotations they have with the brand, and a lot of these people may be very materialistic, there are people I know who date specifically for money. But they often are quick to find out that people with the money aren't the ones who are wearing brands. Um because they know better than to spend the money, says the man wearing Jack Jones and Diesel tee-shirt (we both laugh). But, it has become a very individualised scene in the sense they are completely driven to their own needs and I don't see groups of friends or people together for the reasons that we were together as friends and still are together as friends. People that I know as friends they seem to just band together. I came out in a big group, now I know that happens, and you've got the whole group, storming Norman, and the
rest. But they come together, clump together, and they're together. But then they shift, so rapidly from groups now from groups. I just know from friends of mine, one month they're in this gang, and next month they're in this gang, so there's no continuation or continuity at all.'

Malcolm takes the transformations of gay culture in his stride when doing activist work and adds that he doesn't go and check if the condoms get used, he can only attend to handing out materials because of the volume of people. Packs of condoms are distributed rapidly and with as little fuss as possible, but Malcolm note how there are a range of responses to distributing condoms and safer-sex advice:

'But when you're doing it to a thousand people in a night, you're not necessarily going to get one-to-one contact going on or relationships, you're just going to have the pack handed over, and inside it some materials, and if they look at it, they look, and if they don't, they don't, because you've got to get the rest done. (SR: The blue packs in an envelope?) Yep, you open them up, you have two condoms and two sachets of lube, and you've got an information card. And the packs themselves are usually a referral card in themselves, or with something on them. Nine out of ten times, for many reasons, it's the condoms and lube they take the pack is thrown away (laughs). The reason is people don't want to carry 'round the excess. Or they're not out, or whatever the variables are, and they just don't want it. Er, you get a receptive or a non-receptive interaction with people. Either they want it, or they don't want it. And they want it or don't want it for many reasons. So it can be a positive or negative encounter with people, depending on what way it goes. And you will get more than 4 or 5 negative encounters with people on any one night. (SR: What sort of negative encounters do you get?) Well, a lot of people don't want to think of anything to do with sexual health, nor should I say health and well-being, while they are socialising. They're socialising, and if they wanted to know, they would find out (themselves). This is the perception, whereas you know, they aren't finding out [using condoms]. The other attitude is you're handing over a condom pack, so by handing that to someone, you are saying to someone the likelihood is that you're going to have a sexual encounter or presumed sexual encounter, or some form of sexual relation in the next few months. Some people, their attitude, or my perception of their attitude, is how you dare deem that I would have such an interaction with someone! (SR laughs). And they would literally say to you 'I don't use them' or 'I don't need them' or 'why would I need them?' Some people are like 'whatever', or some people view people in (our) group or I feel that people view me in some cases, as Goody Two Shoes going around the scene, 'aren't you great giving out these packs'. Um when that's not the reason that I am bloody doing it! Um
so, you get positive and negative. Most of it, you get an ambiguous response a grunt, take it, whatever. Whatever they do with after, I'm not going to look and check. Most people don't go to the stage where they vocalise their gratitude or their animosity towards you, they don't vocalise it. It's just usually flat. But you do, on many nights, especially with non-Nationals, or visitors as such, (why do I say visitors?) People who aren't essentially Irish citizens or living in Dublin, are more receptive to the packs um because they don't have them. Not every country does get them. Not every city or venue gets them issued to them. And a lot of the visitors are just delighted to get them, for some reason because, they understand, which in a way pisses me off that so many Dublin people don't give a toss about what they're getting, and so many people do. Straight people love the packs'.

In this lengthy quote, we can a host of reactions to condoms and relate this to different ways of managing sexual stigma and sexual practices. Malcolm identifies a number of behaviours based on consumer patterns: some people deftly take the condoms/lube and discard the 'excess' packaging (the rational consumer); others decline condoms 'because they are not out' (closeted), and others 'grunt', or take condoms saying 'whatever' (covering) in an attempt to deny that they are/could be having sex. Malcolm feels that he is sometimes viewed as a 'goody two shoes' for doing activist work (that is, courtesy stigma in Goffman's (1961) terms), and he adds that even 'straight people love the packs' (normals). However, in spite of the gay scene being consumer-driven and focused on which brand of jeans you are wearing, Malcolm concludes that there is an ongoing need for activist intervention. Underlying sexual stigma and general unwillingness to take responsibility for sexual behaviours means that: 'the thought of purchasing condoms is beyond them' in a gay bar. While Malcolm loves his consumer lifestyle, he is also insisting there is a need for a moment of citizenship (Weeks, 1995) – because lives still depend on it!

Thus, while Malcolm is an admirer of the newfound freedoms young gay men enjoy in contemporary Ireland, he is calling for a more grounded sense of citizenship (responsibility for safer sex) to accompany the consumer experience. While Bauman (2000, 2005) places the consumer and citizen in a somewhat antagonistic
relationship, Plummer (1995: 151) contends *intimate citizenship* not only involves consumption but also control over one's body and sexual practices. Where he notes how 'straights love packs', he is noting how heterosexuals seem more attuned to linking bodily/sexual pleasures and consumption because their 'sexual citizenship' is privileged and is not framed by stigma.

While at the time of interview, Malcolm had not long come out and rushed headlong into a supportive activist milieu, he insisted that he would not dally in the world of activism for ever. True to his word, about a year or so later, he handed over the reins of the organisation he established to a new project leader. Thus, his lifestyle in this instance - of moving on, discarding what is not needed, renewing each time – bears some of the hallmarks of Bauman's (2000) *liquid modernity*.

**Conclusion**

In Bochner's (2001) call, at the opening of this chapter, to explore the *circumstances* in which stories are told, we can appreciate the centrality of the coming out story to gay men's identity formation. Furthermore, if coming out stories are increasingly shaped by the ability or readiness to consume as we move from an era of silence to more openness about sexuality, then we have to frame men's coming out stories within a wider problematic of consumption (Goodman, 2004). My narrators suggest that underpinning this 'consumer' dilemma is a concern about whether the body – in this case the gay body – can consume in the name of self actualisation:

>To a greater or lesser degree, the project of the self becomes translated into one of the possession of desired goods and the pursuit of artificially framed styles of life. (...) Not just lifestyles, but self-actualisation is packaged and distributed according to market criteria*. (Giddens, 1991: 198).
While men like Barry problematise their bodies and attractiveness (self-esteem), younger men are literally ‘fit’ enough to engage in experiments in living (Giddens, 1991). Dilemmas about coming out - for these men at least - could be placed within wider discourses about late modern masculinity and consumption (S. Alexander, 2003: 551; Bauman, 2001, 2001a; Holt and Thompson, 2003; Kimmel, 1993, 2003), about masculininity and the media (Craig, 1992), and masculinity and subcultural movements (Healey, 1988; Lewis and Ross, 1995). The ‘market criteria’ to which Giddens alludes are bound up with hegemonic masculinity, but we need to further theorise how masculinity shapes Irish gay men’s sensibilities.

As Peter pointed out, hegemonic notions of gay masculinity - even bias - shapes gay men’s self-identity and sexual practices, and this distorts consumption, as certain sexual subcultures are stigmatised within the gay community. For gay men, ‘non-consumption’ is discouraged. Zach’s friends called him Sister Zee in order to ridicule his choice to be celibate for a time. Those like Barry, who cannot consume, are left as intimate denizens because they are not the right ‘type’ of gay man. Peter - as a more critical gay man - would rather eschew the gay scene for his garden (a metaphor of modernity surely!) but he is motivated to continue activist work in order to both help gay men, but to also change society’s view of itself. While Barry and Peter come closest to being critical of progress, most gay men do not tend to comment on the heterosexual norms that underpin society so explicitly, but we can see how the conversation on this critical issue is starting in the Irish context.

In and indirect way, and constitutes an important issue for further research, it raises for me the issue of how a late modern collective politics and ideology can (or could) support late modern/ liquid sexual politics.
Chapter Six: Lesbian and Bisexual Women’s Coming Out Tales

I now turn to stories that Dublin-based lesbian and bisexual activists shared with me. After deciding that I should extend my research scope beyond gay men alone, I began an exploratory research phase and this led me into talking with Janet, a bisexual woman informant. While I later decided not to pursue bisexuality further as a category (in this thesis), these initial explorations helped me to theorize non-heterosexual women’s intimate citizenship. In short, women’s stories problematise the idea of a unitary lesbian /gay intimate citizenship claim.

Janet: a bisexual s/exile of Erin

As I embarked on seeking out the views of women, I happened to meet up with a long-term college friend of mine on the street one day. Janet and I had been undergraduates together and had shared a college ‘gay’ activist life together for about a year. During that time, we had helped to rescue the frail state of the college gay society (gay soc). Janet expressed a willingness to help me and agreed to tell her story before she planned to leave Ireland.

Janet had spent many of her teenage years feeling ‘different’ and had initially thought that she might be a lesbian:

'I remember having a conversation with my then best friend Linda when I was about ten, and when I think about it now I should apologise to her. I remember saying to her that I thought I might be a lesbian because I simply I knew that I was different. I know that it is a classic tale, but all the, with, the onset of puberty with makeup and all that sort of stuff was starting to come on, and people would start noticing boys. I was starting to notice everybody kind of, and I was aware of myself as a sexual being and I was becoming aware as in puberty. And her reaction was vastly different from what I expected, and her experiences. I was literally that egotistical that I didn’t think that it was that different, I
thought that everyone looked like this and then we'd settle down, I don't know like ...
Phrases like gay weren't really in my vocabulary, but I thought I might be a lesbian and
um that pretty much progressed from there. My teen years were pretty much falling in
and out of love with girls, infatuation with girls and things and then my parents started to
split up and I thought I didn't want to 'go there'. And then I got stuck in a boyfriend thing I
didn't want to be in but everybody else was in one. And there was just nowhere to go with
it. And people thought it was maybe kooky or quirky or something. It was sort of new age,
romantic time anyway in the fashion scene, so it was sort of 'in'. Like a David Bowie fan
gone wrong but I knew I wasn't. I still do, and nobody could convince me otherwise I was
wrong. It was just 'you're not going to make this feeling go away'. And I would sometimes
think 'I wish this would go away' and I've come to terms with that now but I didn't have
the vocabulary as an Irish person, I didn't have the phrase 'come to terms with it'. The first
time I heard all this was when I walked into college and I realised that this and that I
would have to get used to it. And that your perspective, your sexuality did make a
difference. And then that was great and wonderful and we're all very proud except 'not
you'! (SR: What do you mean?) Everyone was waiting for the other shoe to drop and then
when it didn't they went 'OK (she's) Bi' (and not a lesbian). I would like to emphasise that
this was my personal experience of being 'Bi' but I don't feel I am welcome in the
community at all here!'

Her nascent sexual awareness and cautious exploration of her feelings for girls was
dealt a heavy blow by her parents' divorce. Like many children of divorcing/
separating parents, Janet felt that she should not 'go there' in the context of family
tensions. She turns from telling her friend Linda about her dilemma into a more
solitary reflexive engagement with her feelings and emotions, for which she did not
entirely have the vocabulary to name how she identified. She started by identifying
with David Bowie and dressed in a new romantic style, which reflected her fluid
attitude to sexuality. Janet was able to get by being described as kooky as
impression management. Only upon arriving in college, did she start to engage with
being bisexual and found that she was politically excluded or 'unwelcome'. In short,
she did not feel like she belonged. Her own bitter experience and isolation is
contrasted with the typical coming out experience of gay men. Whereas gay men
come out and (maintain that they) move on from that phase, Janet suggests, she
feels that she constantly has to come out and struggle to find a home:
'When you initially come out as gay, there is relief and freedom and you tell people. It is a maturing process as well I think, saying this is who I am and where I am, and I'm a grown-up. And then there doesn't seem to be anywhere to go from there. You can't stay saying this is who I am, this is where I am and I'm a grown-up when you're thirty. We know you're a grown-up, shut up! Get over it! So I think the transition for bisexual people is easier to fade off into the background and maybe form if they're very lucky, find other bi people and form relationships with them or I think a lot of bi people end up in heterosexual relationships because its just easier. Gay people, you see, they can go off and form heterosexual relationships because it's easier. But the irony is that it is easier to live in the straight community than live in the gay community, it's actually easier to live in the straight community as bi in a heterosexual relationship than for myself and my partner go into 'The George' as bisexuals. Sometimes that makes me sad, sometimes it makes me quite angry. And I think that you're missing out a part of your culture or something because part of who I am, I am not able to express, like. I don't even know what it is to express it. Cos my image is like of Brad and myself that we're the people in the grey rain macs at the end of the Gay Pride march going, 'Thank you for letting us come! (laughter). We won't make any noise', bisexual people at gay parties are just there cleaning up and being apologetic, and talking to pot-plants.'

As I look over Janet's story, I am reminded how isolated she felt about being caught in what she felt was a divide between straight and gay cultures, which both offer communities of support to their members. She feels that Irish culture extends little support to her as visible bisexual woman, and she considers her place as being like a misfit who talks to plants. While Janet is satirical about being an outsider, she does mourn the lack of a community of support:

'I mean it's a gap in my life, in Brad's life, there's a gap in my life, I know its there and I am aware of it, and I've absolutely no idea how to fill it. Because the communities are so divided, the gay community is still in Ireland in its 'Don't mention the war' approach. I mean, we'll let it go on and we won't mention it in polite conversation, so there is nowhere you can go and like ... the word like be gay... but you know, what I mean, but be whoever the hell you are. You know you can do that in San Fran, and you can do that in London, because the population is so large'. 
Having engaged with sexual politics (within college and on the scene), Janet feels alienated. Her way for filling the void is by finding privatized fulfilment in her relationship with Brad and, in the longer term, there is the couple's plan to migrate to Canada. Janet described how she relied on her relationship with Brad:

"I'm with Brad for now, I hope... we're together for a while... but we're just seeking that kind of thing, just comfort and companionship and friendship and people to share stuff in common with. Like it's the lonely hearts club, sometimes I find that with men and sometimes I find that with women. But that's me, you know, people joke I am a serial monogamist, so, that's um what I am seeking out for myself."

I feel that in many ways, Janet's story is not that different from heterosexuals, as described in Giddens's study of intimacy (Giddens, 1992). It is interesting that Janet alludes to 'how I'm with Brad for now' and how other people term a 'serial monogamist'. The 'for now' recalls Giddens's idea of the pure relationship (Giddens, 1991) where a relationship is made and unmade for itself and it freed from external referents, which were characteristic of traditional society. We can see how their relationship is based on the couple as it focuses on 'comfort, companionship, and friendship'. It is a 'lonely hearts club' with a membership of two, and over time that relationship is found with other men and 'sometimes' with women. There is a defiant, refusal to be defined in her story but it is also an admission that society constrains her sexual identity.

Janet – although not using citizenship language - is arguing in effect that she is denied having intimate citizenship, save for her private world with Brad. The ongoing struggle for intimate citizenship is wearing her out completely. As a bisexual woman, she is denied intimate citizenship on two fronts: firstly, she resists compulsory heterosexuality and the accompanying housewife role but, secondly, she also eschews the main alternative of a lesbian existence. Her position as a bisexual woman, then, placed her in a tense in-between, liminal position.
While it is ‘easier’ to pass in the heterosexual world, Janet felt that the typical life path for heterosexuals (of marriage, mortgage, and children) was ascribed and set up as a natural life course to be followed. She describes her resistance to taking this route as being an underlying cause of animosity towards her because she will not play the game:

‘If I present for all the world, as a straight woman of 27 years of age, in a relationship, they [heterosexuals] resent the fact that I am not going down the mortgage, kids and marriage route, never mind the fact that I’m bisexual. The level of the only word I can describe it is animosity. How dare you not do what we’re doing? How dare you not get married and have a rake of children? We’re tied down, you’re bloody well going to be tied down too! And it comes from them because I would always respect somebody’s life choices. If someone wants to go out, have children and get married then that’s what they want to do, then go for it. I think they’re insane, believe me! But I mean if that’s what you want to do, then off you go! But its sort of like, an awful lot of straight people are frankly don’t ever question what they do find themselves in a marriage with 2.4 kids with some person and go ‘how the hell did we get here?’ I think they somehow win something. It’s like when you buy the house and have the kids, someone’s going to come through the door and go ‘Congratulations’...’

While Janet is being critical of how heterosexuals follow the prescribed route for them, it is important to note that the animosity she faces is because she questions the assumptions of heterosexual life.

Her relationship with Brad looks like a heterosexual one, but it exemplifies that women of Janet’s age can choose whether to be subject to compulsory heterosexual norms, but while she would respect whatever choices heterosexuals want, she feels her own lifestyle choices are not reciprocated. Alluding to not being ‘tied down’ with children in Janet’s description is an interesting turn of phrase, which I associate with how women talk about patriarchal oppression (Mahon, 1994). Janet is pointing to how much of the critique she experienced emanates from women who
are ‘tied down’ as mothers, but who still regard compulsory heterosexuality as the norm, although there is more marital complexity (O’Connor, 1995).

As heterosexual choices about marriage, children and mortgage are construed as natural and compulsory, Janet posits that the ‘normal’ mode of establishing family relationships becomes problematic when difficulties arise: ‘how did we get here?’ she asked. I surmise in passing that the ‘how did we get here?’ phrase alludes to her own parents’ marital problems and so she might, in some way, be seeking to avoid the problems that her parents, Jack and Jill, have gone through.

As she is in a small minority position within a small sexual community, Janet feels that she is having to reflect about being bisexual and disclosing her sexual orientation on an ongoing basis (West and Zimmerman, 1987) and feels like a scapegoat (Inglis, 2002). But rather than retreating to a closet, and sitting it out until she can migrate, Janet reacts to heterosexual norms by resisting people’s assumptions about her and presenting (Goffman, 1959) herself as non-heterosexual in public space.

Shaking up assumptions about heterosexuality is evocative of Ireland being in ‘a period of contested ideologies’ (Inglis, 1998: 148) and is a way of claiming bisexual identity as an act of empowerment. Although less likely to face hostility in heterosexual company, both of them feel constrained by norms and assumptions about gender and coupledom. They resist norms by flirting with other people in social settings (e.g. parties). Janet suggests that she and Brad try to portray fluid identities to resist any heteronormative definition of self-identity that might tie them down. When out socialising, they often flirt with individuals of their own sex a lot as a way of confirming their non-heterosexuality:
'Brad would come over and I'd plant a big kiss on his lips and walk away and six people opposite would go 'well we don't know how to compute that at all!' [laughs]. So that's the only way I have of explaining it really to people, you know. I often wonder who our next partners would be if we broke up, would we both go 'I'm done with the whole heterosexual thing, I'm off' if you could make a conscious decision like that. I've never done it, decided like 'NEXT! Woman' my woman catchment level is down. I don't know if it would appeal to me. I know we both flirt with same-sex people a lot more than we would with potential heterosexual partners. We'd be... its almost like a way of re-asserting ourselves as bi-people, as a way of us saying it's important that (pauses) um I'm even trying it out to reassure er, I'm even reassuring myself then that you're not becoming straight. That it isn't a lie, that I'm not straight, that they aren't right, that it's not a phase! You've to live hang on to it! So I suppose that's what we do, but we have an understanding that's what we're doing. And obviously we communicate all the time and everything has to be safe and all that kind of thing as it does currently. But, yeah, but that's how we do it and that's how we keep our bisexuality intact like by driving other people up the wall!'

Flirting with same sex people and establishing that they are not heterosexual to the wider world can help them to resist 'traditions of behaviour' (Giddens, 1991: 145), but inadvertently the spectacle seems to conflate bisexuality with homosexuality. People seem, in Janet's view, to be quick to assume that they are perhaps gay underneath it all. So asserting bisexuality seems to have limited political impact (in the manner Janet would like) because her bisexual lifestyle, with Brad, does not look radically different from compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1984). After all, a man and woman living together, who seem to occasionally flirt with members of the same sex and/or opposite sex is not so transgressive from a pair of open-minded heterosexuals who might be open to experimentation. However, unable to find a clear sense of belonging in Ireland as sexual citizens (Weeks, 1998), Janet and Brad did, in fact, leave Ireland in 2002. A brief letter followed at Christmas, but I since lost contact with Janet. Janet's dilemma, however, reminded me how pervasive assumptions about heteronormativity can also be for some bisexual men.
For instance, in an earlier research project, I had interviewed Mikey, a twenty-something, Dublin-born, bisexual healthcare activist. Janet’s story about ‘flirting’ reminded me of Mikey’s dilemma in coming out. Working as a gay health activist, Mikey had told me how his professional role in the community meant he was not seen as sexually available. He had to be neutral while socialising, but had been labelled as heterosexual in the social setting of the gay bar. As a ‘cool straight’ guy, he had found it impossible to chat up men or women: ‘I realised I’d wasted months like. Trying to chat up people [male and female] and everyone just thought I was a cool straight friend’. So one night, he came out publicly by snogging a guy in the local gay bar just to show that he was not straight. After a manner, there was also a claiming of bisexual identity in Mikey’s story, but there had also been little in it about how to live, in part because the Irish bisexual community was only very weakly articulated.

After interviewing Janet for my doctoral thesis, I began to feel that the inclusion of bisexual and trans* narrators would complicate my analysis at this time, and so I decided from then on – with no small amount of reluctance - to focus on self-identifying lesbians and gay men. Janet’s contribution, however, highlighted to me the salience of compulsory heterosexuality in framing the accounts more generally of women who come out.

In the rest of this chapter, I take this up in mapping the coming out experiences of five Dublin-based lesbians who have, like Janet, been implicated in activist work.
Constance

'There was a huge conflict between bearing the weight of conditioning to be a wife and a mother and to be performative in the world. And that was very contradictory. I think it was that, that sort of broke me. My generation of white middle-class women here really took a lot of the brunt of that, and it actually literally broke some of us and our bodies. And of course, in terms of your sexuality, that was highly policed and monitored...'

I met Constance through a few public meetings that I attended in researching this thesis. A middle-class lesbian, who is now in her late 50's, she identifies as a 'white, Irish, catholic, middle-class woman' who has been involved in feminism. Born into a family of business people, she felt that their values, while conservative, did allow her to be an independent woman - even her elderly grandfather, who recognised how bright she was as a child, used to urge the family to 'let Constance do what she wants'. Autonomy has always been important to her, from childhood onwards.

A central element in Constance's life was how education provided her with a route to independence. Education 'set me apart and (was) also a potential escape route, and in fact it became possible to realise that.' Constance became the first in her family to attend private school, go to college and become a professional worker. Her educational upbringing was, however, shaped by Catholic dogma. Even at university, what students could read was policed. Constance recalls how she wanted a particular novel for a college course only to be told by the librarian that it was a banned book and she was not allowed to read it, So university 'was technically freeing, but you still had to fight to get those freedoms'.

In many ways, social control over girls' sexuality that was characterised by silence. At school, an agony aunt was brought in to tell Constance's class of teenage girls that:
'Of course sexually, you couldn't talk about sex. You know Angela McNamara [Ireland's first 'agony aunt'], you know, the great Angela McNamara? And I can recall [her] sitting there and being asked questions by girls which were a bit too explicit and she said 'well in future if you have very personal questions you might like to write them on a small piece of paper and put them in the wooden box that I am going to give to Reverend Mother for you. Then your questions will be anonymous and I'll be able to answer them more fully'. But she did actually say to us that if we went out for a drive with a boy we should never go in the direction of Killiney or Dalkey because it was very dark along Killiney Road and I promise, I swear it was absolutely extraordinary. And there were some other things about white gloves and situations in which you could or could not remove your white gloves, which I don't think had anything to do with safe sex quite frankly. Except that one didn't have sex'.

While girls were not always encouraged in Ireland to become educated, Constance's family and school encouraged her and even tolerated her naughty behaviour (skipping class, coming home late from dances) that 'would sort of break out from time to time' and allow her to develop a sense of agency.

While, ostensibly, the era of the Catholic Church's moral monopoly held sway, Constance realised that she could escape the gaze of authority figures. After she went to college, she found two routes to escape from moral authority. Firstly, she became implicated in a bohemian subculture, and learned about jazz music and allowed herself to be 'multiply led astray in extremely agreeable ways'. Secondly, through studying languages, she could justify travelling abroad and accessing foreign (sometimes banned) literature. While these modes of escape from authority were temporary, Constance felt that Irish culture was in the throes of transformation in the Lemass era of the mid-1960's:

'The systems were really beginning to break down in ways that you could feel them breaking on top of your shoulders and people didn't always have answers to the questions that you were asking. And there weren't pathways but you knew that the old paths weren't going to work'.
Initially, her own progression continued and she seemed to fulfil the 'very high expectations' on her and underlying this was the tenet of compulsory heterosexuality. After college, Constance married early in life and 'married well' to a professional man. Armed with her college education, she secured a permanent, pensionable career. But shortly after Constance married, and still in her early twenties, she realised she had made a mistake:

'So I was also a professional person with an independent income, so I didn't need to be married in any case in economic terms. I'd already broken that gender stereotype and I'd got married really because fundamentally that was the path I had to follow as a young woman. And I did. But it literally nearly killed me. But I had the good sense to get out and um that was a very, very, very difficult thing to do. A middle-class woman did not leave her husband and certainly not after months of marriage. And there were all kinds of difficulties that arose as a result'.

After splitting from her husband, Constance began to suffer with 'her nerves.' However, her rebellious nature led Constance to believe that in spite of feeling 'highly stigmatised I didn't think particularly I should keep quiet about it' – this runs counter to how women should be, or how they were represented in legal discourse (Flynn, 1995). Around that time, she became exposed to feminist thought:

'The women's movement had been developing for the previous, well really since 1970 in this country. And I'd been doing a lot of reading and thinking. Seeing that my life, actually my life trajectory, you know, beginning to see that it was a perfect kind of path being mapped out by women in the not-yet post industrial world, but certainly the West. So it was very clear that what was happening to me, was happening to an awful lot of other women in maybe somewhat different circumstances. It was pretty classic, there was nothing unusual about it - that was both rather disturbing and also very comforting. So I became very much more involved in um, the women's liberation movement, after my daughter was born. And there were a few sort of germinal books there too. And I began to incorporate feminist insights and approaches into my work'.
While suggesting that her experience was 'normal', it was in this period that Constance started to interrogate her social role as a woman in Irish society, and to contest women’s gender norms. She also realised that she was not alone as separated woman. Her intellectual journey into feminism left her trying to bridge social norms and her ‘deviant’ status (as a feminist) and she started to feel that space was emerging in Ireland that would enable her to live in a non-traditional way. A few years after separating from her husband, Constance had a child through another heterosexual relationship and chose to raise the child on a co-parenting basis with the child’s father as they did not live together.

Through her feminist engagement, Constance began to feel that she did not want to have intimate relationships with men and began to find women attractive. However, she felt quite stigmatised by her changing sexual identity and only initially explored this outside of the State. It was through the feminist movement that she started to explore lesbian sexuality as it:

‘... was bringing me more and more into contact with feminist activists and I became active in various campaigns. And in that was of course, I began meeting many lesbians. And er, my life became very much more women-centred and I wasn’t really involved with my daughter’s father. I mean we co-parented our daughter; actually we still do really, although she’s a big girl now, but um, you know, we had a social relationship but not an intimate relationship. We were good friends um, and when she was, when I was about 38, I think, or thereabouts, I had begun to realise that I was not interested in meeting other men. Various friends started to suggest to me that hadn’t I been on my own for quite a while, more or less and what was I doing about this. So I said, well, ‘nothing because I am doing so many other things and I think as Simone de Beauvoir said ‘I think my energy and libido is going into politics’. And I always had these rationales for it. You know. But then I just met somebody, as is so often classically the case. But I met somebody because I wanted to, and I was prepared to, and I was able to, and I wished to and I was able to put myself in the way of someone. But interestingly she, I met this woman at a conference in Britain and she was steeped already in a relationship, and it was pretty disastrous actually. But that started me off really, but it was in Britain, as if I didn’t dare, to do that
in Ireland. And I remember coming back to Dublin after meeting her and we were having a (conference) here and I said to a few of my friends ‘Oh my God! You’ll never believe what’s happened to me’ and actually they said ‘we know perfectly well what’s happened! We can see what’s happened to you!’ (we both laugh) And I was so deflated and non-plused! But that was, you know, in my late 30’s. I was 38 and probably, you know, I had a couple of sort of really fledgling relationships then and then met somebody with whom I had a relationship for five years, when I was 40. So I was very elderly by customary patterns when that happened’.

Her first same-sex experience occurred while she was abroad, and she was able to gain some element of access to the erotic. Retrospectively, Constance viewed this relationship as ‘disastrous’ as the woman that she met was already in a relationship. But Constance identifies this encounter as an important point where she came to terms with her lesbian sexuality. She did something that she admits she ‘did not dare’ to do at home and she returned to Ireland as a lesbian. Her feminist friends were, in Constance’s words, not surprised about her coming out as a lesbian. After a few early relationships, Constance settled into a long-term relationship with a woman in Ireland at close to forty years of age. Disclosing lesbian sexual orientation was politically fraught for Constance:

SR: In terms of coming out then, I mean, you had a network around you?
C: Yes
SR: Did that make things easier?
C: Well you know, what is coming out really? Every single day I am still coming out. I walked into a [shop] and I am coming out. To whom did I come out really, at that point friends, close friends, most of whom were dykes anyway at that point. Um, or about to be, or whatever. And then when I started a more serious relationship, I did tell some other people. Friends, who were straight and got a very mixed reception actually. And most interestingly, I told... my daughter’s father, and I told my daughter. My daughter was about 8 I think at the time. And that was a really difficult thing to do, because there wasn’t very much of a vocabulary around and you didn’t really know what you should do because my own philosophy and practice in parenting had always been to talk about things and to try and set up a discourse all the way, through conversation about things. Um, my small daughter very quickly said to me ‘I don’t like that word lesbian’ because of
course she had heard it or did hear it from wherever. It came up, yeah. I told my daughter and I told her father. And he, on the surface, responded very well, but in fact it became very difficult [with him] and um I didn’t tell my brother and sisters or my parents. Er my father had died at that time, no, I think my father was still alive, I’m sorry, he was still alive. But he died shortly after, I didn’t tell my mother. I didn’t tell most of my colleagues. I think one or two of them knew) but by and large they didn’t. The ones who I knew were open did, there was nobody else, lesbian or gay, that I knew here in [work] at the time at all. I didn’t know anybody else. I had had a colleague in my own department who was lesbian and she had been a great support to me, um but she was gone at that point. She was probably really important... I did have support, I mean from my lesbian friends, of course. Other friends were, to some extent, supportive, but it varied and none I think was 100% supportive. It was difficult in terms of my own immediate kind of nuclear family and, about a year after, I started this more serious long-term, what would seem like long-term, relationship’.

My probe, asking Constance if a feminist community of support made coming out ‘easier’ was greeted with her sharp reply: ‘What is coming out anyway?’

At the time, I took it that Constance was being critical because she may have thought my understanding of coming out was that of a typical gay man (coming out is a ‘one-time’ event) and Constance insisted that coming out was an ongoing accomplishment. However, my probe seems to make Constance have to articulate how complicated and often dangerous disclosure is for women. While she felt able to come out to close lesbian/feminist friends and then very few work colleagues, she was surrounded by other work colleagues in whom she could not confide or trust. A slip about whether of not her father was still living when she came out demonstrates, for a brief moment, how this period of her life was a bit blurry and hints at the stress of coming out. Other family members were not told anything about her sexual orientation. After telling her daughter and her daughter’s father about her sexuality, she lost custody to her daughter’s father. Afraid to go to court because of the impact public disclosure might have on her relationship with her daughter led Constance to decide to give up her rights as a mother.
Only over time has she been able to turn this imbalance in gender power around. Now that her daughter is an adult, Constance and her daughter have re-established their relationship, and Constance tells me how she could openly claim the identity as a *lesbian mother* on national television - *a moment of intimate citizenship after a long period of transgression* (Weeks, 1995) - but she is not a mother in the traditional sense.

As her professional career developed, she became more avowedly feminist - 'I was very active really in the women's liberation movement' - and this led her into lesbian activism in the past ten years. But her bitter experience of both marital separation and coming out as a lesbian has led Constance to admit that she plays a 'strategic' role in activism in order to maintain an independent voice in the face of the dangers she sees. She floats above activism while working as a teacher, so being 'strategic' is necessary politically. But this approach has allowed her to be independent and she has spoken out publicly about her concerns with the direction of activism generally. Speaking to an audience of young GLB people, she urged them:

'Please do not be fooled by an equality agenda. Please to not think that consultations and reports mean anything, they don't, until they are actually turned into some kind of reality that people can live and experience in their everyday lives. And in order for that to happen, there has to be the commitment of resources. And I said to them you must not give up until you feel you are coming close to revolution because that then is when you know you've made the difference that counts. And I said these things which I felt were really it was really a revolutionary discourse, it was really saying please do not, accept the surface reality for what you need in your lives. I thought that they would just go to sleep, and on the contrary, they were absolutely thrilled. And I thought, isn't that fantastic, and they said, this is really important, we haven't had people coming to us sort of saying we love the way you ticked off the politicians there, and you didn't let them off the hook. But I thought that's different, there's something that shifting with these young people and I mean young, 16, 17, 18. I don't just mean a lot younger than me. I mean a completely different generation. Light years away from me... and I think that there's something changing. I just found that hugely encouraging.'
So what Constance was seeking to draw this audience's attention to was how there is a danger that lesbian and gay communities could be assimilated by the State and the heteronormative structures (of gender oppression) remain in place. She argued that:

'... there is a kind of establishmentarianism now, with the lesbian and gay communities and so on. I never think really that reform is the only way to go, I don't really. You always need something else, I think you need the extremes, you really do, to push things along. Otherwise they don't move. They just go into the morass in the middle and I think the huge difficulty, I'm not sure if I referred to it now, but I think the huge difficulty right across the board, at present, is assimilationism. There's absolutely no doubt about it. That is the, again, subtext of State policy effectively, is to assimilate outsider groups in ways that either get rid of them entirely, and send them away again as in the case of refugees and asylum-seekers, or alternatively to pursue a kind of assimilationist policy but absolutely not to change the structures'.

This assimilation is potentially detrimental, because it is framed in male-dominated ways, it tends to assume a unitary 'gay' subject, and being 'assimilated' is about being a good gay. Women, Constance argues, have specific needs in terms of support structures that can be safe public spaces for women to tell what Kalcik termed 'kernel stories' (Kalcik, 1975) about multiple gender oppressions. She used the following story not solely to relate to people how terrible her own experience was, but as a story that transforms political consciousness and spurs her and others onwards:

'...I've been spat at, in the street in Temple Bar when I was wearing my own AIDS red thing (ribbon). I was telling my class actually, and they were horrified. I said don't be horrified, I find it horrible, but you know, I wasn't beaten up, and I have survived. But you need to know that the inhabiting of public space is not the same for everybody and we have a student this year who is a wheelchair user. And I was saying [she] has experiences, and she said 'you bet'. So there are all sorts of kinds of ways in which you inhabit that space. And we can choose certainly to perform it. To see our performance and to project it
rather differently in those spaces, but you know, you can’t actually do that indefinitely. You can’t always either. There are times when you don’t want to dis-invest yourself of particular aspects of your identity. So I think the physicality of space is important. And the kinds of buildings that lesbians and gays organisations have are generally, are generally tiny, older, not very well-equipped and it’s the same for women all over the place. But there are things like that, there are signs or badges of our status in a broad community generally, but I am fascinated by space’s metaphor as well, and I actually like working on those kinds of things’.

Jean

In contrast to Constance’s middle-class upbringing, working class women found it much more difficult to extricate themselves from the pressure of compulsory heterosexuality. As the eldest of a large family, who were raised in a city tenement, Jean felt she had to mask any sense of gender difference from her mother and father. She came out to herself when she discovered same-sex desire through a brief intimate experience at the age of 12. While she did not quite know exactly what to make of this encounter at the time, four decades on she views it as formative as making her self-identity. While her lesbian identity was settled, Jean did not have the option of moving towards any sort of recognisably lesbian lifestyle as she grew up.

She lived a double life where she tried to blot the constrictions of a working class woman’s life:

‘[In] those... formative years I lived fairly much under a cloak of secrecy. They didn’t know what I was doing, my parents, my friends knew what I was doing, and I had a fairly hippy, alternative lifestyle and yet turned up for work five days a week (aspirated laugh at end of sentence)... I cloaked my alternative lifestyle under the guise of loving ballads and folk songs, folk festivals and that. So that worked fairly well as a disguise, if you like. I got married in 69, I went on to bring me son on these alternative trips under, again, the guise of folk singing... [It] wasn’t really about meeting other women it was about not
living that life, you see. Working class kid, going out earning money and bringing it home. It was about that life, you know. Then the working class mother, bringing up the kids, managing the money, it wasn’t to me about that. There were very few places to meet in the ’60s. There was a lot of secrecy, a lot of shame or certainly shame is not the right word. What is the right word? Um, a need to be cautious, a need to be guarded, a need to protect. Yeah’.

The ‘that life’ in question for Jean is the life of a heterosexual working-class woman who is unable to escape from social norms. While Jean was able to use the excuse of the festivals to escape her everyday existence, she signals that her excursions were not so much about meeting women as about getting away from home life. At the same time, she was meeting members of the nascent feminist movement and she was able to experience closeness with other women. But Jean’s imperative was to bury her nascent lesbian tendencies in the aftermath of becoming pregnant before marriage in late 1960’s Ireland. She adds: ‘As the eldest I needed to get out of it and live my life, but not bring my stuff into her kitchen, which I tried not to do at that time’.

Her story is replete with the shame women felt. When she had to get married because she was pregnant, Jean recalls her mother’s shame and adds that ‘she certainly couldn’t cope what she would have called the abnormal shame of me declaring myself gay.’ There was over a decade of silence about her sexual orientation. To mask her feelings, Jean turned to busying herself with being a mother. Through struggling with a disabled child, Jean became politicised about getting service provision for him. Jean organised a highly effective action group of local mothers to get better health support services for children with serious illnesses and disabilities. She immersed herself in writing, in her ‘war with the State’ campaigning for her son’s health rights, and ‘trying to accept myself’. Jean acknowledges that ‘I didn’t have an intimate side at all then. I left it aside’ and adds, ‘I wasn’t living a secret life, I was living a celibate life’. She is adeptly trying to side-
step the sexual stigma felt by many lesbians who were in the closet by *covering*. Jean’s secure space, as a lesbian, is home with her family. Since her husband left, the family unit is run democratically with weekly sessions where the members talk about their needs and domestic work is planned out. It was through the context of open dialogue with her children that developed over time, so:

‘... it wasn’t something that I hid from them. Well, first of all, I wasn’t hugely active and it wasn’t something that I hid. We knew for years, I knew and they knew what I was. You know. But then they asked me one day and I said ‘yeah, I am gay, yeah’. A really fucking sad gay, I said to them, but I am! (We both laugh). Yeah. I would have disclosed, not everybody knows. Not all my friends know and they would be the less able to hear. Yeah? But my friends, my really, really good friends know, my colleagues know. And um people that I have any kind of alliances with, or associations with in terms of those issues, know’.

To the outside world, she *presented* herself as a mother, but her backstage life (Goffman, 1959) of marital breakdown, the strains of seeking medical services for her son and poverty took their toll on her, and led her to suffer from exhaustion. Needing support for her disabled son, she set up local ‘action groups’ and they wrote letters demanding services for the disabled. This activity sustained her and her family in what Jean terms was her ‘war with the State’. Only after a long struggle did Jean get a sufficient health service for her child, and she was then in a position where she could take up work outside the family home and attend university. At university, she started to meet other lesbians but she felt that class differences were a barrier to establishing any sort of same-sex relationships:

‘I would have met women along the way (clears throat). I didn’t meet too many working class women. And had a self-consciousness with them. The women who were more out, were more middle-class professionals. And I always understand that if you make a promise to family, you keep a promise to the family first. It’s certainly the case in my culture. So at times, that became problematic. And then I just really didn’t go in for a long relationship (pauses to end line of questioning)’.
She is suggesting middle-class women were freer from family constraints than working women, which seems a fair comment in comparison to Constance’s case (above). She admits that her adherence to feminism frightens off potential partners:

‘Being a feminist, I’m very out as a feminist and quite challenging as a feminist. Um I think that may have scared working class women (laughs) it certainly scares middle class women (we both laugh). And I have a sense that if they’re not able to get through what I do, then I really don’t need to know or persuade anybody. So.’

The clear ‘so’ draws her commentary abruptly to an end. I recall pausing for a moment during the discussion, just to see if I could encourage her to continue her train of thought. But she just smiled at me, echoing her comment of not having to ‘persuade’ me and I politely continued with the next topic. Jean’s rationale for being ‘challenging’ as a feminist is partly a working-class device and partly a defence mechanism to maintain her own private semi-closeted space.

Elsewhere in our discussions, she alludes to how she disliked consumer society and, especially, the gay scene, ‘the scene though, it terrifies me’. As a working-class lesbian, she feels the scene is not supportive as an environment, but it is also part of another generation’s way of socialising:

‘I’d say there are very little transfers across class, very little. And if you’re asking me what is the scene like now, very deliberately I’d say it’s an aggressive scene if you’re out. Quite aggressive because of all those pressures. And those who are not publicly out or who don’t socialise are the aging, older, less confident lesbians’.

Thus, I suggest that Jean’s challenging feminist standpoint mirrors the tough approach that she encounters on the scene and in social life. As well as being a
minority, as a working-class lesbian, she is part of another aging subgroup. Older (50+) lesbians are:

‘... invisible and disappearing fast. It’s a real tragedy that there are not enough support groups. Support groups tend to be used by younger people and staffed by younger people. So you need to be fairly dynamic to have coped and escaped’.

Jean clarifies the position of older, working-class lesbians in somewhat dire terms: only the more liquid (Bauman, 2000) lesbians, who could cope or escape, managed to survive. She described the scene as ‘sick and sad’ and meant this in literal terms.

There is, she adds:

‘... quite a small community of women who are out, a larger younger community of women who are out and emerging, um but have different interests. Different scenes and that scene wouldn’t be acceptable to me. I wouldn’t seek it. Um we’re tending now towards the book club. Um, project oriented stuff, trying to do things for the community instead of looking at ourselves in the community. And I’m not bringing that up as a battle cos I’ve had too many battles in my life. I’ve already had a battle between feminists saying that there are inequalities between them. I’ve already done that one so I’m not prepared to do that one now. So I think many older lesbians have financial difficulties. Are not very settled. Many of them if not the most of them live in rented accommodation. So we already have problems about mortality and we’re aging. So that what I mean by we’re a sad and sick scene’.

There is a common theme between Constance and Jean in terms of the problems of coming out and disclosure. For both women, there have been life-long dilemmas about coming out publicly and disclosing their sexual orientation beyond their peers. Their dilemmas focus on their insecurity of coming out and the public disclosure of lesbian identity. They are both acutely aware of the dangers of not complying with heterosexual norms. For much of their lives they have not been able to fully disassociate themselves from the tenets of compulsory heterosexuality and its embodied legacy. This is utterly understandable, as they have not solely
imagined compulsory heterosexuality, but they have lived through it (marriage, children, divorce, sexual stigma). We see also in Constance and Jean’s stories that they position themselves primarily as feminists rather than lesbians to maximise solidarities between women.

**Coming out stories of younger lesbian activists**

Unlike middle-aged lesbians, the younger activists I spoke to problematised their sexual orientation much more explicitly because it was now imaginable to live as a lesbian in Ireland. I take up three cases-in-point here of younger lesbians who have played important roles in the movement over the past fifteen years.

**Willow**

Willow grew up in a very conservative household. As the eldest child, she was expected to be a dutiful daughter:

‘There was a very closed household. We didn’t have people dropping in all the time or anything like that. I would have had very few close friends. And I actually changed secondary school after my inter cert cos I ‘wasn’t settled’ according to some people. But actually what was wrong was a disability that wasn’t diagnosed until my Junior Cert anyway. So there was a lot of pressure as the eldest, an awful lot of pressure to just perform. You know, do the right thing.’

While Willow struggled with an undiagnosed disability, she also felt a good deal of pressure because of her father’s high status job in the community. His career position in the community meant that Willow and her other siblings were set apart:
I knew it was a strict regime. A daughter of a welfare officer always knows that she is different because you don’t get told things by other people. You’re regarded suspiciously by other people, ‘cos your Dad’s a nosy welfare officer, and blah, blah’.

After she finished school, Willow spent some time in the UK training for a career as a medical assistant. Getting away from home gave Willow the opportunity to start thinking about her embodied feelings of difference:

‘I didn’t know what a lesbian was until I was around 16 going on 17. I would have been very aware of gay male sexuality, because I followed intensely the stuff about HIV and AIDS in the media in 1984/85. And constantly, was going on about it. My father used to give out shit to me for my interest in news and whatever. And everybody was talking about it. And I think it was very strange, I didn’t have friendships with women many anyway. And also, because I was unfit when I was a teenager, there was that whole thing about body image and whatever. So there was a lot of this ‘boys don’t really like me’. There was stuff going on like. So it wasn’t until I went to London that er I was exposed a lot more to Channel 4 and knowing what a lesbian was. I didn’t know what a lesbian was’.

So there is the beginning of a shift in Willow’s sense of self-identity from feeling that boys were not interested in her to a position where men were not objects of her sexual desire. It was while on her initial period training as a medical assistant where this feeling became more concrete.

Willow started to develop feelings for other women and adds that she became ‘very close’ to a female work colleague. Here Willow uses a kernel story (Kalcik, 1975), I met a woman and got very close to her:

‘... I met a woman and got very close to her. And didn’t really know what was going on, and neither did she. It was her first relationship; you wouldn’t even call it a relationship cos we weren’t doing anything anyway. But I watched a programme on Channel 4 about er, coming out. I don’t know if it was one of those ‘Out’ series, you know that was on. And um, I was sort of saying, yeah, that’s how I feel. And then, going to back to how I knew I
wasn’t attracted to men. And asserting that as ‘I am not attracted to men’ and it’s not as
‘men aren’t attracted to me’, which involves all this body image stuff that was going on
before. So that was sort of like taking control, you know. (W pauses) and then I rang, I
actually looked up information’.

Nonetheless, she was wrestling with her lesbian desires and her deeply-felt Catholic
guilt but wanted to come out as a lesbian:

‘Whereas the woman I was sort of involved with, didn’t want to do anything about it. She
was Irish and really didn’t want to be out and I wasn’t looking to be out, I was looking to
get me head sorted because I was still wrestling this with sort of Catholic stuff. So I was
still going to Mass and this sort of stuff. I just didn’t know what was going on in my head.
Er cos, I was sort of admitting that I was a lesbian but then I was saying ‘no I can’t do this’
or ‘it’s not the way it’s meant to be’...

The woman with whom Willow developed a bond remained in the closet but they
continued to be close for a couple of years. Willow, however, developed a serious
illness and decided to return to Ireland. She decided to come out about being a
lesbian. Realising that his daughter was lesbian, Willow’s father threw her out of
the family home and cut off any support to her:

‘I would have had a lot of grief at home, just fed up with home life, or whatever. When I
was asked to leave the house because I was gay and because I wouldn’t do anything about
it as far as my father was concerned. Er that cut off everything. Er, I haven’t had, even
though I’m in university now, my father doesn’t support me. He always wanted me to go.
And when I finally get around to getting the wherewithal mentally to go, I don’t get the
support from him.’

Even at the time of interview, where Willow was a university student, her father
was still not willing to lend support to her several years on from asking her to leave
home. This entrenched level of parental rejection has had an impact on Willow’s life
since. She points out that her father let her younger sisters have quite an amount of freedom in their lives and they received:

'lots of financial support from my father. Things like that and I know now like that I disappointed my father (giggles nervously at admission to 'cover' her stigma about it) so I didn't get the support and that'.

Shockingly, Willow was left destitute as a result:

'I slept on a friend’s floor for a week; I couldn't tell her the reason why I was kicked out of home. Her parents were very good and they helped me, and I eventually found somewhere to live. I went to Focus Point and said 'I'm homeless, I need help'. Got money from community welfare towards rent, rented a place actually 200 yards away from my father's place of work. So I lived ... for 3 years, in different bed-sits. Was very ill, I probably was depressed as well but never really got anything done about that'.

With no autonomy (Weeks, 1998) to be an intimate citizen, Willow was shattered emotionally but through the aegis of a charity she got some work with a youth group.

Around that time, she also volunteered for a political campaign, which got her out of the city. While she retreated into the closet and had nothing to do with lesbian or gay issues, she identifies this period as one where she started to become politicised and fight back. Through voluntary work, she came into contact with some young gay men, who Willow refers to as 'camp queens' and these men brought her out onto the gay scene in Dublin:

'I actually met other gays on the campaign. But they didn't tell me they were gay (laughs) I was developing 'gaydar' anyway. Um I actually, what I did I went to visit the gay youth group to give a talk about the youth parliament I came back two weeks later, cos I knew I'd found somewhere (laughs). And I was brought out to gay bars, after the gay youth
group meeting one day. And then sort of began a cycle of going out three times a week, like, crazy you know. But most of the people, there were about 6 or 7 men and another one or two women, but it was mainly gay men I was coming out with. Young camp queens, basically, who were into clubbing. And that wasn’t really my thing at all (laughing through phrase) I wasn’t really a night-club person but I went out, because it was something to do. And at that stage I had moved into NCR and there was a guy around the corner who I’d met out on the scene and got pally with, like, whatever, so. Just being around gay people, I was constantly out then, going out with people whatever. Finding my way into things. And then I applied for the job as editor of GCN. And this was within three months of going on the scene.’

Alluding to going clubbing with gay men highlights how Willow was finding a home as an intimate citizen (Plummer, 1995), but this home was predominately gay masculinised spaces.

Interestingly, in the period between the era of the old Hirschfeld Centre and establishment of the Outhouse - Willow found that lesbian public spaces were rare.

Willow points out that there were informal spaces, which were welcoming of gay men (such as Bewley’s Café in Dublin) that were open to women. But it was through mainstream politics that she developed a contact with a gay politics group. Shortly after that, she came out publicly as a lesbian:

‘I came out to the Popular Party meeting and all these tough party members were sitting down the back of the room couldn’t believe it... [and this gay activist was there and] he was talking about gay politics, and I just seized that moment, coming out. And I got involved with gay politics, and became so involved that I couldn’t enter meetings because I was such a political animal. I wasn’t a normal lesbian according to the gay men who I worked with. I didn’t go to women-only venues; I didn’t go to women-only organisations except when I had to’.

Willow recalls that when she came out in public that night ‘I was very nervous’ because of anti-gay sentiment in the political party.
In her initial foray into gay activism, Willow deliberately side-stepped lesbian-only organisations, such as LOT, as Willow put it, the experience of women gawking at her felt ‘uncomfortable’, even predatory. So she is quite clear about the rationale for joining a gay group:

'I came in, in the height of carrying the campaign for law reform. People had been in it for 2 or 3 years. And I was bringing in campaign organising experience, as such. I didn't really understand the issue and I didn't know the history of oppression or whatever. What I actually did for a number of weeks was I sat and read the newspaper archive in GCN, to find out about the deaths, and murders and stuff that had happened in the 80's as well. Things that had been said, and promises that had been made, the history of the court case. You had to bring yourself up to speed very quickly, and I was exposed to huge amounts of information of what was happening in other countries through newspapers that were coming in to GCN. I knew the political system very well, so I was sort of bringing straight politics into gay things and not knowing very much about gay issues as such. Knowing more about Catholic influence whatever, but nothing else about the scene or the culture or, you know, knowing so little, so little about it. Er, very strange now, cos I didn't know anything. I knew that I was _ eh, people didn't realise that I was a lesbian. I wasn't asked for a long time, 'was I or wasn't I' cos I knew so little. But I think I got a away with it, without saying I knew so little as well. Obviously I impressed somebody, cos within six months of being in the group I was helping to run things. So I started doing interviews, things about issues. Radio interviews or whatever. And we were on the road to decriminalisation after Labour got into government. We knew reforms would happen. Maire Geoghan-Quinn [had taken office as Minister for Justice and would bring law reform]... But I didn't develop a lesbian identity, I was a gay woman. Definitely a gay woman then'.

Side-by-side with her politicisation was an ongoing life-political dilemma about identifying as a lesbian, but she chose gay politics and defined herself as a ‘gay woman’, because it allied with men’s political causes rather than the separatist radicalism of lesbians, and it placed Willow into a sexual community. Being public about being a lesbian was also problematic in her personal life. She also side-stepped coming out to other people where it would cause relationship problems. In her first intimate relationship (with the Irish lesbian whom she had met while
based in the UK), Willow alludes to how she would be *complicit* with gender norms (Connell, 1987), covering her identity as a lesbian, so as not to upset her then partner's family:

>'When my partner at the time came home [from the UK], we'd go off down the country, you know. She wasn't out at home and her mother just thought I was a good friend or whatever. So I just went down and stayed in her mother's house. And we just had this long strangulated relationship because she was too fecking terrified to go and do anything about meeting somebody else when she was still in London, you know. And I wasn't doing anything, you know, I just went back into pre-going-to-England mode in terms of everybody who knew me thought that 'oh its just Willow'...'

While Willow mentions how 'strangled' the relationship between her partner and her partner's rural family was, it would seem that Willow was also trying to avoid her partner ending up being disowned in the way that she herself had been.

Politically, in joining a national *gay* group, Willow had rejected the idea of separatist women's sexual politics and became to be viewed suspiciously in some lesbian quarters as being a gay men's ally. But over a period of years, she has identified more with a feminist politics and has become more 'women-centred'. Her intellectual process took time, and it was inherently bound up with *life politics* (Giddens, 1991):

>'It was a few years before I actually recognised why women needed those spaces. Say in conferences or organisations or whatever, you know. And I became very involved in international organising and there I was meeting women from particularly Germany or Austria that were very feminist, very radical-identified, very separatist. Sometimes it was very difficult to get on with everybody, and to get themselves heard, well, to find what they were looking for. And I'd become - I've no problem now, eight years on, saying 'yeah I'm a lesbian'. But er, that's my version of it. You know I think there is still, I think there's still a huge hang-up in the early 90's about separatist Amazon-type stuff. You know there was still an awful lot of that going on. And, er, I'd read Radclyffe Hall, really bad. The
Well of Loneliness' (chuckles), you just knew you didn't want that!

In more recent times, Willow has left the gay group she was in and has become actively involved in organising women-centred activist work. She openly identifies as a lesbian - and does very definitely 'want that'.

Mary

Mary is a thirty-something foreign-born lesbian who has worked in activism for a number of years. Her narrative about the day she signed up as an activist coincided with a time in her life when she was coming out as a lesbian in 1990 and so coming out and coming into activism coincided:

'Well, I sort of fell into it. Um I fell into it because I was walking down the street and there was a Flag Day and um (1) probably when I look back with the benefit of hindsight, he (collector) was the first openly out gay man I'd met. He was this big leather bear. Fucking huge, he was massive (laughs) he was intimidating people into giving him money. He was just fucking enormous. You know. And he was standing, you know in subsequent years we would tell people (1) 'have your collection box and be friendly and smile'. But there he was and like and he didn't have to say anything! People were sort of like, will I get tolled (SR laughs) in order to get across O'Connell Bridge. Um so apart from that, I was drawn to him, it was mesmerizing in some way, fascinated by him. And so I gave him some money and said 'what's this all about?' and he said [in deep voice] 'there's an information stand at Virgin Megastore'. So I went over to the information stand and spoke to them and they told me what it was all about. They told me to drop into the office, which was around in Parnell Street at the time. So by the time I did, I walked in the door and I met these two other queens on the reception, one of whom has since died. They were clones, you remember the whole clone look with big moustaches, cos everyone was a clone at the time. So I met these two queens at reception and er they made me feel really welcome and I stayed'.
Mary felt at home in the organisation she joined. Initially a volunteer, she later became employed there. When I interviewed Mary, she was on the cusp of leaving the organisation to pursue a business opportunity in the media.

I had to persuade her to talk to me. When I contacted her by telephone, she questioned why I was researching women and wondered aloud whether she was the right person to talk to. I persisted and alluded to how other lesbian activists (without mentioning names) had already talked with me. I referred to the importance of being inclusive of women, and not solely focusing on gay men. My interest in women's views seemed to interest her, or at least intrigue her. So, she agreed to meet with me but initially told me she was very busy. Originally, I was informed that I would have half an hour! However, our discussion went on for over twice that time. In the interview, principally because I had focused on wanting to ask her to talk about her activist work as a lesbian and her experience of coming out (in that order), there was a focus on the political over the personal/private.

At the time of the interview, I regretted that she did not elaborate much about her private life, and it was difficult in the interview setting to turn the discussion towards the private sphere. However, Mary produced some very interesting, critical reflections on the world of Irish AIDS activism. I put much of her decision to 'let rip' about politics to be down to the timing of my interview. The timing seemed to tap into her reflexivity about the political sphere. Perhaps she was reviewing her career in activist work at a time when she was leaving. However, Mary chose to generously share her insights about politics.

Mary was quite critical of how activism had changed over the past decade or so. At the beginning of her activist career, she felt there was a degree of unity around a
common cause (AIDS) and many lesbians were attracted into AIDS/HIV organisations because they recognised a common ground with men:

_I think it was a sense of belonging, because in those early days, there were lots of dykes involved in AIDS activism. We had a common enemy, because the enemy was trying to oppress us, not just around healthcare issues but I suppose, I've often heard Mick Quinlan say. I can't think of his exact words here now, I can't think of his exact wording, but it was something along the lines of one of the benefits or the positives... No. One of the 'collateral benefits', that was it, one of the collateral benefits of the AIDS crisis was that it forces society to look at and address issues of sexuality and sexual orientation. Not so much sexual identity, but to sort of touch off those and go into those. It certainly forced us to excavate all of our conditioning as a people around what sex was and what our roles were in order to address our attitudes to sex. Like we had to address our attitudes to sex in order to address our sexual behaviours and so forth. So I felt at home, because we were fighting on a number of fronts. It wasn't just about getting condoms into pubs or clubs, it was also about challenging notions and stereotypes, do you know what I mean?_

The common enemy is the State: for a while, Mary felt that there was a degree of common ground against State oppression and heteronormativity. Whereas Malcolm argued that all late modern activist work could hope to accomplish was risk prevention and it had to fit in with the 'busy' consumer-oriented turn in social life and dole out condoms, Mary suggests that there was a deeper concern about changing assumptions about sex and that activist work was trying to challenge praxis. The clear difference is that lesbians like Mary, were problematising the State's hegemonic control over lesbian and gay men's lives (particularly through their AIDS activist work). While AIDS organisations did not have much money, they challenged people in positions of power through radical approaches. One target was the recalcitrant Minister for Health Dr. Rory O'Hanlon. He was a central obstacle at the time to funding for AIDS.

For a number of years after the emergence of the pandemic, he was instrumental in refusing financial support to AIDS groups or making condoms available because
homosexuality was illegal under Irish law. Years on from this phase in activist work, Mary’s eyes glowed with utter anger and annoyance at how this standpoint cost lives. Mary and fellow AIDS activists adopted a direct protest approach, which eventually succeeded in getting support for activist workers and their organisations:

'[He] was the Minister for Health and we used to call him Doctor Death. And whenever there’d be a march, there would be posters of him with Dr. Death written because he would just not accept that there was any need for safer sex or there was a need for any talk about sex. He just didn’t accept that HIV existed initially. He was a bit like Thabo Mbeki in South Africa at the moment'.

Not talking about sex ultimately kills: Mary points to how prudery (Inglis, 2005), while often thought to be akin to a ‘reservation’ about sex-talk can be viewed as an ultimately dangerous ideology. In the early days of Irish gay activist work the denial of gay sexuality’s validity, legality and (even) its existence cost many lives (Philpott, 1996). Mary’s quote illustrates how the lack of recognition about AIDS and a refusal to discuss gay sex in government circles (ostensibly, as it was a criminal act under the law), stymied safe sex campaigning. However, this attitude galvanized activists. They learned a great deal about doing politics:

'We had no money at the time so everybody was focused on common goals, everybody knew what their role was and what had to be done. So while it was very difficult, over time, with everybody doing their bit, eventually, it was inevitable that attitudes would shift. That change would come, because behaviour needed to change, to be addressed. Um and essentially, it was because people were contracting HIV and then we had hepatitis C, No hepatitis B and then hepatitis C, um that they had to do something. And so then as we gained power positions and were smart around getting people on national strategy type committees and consultative committees and that, we started to acquire power amongst policy-makers'.

In particular, they learned that it was important to get into consultative processes, which, in turn, would enable activists to influence policy-makers. For Mary, this represented the high point of lesbian and gay activism, where funding was developed for HIV/AIDS and the decriminalisation of homosexuality occurred. Over the years since then, activist work has been weakened. Decriminalisation led to apathy towards emancipatory politics and burn out from campaigning:

'... the decriminalisation of homosexuality there back in whenever it was, a lot of gay men certainly felt 'we're equal now, now we can forget it now'. So they disappeared off the scene entirely. And everybody took a breather and a rest. And then there are still a few die-hards who are campaigning on for partnership rights. But I'm sure it must be a very tough battle because you can't keep at that sort of stuff for ever. You burn out, you have to do your bit and move on'.

After the battle for decriminalisation of homosexuality, Mary suggests that as some activists had left that equality had been achieved, i.e. 'it' was all over as it were. Rather, the attainment decriminalisation on equality grounds has sown the seed for further activist work. What GLEN had been trying to explain at that time was that the Government had stated that were things reversed (and homosexuality was legal), there would be no case on equality grounds for making it illegal. Hence, the 1993 decriminalisation involved normalizing homosexuality in the name of equality. However, in some quarters, people felt that the battle for legislation had been won but the battle for equality was only beginning.

Those who remained in lesbian and gay activist work became implicated in the emerging arena of equality politics. The shift in activism came as Ireland’s Rainbow government (Fine Gael/Labour/Democratic Left) came to power in 1992. With Labour in power, equality politics took hold on the political agenda for a time. Mary’s organisation was asked to actively contribute to policy-making:
'We had to go lobby on those and have some of our own wording put in, I remember that, around equal opportunities. That went into that legislation on equal opportunities in employment, what ever it was, that employment equality thing. And it was great, it was very successful until of course they wouldn't shift on some of the exclusions particularly the one around teachers we had real problems with. And then um, then it went to President Robinson and the Bill was not signed in because it was found not to be constitutional. And then the government bloody fell which was really bad. Cos with the Rainbow Government a version of that Bill would have come in. But with the bloody Fianna Fail/PD coalition came in sometime just before our campaign ended and they had a completely different agenda. They just watered the thing down completely'.

A political shift occurred, according to Mary, when the government changed (to the current Fianna Fail/Progressive Democrat coalition). Accepting funding and retaining/maintaining funding meant that a form of consensus politics under the guised of partnership government had to be accepted:

'collateral damage of the partnership approach [to] consensus [means that] nobody puts their head about the parapet and if they do they get their funding cut off. And that will backfire on them anyway because their funding will be cut anyway'.

The radicalism of equality politics, under the aegis of the Equality Authority, has been, in Mary's view, weakened in recent years by the rise of a civil servant ethos in the NGO. Lesbian and Gay groups were asked to join a 'subcommittee' because it was deemed that they were under-represented. But she recalls how it became difficult to coordinate all the interest groups involved and the subcommittee became an 'unwieldy' way of doing politics. The Equality Authority is doomed, Mary feels, because of this civil service mentality:

'It's pretty much a statutory body, you know, full of civil servants who've been transferred from other departments. It was given a piddling budget to take on a few extra staff, which they took on as development workers, a handful of them. Most of the staff are transferred in from other civil service. Old hat civil service as well. And my experience of them, just going to the meetings and stuff, and the ones at the meetings were grand, but the people
you'd meet, they were just civil servants, they think like civil servants, their business is procrastination, their business is to not rock the status quo. And here is a body that is set up to rock the status quo being staffed by people who go against that very grain. So I think that in terms of the actual structure of The Equality Authority was a difficulty and still is today.'

Equality politics is trapped in the inertia of the State apparatus and, ultimately, State control. Mary feels this 'a typical Irish government set-up, you know. You set something up and you give them inadequate funding. And wait for it to fail'. Feeling that she has accomplished what she can, Mary has since moved out of activist work and works elsewhere, which also echoes a form of liquid activist work espoused by Malcolm (in chapter five).

Julia

Julia is a middle-class activist. In her interview, she focuses on her adult life, coming out and her involvement in activism. Julia did not talk about her childhood at all and began her story in early adulthood. She talked about identifying as a lesbian, which she saw as the political opposite of compulsory heterosexuality. She started to come out during her final year at undergraduate study and describes lesbianism as acting as a foundation for her non-heterosexual identity. She feels that, in a more traditional Ireland, she might have been a nun in order to live in a women-centred community:

'... and very quickly after I'd left home I kind of came across a woman who said she was a lesbian, and I was in love with her (ha) from the second she said she was a lesbian. (SR: Had you identified as a lesbian?) Not at all, no, I hadn't. I mean, I suppose I should have kind of been more aware but I just wasn't, you know. I thought I was going to be a nun, which I think is common among Irish lesbians of my age. Um I was born in '66. It just seemed like a lovely synthesis of everything I wanted to do. I wanted to do good. I knew I
didn’t want to get married. That was absolutely it. If there was any clear indicator of sexual identification from an early age it was that. It was a knee-jerk reaction. I did not want to, um, it was not that I did not want to be a mother, er, it was that I didn’t want to be a wife. I didn’t want to have to be married’.

However, while Julia did not want marriage, she did have a boyfriend because social norms for young women dictated that she should:

‘I had a boyfriend in college, a lovely guy, um, but it was because it was required really. If I could have figured a way of not having a boyfriend I would have done so, but I just couldn’t. It was absolutely de rigueur, compulsory. Um and it was safer and easier to have one. And he was just so cute, he was lovely, and I treated him terribly. Um, he didn’t deserve somebody like me. So I came to Dublin, and very quickly I suppose in that year, being 20-21-22, was more and more certain that I was in love with this woman’.

While Julia faced compulsory heterosexuality, like other women, she also had more choice, and migratory experiences helped to shape her understanding of choice (Weston, 1991, 1996, 1998; Whisman, 1996). Unlike older lesbians like Constance and Jean, Julia’s age group now had some level of choice about their lifestyle and sexuality. While Julia felt the power of normative sexuality, and expectations for women, she was able to side-step compulsory heterosexuality and navigates her way around hegemonic norms.

She feels that her choices were marked out as a woman, who should be thinking of marriage. From early on, however, marriage was not in any way desirable to her as a life choice. Shortly after finishing college, Julia decided to go abroad and study for a postgraduate qualification in the USA.

Her time away from home allowed her to think about her sexuality. She puts it also most casually:
'And on the list was, oh you’re going to have to deal with this umm lesbian thing! Or you’re going to have to find some lesbians. It was funny I never thought of coming out. I just thought of finding others. Lesbians, not finding lesbians, they were Other. I didn’t know or care if I was one, I just knew I wanted to be with them. So kind of that took a while. It took the guts of a year really. I did the usual Irish thing of drinking too much. And kind of gave it up (huh) and found myself a girlfriend well, got found really! (SR: OK). And again my identity, even though I was quite open. I was very open, and I made sure my friends back in Ireland knew. And, I was clear that this relationship was going to be upfront and out there. It wasn’t going to be hidden. Um, I still had this notion that lesbians were the people I wanted to be with, rather than ‘I am one’. And it really wasn’t until that relationship broke up, I really think this is common, that I found then, that I was clearer that I was a lesbian because I definitely wanted another girlfriend. And I was looking at women, in a way that I hadn’t up until then. Even though I had already had two big loves. I hadn’t looked at women as romantic, erotic partners. Um lesbian women in general, I hadn’t had those eyes in my head. Um, and luckily I was living in _____ at the time, which is a gay enclave. So I could have the luxury of looking around me, and kind of seeing with lesbian eyes. You know, watching other women. Um, it was great, it was wonderful’.

Her sexuality, the ‘lesbian thing’ was something that had to be ‘dealt with’ and the important part of this life political dilemma was the need to find other lesbians, to find a community. She distances her search from the term ‘coming out’ but talked about finding a community of support. I was a little puzzled as to why Julia suggested that the dilemma was not about coming out. Julia, however, is telling me that as she never identified with being a wife and mother (with compulsory heterosexuality), she did not come out in the sense of ‘leaving’ heterosexual norms behind. Hence, her dilemma is clearly a life politics (Giddens, 1991): it is about lifestyle, and ‘who she wants to be’.

Who she ‘wants to be’ emerged over time. She distinguishes wanting to ‘be with’ women rather than herself being a lesbian initially. Only through the journey to finding a women’s community, which took time, did Julia identify as a lesbian and gain a new sense of sexual self. Under the guise of her membership of the Irish
expatriate community, she was able to find lesbians. To the outside world, Julia presents herself as a young Irish migrant – as a *normal* (Goffman, 1963). But she ‘was found’ by a woman and a relationship ensued. The term ‘was found’ suggests a religious allusion, hinting at Julia’s spirituality. During the initial intimate relationship, Julia describes her identity as being ‘very open’ and hinting at liquid modernity. It was only after her first romantic relationship ended that she felt she could describe herself as a lesbian. She suggests that her sexual orientation was fixed as a lesbian because she *definitely* wanted another relationship with a woman. She posits that her own process of coming to terms with a lesbian sexual identity was similar to the experiences of other women. Overall, her experience abroad gave her permission to look at other women, ‘seeing with lesbian eyes’ and giving her the scope to come to terms with her feelings for women.

After a time, she missed Ireland, and returned home to read for an advanced qualification, and it was in this context that she came out in Ireland:

'I used to call it [doing research] my alibi because in lots of ways it was, it was my coming out period. I had four years of really coming out, I guess, in __, even though at that stage even my mother knew. Those four years were coming out, still. That’s my coming out phase. Um. And I got very much involved with what at the time was a new kind of flowering of the lesbian community in the city, and that was 1991 onwards. I think previous to that I mean, when I was leaving Boston, a very good friend of mine from home who is a lesbian, my age, whose sister was a lesbian in there too, and she was so nervous for me. She actually cut me keys to her apartment in Boston and said ‘anytime, because you will need to escape, because they are all alcoholic’. Ha! (SR: That would inspire wouldn’t it) Yeah. And there are only twelve of them! (SR laughs) And sure enough when I went into the women’s bar in __, on Thursday night, there were just 12 in the back-room. And I stood at the kind of entrance way to that back-room, which is between the main bar and snug there (S: I know the bar well) and that was where I stood for the next four years! Huh! I didn’t really want to sit down, so initially I wasn’t incredibly well welcomed. Because I was seen as dubious, I was seen as younger, and too friendly with young teenage dykes coming out who were in the main bar. I was too much associated with young gay men'.
The fluidity of life abroad and the relative ease of finding a lesbian community and finding lesbian love there is contrasted by Julia with her experience of coming out in Ireland, in the more solid modernity of an Irish town. Her rich description of coming out in a regional Irish city is joyous. Symbolically, Julia describes her liminal position between the hard-drinking lesbians of modernity and the younger liquid-modern generation of dykes and their gay male friends. She describes how her generation of younger dykes, who emerged in the city where she lived during the early 1990's, were initially regarded as something that posed a threat to the certitude of traditional lesbian existence, but also how the younger women played a critical role in reinvigorating the community. This sense of lesbian community is strong in the city where Julia lived, reminding me of other enclaves (Lapovsky Kennedy & Davis, 1994). While the older lesbians seemed to be in a position of dominance, Julia also mentions how sexual stigma (Goffman, 1963), which often led to drinking and other health problems, had virtually destroyed the lives of many of these women.

In a way, Julia seems thankful to have escaped the fate of the older, working-class women:

'I think that it's a large problem in the Irish context, separating it out from Irish social and cultural problems generally. Certainly, the pressure of the oppression would lead one to drink. And I do joke sometimes that there would be no lesbians in Ireland except for alcohol, because it frees those inhibitions, the inhibitions that have been put there by Church and State, education, all the systems, you know'.
Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored the narratives of a cross-section of Irish lesbians (and a bisexual woman) who have been involved in activist work. Whereas the experiences of gay men interviewed for this thesis have been shaped by masculinity, these narrators have emerged through a complex process of resistance to heterosexualised social norms that have regulated Irish women. The sexual stories are carefully told, perhaps suggesting some anxiety about talking to a gay man about intimacy, but also mirroring their wider levels of stigma in Irish society.

In terms of coming out, these narrators, show clearly that naming oneself as a lesbian is a cumulative life politics process, where there are many negotiations with the self and wider dilemmas about social life. Their sense of intimate citizenship is shaped by most women through an engagement with feminism, and their intimate citizenship concerns are primarily oriented towards their embodied relationship with the public sphere (personal safety, the State) and the body.

Giddens suggests that women are in a particularly complex situation in late modernity:

'Women today have the nominal opportunity to follow a whole variety of possibilities and chances: yet, in a masculinist culture, many of these avenues remain effectively foreclosed. Moreover, to embrace those, which do exist, women have to abandon their older, 'fixed' identities in a more thorough-going way than do men. In other words, they experience the openness of late modernity in a fuller, yet more contradictory, way.' (Giddens, 1991: 106).

For Irish women who love women, it is clear from the narrators here that their 'life political' situations remain fraught and fragile.
In the next two chapters, I turn my attention to two evolving public discourses about intimate citizenship in which concerns about being a ‘good gay’ (Seidman, 2002) are central. Within these messy settings (and others), we can see the construction or expansion of civil society, and attempts to make the ‘strange’ more familiar (J. Alexander, 2004).

I allude to ‘evolving’ debates, as – to echo Benhabib (1999) – we must note how such local discourses are part of global constellations in the making.

In chapter seven, I reflect briefly upon the place of occasional activist meetings as an exemplar of collective politics, where sexual stories can (or cannot be told/heard). While these meetings are rare, I would suggest – from observation of masculinity politics in Ireland – that there is potential for ‘liquid’ collective politics around these sorts of political activities.

In chapter eight, I consider the rise of mediatized debates about ‘gay marriage’ to be central in framing the married good gay. We can see there is a tension between pragmatic political needs and the romanticized idea of marriage. At time of writing, it seems that conservative forces have constrained the discourse around the gay couple, rather than the same-sex family because adoption still seemed to be a political step too far.
Chapter Seven: Reflections on viewing Activist Gatherings

'[Cloakroom communities] ...need a spectacle which appeals to similar interests dormant in otherwise disparate individuals and so bring them together for a stretch of time when other interests – those which divide them instead of uniting them – are temporarily laid aside, put on a slow burner or silence altogether... [they] do not fuse and blend individual concerns into 'group interest'... [or] acquire a new quality ... spectacles have some to replace the 'common cause' of the heavy/ solid/ hardware modernity era – which makes a lot of difference to the nature of new-style identities and goes a long way towards making sense of the emotional tensions and aggression-generating traumas which from time to time accompany their pursuit" (Bauman, 2000: 200).

'[Carnival communities]temporary respite from the agonies of daily solitary struggles, from the tiresome condition of individuals de jure persuaded or forced to pull themselves up by their bootstraps... let off steam and allow the revellers to better endure the routine to which they must return the moment the frolicking is over .... [They are as indispensable a feature of the liquid modernity landscape as the essentially solitary plight of the individual de jure and the ardent, yet on the whole vain efforts to rise to the level of individuals de facto.". (Bauman, (2000: 201).

Introduction

This brief chapter is based on some observations that I made at a series of public activist gatherings in Dublin during 1999-2003. As I mentioned in chapter three, my comments here are provisional and tentative, and offer some thoughts for future observational research of lesbian and gay politics. I suggested that one omission in Giddens’s work on self-identity is to consider the issue of collective identity. The more I think about it, the more I feel there is a need to theorise 'collective identity' through a longitudinal analysis of one or more activist groups, but this is something for future research about Irish lesbian and gay culture. More generally, little sociological research on Irish lesbian and/or gay space has been done. Bradby has researched lesbians’ talk about music (Bradby, 1993a), which reflects her broader interest on analysing talk in social settings (Bradby, 1993b, 1994).
Of course, one can think of many other aspects of interaction to explore in terms of lesbian and gay subcultures, from how we talk in gendered ways (Bunzl, 2000) to erotic fieldwork sites (Bolton, 1995). My position is that Butler’s work (1990, 1991, 1993) serves a useful purpose, if one wishes to take on *queer theory* (Sedgwick, 1990; Jagose, 1996; Roseneil, 2000). The problem is that one tends to lose sight of the agent in a social context in a naturalistic setting (Cicourel & Kitsuse, 1963; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). While Goffman’s work does present us with a more structuralist account, I feel his concepts (as sociological shorthand) help us to keep close to real people in social situations, including *interaction rituals* (Goffman, 1967) – as in my case here.

While observation research of social settings (Lofland and Lofland, 1995) typically examines spaces over long periods, my research on this differed considerably. Firstly, these gatherings were *occasional* and did not provide any long-term access. I could only take a researcher role of a *potential participant* (Miller & Tewksbury, 2001), which was afforded to me through privileged access as a member of the gay community.

Secondly, given the small scale of these settings, I had to adopt an anonymized approach (descriptors only), looking for *topics not people* (Schwartz and Jacobs, 1979; Byrne, 2000; Byrne & Lentin, 2000). I also accepted the proviso that the truths people tell are only ever partial (subjective) accounts (Personal Narratives Group, 1989; Meyerhoff et al., 1992), that need to be ‘good enough’ (Mishler, 1986, 1990; Luttrell, 2000) and so I focus on what Goffman (1967: 2) terms a ‘sociology of occasions’. I concern myself with what we can analyse about what ‘goes on’ in these settings. To this end, I have chosen to order my comments through two exemplars (Mishler, 1990) that speak loudly. In turn, my chapter becomes quite
short – perhaps pointing to future research. My reflections here come closer to Maher’s work on *ephemeral institutions*, which he defines as ‘networks of cooperating individuals and groups that produce a single event on an occasional (often annual) basis’ (Maher, 1999: 205).

In my case, many activist gatherings clustered around Gay Pride in Dublin; relying on ‘spectacle’ they had some characteristics of TV shows (Lunt and Stenner, 2005). Hence, as the meetings were *ephemeral*, I did not have long term access to fora during my fieldwork, so I had to work with the data I had, and draw upon some insights from Goffman (1967) to reflect upon the social processes that shaped these meetings. Overall, I would argue that these spaces fit Bauman’s (2000) ‘cloakroom communities’ idea, but their potential seems to be stymied because only certain calibres of *sexual stories* (Plummer, 1995) can be heard in certain contexts, and this delimits their current political impact.

American social movements theorist, Lichterman (1999) argues that we should attend to what discourses are valued by a social gathering because there are ‘culturally structured ways of talking identity in the public sphere’. More pointedly, instead of their being a ‘generic citizen’ (p.103) in the Habermasian sense, we need to analyse how multiple, competing voices operate within the social space.

While, from a lay perspective, we might refer to a ‘forum’ as the meeting/ gathering itself, Lichterman (1999: 104, *my italics*) argues that a forum is a ‘quality’ of a group. By this, he means that ‘a group contains a forum to the extent that it values critical reflective discussion about members’ interests and collective identities’. Lichterman distinguishes the ‘forum’ aspect of a gathering from its wider political role of ‘strategizing identity and interests to gain more members or influence’, which, in my case, might be how participants present themselves as lesbian or gay.
While no meeting dwelled on recruiting members, there was some allusion to how activists should seek influence with government. While useful, Lichterman's dissection of discourses is a bit laborious in terms of my reflections here, and my preference is to present the lively interactions as a weave of data, in Goffman's (1959) style.

Lichterman's two distinct repertoires of language, strategizing talk (politics, activist issues, and new member recruitment) and identity politics could be linked to Giddens (1991). We could substitute Lichterman's dualism with Giddens's: Lichterman's strategic element resembles emancipatory politics, and identity discourse refers to life-politics. Although Giddens does not get into the modalities of how politics operates, one important factor highlighted by Eliasoph (1998), and other writers on social movements, is how the political use of silence in public discourse, which can be viewed as a way of avoiding doing politics, does serve to constrain public debate and stymies public conflict.

In this chapter, I briefly outline two sets of 'practices' (Morgan, 1996; Finch, 2007). Firstly, I will look at how participants present themselves and manage their emotional selves in relation to publicly telling coming out stories (following the theme of chapters five and six). Then, secondly, I will consider how when activists in these gatherings talk about 'gay politics' that sexual stories are constrained.

**Presenting Sexual Selves: humour, pain, pride and shame**

In the gatherings, I found that there was a clear gender divide in terms of how men and women presented themselves. Men tended to present themselves in a clearly rational way ('I am gay'), but women used the meetings to tell stories about the processes by which they came to identify as lesbians, and the dilemmas emanating from such choices.
One contributor, who I termed Married Guy, tells the audience that he and his wife still live together and he divides his life between the gay scene and his straight life. He doesn't see why he should give up living at home. He notes how 'from early days, I felt different'. Recalling childhood photos, he feels he even looked gay then, and mimics his posture in photo, saying, 'I was posing... I was a gay child'. To illustrate this, he stands up, poses and then gestures, as if to indicate 'see?' to the audience. The audience giggles a bit at this theatrical act, but I detected that many women in the room did not appreciate his comments about being 'always gay', reflected the convoluted journey many lesbians experienced in naming themselves.

As Goffman suggests (1967: 16), you can be discredited in a room full of strangers, by not sticking to a 'safe' topic of conversation. Married-Guy tells them how he did not intend to give up the family home (which he implies is his), and his performance of always knowing he was gay is not done with much 'poise' (Goffman, 1967: 16). We can see how relying on 'safe' ground makes presentations of self coherent in other participants.

I noted how divorced participants appeared to have more credibility than the still-married/ gay guy. While money as a theme underlaid their concerns, there was also a critique of married guy's duplicity. A recently divorced gay man [Divorced Gay], who had not long left his wife, added how 'the money economy leads to commitments and that makes it difficult to disengage'. Although he did admits to doing little about homosexuality while married, he wished to 'become respectable' instead of leading a double-life led to his coming out. A number of women in the room are already nodding, I note, and seemed to identify with his impetus towards respectability. One other woman suggests that monogamy is important in this discussion, hinting at criticism of Married-Guy, while a lesbian (The Divorcée),
who was in the throes of divorcing her homophobic husband concurred with

**Divorced Gay**’s signal that it was important to be truthful and reasonable about
sexual orientation. Audience members squirmed as **Divorced Gay** mentions
having visited sex clubs abroad, but he regains the audience when he expounds how
he now wanted to have a responsible, open gay lifestyle.

Breaking from heterosexuality and establishing a respectable lifestyle was a theme
in the **Lesbian Mum**’s sexual story. She introduces herself as a 30-something
lesbian who was going through the final stages of separation from her husband. He
is, she adds, resisting signing the papers because ‘he hasn’t moved on’. She begins
by telling us that she was 14 years married, and had children. She reflects that at a
time when she was the average coming out age, she was up to her eyes in child-
rearing. So she situates herself in terms of child-rearing, and being ‘tied down’.

**Lesbian Mum** ‘named myself as gay... and I came out to my husband, he was
shocked’. However, ‘for the sake of the children’ they did not separate, and had ‘no
sex lives’. She remarks that at that time, ‘I had no income and couldn’t have left’.
She also feared ‘losing the kids in particular’, which re-articulates her as a (lesbian)
mother in her contribution. There was no separation until years later. **Lesbian
Mum** was, all the same, determined ‘not to make the same sacrifice as my mother’
who had experienced ‘no difference between being an individual and mother’.

Again money and sexuality are interlinked when the **Lesbian Mum** adds, it ‘cost
me £32.50 to marry at the registry office and £90 grand to get out of it!’ She frames
her pain and struggle in terms of money, lamenting how, ‘I’ve been 6 years trying to
separate but he’s not moving on’. This kernel story captures how her ex is still
invested in heterosexual norms, which allows her to maintain her political ‘poise’
(Goffman, 1967: 9), and outline her efforts to renegotiate her familial relationships.
Since coming out to her kids, she and her partner brought them to Pride so that
they can see ‘the diversity of society’. I notice how Lesbian Mum minimises the pain that she has been going through by telling a humorous story about how her co-workers parade the ‘lesbian’ when someone important visits (and they want to show their ‘gay credentials’), but hide her in the back-office when the bank manager visits. She has to come out as an everyday accomplishment, echoing Constance’s point (Chapter Six).

There are also difficult stories to tell about identity and sexuality. A gay disabled activist from rural Ireland tells how disabled people used to ‘disappear from communities, and were hidden in the backroom’. He implies, but does not initially clarify, if they were homosexual. He mentions an example of visiting someone’s home where there was a sequestered (Giddens, 1991) disabled member of the family. The activist reminds the audience that disabled do have power in some contexts. While being offered tea and cake, the disabled person called out for cake, and the reply was that there were visitors. In response, the disabled person called back ‘give me some cake or I’ll come out’. The interchange is both defensive of the vulnerable and protective and the activist deftly attacked the ‘tactful blindness’ towards disabled sexuality (Goffman, 1967: 18, 19). In contrast, when a disabled person tells a story about being incarcerated by his father, the gathering has difficulty hearing this sexual story (Plummer, 1995) about personal tragedy as it is too painful to hear.

Presenting and Doing Politics: not welcome in public either

At a gathering I attended before starting this thesis, I heard a politician talking about the ‘way ahead’ for gay politics. I quote this from my fieldnote jottings:

‘[The politician] begins by suggesting that this debate is ‘timely’ as a commission is being
organised to review the Constitution. This action is the legacy of (Minister for Equality & Law Reform) and it has been ‘sitting on the shelf’ since last year. As certain acts were found to be unconstitutional (Equal Status), the Bills are now not operable. In the light of changes in family structures, gay and lesbian relationships should be examined in this changing context of the Constitutional Review Group. [The Politician] adds that there is ‘no definition of the family’ and the divorce legislation was the start of re-thinking the family in Ireland. [The Politician] adds that there is a need for us to ‘separate civil marriage out from the religious ceremony’. In light of this review ‘there isn’t any logical reason’ why lesbians and gays should be excluded from this. She feels that we need to keep out any moral argument about this issue.’

The tone and manner of the contribution is not much different to a sermon. The discussion did not last too long, as there was no inclusivity around what people wanted, or wanted to know. The ideas mentioned here, as captured in my fieldnotes are big concepts, such as the idea that there is ‘no definition of the family’ (not true). Likewise, the need to separate civil and religious elements of marriage, and the insistence that there is no logical obstacle to including lesbians and gay men in this reform, seems hopelessly optimistic now that I look at this comment in the light of political discourse globally about same-sex marriage and partnership.

The politician even explicitly mentioned that the issue was not a ‘moral’ problem – which seemed strange to me, as I thought values were a central concern. The politician seemed to assume that there is a momentum to the continued expansion of equality politics. While there was support for this discourse when the politician mentions that the lack of defined personal rights should be ‘dealt with’, the audience does not ask how this is to be delivered. This forum fell short of what Bauman describes as a ‘cloakroom community’, as the meeting lacked a sense of democracy, which stymied open discussion. What I noted in some more recent gatherings was how smaller-scale interactions between activists or about activism serve to also stymie some discussions that Bauman (2000) would see as the work of cloakroom communities.
For instance, controversial issues are avoided. When at one meeting someone asked what the group thought of the term 'Queer', the responses were rather vague, and many did not understand the term in the academic sense of the word (Jagose, 1996). One respondent said, with a nod to essentialism: 'I love the term queer, gay faggot, or whatever. I have no problem with names. I am me'. Another added non-committally how he is ‘flexible’ about the use of ‘queer’ and ‘gay’. A lesbian added that ‘queer is a political term which is useful...I am very proud as a lesbian’; but her disavowal of queer was accompanied by supportive ‘mmm’s’ from women in the room. Another lesbian stated ‘queer is something outside the norm, now ‘Dyke’, I love that!’ Reclaiming a more embodied, gendered name for oneself seemed to show the importance of self-identity over a more academic gloss. In a more substantive way, I noted how the intrusion of political issues serves to undermine the flow of discussions about people’s lived experiences.

On one occasion, a participant criticised a forum leader for being critical of how Pride was organised. The Pride Organiser said ‘change is slow’ (a point about progress), ‘there are limited venues available’ (which was not a true statement), and the commentator added how Pride Organisation managers are ‘doing the best we can’. I noted a ‘sense of frustration in the room, glances exchanged’, and some concern that there might be an argument brewing. To mitigate a row, a contributor suggests ‘getting a list of venues that could help us’ (thereby offering a neutral position while trying to move the conversation along). The meeting facilitator asked if the person who complained about Pride organiser’s disorganisation wanted to come back on this point. The complainer ‘shakes’ his head, as if to say ‘no’. The discussion appeared awkward and led to a break in the momentum that had been gathering about people’s stories.
Yet, on another occasion, one former activist asked the organisers of a meeting if there was a policy on disabled sexuality. A policy expert in the audience ventured to add, 'No, not explicitly'. 'Oh, I was looking at Chuck there!' claimed the panellist, who indicated that she had been trying to make eye-contact with another policymaker sitting in the room. There are some giggles around the room, as the policy analyst, turned to see the other policymaker and looked rather sheepish at her mistake. But the other policymaker ventured to add 'we need to look at NESC's position'. Both policymakers seem to have been caught out about disability policy, and at a public meeting about disabled sexuality!

The panellist smiles at having been able to get disabled sexuality into the policymakers' minds. However, I noted that the content of the interaction loses most of the audience, because they are not included and the complex point were not explained to a lay audience. A more pro-active engagement to explain the policy turn in activism would, in other circumstances, have enabled a 'cloakroom community' to develop. There is much potential to develop this mode of politics, in the style that I had witnessed by men's groups, which were characterised by more dialogue between 'politics', 'policy' and life stories.

Conclusion

For reasons of preserving anonymity, I have only presented a short analysis of the activist gatherings that I attended in the past number of years, and I have sought to exemplify ways in which we can suggest that these venues do illustrate some real potential for the 'forum' to become a more developed element in activist work. Primarily, the public meetings allow vulnerable members of the community to meet others in a political context.
Activist gatherings should focus on giving space to intimate citizens to hear and tell sexual stories – i.e. they should act as a ‘forum’ for sharing sexual stories – it seems talk about life politics animates the community. Occasional slides into ‘activist talk’ about policy and politics seem an impediment to the flow of sharing life stories. Paradoxically then, activist talk both stalls discussion but also serves to control discourse as only certain stories become issues for political struggles.

People tend to feel a lack of competence to discuss policy and politics with ‘experts’ (Bauman, 1987), but this is manifested in the form of a resistance to expertise that appears as boredom about ‘politics’. This may be changing as people begin to use the internet more and social blogging, social networking and bulletin board sites become more popular. But my recollection in this particular social setting was how the audience seemed to want to focus on ‘who they want to be’, and finding someone to talk to.

So, as Ireland moves from an era of silence, it is crucial to encourage knowing, experiencing subjectivities, allowing lesbians and gay men to ‘speak as’ lesbians and gay men (Stanley, 1995; Hogan, 1998; Sparkes, 2002). We also need to clarify the nexus between activism and lived experience – or at least think it through how such emotion work (Hochschild, 2003) should be configured for the liquid modern age. I argue that more could be made of the ‘weak ties’ in late modernity, and much potential could be developed if gathering more clearly operated as ‘cloakroom communities’, with activists telling us more about their motives for being in politics (Dyer & Keller-Cohen, 2000), and adopting an activist role that is closer to a ‘mediator’ (Osborne, 2004).
Chapter 8: Thinking about Marriage, doing Civil Partnership

'It is inherent in the plaintiff’s case that, as an irremediably exclusive homosexual, he [David Norris] will never marry'. Henchy, J. in Norris v. AG [1984].

'People’s narratives of their marriage proposals invoke a dramaturgical telos of a common resolution: popping the question' (Vannini, 2004: 173)

'... all those separate dreams coming true in a gilded, high-domed palace straight out of Beauty and the Beast. You had to have witnessed that long line of middle-aged people, some of them with their kids in tow, waiting to affirm what they’d known for years. And the mayor himself, so young and handsome and ... neat... that he actually looked like the man on top of a wedding cake' (Maupin, 2007: 3).

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the some aspects of intermittent mediatized Irish discourses about extending legal recognition to same-sex couples, which is occurring within a multitude of wider transformations of intimate life. In this final data chapter of this thesis, I wish to argue that the issue of same-sex relationships has come to the fore within a global transformation of sexual rights (Binnie, 2004) and it is necessary to begin examining how dilemmas are given voice.

My concern is to sketch how (and I am only glimpsing at what is occurring), the issue of ‘gay marriage’ is being shaped through mediatized discourses about gay marriage. I begin this chapter by suggesting that the detraditionalization of patterns of how people live together in Ireland is one significant (but not the only) impetus for the rise of new thinking about relationships. Then, in some depth, I shall take up how media debates about ‘gay marriage’ have helped to advance political consciousness about the rights of a same-sex couple (Reynolds, 2007).
Finally, I shall briefly outline how, public policy has played a key role in leading us to the cusp of legislation in Ireland.

Two inter-related factors have given rise to and shaped contemporary interest in marriage and, by extension, the need to recognise same-sex couples. Firstly, we can note how a number of studies have focused upon weddings as sites of consumption (Corrado, 2002; Hochschild, 2003; Illouz, 1997), and — in passing — we might note the need for research on this area in the Irish context. Secondly, marriage as a site of consumption can be placed within the wider transformation of intimacy (Giddens, 1992; Graham, 2004). Both of these issues are linked to Giddens’s concept (1991: 82, 83) of *lifestyle*, which is a 'cluster of habits and orientations' that is heavily influenced by 'group pressures and the visibility of role models, as well as by socioeconomic circumstances' and social 'milieux'.

Gay marriage arose as a political issue through a nexus of at least three inter-related discursive claims. Firstly, a legal /policy discourse has helped to embed a *legal consciousness* (Harding, 2006) about how same-sex couples are disadvantaged in law (c.f. Mee and Roynane, 2000). In the exemplars in this chapter, there is a weave in the arguments made between essentialist and socially constructed views of sexuality (Giddens, 1991, Graham, 2004) that are informed by legal discourses.

Secondly, the circulation of stories plays a pivotal role in shaping sexual knowledge about relationships, including marriage. For instance, I began to think critically about it when my uncle died as I was writing up this analysis. I found myself both admiring how my uncle and aunt had been wed for sixty five years, but I also noted their relationships was affirmed in both life and in death: in life, they could access taxation benefits, etc., while in death, succession law supported my aunt’s rights as
a spouse. Earlier, I remarked how MacLiammoir and Edwards made mirror wills to manage their estates. A key difference is who same-sex couples are liable for hefty inheritance tax on their estate as they are defined as being ‘strangers in blood’.

While in many respects, the first two elements are legalistic, the third element of this terrain relates to how people account for their views and beliefs about same-sex marriage. In this chapter, and in the previous one, I attended how people frame their views about same-sex marriage, and to ‘what goes without saying’ (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1991), to the underbelly of discursive claims.

While some of this discourse relates to consumption and to the law, we can note that being a ‘good gay’ (Seidman, 2002), respectable couple is an important rationale used to advocate rights for same-sex couples. In the exemplars, we see repeatedly how protagonists privilege concepts such as privacy, respect, universality with heterosexuals, etc., in the name of being recognised as ‘good gays’ (Seidman, 2002) or ‘very straight’ gays (Connell, 1995).

**Changing Times: the example of the fragmenting Irish family**

In Chapter Six, it was noted how women contend with a persistent moral ethos to be wives and mothers. I would suggest that the arrival of divorce and the recent acknowledgement of increased cohabiting couples have given women cause to reflect on the implication of the older sexual regime in Ireland. Mulqueen (2007: 4) reported how eminent Irish feminist and journalist Nuala O’Faolain lamented the persistence of material inequalities of opportunity for Irish women of her generation.
In particular, O'Faolain argued ‘the thing sacrificed on the fires of Ireland has been people’s sex lives’. The ‘sacrifice’ to which she alludes is her lesbian identity. Remarking that women have not been free to determine their sexuality and to manage their own lives today, leads O'Faolain to call for the revitalization of the women’s movement. What I took out of O'Faolain's comments is a wider issue of how social transformation and the detraditionalization of family forms, not only frees people up, but also creates new demands for legal recognition. Just taking the variation of relationship patterns in the most recent Irish census is cause for reflection about how we live (Giddens, 1991, 1992).

We may see, recent Irish Census figures record multiple family forms but only one type is validated: heterosexual marriage. Other forms of relationships are emerging fast. The CSO (Central Statistics Office) reported in the 2006 Census that there were 2,090 same-sex couples in the State, of which two-thirds were male couples and this represented an increase from 1,300 same-sex couples recorded in 2002 (CSO, 2007a). While this figure seems to be very low and, as one blogger remarked, ‘closet doors are still closed’ (Maman Poulet, 2007), change is afoot. Census figures paint a fascinating picture of significant change in people’s intimate lives and living arrangements more widely, with 329,450 people in the State living alone. Of the 415, 354 two person households, 49.2% were husband and wife (no children); 15.6% were lone mothers, and 3.1% were lone fathers. The total number of divorced people in the State was 1.4% of the total. I noted how in the 15-19 age group, 10 men and 16 women were (already!) divorced and – at the other end of the scale – in the 85 years+ category, there were 110 divorced people (CSO 2007b, 2007c). These figures are but glimpses into how family life is changing, and we can situate Ireland’s experience in terms of wider global transformations around family life and sexuality (Giddens, 1992; Holton, 2001; Binnie, 2004).
The statistics, however, do not tell us anything about how people manage to break out of social norms – nor do statistics tell us anything about people who are unhappy but still in their marriages, etc. But if I understand O’Faolain’s general point about the local correctly, it is still normatively assumed that Irish women should be wives and mothers (married to men) and they are engaged in a struggle in an ongoing way to get away from the essentialist assumption that women’s biology is destiny. While marriage is normative, single motherhood in Ireland remains stigmatising (Hyde, 2000). O’Faolain’s frustration and anger about how her lesbian life was constrained, however, indicates to me how stepping out from the norm is not solely a political dilemma but a moral one, about moral values (Weeks, 1995). I sense that recent debates about same-sex couples in Ireland reflect analogous tensions to those experienced by women.

Media debates about ‘gay marriage’: beyond Two Poofs and a Cake

In 2001, just prior to 9/11, a fascinating exchange of letters in The Irish Times appeared in response to the first same-sex civil partnerships in Germany, which I ‘tracked’ over time and had a version of my analysis published (Reynolds, 2007). Here, I take up the main findings in summary and add a second exemplar (Mishler, 1990) about gay marriage appeared in The Irish Times in 2004.

Ireland has presented a mediatized discourse about same-sex marriage, in which telling sexual stories are an important component. In the 2001 debate, I tracked the newspaper letters page reactions to the photograph of a gay wedding (below) which can be explored as a site of interaction that tells us a lot about the institutional level of gender politics. In the 2004 case, the reaction is in response to an article about a gay wedding in Canada and, while shorter, both analyses point to how global sexual
politics inform local discourses. These interactions are no longer face-to-face, there is *no physical presentation of self* (Goffman, 1959, 1963), but my analysis hints at the work of media theorists who use the term *informational co-presence* (Meyrowitz, 1985; Peillon and Corcoran, 2004).

The instances of mediatized debate that I draw upon here, of course, are part of a wider, burgeoning issue on internet newsgroups and bulletin boards. While there have been some studies, from media and journalism scholarship, that have explored the issue of editorial control, my focus is on contributor storytelling practices and I use the letters as my documentary data (Hodder, 1999). These debates constitute a research lens into how intimacy is done, or at least, discussed.

We might consider the image as a *gender advertisement* (Goffman, 1976) which problematised the naturalness of heterosexual marriage through a *gender display* of two men on their wedding day. Goffman (1976: 3) argues that ‘a picture... of the relationship between any two persons can hardly be obtained through an examination of the displays ... [there is] a loose gearing... between social structures and what goes on in particular occasions of ritual expression... generated within social situations’. Gender displays are representations that rely on the agent’s analytical skills to arrive at a nuanced interpretation or ‘reading’. Following Goffman (1976: 2), I suggest that the image of the gay couple symbolically marked out gay masculinity in an active way that served to *complicate* (heterosexualised) gender norms associated with a wedding.

Gay men are characterised by Raewyn Connell (1995) as being a *subordinate masculinity*, but here we find gay men being responsible as agents for *gender vertigo* (Connell, 1995; Risman, 1998) and for problematising the lack of access for same-sex couples to the institution of marriage. The debate, through the
newspaper, is part of a wider process that tries to shift Irish marriage towards a life politics concern (Giddens, 1991; 1992). The quotation (at the top of this chapter) about how Senator Norris would never marry seems rather dated now.

The context in which the media image appeared should be noted. Responses to the image in the letters page were shaped by powerful forces: how people read the image, how the image fitted into or challenged social moirés about weddings and how it had a particularly historiographical resonance in Ireland. Plummer (2003: 12-13) posits the idea of doing intimacy as people’s attempts at getting close to feelings and emotions about a topic in an embodied way – that is, people write to the newspaper for a reason.

The photograph certainly solicited a reaction as it challenges a familiar wedding scene and formula of showing the cutting of a wedding cake and challenges our normative understandings of marriage as it is queered (Honeychurch, 1996) because two men are involved, or –putting it another way - because no women are involved. The photograph made me think about similarity and difference because it disrupted the more widely understood concept of a ‘married gay man’ in modernity.

From Oscar Wilde onwards – there have been men who presented as ‘heterosexual’ married men but who had sex with other men. Wilde has present-day successors, such as the American phenomenon of (straight) men go on the ‘down low’ (i.e. having sex with men) (King, 2004) or the emergence of an Irish-based Married Gay Men’s support group, for married men who have sex with men (and who may or not have left their marriages). Present day media discourse of men who have sex with men, vary in tone but tend to problematize the idea of unitary (heterosexual) manhood (Kilgannon, 2005). These discourses show men as ‘weaving’ between ‘natural’ and ‘abnormal’, but also suggest that there is some societal tolerance as
long as their ambivalence remains ‘a personal affair’ (Bauman, 1991: 197). In many instances, if we generalise, these men still have significant links to heterosexual life.

The photograph of two men marrying one another seemed important because they are symbolically breaking completely with heterosexuality. Simultaneously, I thought that the image ‘style’ bore striking resemblances to the few heterosexual weddings that I had witnessed, although part of me wonders if same-sex weddings should be ‘the same’ (Tyrnauer, 2004) - or if I wanted cake at my wedding. I suggest that the cutting of a cake is an example of ‘doing intimacy’ (Plummer, 2003: 12-13) because it only done by a newly married (heterosexual) couple as part of their ‘big day’. The embodied image of the gay men cutting their wedding cake demonstrates the power of sameness by displaying the same ritualised behaviour as heterosexual couples in a wedding day public space (Weeks, 1995; Valentine, 2002). To echo the quotation from Maupin (2007), the married gay men in the picture were seeking public recognition of what they already knew. As an exemplar, however, the image provides us with an exemplar with which to deliberate about weddings, ceremonies, cakes and morality – and it does!

In terms of the opening contribution to the letters page, Vera, as the protagonist to this discussion, professed her ‘shock’ at the photograph of the two gay men on the front page. However, she ignored an article, several pages into the same edition of the newspaper, which had profiled a journalist’s account of a German lesbian couple’s wedding and how the women’s family members had been supportive (Scally, 2001). Vera, it seemed, was particularly shocked by men and she did not take pleasure in the image. Following Chalfen (1998), for whom photography is a continuum of representation from iconic to familial imagery, we can understand how the gay men’s photograph disrupts the normative reading of a wedding day, with the attendant rituals and unsettles those who do and do not take ‘pleasure’ in
this particular image (Mulvey, 1975). The photograph, therefore, acted as a powerful cultural symbol (Kuhn, 1985) to both sides of the debate. It problematised the (heterosexual) myth (about marriage), which both antagonised the respondent who was ‘shocked’ by the image and the reinforced the need to protect the image of real heterosexual marriage. But it also provided an image, to those in favour of same-sex marriage, which offered succour to them to make necessary fictions (Weeks, 1995: 99-100) of their own by going public in the letters-age with their stories, plans or ideals about same-sex.

In my analysis, I am also thinking about ‘what is Irish’ in the Irish debate about this photograph. Inglis (2005) has recently reiterated a key finding of earlier sociological work about Irish sexuality (Inglis, 1998a, 1998b, 1998c) in which he posits that historically, prudery about sexual matters made it problematic to speak or write about sexual matters. From attending public discussions about sexual rights, I have often noted how people just have difficulties talking about ‘sex’. But in the letters page of a newspaper, it seems the virtual anonymity allow more scope to do intimacy (Plummer, 2003: 12-13). Could be that anonymity helps intimate disclosure? Reading the letters, I would argue that mediatized storytelling seemed to allow people to cover about their sexual insecurities through allowing them to silence the uncertainties in their lives (Goffman, 1963).

Nancy Schepere-Hughes (1983) surmised over twenty years ago that storytelling in the media would become a way of negotiating cultural changes in Ireland – and how right she was! Resultant from her well-known study in rural Ireland (Schepere-Hughes, 1978 [2001]), she was criticized because she had supposedly invaded people’s privacy and display Irish prudery about sexuality.
In her subsequent reflections about her research experience, she noted how her critics had attacked her through the media and not directly. Although she did not accept their criticisms, she suggested that their views needed to be taken into account as part of an interactive ethnography work as it was important to capture just how dissent is given voice in a culture.

In particular, Scheper-Hughes noted how it appeared that 'challenges coming from 'the natives' themselves, whether these be in the form of tribal petitions or irate 'Letters to the Editor' of the Irish Times' seemed to the way in which people offered critiques (Scheper-Hughes, 1983: 158). While one might be tempted to suggest using the media to comment on an issue is a contemporary phenomenon, or a liminal phase of sexual politics (Turner, 1985; Little et al, 1998), Scheper-Hughes (1983) leads me to suggest this is a deeper cultural phenomenon.

While writing letters is a way for contributors to side-step personal stigma, the evidence of letters allows me (as a researcher) to explicate sexual stories, their necessary fictions, as mediatized intimacies. Furthermore, my own researcher position was mediatized. I was both part audience member to this mediated interaction (as another textual consumer) and part analyst (through writing about the social interaction).

Fragmentary as this data is, it is an instance of a dialogic struggle over intimacy – between myth and fiction - made by a 'tiny public' (Fine & Harrington, 2004) or a 'public sphericule' (Cunningham, 2001) whose impact goes beyond its size in the transformation of gender.

Through the lens of this particular debate, we might find it useful to think about Weeks's (1995: 99) distinction between myth and fiction where:
‘... the dominant (hetero)sexual identities in our culture have some of the qualities of myths: they speak for an assumed naturalness, eternity and truth which belie their historical and contingent nature. The radical, oppositional identities, which have arisen in and against the hegemonic ones can be seen as fictions: they offer narratives of individual life, collective memory and imagined alternatives which provide the motivation and inspiration for change. In that sense, they are not only fictions – they are necessary fictions. Without them we would have no basis to explain our individual needs and desires, nor a sense of collective belonging that provides the agency and means for change.’ (Weeks, 1995: 99).

Weeks is pointing to a central fault-line in the debate about homosexuality/heterosexuality, which helps us to see how in many Irish contemporary struggles for lesbian and gay equality a combination of discursive claims are implicated. Rather than there being solely a pro/anti divide, I posit that there is a weave of argument between how people would like the world to be and how we find it, which recognises the position of the other. While Byrne (2002) can claim that the Irish LGBT movement is calling for ‘nothing special for ourselves’ in its political campaigns – which reflects the strategic essentialism of the movement’s lobbying for ‘fairness’, the myth/fiction dynamic helps to expose a powerful element of a wider challenge to the naturalness of heterosexuality in late/liquid modernity.

‘... You've got to accent-chu-ate the positive
Eliminate the negative
Latch on to the affirmative
Don't mess with Mister In-Between...’

('Accent-chu-ate the positive', Mercer and Arlen, 1944).

Thus while the traditional era of modernity (as evoked by the chorus from Arlen & Mercer) placed a premium upon an avoidance of all ambiguity ('accentuating the
positive') and the certitude of the positive, late/liquid modernity, allows voices singing about 'the negative' and 'the in-between' start to chiming in.

While certitude about (two) gender identities, the belief in rationality and adherence to the sanctity of marriage (Giddens, 1991) were the hallmarks of modernity, it was the case in Ireland that 'silence' about the embodied aspect of marriage was the order of the day. Our current-day experience of high modernity posits that there are inescapable 'negatives' or "risks which previous generations have not had to face" (Giddens, 1991: 4) and which cannot be avoided. In relation to the institution of marriage, there are a host of risks and challenges facing the institution from within (divorce, plastic sexuality) and from without (non-marital living arrangements/ family forms), which have been widely signalled (Prendivelle, 1988).

While Giddens (1991) argues that transformations of personal life and self-identity are critical issues in late-modern society, where knowledgeable actors act in dialogical relationship with institutions, Bauman (2000) has more recently posited that a more complex, liquid modernity is underway wherein there is 'a redistribution and reallocation of modernity's melting powers' (Bauman, 2000:6). In the case of 'gay marriage', its claim is subversive because it is a liquid modern claim. The idea of gay marriage offers a caesura of the old – as heterosexual marriage is re/imagined as a socially constructed rather than natural concept. Gay marriage problematises the non-conventionality of the 'traditional family form', which was imagined through the 1937 Constitution under the aegis and 'special position' of Catholic Church influence and which has since had implications for Irish women's lives and life-chances (Mahon, 1994).
Whether Ireland introduces 'civil partnership', 'gay marriage', or neither, the important thing is the 'natural' ground of heterosexuality has been unsettled by the 'gay marriage' debate. Having stated that (in my lefty radical mode), there are a couple of reasons why it must be stated that attaining 'gay marriage' (rather than a civil partnership) would be extremely difficult in Ireland. Crucially, marriage is protected under the Constitution. The Irish Constitution (under Article 41. 3.1) seeks to 'guard with special care the institution of marriage, on which the family is founded, and to protect it against attack'. The use of the word 'attack' is rather stark, and evokes the idea that there was no 'in-between' on marriage at the time.

More than solely that marriage is 'protected', an entire state apparatus in terms of policy and law has been developed over the years to promote 'family values' (divorce, marriage bar, employment discriminations) to the detriment of other Irish citizens. Women were particularly badly served by a private patriarchal regime (Mahon, 1994) that still resonates with younger women today.

Asking for 'gay marriage' would not only aggravate those who wanted 'traditional' marriage, it would also possibly cause concern to the heterosexuals who had already organised non-traditional living arrangements. Changing the institution of marriage, it might be deemed, would have an impact not just upon heterosexual marriage but it would also have implications for cohabitants or those who have had civil marriages. While the overall rate of marriage increased from 4.6 per thousand in 1996 to 5.2 per thousand in 2002, it is also interesting to note that the proportion of marriages in Ireland which are 'civil marriages' (at a registry office not a church) has increased significantly from 5.7% of all marriages in 1996 to 17.6% in 2002. The rise in civil marriage as a proportion of all marriages can be seen to be associated with the rising financial costs of traditional weddings and with the rise of re-marriage, as divorce was introduced in 1996 (CSO, 2004). Hence, in spite of being presented as 'natural' in discourse, we can argue that heterosexual
marriage is being increasingly fashioned by active agents who plan for their 'big day' and live together happily ever after (or not) (Plummer, 1995; 2003).

The 2001 'Gay Marriage' Debate in The Irish Times

Two German men pictured on their wedding day, 2 August 2001

Sir, -

A photograph in your edition of August 2nd shows a German gay couple cutting the cake at their travesty of a wedding in Berlin. I just wonder if there will be any outcry from your reading public as to the picture being disturbing, shocking, and/or tasteless and insensitive. I do know that if my grandmother were alive, she would give vent to a deeply felt and fervent "muise go sábháilidh dia sinn, agus Amén", a Thiarna!"

- Yours, etc., Vera. (Irish Times, letters to the editor, 14 August 2001)

After the appearance of the photograph of two German gay men (picture 1, above on 2 August 2001), the opening contribution in reaction to it appeared from Vera (14/8/01). The article made me think about Goffman's (1963) frontispiece to Stigma, and the letter from the woman with no nose.

In her first letter, Vera terms the picture of the same-sex wedding as being a 'travesty of a wedding' and she wonders 'if there will be any outcry from your reading public as to the picture being disturbing, shocking, and/or tasteless and insensitive'. Vera's letter ends with an Irish language phrase, which expresses the
idea of ‘God preserve us from harm’. **Vera** ventures to argue that her grandmother might have uttered this saying as a reaction to being scandalised by gay weddings.

Following **Vera’s** initial letter, two replies appear on 17 August 2001. **Ian** (17 August) briefly critiques Vera’s ethical position as a Christian and argues that:

‘... perhaps the only cause for outcry is that in 2001 Ireland still has these wonderful ‘Christian’ attitudes to any progress in understanding commitment between same-sex couples’.

**Ken** (17 August) argues that the real travesty is the non-existence of rights for same-sex couples under the law and he argues that heterosexuals would not accept such inequality. Additionally, he is saddened by the idea that Catholics, who in traditional Ireland might not have understood homosexual love, would be so intolerant today. Taking the hypothetical grandmother further, he surmises:

‘Whatever about her Grandmother's fervent sayings, I am 100 per cent certain that, were any of my grandparents alive at the moment, all of them would be present when I marry my partner (of nearly 10 years) next year.’

**Mary** (22 August) writes how she was delighted by the photograph because:

‘... when so much of your paper contains reports on war, crime, cruelty, injustice, pollution, environmental disaster, etc., all of which are unfortunate evidence of our lack of love for each other and the world we live in, it is uplifting to see love celebrated in whatever form it comes’.

**Vera** makes a second contribution (22 August) and tries to repair the situation and re/define her position. She suggests that it was to be expected that her viewpoint would raise ‘a few hackles’ among readers, distancing herself from her own remarks
as if she did not own them. She takes up her symbolic grandmother again, trying to retreat into morality rather than an attitudinal view:

'Now, granted my grandmother belonged to another century, another era, when traditional Catholics/Christians would have been totally uncomprehending of anything outside the norm, especially in the context of sexuality. Today she would, I am sure, as I do, 'live and let live' as far as a gay 'relationship' goes, but I doubt if she could understand a gay 'marriage'. The sacrament of matrimony, then and now, is a binding, religious, covenant between a man and a woman, and no amount of understanding or liberal attitudinising can make a same-sex 'marriage' anything more than a travesty'.

In response to Vera's second letter, three further contributors (25 August 2001 and 30 August 2001) challenge Vera's comments about the cultural meaning of matrimony.

Richard (25 August) takes up a seemingly contradictory position held by Vera over time:

'The fact is that marriage, in the form of civil union, exists as an alternative, and there is simply no reason for refusing gay couples access to the rights that it entails. All arguments to the contrary inevitably insist on requiring people to follow a moral code to which they do not subscribe. In an earlier letter to this newspaper (23 November 1998), Vera quite rightly called for 'respect for divergent views' - it is a principle which deserves to be universally applied'.

Secondly, Thomas (25 August) argues that Vera's view of marriage is partial in the European context, where there is a religious ceremony but it is the civil wedding that legalises a union. He suggests that non-religious civil unions should not conflict with Vera's viewpoint.

Hugh (25 August) wonders how Vera:
... can rejoice that the happy homosexuals of Moate, Mucklagh, Mullingar, Pollagh, Boher and Banagher and all those other charming little midland towns are not cluttering up Roman Catholic churches, desperate to have their unions blessed. He argues that conflating civil unions and the sacrament of matrimony because 'they are not the same thing'. The next time I'm upset by a photo of a 'straight wedding', I may write to The Irish Times. Alternatively, I may have a glass of water and wait for the feeling to pass.

Vera writes again (7 September) and seeks to end the discussion:

'In order to clarify a few points, may I reply to those correspondents who have been exercised by my letter of August 14th? There had been considerable outrage a few days earlier at a poignant photograph you published of a tragic drowning on the west coast. In my original letter, I did not express my own personal feelings at the gay photograph. I simply wondered if it would spark off any outcry among your readers. For myself, I was both amused, bemused and rather saddened by a spectacle of two bald, ageing gays cutting a 'wedding cake' topped by a pair of little male dolls, and I voiced what I know would have been my grandmother's bewildered disbelief at what the world was coming to. And, no, I am not confusing civil and religious marriages. Marriage, whether solemnised in church or registry office, is still a marriage between a man and a woman of whatever faith or none. But it seems to me that gays and lesbians are becoming aggressive in their campaign to make the abnormal normal, by demanding the legal status of marriage, mainly on the premise of property and ownership rights and the bequeathing of same. I would have thought that anyone of sound mind can leave whatever to whomever, without necessarily being in any sort of legal union. What is threatened in all of this is the institution of marriage as we know it, which is under severe attack today from many quarters. In the soap Fair City at the moment, a young woman wants a child without benefit of husband or marriage, but rather the sperm-bank, the implications being that in this respect Ireland is in the Dark Ages. We are not sufficiently enlightened or liberal yet? What message does this give to young people? That the abnormal should be regarded as normal? And does this thinking make for decent living and a healthy society? I must say I am greatly flattered by the correspondent who quoted from a 1998 letter of mine. Does he keep a file of fan offerings? And full marks to the gentleman (August 30th) who consulted the map to find all those midland towns and villages, with their quota of gays, in order to give local colour to his argument! To all my critics who went to the bother of expressing their views, may I say: shall we agree to disagree, and leave it at that?'
Reflections upon the 2001 Debate

The exchange as a story operates as a virtual interaction with people offering their views. There are two stages to the interaction: Vera's initial letter brings replies from Ian, Ken and Mary. Then Vera's second letter (clarification) leads to replies from Richard and Thomas. The trenchant critique of Vera's view leads to her third letter, which seeks to end the discussion. I suggest, however, that two aspects of the exchange are important. Firstly, there is the use of symbols in the argument to shape and produce the interaction. The symbols that I shall refer to are religiosity, the Grandmother and the term 'travesty'. Secondly, we can see that externalising devices (Potter, 1996) are important factors in setting up the discursive critique of 'gay weddings' and in undermining Vera's antigay argument. The reference to religious values appears through Vera's invocation of how her grandmother would pray to be spared from the idea of a gay wedding. This reference is veiled because it is made through the medium of the Irish language to emphasize her Irishness and the authenticity of her Catholic standpoint.

Vera's allusion to Catholicism is taken to refer to timeless religious values but as dated values by other respondents. For example, Ian argues that such supposedly Christian views are obstacles 'to any progress in understanding commitment between same-sex couples'. Likewise, Ken's view is that religious belief systems have to move with the times, while Vera's attitude is interpreted as "sad" because it refuses to recognise love between partners in a more progressive way. Ken's response is embodied because he uses the letter as a coming out story of his own and we see him stress his own experiential knowledge and agency against Vera's attitudinising because this critique affects him personally (Mills, 1940: 905; Giddens, 1991). Mary criticises Vera's lack of tolerance when she mentions how
lovely it is to see 'love celebrated in whatever form it comes'. While Mary's comment may be thought of a 'denial of reality' (Goffman, 1967), and she seems to be 'apolitical', I suggest that this contribution offers what Eliasoph & Lichterman (2003: 743) term the 'default setting', or a position of neutrality to sexual politics. While Mary 'says nothing', there is still a sub-politics of sexuality implicated in her contribution which disputes Vera's view and nonetheless reflects 'cultural work' (Eliasoph, 1997).

Religiosity is more explicitly used when Vera (Vera II) tries to clarify her views by arguing that while traditional attitudes belong in the past that gay marriage is still not a valid living arrangement. This led the two of the final commentators to protest that Vera seems to conflate religious and civil law understandings of marriage. It is at this point that one commentator, Richard, does try to offer Vera a way out of this debate by reminding her how in an earlier letter to the newspaper she called for respect of "divergent views" and he suggests that this is a good policy. In response, Vera writes a final, lengthy justificatory letter, which ends the discussion.

Viewing same-sex rights as 'progress' places the debate within wider discourses of modernization (Newman, 2001) and the tension between natural heterosexuality and its homosexual 'Other' demonstrates how the debate has ideological underpinnings (Peillon, 1982). Rather than the mistakenly held view that consensus is being achieved, we can see that "the mobilisation of a few underlying principles" are critical to the struggle for pre-eminence in "an intellectual and moral framework" (Peillon, 1984: 56). Underlying this, we might argue that religion no longer "prevents men from thinking freely" (Durkheim, 2002 [1897]: 342).
The grandmother image is an interesting and important symbol. Vera begins by professing how her (deceased) grandmother would be shocked by the sight (referring to picture 1). Inglis (1998a) has highlighted how Irish mothers play important roles in family life as both moral educators and enforcers of discipline around sexuality – but what might we theorise about grandmothers? Writing about her own relationship with her late grandmother, Carol Rambo (2005: 564) argues that certain aspects of identity is never erased from consciousness, rather there are ‘traces’ of the past and of experience that infuse the present. My interpretation of Vera’s use of the grandmother is that she chose this symbol as someone who her opponents would have emotional difficulty in dismissing. But symbolically, it betrays the trace of identity that is important to the liminal generation, to those who do remember how things were from experience and memory. My reading of Rambo’s work (2005) suggests that the symbol of grandmother is much more complex than Vera allows.

Vera would like her grandmother to stand for normative, universalised, heterosexual and traditional values, whereas the respondents highlight the variation between the grandmother’s generation and people in today’s generation. Here we have a distinction between Weeks’s (1995) idea of myth and fiction: Vera’s grandmother is a pure, mythical figure, whereas Ken’s grandmother, for example, is imagined as a benevolent, fictional figure who would travel to her grandson’s gay wedding, were she still living. Thus, we also have a tension between those who have rights of access, control and choice about weddings against those who are seeking intimate citizenship recognition at the symbolic level.

The third symbol that seems to be important to the interaction is conjured up by the term ‘travesty’. Vera opens the interaction by tentatively wondering if there is anyone else who is offended by this travesty of a wedding. Travesty means an
'incongruous copy' or a 'caricature' (Chadsey et al., 1956) or, a 'simulacrum' in French. Thus, Vera is subtly arguing that gay weddings are not valid living arrangements. While Vera tries to posit this idea, the response by Ken is clear: for him the real travesty is Vera's attitude to gay relationships. This leads Vera (in the second letter) to locate 'travesty' in relation to a contravention of the sanctity of heterosexual marriage, which is a retreat into ideology. Her more direct criticism of gay weddings displays her antigay standpoint more explicitly, the ensuing responses tackle the way marriage, and religious service are conflated by Vera and voiced as an untenable stance.

In Vera's final letter (7 September), the idea of 'travesty' disappears from Vera's argument. But she takes a broad swipe at a host of liberal changes in Ireland and suggests that traditional values – ideology (Peillon, 1982; 1984) - are under threat by modern values, but she seeks to end the discussion having being forced into an explicitly anti-gay standpoint (Smith and Windes, 2000).

We may extend Durkheim's (2002: 339) stance on changing attitudes to suicide to sexual orientation. Durkheim argued that when a moral issue is no longer proscribed by law, and no longer revolts us, we find ourselves in a quandary because 'we cannot condemn it without condemning ourselves'. That is, we (must) tolerate a phenomenon, even if we do not accept it morally. As homosexuality has been decriminalised, we confront the issue of sexual diversity, but people may still not like the idea of same-sex intimacy. Thus, to invert Durkheim's maxim: once a social type is plastic, it is no longer fixed and is not limited. Instead of a 'social type' becoming fixed, it is subject to constant innovation and expansion – it becomes 'liquid' (Bauman, 2000). [Durkheim's original quote is 'once a social type is fixed it is no longer infinitely plastic; a limit is soon reached which cannot be passed' (Durkheim, 2002: 336)]. In late/ liquid modernity, social types remain plastic or
liquid, and we require life planning skills can attain mastery and navigate the plasticity of sexuality, which is simultaneously an opportunity and risk (Lee, 2005). Thus, after decriminalisation of homosexuality, homosexuality did not become a fixed type. Rather new ideas and demands (such as gay marriage) emerged which, in turn, generate new, more diverse demands, which are not easily captured by policy (e.g. Fine Gael, 2004).

This brings me to the other aspect of the exchanges; how the discursive elements of the communication shape the outcome. Vera begins by describing the gay wedding photo as being 'disturbing, shocking, tasteless, insensitive'. Vera positions her view in subtle ways to be less 'antigay' at the beginning of the interaction. By wondering if anyone else agrees with her analysis of what the 'gay wedding' represents, she is using externalizing devices (Potter, 1996: 151). She distances herself from discussing her views at the start of the interaction in the first person in favour of an impersonal description. Hence, the gay wedding is presented in her description as a travesty, and she uses a category entitlement device (Potter, 1996: 165) by surmising what reaction her grandmother would have to the (in)validity of this union.

While Weeks (1995) points to how myths serve to naturalize heterosexual privilege, Vera actually inverts myth by drawing upon her own fiction, in the guise of the grandmother. Rather than responding to Vera's view, which waxes lyrical about tradition, respondents make comments about the pleasure of looking at the photograph from a neutral setting (Mary), or that sidestep the precise issue that Vera raised (e.g. Ian focuses on Christianity; Ken jokes about 'Musha live and let live').
Vera adopts another tack, which Potter terms as a *retreat into vagueness* (Potter, 1996: 167-168). Vera ends her contribution by asking that everyone ‘agree to disagree’ but she also reels off an almost incoherent list of social wrongs that are symptomatic of the erosion of traditional values. The power of the correspondents who favour equality and fairness wears away at Vera’s use of externalizing devices and renders her empirical presentation of the facts (gay marriage as a travesty) meaningless through the ‘group style’ (Eliasoph & Lichterman, 2003), thereby exposing Vera as being antigay.

The pro-gay/ anti-gay dynamic in this Irish debates is still fluid, but I would argue that Vera’s attempt to paint heterosexual marriage as part of the natural order backfires and those in favour of same-sex partnership rights are reasonably successful at creating ‘antigay Vera’ and rendering themselves as progay. As her antigay view becomes more transparent, Vera expresses concern about how aggressively lesbians and gay men are seeking to make the ‘abnormal normal’ and how a lack of respect for traditional values when rights for same-sex partnership/marriage are being demanded.

I surmise that this flow of letters in the column might have continued a bit longer, perhaps with ripostes to Vera’s last letter, were it not for the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 in the USA, which, understandably, took precedence over all other news at that time.
Media Coverage 2001-2004

Over the period from 2001 -2004, I kept track of correspondence in *The Irish Times* (the Irish newspaper of record) about gay marriage/ civil partnership. We can see three discourses emerge in this period. The first discourse is *reportage*, usually concerning statistics or trends about cohabitation and is presented without journalist opinion (O'Brien, 2004).

The second discourse centres on *consumption*, and generally relates to the economic or political reasons why same-sex couples want civil unions. Carroll (2004) writes about how an (anonymized) Irish gay couple are planning their same sex marriage in Belgium. Interestingly, we learn that because a gay couple live abroad, their spatially-distant relationship with their ‘bio’ family (Maupin, 2007) is not necessarily easier than for (local) couples:

‘Conor’s parents couldn’t make it to the wedding, but, despite their Catholic faith, were enthusiastic. "His mother was all excited about getting the right Belleek china for a wedding present," laughs Stephen. By contrast, his own elderly Protestant parents don’t know about the marriage, he says.’ (Carroll, 2004).

The third calibre of discourse is about *religion and morality* (McGarry, 2004a, 2004b) and often reports on various church opinions about civil partnerships. But its arguments can sometimes be more complex, which leads to correspondence chains. In one such extended chain of letters to the editor in 2004, commentators are motivated to write to the newspaper by an article in *The Irish Times* by an independent author Karen Armstrong (Armstrong, 2004) about a wedding of two lesbian university professors. Writing about the Eck/ Austin wedding, which was held at Harvard University, Armstrong begins with discussing the 800-strong wedding guest list but crosses into a moral discourse when Armstrong emphasizes
how the women are devoutly religious people and suited to be married. A response ensues under a letters page subtitle of 'the vocation to marriage'.

A priest (who regularly appears in the letters column), Fr. Tom (22 July) writes:

'I should be grateful if I might comment on the article by Karen Armstrong (July 13th). She writes enthusiastically about the “marriage” of Diana Eck and Dorothy Austin in Harvard Memorial Church. The vocation to marriage - real marriage - is written into the very nature of man and woman as they came from the hand of the Creator. Scripture says:

God blessed them and said to them: be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it.

The books of Ruth and Tobit bear moving witness to the elevated sense of marriage.
The first public miracle of Jesus - at his mother's request - was at a wedding feast.

In his preaching, he unequivocally taught the original meaning of the union of man and woman as the Creator willed it; "therefore a man leaves his father and mother and cleaves to his wife and they become one flesh".

In the face of clear scripture teaching, how can a state that is merely an expression of lust on the part of two men or two women be dignified with the title "marriage"?

Fr. Tom's message is quite direct, sermon-like. Like much official Catholic Church discourse on sexuality (or wider morality issues), it does not engage with the audience or seek debate. However, a day later, and on the following Monday, there is a flood of correspondence that takes issue with the priest's views on gay marriage.

In rapid response, a letter from Morgan (Dublin) appears on the following day. He argues that the women's values are based on good moral values. Morgan points out that with civil marriage as an option, a church marriage is now 'optional', implying the church is no longer as relevant as it once was:
'Father Tom asks "how can a state that is merely an expression of lust on the part of two men or two women be dignified with the title 'marriage'?" (July 22nd). As he is, no doubt, celibate and has never formed a committed, long-term relationship with another adult, it would be worthwhile to point out that "lust" or sexual attraction forms a part in the establishment of most adult relationships. For a couple like Diana Eck and Dorothy Austin to maintain and deepen their relationship over a period of 28 years, it takes a lot more than that. Like any other married couple, it takes love, forgiveness, shared values and experience. If they still lust for each other after that long, then I congratulate them. Karen Armstrong and Fr. Tom both suggest that marriage has a spiritual dimension. For many people this seems true. But it should not be forgotten that it also has a civil dimension. Marriage in a church is optional, while the civil rights and obligations that come with marriage are not. In my own experience, most gay men and lesbians seek only these.'

Patrick (Dublin) is critical of how Fr. Tom takes a selective interpretation of the lesbian couple’s relationship, and reduced it to ‘lust’. He is directly critical of how a priest can know what God is actually thinking. He concludes with a variation on ‘judge not, lest thou be judged’, and argues that this couple are doing their best to lead a Christian life:

‘Father Tom (July 22nd) seems to adopt a very un-Christian attitude to those wishing to live in long-term, exclusive, same-sex relationships. He takes what is a small part of any relationship, the sexual activity, and uses it to judge the entire relationship as being “merely an expression of lust”. By that logic, a heterosexual marriage might equally be defined as lustful. However, as St Paul reminds us "better to marry than to burn" (iCor 7:9). Father Tom would like that amended to, it seems, “better to marry than to burn; unless you are gay, in which case, just burn”. He appears very sure that he knows the mind of God when it comes to defining the vocation to marriage. The only thing I am certain of on this issue is that it is no help to anyone to judge and condemn those trying their best to lead a Christian life.’

Padraic (Louth) comments about the register of language that Fr. Tom used. In particular, he is critical of how the priest disregards the fact that gay marriage is legally recognised in other jurisdictions. What is particularly incisive in his remarks is how the priest is regarded as “Mr.”, that is, just another individual with no power over others:
In relation to Tom’s letter (July 22nd), I respect his own personal beliefs that he draws upon in his discussion of the vocation of marriage. However, I must take issue with the language he uses to express his view, and his un-Christian approach to respecting other people’s values and natural way of life. Language evolves. Whether he likes it or not, the word "marriage" can now legally refer to the union of same-sex couples around the world including those in the US state of Massachusetts. Contrary to his opinion, this civil marriage is indeed a "real marriage", where two people have come to celebrate their union with friends and loved ones. The use of his word "lust" to describe the basis of same-sex relationships is also problematical, un-Christian and hateful. How does he know? Is he speaking from experience? I’m sure that it can be a basis, just as lust exists in heterosexual relationships. However, from my own experience, I know of many same-sex relationships based on love. And what can be greater for the world than two people coming together to share their love? I don’t believe that Mr [Tom]’s comments reflect the views of many Christians throughout the country, as his approach goes against many philosophies of Christianity. Perhaps he could learn a thing or two if he opens his eyes and sees the love that is shared by thousands of same-sex couples across Ireland.

Finally, John (Dublin) brings some humour to the discussion, suggesting the views of the priest on sexuality are simply irrelevant, even impotent. He simply writes: ‘The opinions of Father Tom on marriage and lust are as valuable as a teetotaller’s opinions on wine or a bald man’s opinions on combs’.

In brief, there is some evidence from this chain of letters, that sermonising by the Church is simply not acceptable in contemporary Ireland, as Fr. Tom is roundly criticised for his stance. But interestingly, his critics are not atheists, rather they appear to be moderate Catholics who advocate fairness in dealing with people, particularly in the case of two Christian lesbians who are ‘good gays’ (Seidman, 2002). Thus, while there is a dichotomy between pro/anti emerging, both sides represent variations on a (moderate to fundamentalist) Christian viewpoint. While the priest is definitely against gay marriage, the respondents are supportive of ‘gay marriage,’ and are more so when the couple are good Christians.
Cultural Change and the Impact of Stories

The role that telling stories about ‘gay marriage’ plays, then, is part of a wider process of social transformation and liberalisation of Irish culture. New intimate citizenship claims are made and new social identities are made public through discourse.

Moving out of the silence about sexuality in Ireland has been a central element of lesbian and gay politics in Ireland (Norris, 1979; Sweetman, 1981; Rose, 1994; O’Malley, 1996; Dunphy, 1997) but it is more recent phenomenon that sexual stories began to ‘shape a new public language’, which is imbued with power (Plummer, 1995). We may conclude that a particular form of new public language is the ‘gender display’ of same-sex couples getting married.

A gay couple at their civil partnership in Belfast, December 2005

The rise of sexual stories about the gay couple ‘has made it possible to claim rights in ways that could not be done until these stories were invented’ (Plummer, 1995: 149-150; Plummer, 2003) but like so many things in Ireland about ‘sex’ - it takes time!
In Irish modernity, gay couples were almost unknown with only the elite (relatively powerful gay men) willing or able to make any sort of public pronouncement about their sexual orientation. Even MacLiammoir/Edwards — as I have mentioned before — did not make a ‘coming out’ statement in our sense of the term, and only after MacLiammoir died did Edwards ‘go public’.

Even when the gay movement became established, I noted — as a young(er) participant at ‘Icebreakers’ — how activists did not allude to their private relationships, perhaps to protect other gay men from the danger of prosecution (for example Norris, 1979; 1981). More widely, individual gay men were criminalised and could be (and were) imprisoned for their homosexuality (Irish Reports, 1945).

However, with the increased (albeit uneven) development of a more tolerant society, and the aftermath of decriminalisation (in 1993), we have witnessed the emergence of publicly identifiable lesbians and gay men (O’Carroll and Collins, 1995), and same-sex couples have emerged in the public sphere. As demands for gay marriage have developed, we might actually argue that same-sex couples, such as MacLiammoir/Edwards, are being rediscovered. Public discourses about same-sex rights serve a consciousness raising role (with gay male couples more visible) by which heterosexuality as an institution is publicly problematised.

Two lesbians at their civil partnership in Belfast, December 2005.
Antigay protests in Belfast were met with parody protests by gay rights campaigners who proclaimed that the earth is flat, and so on – another travesty?

I can now make two points. Firstly, following from Goffman (1977; 2004), attempts to deal with messy social situations by securing an essentialist view of sexuality – such as Vera’s maintenance of the marriage’s naturalness - does ‘not so much allow for the expression of natural differences as for the production of that difference itself’ (Goffman, 1977: 324). Drawing attention to ‘difference’ through ‘allusive phrases’ (Goffman, 1983: 18) in the liquid modern era allows generative politics (Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997) and storytelling to play crucial roles disrupting the naturalness of heterosexuality by problematising the way in which Vera aligns her argument initially. In the second exemplar, a journalist’s words (not an image) helps to shape respondents’ views that Eck and Austin are ‘good gays’.

Within the fragments of progay stories being told, there is an increasing reliance on human agency and embodied experience (Giddens, 1991). The creativity of agency is used to analyze heterosexual norms and traditional social values by turning to the life politics and liquid modern techniques of mastery (Bauman, 2000; 2005; Giddens, 1991) as a route out of Catholic social control, but this is still tentative, even uncertain. However, we can see Ireland is moving from a culture of containment to a culture of constraint.

In the first exemplar, for instance, we see how, using elements of his own coming out story, Ken highlights how ‘individuality is asserted and daily renegotiated in the
continuous activity of interaction' (Bauman, 2005: 21). This instance also shows that stigma (Goffman, 1963) is less salient in places. Associating stories of coming out in support of ‘gay marriage’ and wider issue of intimacy leads me to suggest that there is a need to recast ‘coming out’ from an emancipatory politics to a more life politics framework in Ireland. Ken can tell his story about coming out, of course, as he represents a respectable gay man and would-be ‘intimate citizen’ rather than a sexual deviant or a dodgy queer (Seidman, 1993, 1996, 1997, 1999, 2002). The two Irish men who married in Belgium can also tell their coming out story. But this is accomplished under constraint, and showing carefulness about protecting family members ‘back home’.

While one exemplar ends with an appeal to ‘agree to disagree’ and the other with humour, both interactions serve to play a role in helping to create public consciousness about the same-sex couple. While as Goffman puts it, heterosexual norms ‘may be fully entrenched nowhere [but] ... they can cast some kind of shadow on the encounters encountered everywhere in daily living’ (Goffman, 1963: 153), both exemplars serve to help undo heteronormative gender power by making its underlying assumptions visible.

While there is a sense that Irish culture is either suffocated by silence about sexuality or has adopted a pathway to maturity that is based upon consensus. I argue that the position is more complex. In this chapter, I have suggested that erstwhile fragmentary 2001 and 2004 Irish media debates about ‘gay marriage’ mark an important historical moment in the politics of gender transformation and the rise of an ‘intellectual and moral framework within which cultural orientations develop’ (Peillon, 1984: 56). Both debates help to disrupt the modernist view that a ‘ceremony is a declaration against indeterminacy’ (Turner, 1980: 163) by declaring it as an exclusionary practice when lesbian and gay couples are unable to show commitment. While we like to think that these Irish positions are special or even
unique: 'cultural actors may not recognize, or want to recognize, the significance of exogenous elements in their cultural repertoire, since it is more reassuring to indigenize that which has been borrowed' (Holton, 2000: 151).

The other discursive element that is not quite acknowledged about same-sex partnership is how it is linked to wider discourses of modernization (Newman, 2001). While Vera tries to hold back the modernization of gay relationships by appealing to tradition, her attempt fails because she no longer represents the dominant moral authority. Fr. Tom seeks to turn modernization back completely, rather like King Canute, but the tide of storytelling is about to wash him away.

From the viewpoint of these debates being about knowledge claims, the wider issue is of struggles for superiority of knowledge and legitimacy claims about sexual rights. Peillon (1984: 57) suggested a long time ago that “the social group that is able to successfully propose and impose a definition of equity will control the centre of the ideological field, and this may well be the task that the Catholic Church has set for itself”.

While, we might note that how the Catholic Church no longer holds its former powerful position, we can see a generalized Catholic ethos – a Catholic modernity – has developed. In other words, we can see some evidence in these exemplars of how knowledge of Irish lesbian and gay sexuality is being contested and re-ordered. Writing about the UK, Newman (2001: 29) suggests that we should attend to the ‘ways of organising knowledge, knowledge, knowledge through which problems come to be defined in particular ways and through which particular solutions (i.e. heterosexual marriage) are privileged’. If we take up Foucault’s (1980) point about power and the legitimation of certain scientific knowledges, we can see that a critical feature of these debates is how ‘a whole set of knowledges [i.e. Church
dogma] ... have been disqualified as inadequate ... [because they are] beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity', and yet they still shape our values.

So, rather than a simple decline in religiosity, we seem to be witnessing a shift in the how we 'source' our values. We seem to be witnessing a shift from Church-based sexual knowledge to one that is churchgoer-based. Such shifts are not novel, as Foucault mentions that it is 'through the re-appearance of this knowledge, of these local popular knowledges, these disqualified knowledges, that criticism performs its work' (Foucault, 1980: 82). In doing so, a tiny public performs a key role in shaping 'a new 'grammar' of everyday life rather than political programmes' (Weeks, 2000: 190; de Certeau, 1984).

The Turn to Policy and the Law

In the past three years, there have been policy developments, legislative propositions, and a legal challenge seeking Irish recognition of a foreign same-sex wedding – all these happenings are aimed at securing the implementation of legal recognition of same-sex marriage in Ireland. These issues are highly technical, so I will only briefly summarise the position to date. The pathway of initiatives was interrupted by the 2007 General Election. Overall, the debate has moved into the legislative and legal arenas, and there is considerable expectation of law reform in the coming year or so.
The 2004 Civil Partnership Bill and the 2006 Civil Union Bill

GLEN’s website (www.glen.ie) summarises the Civil Partnership Bill, 2004, which was introduced in the Seanad by David Norris in late 2004-early 2005, in the following concise terms:

"The Civil Partnership Bill was introduced to the Seanad by David Norris in 2004. It is nine pages long (including explanatory and financial memorandum) and proposed a legal framework for the recognition of relationships outside marriage, both heterosexual and homosexual. The provisions of registration closely mirror those of marriage, although the explanatory memorandum states that the "registration of civil partnerships does not affect in any significant way the concept of marriage itself, which many regard as an important sacramental function." The Bill states that "The parties to a civil partnership shall be regarded in law as having the same rights and entitlements as parties to a marriage valid in law under the Family Law Act 1995 and Civil Registration Act 2004 (S6)."

Senator Norris was under the impression that the then Fianna Fail/Progressive Democrat government was going to support his Bill, and it appeared there was widespread parliamentary support for this initiative. However, the government parties threatened to renege on their support. So, after a rancorous debate, and objections from the Government parties, Senator Norris put the Bill into abeyance as tempers flared. Since the publication of Norris’s Bill, it appeared that political support mustered behind the idea civil union, and ‘gay marriage’ became viewed as potentially unconstitutional, although recent policy papers question this viewpoint (Law Reform Commission, 2004; ICCL, 2006; L’Heureux-Dubé, 2006; Walsh and Ryan, 2006). The view, that gay marriage would be unconstitutional, however gained currency, as reflected in a 2005 statement on the Labour Party website by parliamentarian, Deputy Liz McManus T.D.:"
"I do appreciate by the way that there are sections in the gay and lesbian community who may wish to go further than Senator David Norris does in his 2004 Civil Partnership Bill, which is presently withdrawn, and would wish for full equivalence, both as regards rights and obligations and as regards terminology, between marriages as presently understood and gay unions. That does not seem to me, however, to be a feasible proposition and it is not one that the Labour Party advocates. We do fully support the civil partnership proposal" (McManus, 2005).

A more recent Bill was proposed by the Labour Party. It was debated in February 2007, a couple of months prior to the general election. It was introduced into the Dáil by Deputy Brendan Howlin T.D., who stated:

‘I am long enough a Deputy to remember the debate on contraception, which was controversial and emotive. In my first month as Minister for Health, I was pleased to introduce the reforming contraceptive Bill. A decade on, we wonder what all the fuss was about. In similar terms, I remember the debate surrounding the legal recognition of divorce championed by my colleague, the then Minister Mervyn Taylor. It is interesting to see a recent opinion poll showing that if the question, which was carried by a squeak, were put to the people today, 75% would vote in favour. Doomsayers’ dire warnings of the end of marriage and an assault on communities did not come to pass. The institution of marriage has proven more resilient than they feared. This Bill or one like it will soon become law and we will again look back and wonder what the fuss was about’. (Dáil Eireann, 20 February 2007).

Brendan Howlin outlined the Bill as follows:

‘Let me set out the details of the Bill. We propose that the general law as to capacity to enter a civil union should be the same as capacity to marry, that is, with similar restrictions as to age, the validity of an existing union or marriage, mental incapacity or closeness of blood relationship. We make legal provisions for the notification, solemnisation and registration of a civil union by the same people and in the same way as marriage, mirroring the provisions in the Civil Registration Act 2004. We provide that where a religious registered solemniser has a conscientious objection to presiding, he or she will not be required to preside. This does not apply to civil registrars, but many church men and women are registered solemnisers of marriage under the law. The Bill deals with the benefits and responsibilities of parties to a civil union. The essential purpose is to provide that parties are entitled to the same rights, privileges and benefits and are subject
to the same obligations as those that apply to spouses in a marriage. In particular, the Bill provides that parties to a civil union are responsible for the support of each other to the same degree and in the same manner as is provided by law for married persons. We propose that the rights and obligations of parties to a civil union with respect to a dependent child be the same as those of a married couple with respect to such children. The Bill deals with issues such as pre-nuptial agreements, the recognition of foreign civil unions, civil union break-up and other related issues, as detailed in the Schedule.

The then government objected to this legislative bill, arguing that the Dáil should await important policy reports before legislating. Likewise, the Minister for Justice recommended the Dáil return to this issue in six months (although there was only three months left in the parliamentary term). The Government also maintained that same-sex marriage would be unconstitutional. When these tactics did not appease the Opposition, the Bill was voted down. As I watched the debate, I felt McDowell was extremely pressured, for some reason, over the Bill. What we might suggest about both Bills, is that they both couched their ethos or terms in relation to heterosexual marriage. I thought this was risky as it could be debated that 'marriage' is not as fixed as an imaginary, but that is another issue!

After the 2007 election, the new Programme for Government includes a Civil Union Bill. At time of writing (April 2008), a Bill — rumoured to run to 200 pages — is promised shortly.

While the Dáil is one setting in which attempts to recognise same-sex relationships is occurring, the other setting for claiming recognition is taking place in the Irish courts. Mirroring a recent British challenge by Kitzinger, two Irish lesbians have taken the Irish government to court.
The KAL Case and the link to the Kitzinger case

Recently, in both Irish and UK courts, there have been legal challenges by lesbian couples who were married abroad (Canada in both cases) to seek recognition of their marriages under domestic law. The two cases bear striking similarities. In Ireland, a case was taken by two lesbian academics, Katherine Zappone and Anne-Louise Gilligan, and is generally referred to as the KAL Case. In the UK, two (other) lesbian academics, Celia Kitzinger and Sue Wilkinson, sought a ruling on the Kitzinger case.

In the KAL case, two Irish lesbians, who had been legally married in a same-sex wedding ceremony in Canada in 2003, took a case against the Irish Revenue Commissioners seeking to have their marriage recognised in Ireland for taxation purposes. They were accorded permission in the lower court to proceed to the High Court. The High Court turned down the KAL application and, although the applicants are appealing to the Supreme Court, it is unlikely the case will succeed in light of the Norris judgement [where one judge stated the judiciary would not make law]. This was so in the KAL judgment, but the Irish court also sided with the Kitzinger Case outcome (of two British lesbians who wanted their Canadian marriage validated by UK law). The Irish judge, Ms. Justice Dunne cited the court’s unwillingness to challenge the law under the ‘Margin of Appreciation’ rule.

The Kitzinger case also reflected the judiciary’s unwillingness to make law. Justice Potter ruled that discrimination against the Kitzinger/Wilkinson couple was mitigated by the 2005 Civil Partnership Act (which allows civil partnerships in the UK). In effect, the judge argued the couple could register a same-sex partnership and attain equivalent rights to heterosexual married couples. Furthermore, Justice
Potter argued that EU law could not over-ride British law as the 'Margin of Appreciation' rule did not apply. In other words, in both the KAL and Kitzinger cases, the judge would not entertain being put into a position of having to 'make law' by bringing 'foreign law' into play.

While the KAL Case seems – to me at least – to be lost, we can note that the outcome has put pressure additional pressure on Irish politicians to legislate for same-sex partnerships. As a couple, Zappone and Gilligan have been effective in the media in advocating 'gay marriage'. On Irish primetime television, the couple reduced their argument to a kernel story (Kalcik, 1975), when Katherine Zappone stated on The Late, Late Show (10 March 2006): 'I speak to you tonight as a married woman'.

On live television, Zappone and Gilligan debated with a conservative female member of the audience. The female audience member disputed that the two lesbians could claim marital status and she maintained that 'category' was the preserve of heterosexual married women. Zappone and Gilligan tried to defuse their opponents by mobilising stories of their lived experience together and the discrimination that they faced in their own lives – thus they used life politics as a frame (Giddens, 1991) and talked about 'how they want to live'.

A new identity category; Irish lesbian married women, Marie-Louise Gilligan and Katherine Zappone, pose for the cameras, Dublin (March 2006)
Policy Developments

Two important reports were published in 2006. The Options Report, also known generally as the Colley Report favoured civil unions, stating:

'Full civil partnership falls short of full equality for same-sex couples as it excludes such families from the protection given to the family in the Constitution. While there is a consensus on the granting of as full recognition as possible to same-sex couples, in the absence of civil marriage the full civil partnership option is seen by the Group as one which would address the majority of the issues encountered by same-sex couples' (Colley Report, 2006: 51).

A second significant report, The De Facto Couples report (Walsh and Ryan, 2006) takes a different approach by analysing how Irish de facto couples fare under Human Rights legal standards.

Walsh and Ryan make two interesting points (among many):

'Introduction of a civil partnership scheme for same-sex couples is arguably required to fulfil the State's obligations under the Belfast Agreement of 1998' (2006: xiv).

Secondly, they propose a wider ambit in terms of partnership rights:

'The Committee as a whole agreed that a packet of distinct legislative reforms, designed to ameliorate the position of same-sex and opposite-sex partners, should be enacted. In relation to heterosexual couples, two options are offered: either a civil partnership scheme requiring the parties to 'opt-in' to a formal scheme or a presumptive scheme...' (2006: 6).

There seems to be some merit in Walsh and Ryan's approach. In the most recent development reported in the media on 17 April 2008, the Irish High Court has declared that a lesbian couple with a child is a de facto family (Coulter and Carolan,
2008). The sperm-donor father was denied parental rights by Justice Hedigan, who argued that:

'... there was nothing in Irish law to suggest that a family of two women and a child "has any lesser right to be recognised as a de facto family than a family composed of a man and a woman unmarried to each other"... He believed there existed such personal ties between the couple and the child as to give rise to family rights under Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which do not conflict with Irish law'.

While this case may be appealed to Supreme Court, Hedigan's judgement does take another step in opening up the possibility of the recognition of same-sex relationships in Ireland. While we are awaiting the Government's long-awaited, and much announced, Civil Partnership Bill, it is clear from this most recent case that we need government action!
Any conclusion?

After all the heated debate, both in the media and beyond, there is no compulsory requirement for the big wedding, and attendant heterosexualised trappings of marriage, that seemed to so alarm Vera in a media debate in 2001. In a number of ways, I argue that naturalness of heterosexual marital conventions has had a rather large post-materialist spanner thrown into the works through the rise of claims for same-sex relationship rights.

These ideological debates may have implications for the future transformation of gender and the institution of marriage. Perhaps, in due course, we will debate heterosexual marriage or heterosexual civil partnership. But the debate that I would like to see is a historical one: how our generation made the goal of an equal society into a legislative and social reality for our children.
Chapter Nine: Conclusions

In this thesis, I found, through exploring aspects of the emergent culture of telling sexual stories, that masculinity and gender are important, although sometimes neglected, aspects of the transformations in Irish lesbian and gay sexual politics. My view is that the ‘articulation of life stories is the activity through which meaning and purpose are inserted into life’ (Bauman, 2001: 13), and, in turn, it is the way we can learn more about how we live.

Since equality politics – given voice here through lesbian and gay activists - emerged as the dominant paradigm for advancing gay rights from the late 1980’s, there has been less attention given to gender and to the position of lesbians and bisexuals. The turn to equality politics has been beneficial to the lesbian and gay community and it is fair to recognise the movement’s success and ingenuity. My thesis turns the logic of equality around (a bit) and I ask what the lived experience tells us about social transformation and incipient demands. I argue that we need to regards lesbian and gay sexuality within a late modern context, with some limited evidence of Bauman’s liquid modernity as a ‘chaser’ for the most mobile.
At the outset of my research, I suggested that emergence of an open Irish lesbian and gay culture is coterminous with the ongoing social transformation of Irish culture into late modernity (Inglis, 1998a, Tovey, 2001). Although Norris (1981: 31) suggested that the only novelty of the Irish experience was in how Irish society was predominantly “white, heterosexual and Catholic”, the shift to late modernity is marked out by dilemmas around the central features he identified, although for ‘white’ I would have thought that ‘Irishness’ might be more apt. With the loosening of socio-political and moral constraints around sexuality from the mid-1970’s, it became possible to publicly discuss, and later politicize, homosexuality and gay politics in the Irish context, which is somewhat different to the trajectory in other countries, such as the USA, or the UK experience of decriminalisation during the 1950’s and 1960’s (Weeks, 1995: 75).

I found that while Irish lesbian and gay politics had developed over a shorter timeframe than the UK, it owed much to both the intellectual and politics happenings across the pond. In addition, I noted how equality politics (as the dominant paradigm) was criticised by some as disarticulated from ‘real life’, and particularly by lesbians, and this political tension intrigued me. Were we simply, normal gays? While for Seidman, normal gays are... ‘...associated with specific social behaviours. For example, the normal gay is expected to be gender conventional, link sex to love and a marriage-like relationship, defend family values, personify economic individualism, and display national pride’ (Seidman, 2002:133). My research suggests there is a critique in the tail in the Irish case.

I found that in both interviews and (albeit to a lesser extent) activist-run public discourses, equality and same-sex rights appeared to be uneasy bedfellows at times. At the root of the dilemma is what counts as politics. While public campaigns for ‘equality’ or ‘gay marriage’ are counted as ‘politics’, it seems that ‘everyday life’ is
not viewed in the same way. Rather than seeing 'equality' and 'stories' as being in a dichotomous position, I would conclude from my research that there is a need to 'get close' to how people live and analyse these experiences. In this way, lesbian and gay sexual politics could be strengthened by recognising and embracing the dilemmas of intimate citizens and the dilemmas about who they want to be (Giddens, 1991). While I anchored my interviews in terms of 'coming out' experiences, we can see men and women present complex, rich details of their lives and the multiple dilemmas confronting them can be obtained. Late modern sexual stories are about dilemmas around being able to make the life choices we do (or we would like to) make and how we would choose to live, work and play. Thus making sexual stories part of 'politics' can bridge 'policy' and 'everyday life' in a meaningful way and promote a more open, diverse sexual culture.

Sexual stories, then, represent new intellectual resources for late modern sexual politics, as the experiential gives meaning to politics but can also operate as a powerful tool to challenge heteronormativity. Scott (1992) has suggested that difference and equality are not different sides of the coin, but more importantly, I contend that the renewed visibility of sexual stories will demonstrate that 'equality is not only about becoming equal citizens, but it is also about the right to be heard and have our interests taken seriously' (Seidman, 2002: 188).

In my own case, while I departed from masculinity politics through dissatisfaction with both the ways gay men did not participate in 'men's groups' and by how I felt excluded as a participant, I have become convinced that masculinities is a key factor in lesbian and gay intimate citizenship. In developing a thesis about how lesbians and gay men go about seeking to belong in Irish society, how they seek to be 'intimate citizens', I found hegemonic masculinity is actually a central cultural
constraint (F. Smyth, 1998) in being able to come out and to establish same-sex relationships.

When I introduced this thesis in Chapters One and Two, I contended that it is only in the past thirty years or so that it became possible to publicly disclose intimate stories about same-sex sexuality in the Irish context. Up until the mid to late 1970’s, a range of moral, social and/or legal sanctions silenced Irish lesbians and gay men. For few homosexuals, as I illustrated through the vignette about MacLiammoir, it was rare to find any public allusion to homosexuality. However, it was through performance (onstage and off) that the actor could hint at his sexuality. For me, MacLiammoir represented the more privileged part of the generation of lesbians and homosexuals who lived prior to the era of emancipatory politics and ‘coming out’. When at MacLiammoir’s funeral, the President of Ireland consoled the actor’s partner; I suggest this was a case of informal recognition of homosexuality.

Wider shifts in Irish culture, marked by the weakening of the Catholic Church’s moral monopoly, meant the social controls, which marked the earlier ‘traditional’ era, started to change but there is also evidence of a democratisation of Catholic ethos, and its transformation into a wider discourse on ‘fairness’. Overall, the central feature of this social transformation is the autonomy it has given to individuals – through detraditionalization – which has led to the opening up of social spaces outside the confines of the family homestead through employment or welfare support to lesbians and gay men.

Over past thirty or so years, covered by the scope of this thesis, there has been a rise of sexual stories, the decriminalisation of homosexuality and the emergence of LGBT rights movement. Most recently, we can see that there is a turn to seeking
formal recognition for same-sex couples, which reflects a global shift in lesbian and gay sexual politics.

In Chapter Eight [on a newspaper-based gay marriage debate], ordinary commentators can debate ‘gay marriage’ openly in the media and they can make sophisticated arguments about the right of same-sex couples as intimate citizens. In my analysis, I argued that Weeks’s notion of ‘necessary fictions’ is helpful in analysing this debate. While progress on ‘gay rights’, if only in discursive terms, is being slowly made, heterosexuality is also being ‘denaturalised’. Between them, chapters one and eight together illustrate the sea change around sexuality that Ireland is undergoing in late modernity.

Chapter Three of the thesis charts my methodological choices. Resultant from two initial interviews, I chose to focus on a selective sample (Plummer, 2001: 134) of Irish lesbians and gay men of my generation who were, or had become at some point, implicated in political activism. What was problematic was how to research intimate citizenship, which is, after all, an etic (analyst’s) term. The need to preserve anonymity meant, in turn, that I had to exclude a direct analysis of activists’ political writings. My encounters with public forums where politics was discussed, although my work on that it less certain however, helped me to find a way of considering the ‘political’ as well as the ‘personal’.

In my overview of the evolution of Irish lesbian and gay activism (chapter four), I mapped out its development as a series of historical phases. Chapter Four illustrated how, within a relatively short timeframe, a social movement has attained a high degree of professionalism. I would suggest that while there is a need to develop a more extensive account, which would include a range factual and fictional writings, my overview revealed the centrality of the 1993 decriminalisation of male
homosexuality and the subsequent the professionalisation of activism around equality. My reading is that these processes are both important political achievements and sources of pride, but they are also operating as 'anchor points' in people's lives as intimate citizens who have lived through this era. So while I could see that how Irish lesbian and gay sexual politics can be positioned as progress from the (stigmatizing) past to an (egalitarian, even rosy) future (Rose, 1994, Hug, 1999), somewhat less attention has been given to how people, as active agents, cope with dilemmas as lesbians, bisexuals or gay men in contemporary Ireland. That decriminalisation, in particular, is prominent within contemporary political memory, shaped my thinking as to the distinctiveness of my research focus.

While I decided to focus on a selection of activists as key informants but I also felt that it would be useful to explore how politics is debated in the public sphere and how new political concerns are developed using the language of the market (Pearce, 2004). As 'mediators' (Osborne, 2004) between the State and civil society, activists offer an interesting perspective, based on their experiences. In addition, as in many Western societies, same-sex marriage or civil partnership started to become an important debating point for lesbians and gay men. When a debate arose in the Irish media, I decided to track this discourse as the first exemplar in Ireland.

In interviews, I sought to explore what and how they related about their experiences of coming out and of living non-heterosexual lives, taking my lead from the wealth of contemporary international literature into 'coming out'. My research highlighted how dilemmas around disclosing sexual orientation (coming out), along with ensuing lifestyle ramifications, remain an ongoing preoccupation. The dilemmas around disclosure suggest an important gender distinction. While some activist-narrators, who were long out of the closet, were a little puzzled that I did not seem to assume they were 'out'. Nevertheless, taking a starting point of
soliciting coming out stories helped to get narrators into relating their sexual stories (rather than summarising ‘politics’). The focus on the ‘personal’ enabled me to theorise about the salience of ongoing life political dilemmas of disclosure within a range of social settings, and within the context of social change.

The gay male narrators (chapter five) tended to see naming themselves as ‘gay’ as a more rational process of identity politics, that is, to be an authentic gay man – or good gay man. Coming out was seen by older activists as a rite de passage, which is redolent of emancipatory politics (Giddens, 1991) and the period of ‘gay liberation’, on one hand, or, in the case of the MGM, ‘the closet’. Younger gay men saw coming out as emancipatory politics also, but they were more articulate about the incipient dilemmas of renegotiating social relationships within their families as well. What was less recognised was how dilemmas of disclosure resurface for men on an ongoing [albeit somewhat apolitical] basis, for instance around public situations where they are threatened by violence or discrimination in the workplace.

Lesbian and bisexual narrators (Chapter six) expressed how fraught it was to name themselves a ‘gay woman’, or ‘lesbian’, or ‘dyke’, within a heteronormative culture that constructed women as wives and mothers. Refusing the route mapped out for them meant eschewing social conventions. While older lesbians also experienced dilemmas about the ‘closet’, younger women experienced naming themselves as an extended, reflexive process. Through reflecting on their dilemmas about naming, and the contexts in which they had chosen to do so, women’s accounts made me aware of how male-dominance underpinned Irish lesbian and gay sexual politics.

In chapter seven, I briefly considered how fora (as safe spaces to discuss ideas and share sexual stories) could be profitable as a way of reinvigorating lesbian and gay politics. My thinking here comes from a model of working with men and
masculinities that I have witnessed elsewhere in Ireland. While only a brief glimpse into fora, I consider that there is considerable potential to be had in the name of democratization of the movement. This will not be easy work, but can be done.

In chapter eight, I documented two mediatized debates about 'gay marriage'. Initially, I added this to my thesis because I thought it was interesting in itself. However, I am now more convinced (using a lens around myths and necessary fictions (Weeks, 1995) that life politics claims offer potential to disrupt the naturalness and dominance of heterosexual norms. More widely, there is potential here to explore more aspect of this development. My personal opinion is, however, that 'gay marriage' does not show enough imagination. When heterosexual 'norms' are also in flux – is not a more fundamental rethink necessary?

In ending this piece, I feel that the study has helped me to think about how I should go forward in researching the sociology of intimate citizenship. I began thinking about lives and social change, but that it not the whole scenario.

Bauman (2001: 13) considers the 'paramount task' for sociology, in an increasingly individualized society, to be the exploration of how people try to make sense of and find purpose in their lives. The place of life stories are central because they are routes by which we can examine how the 'boundaries of articulation' are being expanded as arenas of social life, which were relegated to the back burner of social life, come back into play through the 'radical widening of the political agenda'.

If we think about Mills' sociological imagination (1959), we need to focus on the inter-relationship – or the sociological meaning – between biography and history (and here we might include political debates).
This brings me to how Plummer (2006: 153) has recently argued that the:

"... the task for sociologists is to become intimately familiar with the crusaders, their claims and the social processes through which rights emerge. They need to see 'rights' as part of the day-to-day world of lived meaning, and not simply belonging to the theoretical and philosophical or even legal heavens".

Not all the 'legal heavens' are that detached from everyday life, Ken, sometimes we need the regulatory State to organise sexuality, to recognise sexual rights. However, given the complexity of debates about same-sex relationships, I would hope the government would realise its children are growing up and need to be empowered to make decisions about their intimate lives. Rather than a top-down approach, we need a more dialogic democracy.

My focus in this thesis has been on teasing out some neglected features of a particularly interesting period, a crossover point in Ireland between modernity and late modernity, but there is, as they say, 'more to do'.

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