

## Articles

# FROM SCHOOL TO SCENE: SUBJUGATED KNOWLEDGES AND THE INFORMAL EDUCATION OF QUEER YOUNG MEN IN VANCOUVER, CANADA, AND SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA

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### Abstract

*This ethnographic study examines the experiences of young queer men becoming queer adults. Twenty-seven gay-, bi-, or queer-identified, same-sex attracted men from Sydney and Vancouver, from diverse cultural and educational backgrounds, describe tacit, informal learning experiences acquired through seeking queer community. These men bring into adulthood scars and wounds from K–12 school environments rife with homophobia; when they begin exploring queer community through their local Scene, their expectations of finding comfort, support, and validation are inevitably met with disappointment. Until society at large accepts its queer members as full and equal citizens — regardless of age — queer young men will continue to spend a significant amount of their early adulthood overcoming their formative years.*

### Résumé

*Cette étude ethnographique examine l'expérience des jeunes hommes queers devenus des adultes queers. Vingt-sept gai, bisexuelle ou queer identifié, même sexe attire de Sydney et Vancouver, des milieux culturels et éducatifs divers, décrivent des expériences d'études tacites et informelles acquises en cherchant la communauté étrange. Ces hommes introduisent dans des cicatrices et des blessures d'âge adulte des environnements scolaires K-12 nombreux avec la homophobie; quand ils commencent à explorer la communauté queer par leur Scène locale, leurs espérances d'y trouver le confort, l'appui et la validation sont inévitablement rencontrées avec désenchantement. Jusqu'à la société en générale accepte ses membres queers en tant que pleins et égaux citoyens-sans se soucier de jeunes hommes queers continueront à dépenser une quantité significative de leur âge adulte tôt surmontant leurs années formatives.*

### Purpose

The experience of becoming an adult is significantly mitigated by one's circumstance and position in society. Culture, gender, religion, race, class, and sexual orientation each inform how we experience the world — and how we construe adulthood. Through our families, peers, and even through popular culture, we learn, liminally and not, what it means to be an adult.

For queer young men, fundamental differences between themselves and their families, peers, and society at large often make this process more complex. These men, who identify as gay, bisexual, or queer and who are same-sex attracted,<sup>1</sup> often experience confusion and conflict about how to navigate between a powerful, emergent sense of themselves as queer, and ubiquitous mainstream societal messaging that positions being queer as strange, deficient, dangerous, or even amoral. These men experience a process of what Hrimech (2004)5 calls "tacit informal adult learning" (p. 311) — often homophobic and heterocentric in nature — acquired through participation in day-to-day life. Almost inevitably, conflicts emerge between what is learned about being queer through participation in (frequently) homophobic and heteronormative<sup>2</sup> society and an instinctive drive toward embracing their queer selves. And for many queer young men, queer community is sought specifically to find solace, support, and validation.

This article examines how young queer men in Australia and Canada construct their (queer) selves through the acquisition of differing local knowledges. Their personal accounts delineate how participation in two social entities in particular, K–12 schooling and their local queer "Scene," each offered specific and, at times, contradictory knowledges about being queer. Integral to their experiences is the tacit informal that occurred in these entities. The specifics of these knowledges, and how these men made meaning around them, are a particular focus.

### Why Vancouver and Sydney

In 2001 I was invited to a meeting of activists, researchers, and community members in downtown Vancouver. Recent epidemiological data had shown a sharp increase in HIV infections among young queer men; men under the age of 25 seemed particularly vulnerable. In data from 2000, the rate of new infections jumped from 1 to 4 percent — a four-fold increase — after stable rates of infection for over a decade. These were disturbing findings for any community, but particularly in a city with a global reputation for effective, relevant HIV prevention programs for queer men.

Epidemiology significantly focuses on risks related to disease, mostly in behavioural terms. Epidemiological studies can usefully delineate relationships between *what people do* and *if, when, or how they become ill*. For queer men, unprotected receptive anal intercourse — without condoms — is the strongest behavioural predictor of new HIV infection. The data in question indicated an increase in this risky behaviour among men in the study.

But as a social researcher and activist I knew that *how and where we live our lives* informs the behavioural decisions we make. Since existing (and very successful) HIV prevention programs had not changed substantively, some other aspects of these men's

lives must play a significant part in these behavioural changes. We also knew that similar increases had been previously reported across Canada and the U.S.

So I began to research, endeavouring to identify other major (population of one million or more) Anglophone cities with a vibrant queer community where HIV rates among young queer men remained low. Sadly, the only city that met the criteria was Sydney, Australia. What then was different about Sydney?

Sydney, New South Wales (NSW), has a metropolitan population of around four million and is the largest city in Australia, its economic hub, and its primary international gateway. It has one of the world's largest queer communities, which asserts a great deal of political clout, particularly at the state level. The annual Sydney Gay & Lesbian Mardi Gras parade attracts several hundred thousand spectators each March, and was televised live on national free-to-air television until 1998.

Australia was one of the first social democracies to offer human rights protections for queers with respect to employment and public accommodation at the regional (state or territorial) level of government. Its federal government allows queer Australians to sponsor their overseas partners for immigration, subject to standards similar to those of *de facto* (or common law) opposite-sex couples. Most of these gains occurred in the 1980s and early 1990s; more recent efforts to secure broader human rights protections at the federal level have failed. In 2004 the Liberal/National (Coalition) government banned both same-sex marriage and *any* federal recognition of same-sex marriages, domestic partnerships, or civil registrations of any sort — and from any jurisdiction, including the Australian state of Tasmania's Relationship Registry, that integrates same-sex partner recognition.

Vancouver, with a population of around two million, is about half the size of Sydney, though it occupies a similar sized metropolitan area. As Canada's third largest city and its gateway to the Pacific region, Vancouver's profile continues to increase worldwide. However, being geographically removed from the political and economic hubs of central Canada allows Vancouver to retain something of a smaller-town sensibility. Like Sydney, Vancouver has a large, visible, and politically assertive queer community.

Conversely, most areas of individual entitlement for queer adults — human rights protections regionally (at the provincial or territorial level) and nationally, acknowledgement of anti-queer violence as unacceptable, and equal access to government services — have been secured, at least in juridical terms, across Canada (Egale, 2005). In matters of familial entitlements, Canada excels: Canadian queers have equal access to child rearing, adoption, reproductive services, *de facto* relationship recognition, and, now, marriage for same-sex couples (EGALE). Canada now solemnizes same-sex marriages, both civil and religious (though no religion that opposes same-sex marriage can be compelled to perform them). However, these legal entitlements do not wholly translate in terms of how queers are accepted in Canadian society. There remains, for example, a great deal of homophobic violence targeting queer Canadians (Janoff, 2005).

As I launched the study, paradoxes were already appearing. Canada was the more progressive country, yet Australia more successfully maintained low HIV infection rates among young queer men. Human rights entitlements, therefore, were not even crude indicators of why this was. The fundamental question was *what aspects of the experience*

*of being a queer young man in Sydney versus Vancouver might to some extent explain why fewer men in Sydney became HIV positive?*

### Literature Review

An ascendant body of queer adult education literature has emerged over the last decade. Tisdell and Taylor (1995) examined how the experience of post-graduate study in adult education is mitigated by being queer. Edwards and Brooks (1999) reviewed historical developments in our understanding of queer sexuality, developmental theories of sexual orientation, and issues of queer identity. Hill (1995, 1996, 2004) has written extensively on the marginal role of queer issues in the study of adult education, as well as the role of adult education in seeking social justice for queers. Grace (2001, 2002a, 2002b) has articulated how queer positional pedagogies and autobiographical queer life-narrative research, which “investigates the personal and difficult journey to be, become, belong, act, speak, and represent oneself as a queer person, citizen and educator” (2002b, p. 100). Together (Grace and Hill, 2001) and with others (Grace, Hill, Johnson & Lewis, 2004, Grace and Hill have encouraged queer adult educators to develop a “queer praxis [that] contests such privileging of male over female, straight over gay, and private acts over public ones” (2001, p. 147). Theirs is a call for a radical, liberatory queer pedagogy.

Examinations of the experience of becoming a queer adult have been few, though the sexual behaviour of young queer men has often been the focus of epidemiological surveillance studies, including in Vancouver (Martindale et al., 2001), Sydney (Campbell, Van de Ven, Prestage, Crawford, & Kippax, 1999), and elsewhere (Morbidity & Mortality Weekly, 2001). Middelthon (1997, 2001) has studied meaning making around early sexual experiences of queer young men — particularly as it relates to HIV risk — but Middelthon’s work has not holistically examined young queer men’s experiences. Shibly Hyde and Jaffee (2000) have used empirical data to interrogate the hegemonic heteronormatizing forces faced by young queer women. But their review is an a posteriori examination of data collected for other, non-queer-specific purposes, and again does not holistically analyze women’s experiences.

### Research Design

This ethnographic study relied on extended, iterative data collection strategies, including participant observation and semi-structured interviews (Bernard, 2000) in order to capture naturalistically these men’s holistic experiences as young queer men. Detailed field notes were kept during several months of unobtrusive observational field work around Oxford Street in Sydney and Davie Street in Vancouver, neighbourhoods that serve as geographic centres of visible queer life in each city. On-the-street observations were conducted in late afternoon (after school hours), early evening, and late evening/early morning hours, to identify patterns of presence and visibility of queer youth. Additional observations were also done in gay bars and nightclubs, at queer youth drop-in and support programs (with both staff and participant consent), and at beaches and public recreation areas. Informants were recruited during this fieldwork, as well as via local LGBT/queer e-mail lists, and through stories on the study published in queer-friendly press in both cities. Any queer-identified (gay, bisexual, or queer) same-sex attracted men aged 17 to 24<sup>3</sup> at the time of recruitment

who were living in the greater metropolitan areas of either Sydney or Vancouver were eligible to participate. Participants did not need to be out (living openly as queer men), though all, to some extent, were.

Each participant took part in an initial semi-structured interview, using a quasi-life history format. Topics included family life, K–12 schooling, becoming aware of sexuality issues, questioning one's own sexuality, seeking queer community, sex-love-dating, and knowledge about HIV/AIDS. A second round of interviews was conducted with roughly half the participants to follow up on their lives approximately six months after their initial interviews, to discuss preliminary analyses and probe specific compelling narratives from these informants' initial interviews. In total, approximately 90 hours of interviews were conducted. All interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed verbatim (via a contracted, third party transcriber who was not attached to the queer community), and analyzed using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) via Atlas/ti software (Scientific Software, 2003). Consent procedures for the University of New South Wales were followed and ethics forms signed by each participant. Participants were given interview transcripts for member checks and encouraged to add to, amend, or delete any of their responses as appropriate. The findings reported here were triangulated two ways: via an interview with an experienced queer youth program facilitator, and by a review of a draft of this manuscript by a study participant.

My analysis of these men's accounts posits that the experience of becoming queer is mediated by participation and membership in various social entities. Membership in these entities — including in families of origin, in primary and secondary schools, and within queer social networks — produces, scrutinizes, and reifies what Foucault (1980) referred to as local knowledges: context-specific, socially situated knowledges acquired through tacit, informal learning. More precisely, some local knowledges operate as “subjugated knowledges” (Foucault, 1990, p. 81), frequently valued only by members of excluded or marginalized groups — and often constructed in resistance to mainstream society's biases. My experiences as a queer man and queer rights activist for over two decades taught me that queer local knowledges largely operate as subjugated knowledges.

Foucault (1980, 1990) also posited that more generalized — and reified — mainstream knowledges often contradict subjugated knowledges, rendering subjugated knowledges marginal not only to mainstream society, but to those who possess them — particularly those who are isolated from their peers. Such persons, including queer young men not yet attached to queer community, are often left in a quandary. Their lived experiences are often, at best, queer-tolerant (queers are to be pitied) or, worse, queer-antagonistic (queers are to be vilified, excluded, even assaulted). Many isolated queer young adults accept aspects of hegemonic, mainstream knowledges, even as these knowledges invalidate their powerful desire to affirm and celebrate their queer selves. Some try to maintain queer-affirming local knowledges in isolation, outside the purview of the mainstream; others will, in rare instances, directly challenge the status quo and assert their queer local knowledge over mainstream knowledge. Many will, through choice or necessity, relocate to places where queers are more accepted.

Thus, the experience of constructing a queer identity involves the integration of these disparate — and ostensibly incompatible — knowledges. These men's stories

describe the specifics of these knowledges, how they are acquired, and how young queer men integrate and make meaning from them.

### **The Men**

A total of 27 informants, including 15 from Sydney and 12 from Vancouver, participated in the study. They ranged in age from 17 to 24 at the time of recruitment: the Vancouver sample (age  $M = 18.67$ ) was slightly younger than the Sydney sample (age  $M = 20.13$ ). One man from Sydney and two from Vancouver identified as queer; one from Vancouver identified as bisexual; and the remaining 23 (14 from Sydney, 9 from Vancouver) identified as gay. Among the Vancouverites were three early high school leavers (one of whom was enrolled in an alternative high school completion program), three working high school graduates, four undergraduate students in college or university, and one man working full-time after having completed his undergraduate degree. Among the Sydneysiders were two early high school leavers, one working high school graduate, nine undergraduate students in college or university, one man working full-time after having completed his undergraduate degree, and two graduate students.

With respect to ethnicity, both samples were relatively diverse, reflecting the multicultural makeup of each city. The Vancouverites included three Asian or Middle Eastern men, eight European (or White) men, and one Métis (mixed Aboriginal and European) man. The Sydneysiders included five Asian or Middle Eastern, two Latin American, and eight European men. With the exception of two Asian men (one each from Sydney and Vancouver, who were recent arrivals as international students and whose aspirations were to remain in Canada or Australia), all identified at least partially as Canadian or Australian. Two other men in each sample had migrated in childhood to either Australia or Canada as UN refugees. Two more men had migrated as children under general migration schemes. The rest were Australian- or Canadian-born. Despite sustained and varied recruitment strategies in both cities, efforts to get Aboriginal queer men to participate in the study were unsuccessful; the Métis man did not disclose his Aboriginality until after recruitment.

Seven of the Vancouverites and eight of the Sydneysiders still lived with their families of origin. Five of each Vancouverites and Sydneysiders lived in shared accommodation with roommates. Two Sydneysiders lived in crisis housing for at-risk youth (no comparable program or service exists in Vancouver). None of the men lived with a partner. There was one man each from Sydney and Vancouver who was HIV-positive (HIV+); the rest knew themselves to be HIV-negative (HIV-) through recent HIV testing. Overall, each sample was similarly diverse with respect to sexual orientation/identity, ethnicity, age, living circumstances, and educational or vocational experience.

### **Findings**

Analysis of the initial interviews with the participants led to saturation in several areas. Two in particular, representing a number of specific knowledges, emerged as critical to how the men tacitly learned about what being a queer young man meant. These related to their K–12 school experiences and initial encounters with “the Scene.”

### *School as Homophobic Hegemony*

There were no significant differences between the elementary (or primary) school experiences of the Canadian or Australian men. A handful characterized their early school experiences in positive terms, but their experiences in elementary school, though arguably less negative than their secondary/high school years, were often unhappy due to pervasive homophobia. At the elementary school level, much of the homophobia these men experienced was linked to issues of gender conformity with respect to mannerisms or interests, rather than any concrete notion of queer sexuality. However anti-queer language was ubiquitous even in elementary school, and the local knowledge it represented was that queers were less male, strange, inferior, and worthy of ostracization.

About half the men in the study recalled hearing anti-gay language in Grade 5 or earlier. All had heard it well before starting high school in year/Grade 9. Often the words were used with animus, but not in ways that reflected the specific sexual and homophobic ways the terms are more precisely used by adults. Lorne from Vancouver remembers that words like faggot were initially used “more of an insult and making fun of someone” than as a comment on someone’s sexual orientation. Jeff recalls *himself* saying things like “oh you’re gay” or ‘you faggot’ or ‘that’s so gay’” long before he or his peers understood the precise meaning of those epithets. Among the Sydneysiders, Walter was called “things like faggot” because of his interest in gymnastics and dancing. Jim was teased because he “tended to have closer female friends” and was “a bit girly.” Many of the participants spoke to experiences where extracurricular interests (often the expressive arts, non-competitive or individualistic sports, or academics), socialization patterns (preferring to play with girls rather than boys), or behaviours or mannerisms viewed as non-masculine garnered negative attention from peers.

With the advent of puberty and adolescence came an awareness of sexuality (including homosexuality), and the precise meaning of anti-gay epithets became concrete. For most the transition from elementary to high school also meant an escalation of homophobic hostility faced at school — and a shift in the local knowledge around queers. These men commonly experienced fear, anxiety, and exclusion as a result of bullying — more often in the form of harassment but in some cases physical assault. Two, Karl from Sydney and Frank from Vancouver, dropped out of high school to a significant extent due to homophobic bullying. By the time high school started, all had acquired a new local knowledge about what it meant to be queer. Aside from it meaning men who have sex with other men, what previously had been vague terms of derision morphed into harassment or violence.

This exacted a heavy toll. Among the Sydneysiders, Al was “depressed . . . with thoughts of suicide” for much of high school. Brian’s parents were socially progressive, but his school environment was ubiquitously homophobic, which led him to lead a fearful and circumspect life:

I was pretty down in high school, feeling different from other people, and feeling isolated, and not being able to talk about every aspect of your life to your close friends, and stuff like that. It’s pretty discouraging,

thinking you've reached 18 years without anyone knowing exactly who you are.

Brian *feared being identified as gay*, and thus tried to "act straight." Despite largely being successful at "passing," his sense of loneliness and isolation resulting from being self-conscious and circumspect and feeling it unsafe to be forthright with friends and family eventually led him to contemplate suicide.

All but one of the men either endured bullying and harassment, or saw how guys perceived to be queer became targets of it. Despite largely being able to "pass," Brian and several other men spoke of living in fear of becoming a target. Passing as masculine/not queer meant avoidance of becoming a victim. It did not, however, mean avoidance of stress, anxiety, fear, depression, and isolation.

For Larry, high school was "not a good place at all." Although he was aware some queer teens who were out in other Sydney-area high schools, he "couldn't even comprehend" coming out at his school. Eric's Catholic school upbringing gave him "the general impression that all gay people were evil," making his emerging queerness a devastating realization. Even Paul, who spoke at length about how many friends he had in high school and how included and valued he felt there, acknowledged he "wouldn't see anyone being comfortable coming out in that environment [with all the people] making jokes about someone being gay." None of the Sydneysiders reported any sense of acceptance or safety for queers in their high schools.

Some men were the victims of homophobic violence, either at school or at the hands of their classmates off school property. Sydneysider Jim had people "throw things [at him and was] punched and knocked over, ambushed" by groups of his male peers. The harassment and violence he experienced was pervasive, and escalated in tenth grade:

One time when I was on my way home from school, I was walking to my close female friend's [home] and a group of guys ambushed me. One of them in particular wanted to pick a fight with me, and I wasn't interested, I was never the person to fight back. . . . so I mainly just took it, and I was trying to get away more so, just protect myself, but not really fight back.

Though he was not seriously injured, the assault so distressed Jim he told his parents:

I went home and told my Mum about it, and she was worried and talked about it with my Dad. My Dad actually went to the police about it and got advice from them, but I convinced him not to take it any further. I was a bit embarrassed by it all. I felt guilty and I didn't want to get people involved. I felt it was my problem, which I had to deal with. Which I guess was probably stupid in hindsight, but I guess you don't really think. I thought I didn't want to create that extra pressure, make the situation any more volatile than what it was.

His story is unusual because of his willingness to tell his parents about what was going on; many who experience homophobic violence at school keep it to themselves.



Queer youth often will not discuss their homophobic victimization with family out of fear of an unsympathetic — or even hostile — reaction. After tenth grade, when a number of his assailants either dropped out or graduated, school “actually got a lot better” for Jim.

Jim’s instinct not to pursue a formal complaint out of fear of escalation of the violence wasn’t off the mark, based on Don’s experience. Don was the target of “macho, rowdy” packs of males at his Vancouver-area high school. He was often attacked on school property, including group assaults during physical education classes where “things like hockey sticks” were used as weapons in some instances. Although Don “never had visible bruises and was never hospitalized” from the assaults, they nonetheless were “really traumatizing” for him. Even as Don, too, minimized the seriousness of the attacks (“no visible bruises”), he recounted other incidents, including being “locked underneath the gym stage for hours” or being shoved into lockers.

Don, like Jim, confided in his parents. His father didn’t understand why Don couldn’t defend himself. His mother was sympathetic and wanted to do whatever necessary to end the assaults — despite Don’s concerns about involving school staff. His mother eventually called the police, which only served to escalate things. Don described the school administration’s reaction to the police complaint:

The only thing [the school] did was have ‘peer mediation’ which from my experience was a lot of bullshit . . . basically, the guy who was beating me up, and me and this peer mediator had to be in this room. It had windows [with] Venetian blinds, so the entire school was on the other side of this window. Like banging on the window and laughing. And the guy who was beating me up, was just laughing through the entire thing. The more I told anyone about it the worse it got.

Subsequently, Don chose to be “as invisible as possible” at school. His mother dropped him off and picked him up at the front door every day. He hid out “in the bathroom” during lunch and other breaks. For him high school became about survival, rather than learning. The local knowledge about queers in high school, for Don and Jim and too many of the men, was that anti-queer harassment and violence were acceptable at school.

But not always. In some Vancouver area high schools, school culture was changing. Though he never became a target of homophobic violence, Jeff was nonetheless anxious about the possibility. When he started high school he saw how guys who were perceived as queer were treated. After one classmate came out as gay, other students “actually teased him so much he had to drop out of school,” which made Jeff “more scared” to come out.

However, two of Jeff’s teachers organized a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA), a peer support club for queer students and their allies. Men (including Jeff) whose high schools had a GSA described their high school experiences in significantly less negative terms (though social exclusion remained common). Wes found that by “plugging” his GSA to his peers they would “say ‘gay’ without meaning, you know, ‘bad’.” Ted ran his school’s GSA after coming out in tenth grade; reactions from staff were mixed, from “wouldn’t give me the time of day,” to “very accepting.” Even though most continued to experience homophobia, their GSAs gave them a space at school that felt safe. These men encountered

a local knowledge about queers that said at the very least queers should be tolerated and were not deserving of harassment or violence.

Roch's high school experience started off negatively: harassment and bullying eventually led to a suicide attempt. Almost as a last resort he decided to come out at school, expecting to probably cop more flack, but to be less fearful and anxious. His peers' reaction was surprising:

My last year in high school was probably one of the best years I can remember. You know what? People always used to think I was [gay], and then when I came out it shocked everybody . . . I think it surprised a lot of people. It actually did wonders for my social life. It had an opposite effect to what I thought it was going to do. It really helped me grow, I think, as a person, coming out in high school.

Roch's experience, however, was atypical in that he came out without the support of a GSA. Jacques's high school also didn't have a GSA, but there were staff keen to create a safe learning environment for all. As a result, the use of sexist, racist, or homophobic language was quickly punished. Jacques estimated that "only 1% of the time" was anyone bullied in his high school, for which he was grateful. Even so, he never came out at school.

Overall the K–12 school environments in both Sydney and Vancouver remained pervasively homophobic, though the advent of GSAs in Vancouver clearly improved the school experiences of some. However, currently there are about 28 GSAs in greater Vancouver public high schools (GALE BC, 2008), representing only around 35% of all area high schools. The Vancouver men were much more likely than their Sydney counterparts to leave high school with the knowledge that being queer was perhaps okay.

### *The "Scene" as False "Community"*

After 12 years in largely hostile and treacherous school environments, the nearest visible queer neighbourhood (or suburb in Australian parlance) often took on incredibly important symbolic meaning to these men — long before most could actively participate due to age restrictions on venues serving alcohol (age 19 in both NSW and B.C.). Queer-specific venues in such neighbourhoods are commonly known as *the Scene*. Most of the men spoke directly to how an emerging awareness of the existence of "gaybourhoods" like Surry Hills and Darlinghurst in Sydney and Vancouver's West End offered hope of safer, more nurturing, and accepting spaces. All the men in the study had, at various times, explored their local Scene in search of support from other queers.

The Sydneysiders often became aware of the Sydney Scene years earlier via media images of the annual Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras parade. Some, like Walter, who characterized his involvement with the Scene as infrequent, described the Scene largely in favourable terms. They saw the value of having a strong, visible, easy-to-find space for queer life, for newly out young queer men. But most Sydneysiders were negative in their appraisal of the Scene.

Jim, for example, found the Scene “[not] all it was cracked up to be.” The most common characterization of the Sydney Scene was acrimony. Most of the men recounted how they found the Sydney Scene’s foci on partying and body image alienating — like AI, who felt alienated because he never drinks alcohol or takes drugs, or Karl, who at first became enmeshed in the “glitz and the glamour” of the Scene, only for it to lose its lustre:

I was really disgusted and sickened by the fact that I was associated with something that was so drug-ridden and drug-dependent, alcohol driven. I mean, sure a lot of the public image of the queer community is drug, sex, alcohol, partying. But I’ve come to learn that Oxford Street is that area, is the badder part of the queer community. I was quite upset with myself for being part of that...

Karl, like AI, shifted his social ambitions toward non-Scene queer groups and events. Both men found more supportive peers outside of the Scene.

Martin’s relationship with the Scene was more complex. He described himself as someone who studies, works and plays “hard,” and rewards himself with the occasional “big night out”: an extended (as much as 12 hours) session of all-night dancing, including the use of stimulant drugs like MDMA (ecstasy). Despite finding these big nights out fun and a release of stress, the nature of the Scene also fostered anxiety and insecurity:

I go to \_\_\_\_ which is like a super club here in Sydney in the gay world. It’s a club that attracts the “Muscle Mary” type of guy. I go there and I dance but I don’t feel part of that community cause I feel, I’m not them. I don’t happen to have bulgy biceps and, you know, pecs, and abs and stuff like that. In a way it kind of makes me feel angry at them and it kind of makes me feel angry at myself for not being them. There is a hierarchy in our community, there’s no doubt about it, and these guys are the ones that are worshiped. I hate, hate that about our community . . . that whole body worship thing.

Even though hitting the Scene is “a reward” for Martin, participation leaves him feeling alienated, inadequate, and angry. Cory’s experiences with respect to the body image issue on the Scene were also negative, particularly as a non-European man:

All they glorify is abs and six packs and personally I find that really shallow. There’s also a lot of racism on the Scene: the white beautiful blond boy was sort of glorified as the god and then a lot of the rest of the people just have all these insecurities and lay on the side. I felt like Oxford Street was a bit of a sham. *Like this idea that Oxford Street was the community I pretty much rejected* [italics added].

Unlike Martin, Cory expressed more frustration and disappointment than anger. In Cory’s case, his university’s queer club and a social group for queers who share his ethnicity were better suited to building a supportive network of peers. His comment about conflating the Scene with the queer community reflected the Sydneysiders’ most commonly held local knowledge about the Scene as a space that is unsafe, non-supportive,

and exclusionary. It also told them that physical appearance and an appetite for copious partying often determined one's acceptance.

A minority of the Sydneysiders became enmeshed in the Scene. Tom first spent time exploring Oxford Street as an underage high school student, when he would "just hang out in the streets . . . like in café's and stuff." Once in university (and old enough to enter clubs) he rapidly got caught up in the "big night out" phenomenon. One scary experience after taking ecstasy led him to take a step back from it all. More recently he has gone clubbing again on occasion, but is "more inclined just to sit in a café having a coffee, things like that." Larry's university studies were temporarily interrupted by Scene-related drug taking. He ultimately had to take a year off from university to "get things sorted," though he was back studying when we met. Despite at times finding it difficult to develop a sense of community outside the Scene, Larry remains "petrified" of it. He too has been active in his university's queer social group. None of the Sydneysiders positioned the Scene as an important venue for finding or building queer community. Most, however, continued to participate in the Scene on occasion — but with friends met elsewhere.

Sydney's queer life is huge — and often intense. At a time when many of the men were trying to recover from the horrors of homophobic K–12 schooling, there was a great deal of anticipation of finding safety and warmth from other queers on the Scene. Most of the Sydney men experienced more isolation and exclusion on the Scene — of a different sort than school, but still neither nurturing nor supportive. Ultimately the Sydneysiders placed fostering genuine, substantive, supportive social relations ahead of a big night out.

With nearly two dozen nightclubs and bars, Sydney's Scene has a high profile, both in and out of the queer community. In contrast, Vancouver's Scene — a scant two nightclubs and four bars — figured much less prominently in the Vancouver participants' sense of queer community. Just like Tom in Sydney, Brian used to walk "up and down, up and down" the West End's Davie Street in search of queer space through cafés and bookshops, prior to experiencing the Scene proper. Though he eventually started to explore the Vancouver Scene, it never became a primary means through which he met other queers. Instead, his involvement with performing arts organizations proved to be an excellent way to meet other queer men with whom to socialize.

Pierre also explored Davie Street before accessing the Scene. For Pierre, both Davie Street and the Scene proved to be overwhelmingly positive experiences:

The first time on Davie [Street] I was just like "oh my god they're [male couples] holding hands! They're walking together!" There were rainbow signs everywhere! And I absolutely loved it! I was standing in there, I was like "oh my god, there's so many gay people, look at them!" I absolutely loved it!

Pierre's initial experiences in the neighbourhood and on the Scene were exciting and comforting. As were Ted's, who recounted his first time in a gay club:

For me it was just like "oh god!" It was an experience! I danced with other guys [which] was really cool. I swear to god, I thought I'd just like dropped dead and gone to heaven! All of those hot sweaty men there, just

dancing, and having a great time. And it was just really cool there, just being on the dance floor dancing with the guys. Just because I'd never really done that before.

Yet after an initial period of frequent attendance, both Ted and Pierre decided that the Scene, while fun, was both exhausting and expensive — and a bit monotonous. More recently they had gone out only a few times a month — much less than the several times a week they went initially. Both more frequently participate in non-Scene Davie Street life, including queer youth groups and café culture. Like most of their peers, they saw the Scene merely as one of several means through which to meet other queers.

Among the Vancouver men, the local knowledge regarding the Vancouver Scene was that it presented but one relatively small means through which to seek queer community. But like their Sydney peers, social and activity groups were more reliable sources of support. That many of the Vancouver men had participated in either queer youth drop-ins or a GSA while still in high school seems to lead more of them to eschew the Scene.

Despite its relatively small size and more limited operating hours (Sydney's bars and clubs are open 24 hours on weekends, whereas Vancouver's close at between one and two in the morning) the pitfalls encountered by several of the Sydneysiders did affect two of the Vancouverites. Don's first partner "would go after young, newly out people . . . people who had no concept about some of the fucked up aspects of queer community." Their relationship included big nights out and copious drug consumption. Don eventually extracted himself out of that exploitative and abusive relationship with the help of some queer women friends, but his perspective on the community remained negative for a fairly long time afterward. Similarly, Wes's experiences on the Scene left him bitter:

You know, not everybody talks to each other; well, nobody talks to each other, it's kind of like almost taboo to talk to another person. . . . I'd say that the spirit of community is rather minimal unless you're looking for sex. I've always thought that of gay community in general. I hate to apply stereotypes, but, you know, dirty and horrible and sleazy. I guess [the Scene] reaffirms those beliefs. I know it's not entirely true, because I have a lot of gay friends who aren't this way but at the same time . . .

Wes articulated how a dominant discourse in mainstream society (queer men as sleazy) can ostensibly be validated by experience on the Scene. But his experiences with queer men outside the Scene had shown him that the Scene was not representative of the larger queer community. It was, in fact, a very small part of it. Wes and Don's experiences were that men on the Scene were often superficial, that building networks of support with respect to dating or friendship on the Scene was difficult, and that sex and partying were too often the focus. Like Al, Karl and Cory in Sydney both sought — and found — queer community through community groups.

Some Vancouver men found their experiences with their local Scene positive, though the more common experiences were disillusionment, disappointment, and a sense of exclusion. And the two local knowledges described by the men — that the Scene values appearances and ability to party, versus community groups as a more reliable means to find

support — contrast very different experiences of what constitutes the “queer community.” Community group involvement — be it a support group for queer youth, a sports team, a choir, or an activity group — has been an excellent way to build caring, sustaining, and nurturing relationships, both romantic and platonic, for most of the men.

One thing is for certain: the Scene  $\neq$  the community.

### Implications

To a significant extent these men anticipated a profound sense of welcome and celebration once they began interacting with other queers. Their encounters with the surface of the queer community — the Scene, as it’s known in quotidian queer language — often reflect a sense of excitement and anxiety. However, these men are offered little or no mentorship, guidance, or tutelage from parents, extended family, or other role models as they seek to make the transition to queer adulthood. Their subsequent sense of isolation is profound.

For those who experience marginality, the informal learning about one’s self as a member of a marginalized, stigmatized, or excluded community can be profoundly self-damaging. Many who experience racism, sexism, homophobia, heterocentrism, or other forms of discrimination or vilification seek solace and support amongst “their own people” as they move toward and into adulthood. Many are already members of social entities — family, church, neighbourhood — where counter-hegemonic messages are on offer. Young queer men mostly grow up with little or no positive messaging about queers prior to becoming aware of their own sexuality. In fact, many are instead exposed to hegemonic messaging about queers as evil, diseased, or amoral. These homophobic knowledges, reified in social entities like K–12 schooling, are powerful, pervasive, and not easily unlearned.

Paradoxically, some of the most negative archetypes about queer men in particular (substance abusing, promiscuous, and vain) turn out to be true in a very narrow sector of queer community: the Scene. Unfortunately the Scene is the only clear and obvious place to seek out queer community for many young queer men, especially as they try to leave the horrors of K–12 schooling behind. Thus, the very social entity they initially seek to unlearn homophobia validates homophobic messaging . . . until they move beyond the Scene into other more affirming social entities like community groups. It is not mere happenstance that the most subjugated knowledges about queers in both Canada and Australia remain those that are queer positive.

What about HIV? While I was in Australia collecting data for this study, there was an enormous spike in HIV rates among queer men in New South Wales: an 18% increase over the previous year, though still not among young men. It also turned out that the increase reported in Vancouver turned out to be an anomaly. Since 2001 the rate of new HIV infections among men under age 25 has returned to around 1% — the level it has been at since 1993 (British Columbia Centre for Disease Control, 2007).

Still, some of the programming available to queer youth in both cities is having a positive impact on the decisions these men made around HIV risk. In Sydney, the AIDS Council of New South Wales’s Fun & Esteem program offers young queer men a short course on how to connect with, navigate through, and find support in various aspects of queer community. In Vancouver, queer youth support groups offered by the LGTBQA Centre,

AIDS Vancouver, and YouthCo AIDS Society offer spaces for both social interactions and information exchange between young queer men (and women).

These men all found these sorts of social entities as excellent sites for unlearning homophobia and becoming a part of the larger queer community. Having observed several of these groups, I was struck by how naturally these men interacted with one another. Such spaces allow them to feel normal *and* queer, and to do the sorts of things their heterosexual peers got to in high school: gossip, flirt, and date. All safely.

And yet, their stories represent those men who have established a foothold in queer community. A limitation of this study is how those who have not done so are faring, despite persistent efforts to recruit such men. Since these programs offer services only to around 100 youth per year in each city, realistically there are many more young queer men who are not accessing them. And all of the men in this study were to some extent positioned in or near a major city with an easy to find gaybourhood once they were ready to explore their queerness. What about those unable to do so?

The stories of these young queer men reflect the importance of tacit, informal adult education in their lives. Their experiences show how they used queer-specific, subjugated knowledges to construct positive, affirming identities as queer men. While the acquisition of legal entitlements like same-sex marriage is indubitably a good thing, young queer men still must seek queer and queer-affirming spaces to acquire these vital, affirming knowledges about themselves. In homophobic, heteronormative Canadian and Australian society, the onus remains on these men to get to such spaces for themselves — since mainstream society remains unsafe.

These are but some of the local knowledges described by these men. Other knowledges (on topics such as families, relationships/partnerships/marriage, HIV/AIDS, and citizenship) are similarly important; space limitations preclude discussing them here. There were few overall consensuses to be found (within the Vancouver or Sydney cohorts, or between them), except that every man in the study found the knowledges with which they grew up to be problematic as they began to come to terms with themselves as queer. The negative impact of K–12 schooling — of spending much of their childhoods and adolescence in environments rife with homophobia, which remains perhaps the most disputed “ism” in schools today — was clearly the most important part of their stories, despite this being a study of young queer *men*. For many of the men, leaving K–12 schooling had not meant leaving behind the concomitant anxiety, depression, and fear. For about one quarter of the men, counseling or therapy was still needed to heal from bullying and exclusion, years after leaving high school. The Vancouver men whose high schools had Gay-Straight Alliances suffered less than those whose schools did not. The Australian men’s K–12 experiences were almost exclusively negative. None of the men’s K–12 schooling experiences *celebrated* queerness; at best some found tolerance, perhaps acceptance.

Things often got better after high school. The men found less virulently homophobic spaces including the Scene, despite it often being superficial (an emphasis on appearances) and, at times, dangerous (ubiquitous use of alcohol and other drugs). But were the Scene to become gentler or more nurturing, it would nonetheless remain difficult for

many young queer men to access. In the case of Sydney and Vancouver, both Surry Hills/Darlinghurst and the West End are expensive, urban gaybourhoods that represent safety and security, where other queers (and those who accept us) congregate in large numbers, creating enclaves where queer is, in fact, normal. Yet to live in these gaybourhoods requires a lot of money; to access them on a limited basis from nearby requires transportation and money. Many young queer men lack such resources; for those who live in rural parts of B.C. and NSW, to access the community often requires moving . . . in other words, *exile*.

Is that the best we can offer young queer men? Exile?

It would be easy to focus on the ways in which these men learn, as adults, positive aspects of being queer. In fact, others laud the resilience of communities like queers in the face of marginality. But resilience is a coping strategy. Coping strategies are not sustaining, nor sustainable. It requires a great deal of effort and energy — both of which could be used in more proactive ways were they not required reactively to survive. We need to move beyond discourses about survival, or tolerance. We need to create societies where diversity — with respect to sexual orientation, religion, culture, gender, dis/ability, age, and social status — is celebrated.

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(Endnotes)

- 1 Throughout this paper, *queer* is used as an umbrella term that inclusively indicates all same-sex attracted persons; I am referring to *queer theory*. Some queer persons prefer terms like *gay*, *gay man*, *gay woman*, *lesbian*, or *bisexual*. More and more identify as *queer*, meaning "not heterosexual." That some queer persons are both same- and opposite-sex attracted (ostensibly bisexual), for this paper the reader should not construe that I'm really talking about gay men here, or that the experiences of bisexual queers are marginal within the queer rights movement. See Egan (2005) for a reflection on how the role of bisexuals in queer social movements has evolved.
- 2 *Heteronormativity*, according to Egan & Flavell (2006) refers to how society continues to marginalize queerness as something unusual, rare, and, therefore, not terribly important. While not overtly hostile, it nonetheless perpetuates queer isolation by excluding matter-of-fact representations of queers in society at large. For young queer adults, the dearth of such representations engenders a sense of isolation . . . while allowing homophobes to argue "queers don't matter, otherwise we'd see more of them."
- 3 The age range demarcates the years of transition from adolescent (years 11 and 12 in high school) and early adulthood (the first five young adult years, as defined by the UN and WHO).