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**Understanding gay men's identities through narratives
of their erotic and romantic relationships**

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The University of Edinburgh
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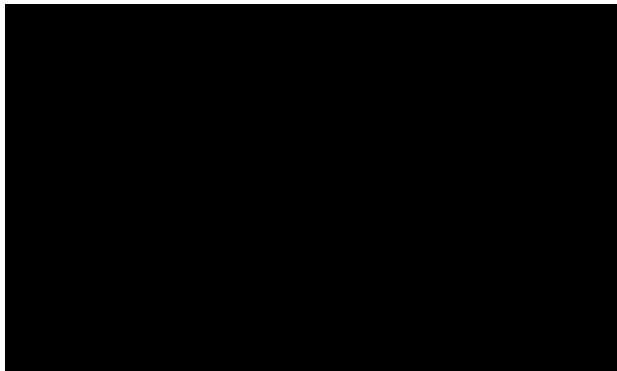
Declaration

I certify:

(a) that the thesis has been composed by myself, and

(b) that this thesis is my own original work, and

(c) that this thesis has not been submitted for any other degree or qualification.



Abstract

'Gay identity' is an often taken-for-granted concept in research. When researchers refer to gay men's identities, the term is used in relation to sexuality, as a labelling process, and operationalised through reference to homosexual relationships. But what do those relationships mean to gay men? What does 'being gay' mean to gay men? Those questions, for the most part, remain unaddressed. My review of literature shows that 'being gay' has been commonly equated to 'being homosexual' and, although sexual relationships are one of the most common themes in research about gay men, studies often investigate them from epidemiological perspectives. In this thesis, I draw attention to the limits of those perspectives and explore the contributions that sexual, erotic, and romantic connections make to gay men's sense of identity. From a narrative approach, this thesis is concerned with how self-identified gay men give meanings to their romantic, erotic, and sexual relationships and how those meanings become entangled with their sense of who they are. To conduct this study, I interviewed ten gay men of different ages and backgrounds living in the United Kingdom, each of whom provided narrative data during unstructured one-to-one, one-off interviews. Drawing upon a narrative structural analysis, my findings are presented in two ways: first in the form of idiographic narratives concerning five participants and, secondly, as an overarching analysis with central themes identified across participants' narratives. My findings show that gay men construct a sense of identity through their sexual, erotic, and romantic relationships and that being gay pervades the self in a way that affects their entire life stories. This study concludes by challenging the conception of 'being gay' as a sexual orientation because it describes in sexual terms an identity that is not only, not always, and not predominantly sexual.

1 | Introduction

1.1 Research background – a story

I am going to tell you a story that horrifies me. It horrifies me because of the lure, danger, and betrayal of its nature but also because of the sorrow that surrounds it. It did not horrify me when it happened, back in 1998, but it does now. In 1998, it excited me and filled me with hope. The excitement of early discoveries in my teenage years. The hope of thinking about Raoul¹ and me. I am writing about it now because this thesis explores how gay men construct a sense of identity through narratives of their erotic and romantic relationships, and this story provides insight into where my research inquiry began. For many years I forgot about it, perhaps because it does not make me feel proud. It features some sexual activity but mainly it features an encounter between two people who were in the same bed but never were in the same space. It is relevant here because throughout the course of this research, whilst listening to my participants within the interview setting telling me their stories, this story of my own re-emerged and resonated, deep and opaque, in my heart. Only now, nearly 20 years later, can I make sense of this otherwise obscure episode.

Raoul was the type of friend who was actually a classmate but we called each other friends, just because we used to have a laugh and hang out during breaks between classes. Our friendship did not extend beyond the school boundaries and we would never meet for purposes beyond schoolwork. He had another friend, however, who seemed to be truly close to him. They had the same sense of humour, their ideas seemed to converge when they did

¹ Pseudonym

school projects, they both used to wear sports clothes even if they did not practise any sports. Their slow and synchronised pace when walking together made me think they were so harmoniously matched that they could be friends forever. With their kindness and light-heartedness as their most beautiful assets, I would often join up with them for team projects, and through those team projects the three of us would spend time together. It was during that time together that a sparkle of curiosity filled me with elation. When I felt that sparkle, although I was only an incidental character in the story of their perfect friendship, Raoul had something in common with me; something that he did not have with Pablo². I was, and still am, unable to articulate exactly what I saw, felt, and sensed in him but I was almost certain that he was not like his friend. He was more like *me*. Perhaps the way in which I looked at him made him look at me differently, resting his eyes on me a bit longer than usual. Our holding of gazes could have been inconsequential, just a couple of seconds looking into each other's eyes every now and then. It was so brief but in those couple of seconds I would feel we were co-holders of a secret that made us accomplices in a crime that was yet to be committed. It was very brief but with the daring motivation of my 17 year-old self, that briefness was enough to make me test if he was, indeed, like me. It was that motivation that made me invite him to watch a movie at my house.

Had I told him that the movie I had in mind was an American gay porn film entitled 'bed and breakfast', he probably would not have accepted. Had I told him I was planning to seduce him so I could end up resting my body on his the same way he used to rest his eyes on mine, he probably would not have accepted. So I lied to him.

² Pseudonym

It was a triumph to get the VHS cassette of 'bed and breakfast' and I was sure Raoul would appreciate it as much as I did when I first watched it. I felt ashamed entering the sex-shop but I had already travelled to downtown Mexico City to get the film, so I overcame the shame and made my way in. It took me perhaps an hour to decide which video tape I would choose from the selection of titles on offer. All of them mesmerised me with their handsome men on the covers, unashamedly showing their bodies and faces. So many I wanted to buy but I could only afford one. Any of those would have been fine, as my elation about the movie relied on the expectation of seeing couples enjoying the pleasure of their skin-to-skin action; beautiful promise that had not been fulfilled when I bought my first porn magazine and its glossy pages displayed only solos. I would have liked to have seen couples but, at the time, I was content with the fact that the newsagent outside my high school showed, amongst the wide collection of magazines with mainstream porn, one with gay porn. I had to face my fear when I bought it for the first time but the newsagent responded so kindly and non-judgmentally when I asked for my obscene magazine that I felt I had found a haven in a homophobic society. Every month I would get the new issue of *Boys & Toys*, where a different man would feature on the cover. Besides the naked men, the magazine had sections touching upon literature, nightlife, fashion, specialised shops, health, and advice on relationships. In subsequent years, I would end up writing a section on Human Rights for that magazine but that is another story. Let me go back to the nudity of the models. Feeding my eagerness, all men would appear, over and over, alone in their sexiness. Partly that depiction of loneliness was what kept me looking for something more. When in that magazine I saw an advertisement for a sex-shop, I thought I had found what I was looking for. I just needed to embark on a two-hour journey downtown.

I told Raoul that 'Dante's Peak' was the movie we would be watching, Hollywood's story of a dormant volcano that, after showing ambiguous signs of activity, erupts unexpectedly, making the people living on its outskirts run for their lives. We sat on my bed. I turned on the TV. I offered him something to drink. We were ready for the movie. With my heart pumping in uncertainty, I put the cassette in the VHS player and placed the case, with those stunning models on the cover, next to my friend. I had already pressed play when he took the case and saw it. The first scene was starting when he turned it to see the back cover. Silence. He is looking at the entanglement of naked bodies in silence. On screen, a blond guy parks his car in front of a countryside B&B, takes his suitcase out of the boot, and enters the guest house to register his arrival. Raoul puts the case on the bed and comments that the movie does not look like a Hollywood production. On scene, it takes only a couple of minutes to see the two actors kiss each other when the host takes the recently arrived guest to his room. *'Oh! A pair of homosexuals!'* Raoul comments in a tone that I interpret as 'I'm cool, I'm open minded'. With their clothes off, the two actors are embarking on a sexy holiday affair. *'This is not Dante's Peak'* is what Raoul exclaims before asking me if I am a homosexual. *'Are you a homosexual?'* His question feels as if he has ripped my trousers and left me naked, exposed, and humiliated in front of an astonished crowd. *'I like men'*, I say, trying to get around his caustic question. *'What about you?'* I ask him. *'I am not a homosexual'* he says. *'I was asking if you like men'* I clarify, whilst I dare to touch his knee. I am sure he will say yes. He says no. But he does not stop me from touching his knee. *'Maybe'*, he says. He does not stop me from touching his thigh. He does not stop me from touching his crotch. He does not stop me from taking his belt off, trousers, underwear, nor from taking his fully-grown member in my hand. He does not stop me from putting it into my mouth. He never stops

me from anything. Lost in his thoughts, it is only his member that seems to be participating in the encounter with me, not Raoul. I am still fully dressed when he takes my head with his hands and pulls me strongly towards his member. We continue for a while. Not sure of how to proceed, I ask him if he would like to do something more. He says no. His no, added to his quiet, motionless way of lying in bed, demotivates me from pursuing anything else. The mutuality I expected does not happen. The actors in 'bed and breakfast' are already all entangled in anal penetration when I stop the video player. The screen goes black before they reach the orgasm. Perhaps it is the lack of his own orgasm that makes Raoul tell me *'I might want to do something more'*. Because it was not very clear in my mind what would happen in that encounter, I did not buy condoms. When he asks me if I have any and I say no, he says he will not do anything else. His vision of doing our own rendition of 'bed and breakfast' vanished as my idea of Raoul being 'like me' vanished. Before he leaves, he asks me if I plan to live like that. *'Do you plan to live like this?'* Raoul utters. *'Like what?'* I reply. *'Liking men'* he continues. *'I would like to have a boyfriend'* is my answer. *'I see. Take care, you might meet dangerous people'*. Silence. Sadness. *'Didn't you like it today?'* I ask. *'Yes, but we cannot live like this.'* After saying that, he leaves my house. We never have physical contact again but we remain friends for the rest of our high school years. The kind of friends who are actually just classmates but they still call themselves friends. Our encounter was never mentioned. Raoul's friendship with Pablo seemed to be the same. They still seemed to be the kind of friends who could be together forever. Forever is a long time now that I think about it but I do wish their friendship lasted after school, as it seemed that what they had was solid, sincere, and winsome.

1.2 The relationship between my own experience as a gay man and my research into gay men's identities

What I find horrifying about this story is that I lied to my friend and lured him to my planned seduction. It fills me with sadness that I wanted to know many things about Raoul; I wanted to know when and how he had experienced desire for other men or if he had met other guys like *us* but I could not approach him directly with my questions. I could only approach him through sex. I had learnt that sex was the language guys like me spoke. I wanted to know many things about Raoul that I did not dare to ask. It fills me with sadness that I hardly found Raoul attractive or interesting, I never felt we could be a good match, but still I dreamed of him being my boyfriend. I am using this story to introduce my study because for some time after the event I could not understand why, when he seemed to enjoy part of the encounter, he did not want to explore more. For some time I thought that just because we both liked men, we were both homosexuals. Yet even though we were in the same bed, at the same time, with each other, it is clear that the encounter meant something different for him than it did for me. We were both scared, but scared of different things. He thought some homosexuals were dangerous. I thought the danger lay in being discovered or catching an STI, not in my fellow homosexuals. I am using this story because it shows shame. I was ashamed of being *it* despite having already come out to my mother, broken up with my then girlfriend, and told them 'I like men and that will not change'. I had reconciled my own desires with myself and had already decided I would defend it against anyone and anything. I am using this story because that was one of the few occasions on which someone has asked me bluntly if I am a homosexual. Yet whilst my knowledge of the subject made me think '*yes, I'm homosexual*', it never felt right; I never felt I actually was *that*.

In that encounter with Raoul I realised our desires were not the only elements that would make us homosexuals. Nor would our sexual encounter. Although I did not like the term, I grew to accept it and started identifying myself as homosexual. I used to say out loud 'I am homosexual' to see if the caustic reaction of the word in my sense of self disappeared, vanished, or hurt less. It never did. Every time I said it, I felt as though my soul needed to recover from second degree burns. I used the term regardless, especially in those spaces where there was no need to use it, such as gay clubs. I wrongly assumed that all who were there were homosexuals. Later I would realise that even under that assumption, we were *it* differently. Throughout my teenage years, I met other men who were willing to engage in different levels of sexual contact. Many of those men did not think of a relationship between two men as their primary relationship; many of them called themselves homosexual but many did not. Those encounters with other men who attended the *gay* clubs and visited the *gay* neighbourhood in Mexico City revealed to me a new term, which I embraced as it released me from the caustic homosexual. I identified myself as *gay* but I did not really know what that was, other than a fancy foreign word. Yet it was an alternative that men like me were using and embracing. This sense of having found a concept with which I identified made me want to know more about it. Thus my engagement with the term 'gay' started with the idea of talking to other men like me and writing about it; talking and writing as a way to understand. Talking to gay men was, however, difficult. The only place I could meet them was at gay clubs, which I would go to despite being underage, and dance until the early hours. Someone would approach me and – volume of the music permitting – we would talk. If the chat was good, we would go to his place, where we would engage in different levels of sexual contact, and after that we would talk.

Through my conversations and writing, I understood that some gay people had to hide, to be careful in our approach to other men, that many experienced discrimination, injustice, violence, and invisibility on a regular basis. I used to believe that the physical and psychological violence coming from external sources were the only negative forces that affected our lives but now, aged 35, my understanding of the forms of violence against gay people has changed. As has my understanding of relationships and my understanding of sexual encounters. I understand that gay men engage in different forms of relationships and sex for different reasons. My understanding of gayness has changed. Yet, more than ever, I am intrigued by the meanings relationships have for gay men and how they affect who we are. Over the years I have had sex with strangers, had meaningful loving relationships, fell in love, had my heart broken, and broken other men's hearts. It used to make me feel very proud to count the number of men I had slept with and tell my friends those stories of desire as acts of empowerment. Those encounters were, some of the time, fulfilling but for the most part they were ephemeral. I am a romantic man; some people have laughed about or admired that quality. Men have had different reactions to the way I look, to my masculine femininity, to my sexual skills and approaches, and to other aspects of the person I am. At 35, I am going to get married to a man I could have only dreamt of. In our convergence and divergence, we love each other. From our radically different positions on gay-related issues, we love each other. In our humanity, we love each other. We are going to get married and it mesmerises me because I grew up knowing that marriage was impossible for men like us. It makes me joyful but it makes me sad that it is happening in a world where people are still looked down on, mocked, attacked, tortured, thrown out of buildings, and killed for being like us.

This research emerges from all and every single one of those relationships and encounters with those men who have done something to and with me. It emerges from the sexual relationships that were everything and nothing, fulfilling and emptying; from those sexual encounters that first made me feel ashamed but then empowered me. My work here speaks to those men who, through those experiences of togetherness and disintegration, made me realise that it was only *with* them, their presence, their absence, our desire, our questions, our rejections, and love, with their bodies, their stories, our fears, their inconspicuous families, our brokenness, our invisibility, and my eagerness that I became the man I am. Narrative enters the picture because it became a way in which I tried to understand why I was so drawn to those relationships and encounters even when I did not feel drawn to them. It was through the love and sex stories I used to tell that I constructed the story of who I was. Jerome Bruner (1986) is one of the pioneers of the narrative turn, whose work I have used in my attempt to understand these relationships with those men, what they have done to me, and what I have made of them. In the second half of the 20th century, Bruner and other authors such as Paul Ricoeur (1984) proposed that life was not real nor a group of sequenced happenings. They proposed life in itself was inherently meaningless that life becomes meaningful because we construct it as such. They suggested that daily happenings occurring in our lives, the ones that we believed as the foundations of our current situation, were a connection only justified by our necessity to find coherence in our lives, our necessity to resist the idea of fortuity. I saw in narrative an opportunity to approach gay men, explore how they tell the stories of their own becoming, and explore how their stories of love and sex, lovers and sexual partners interweave with one another to create the foundations of what become the stories of their lives.

What made scholars such as Bruner and Ricoeur special for me was their acknowledgement of people's agency to engage in meaning-making acts through listening and telling stories. Therefore, stories have implications of power. What made narrative theories relevant to my research is that they acknowledge individuals' capacity to narrate their experiences of living and through those life stories create the narrative net that contributes to our understanding of gayness. Narrative would give me an opportunity to listen to the stories gay men tell about their relationships and then get an understanding of how those stories resonate in our culture. Narrative would help me to visualise how the stories that are common in our culture resonate in us. If life is meaningless in itself but we give meaning to it; if our relationships are meaningless but we give meaning to them; if we learn through stories because they play in culture the role that genes play in evolution (Wilson, 2009); I wonder how I learned that it was easier to have sex with a friend than talking with him about what we felt. If it is us, gay men, who give meaning to our lives and our relationships, I want to know how we have constructed that narrative net that conforms our understanding of what it is to be gay. Narrative has given me the means to thus explore the meanings that gay men give to their relationships and state my research question:

How do gay men make sense of the intertwinement of their romantic and erotic relationships and their sense of identity?

In this context I view narrative acts as opportunities for gay men to describe in their own terms what being gay means to them, to give a voice to the thoughts that construct their understanding of who they are. Why do I distinguish romantic and erotic relationships rather than think of them together just as relationships between gay men? My life experience and my contact with specialised literature has shown me that gay men seem to engage

in sexual relationships straightforwardly. Whether that is an accurate representation, a misrepresentation, or an incomplete representation, I wondered how that narrative resonated in us. I wanted to explore the meanings that that narrative had in our lives. Then I remembered that besides having met and talked with gay men, I had also read stories gay men had written. I started to read more and revisit novels that addressed gay relationships, such as James Baldwin's (1990) 'Giovanni's Room' or the poems by Andrew McMillan (2015) in 'Physical'. I noticed that although they depicted sexual encounters between men, there was something richer in the passages; something greater than the bodily acts. There was something sensuous that perhaps emerged from and affected the body but transcended the body. I understood that to be the erotic. I decided to use that understanding of the erotic as one of the pillars for my inquiry because I thought it would allow participants to talk about how they make sense of the sexual.

The romantic aspect arose, on the other hand, from observing that literature often uses the term 'long-term relationships' but I wanted to move the focus from time and duration, on the basis that feelings and emotional engagement do not necessarily occur over a long period of time. My separation of the concepts of 'erotic' and 'romantic', compared to the integrative term 'intimate relationships', speaks to my insider's experience as a man who has engaged in, been the object of, and witnessed relationships that seem to separate them unproblematically. The separation of these terms, in combination with analysis of how gay men understand them, presented me with epistemological challenges; one of which is the question of whether such experiences can actually be narrated.

Other challenges to narrative have been highlighted by Atkinson (1997), who shows methodological scepticism as narrative relies on the individual's fallible memory; or Bourdieu (1991), who raised political concerns as narrative is tied to the linguistic skills of the narrator. I will discuss these, and other potential pitfalls of narrative as my chosen epistemological perspective, throughout the thesis.

1.3 Outline of the thesis

This study is concerned with the intertwinement of gay men's identities and their erotic and romantic relationships and encounters. I rely on a narrative approach to analyse how self-identified gay men tell stories about these relationships and how their narrations shape, inform, influence, reinforce, question, challenge, align with, and construct their sense of who they are. In analysing this intertwinement of relationships and identities, I also explore how their narrative processes are inextricably immersed in the narrators' social contexts.

In the next chapter, I present my review of literature relevant to my research question. In this review, I noted a distinction between macro- and micro-social perspectives. In the first group, I reviewed studies that, focusing on large samples of people, aimed to explain how different bio-psycho-social factors influenced gay identities collectively. In the micro-social perspectives, I reviewed literature that explored gay identity from the perspective of people's immediate social relations such as family, school, and work relations. This thesis, whilst considering the more immediate relations engaged in by the individual, acknowledges that the broader social spheres always need to be taken into account in the understanding of identities. Whilst reviewing this literature, I observed that sexual relationships and sexual behaviour occupied

an important part of these studies but only a small number of them explicitly addressed how these sexual connections affected people's sense of identity. From this observation, I developed a third area in my literature review, which focused on studies addressing identities from a relational perspective; a framework where the individual constructs a sense of Self that positions them as a reflexive being in relation to the Other.

In chapter 3, I discuss the onto-epistemological foundations of my research. I start by explaining how relationships seem to be central to the understanding of a gay identity to the point that people find it difficult to talk about being gay without mentioning aspects of these relationships. In contrast to the analysis of gay relationships from a sexual health perspective, I explore how gay men narrate these erotic and romantic experiences and how through them they engage in an identity meaning-making process. Narrative thus becomes the epistemological foundation to understanding identity in this research. It implies that I, as a researcher, worked with people's ability to cognitively create knowledge through acts of telling and listening and co-constructing life stories. From this onto-epistemological perspective, gay identity as a phenomenon comes into being through encounters between those who have felt some sort of attraction towards men and have identified themselves as gay, the narratives that have been produced from those encounters, and the interplay of these narratives within broader social spheres. It is through the dialogical process in which participants narrate their experiences and my inquiries into these meaning-making processes that I can gain an understanding of what their erotic and romantic relationships mean to them and how those meanings entangle with their sense of identity.

In chapter 4, I present a detailed description of the methodology I planned and implemented for the conduct of this study, which focused on the

premises of narrative as methodology and drew on unstructured interviews as method. Being mindful that both my and participants' experiences and values substantially influenced the interviews and my analysis, I emphasise how I used reflexivity as a continuous research practice in an aim to make transparent the co-construction of qualitative data and other relevant discussions of the methodological and ethical issues I faced throughout the research process.

In chapter 5, I deconstruct the structural narrative analysis I conducted with each one of the interview transcripts. I then give a meticulous explanation of the analytic process I developed in order to determine my units of meaning. In other words, this chapter explains how I determined which parts of the interview would be analysed and which contents would be excluded. It also sets the scene for the idiographic findings I present in chapter 6.

In chapter 6, I introduce five of the participants I interviewed for the study and, based on a structural narrative analysis of their interview transcripts, I engage with prominent themes relevant to this research inquiry and discuss them in the light of relevant literature. The role of long-term relationships as identity stabilisers, the role of sexual encounters as a way to search for the self, the erotic as an act of human connectedness, and the understanding of loving relationships as acts of resistance to an overwhelming sense of oppression are examples of the themes discussed here.

In chapter 7, I bring together the narratives from the ten men who participated in this study and present common themes and trends in their understanding of their gayness. This chapter is divided into four sections through which, by doing a close reiterative reading of each interview transcript and coding its contents in a data-driven fashion, I explain their understandings of being gay with a focus on relational aspects.

In chapter 8, I identify my original contributions to knowledge and, by locating them amongst academic dialogues, I join, question, and expand on them. This chapter also includes the limitations of this study and offers some suggestions for future research.

Finally, in chapter 9, I offer, as a way of conclusion, some reflexions on how I was transformed by this research and what it meant for me to write about being gay 'from within'.

2 | Literature Review

2.1 *Introduction*

In the previous chapter, I explained the personal background from which my research inquiry emerges, emphasising why I focused this thesis on encounters and relationships between gay men, and situated it in the narrative field. Now I explain how I located this study in relation to the existing body of knowledge in the field of gay men's identities, where I identified current debates and political concerns. At the core of this review is the centrality that research has given to gay men's sexual behaviour, and on the other hand, how family, social, and cultural aspects affect the construction of gay identities. There is, however, a scarcity of studies that look at how sexual encounters and relationships – together – affect gay men's understandings of who they are. This gap in literature has informed my review of literature.

The literature I reviewed was heterogeneous in terms of the disciplines, populations, cultures, and socio-political contexts that featured in them. That heterogeneity responds to the multiple scholarly angles from which gay identities can be seen and to the exploratory nature of the inquiry. There is extensive literature focusing on collective gay identities and the broader social aspects that inform them but far less focusing on relationships between gay men and the intrapersonal aspects of those relationships.

Here I present and discuss this diverse body of work from two angles: (1) research work that looks at gay identities from a macroscopic perspective; and (2) research work that speaks about gay identities from an interpersonal, relational perspective. Although these perspectives are – of course – overlapping explanations of the phenomenon of how gay men understand who they are, and a number of the articles I reviewed offer explanations that

operate simultaneously at both levels, through this categorisation I identify the main areas on which the literature was focused.

2.1.1 How I conducted this literature review

Before starting my doctoral research, I was familiar with some gay-themed literature but in an attempt to explore more broadly and provide an informative sample of the work in this field, I conducted a comprehensive review that allowed me to see a bigger, more panoramic picture. My attempt to exhaust the available sources consisted of an online advanced search for peer-reviewed articles written in English in seven databases: DiscoverEd by Edinburgh University, Project MUSE, Health Source, Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection, PsycINFO, ERIC via EBSCOhost, and Web of Knowledge. I targeted research pieces that dealt with the type of research that could relate to mine, that is, research aimed at understanding how men construed life events associated with relationships and sex, in entanglement with their sense of being gay.

Because I am looking at the construction of identities through a narrative perspective, I focused on articles that addressed narrative in one way or another. This implies that the works I reviewed used the term 'narrative' in different ways: theoretically, methodologically, or other ways. For example, there is a distinction between personal narrative and a broader social narrative. Although the personal and the social are interdependent, the first one might refer to a direct story, account, or explanation that is given by a particular person, and the second might refer to a story that is shared by a number of people and is easily available through public channels, such as the media.

The search words I included were: 'gay', 'homosexual', 'identity', 'relationships', and 'narrative'. I excluded articles that did not have 'identity'

as their primary focus (namely in the title or expressly stated in their abstracts) and articles that were focused exclusively on biomedical aspects of homosexuality, for example drug use and sexually transmitted infections. Although the terms 'gay' and 'homosexual' have different connotations, especially that the latter can have medical and homophobic connotations (T. L. Brown & Alderson, 2010), for the purpose of this review I looked for the terms 'gay' and 'homosexual' interchangeably as these are used by the research community to refer, arguably, to the same population. However, in the discussion of this literature review, I problematise this undifferentiated use of these terms.

An emphasis on narrative methods and approaches, namely studies that dealt with participants' narrated experiences either in written or verbal form, helped me to narrow down my results to 141 articles, which I ordered chronologically and then screened (a table that provides a summary of these studies can be found in Appendix 1). This selection comprises articles published between 1989 and May 2017 as depicted in Figure 1. More articles might have been published before 1989 but I did not access them as this search only included digitally available material rather than hard copies of research journals. The oldest pieces of research that my literature review comprises are Richard Friend's (1989), Richard Troiden's (1989), and Michael Ross' (1989) papers. They all make an attempt to better understand identity processes by analysing the relationships between families and older gay and lesbian adults (Friend); applying sociological theory to develop an ideal-typical model of homosexual identity formation (Troiden); and comparing homosexual men from four countries on a number of psychological and social indices to determine differences between them, and the effect of culture on any such influences (Ross).

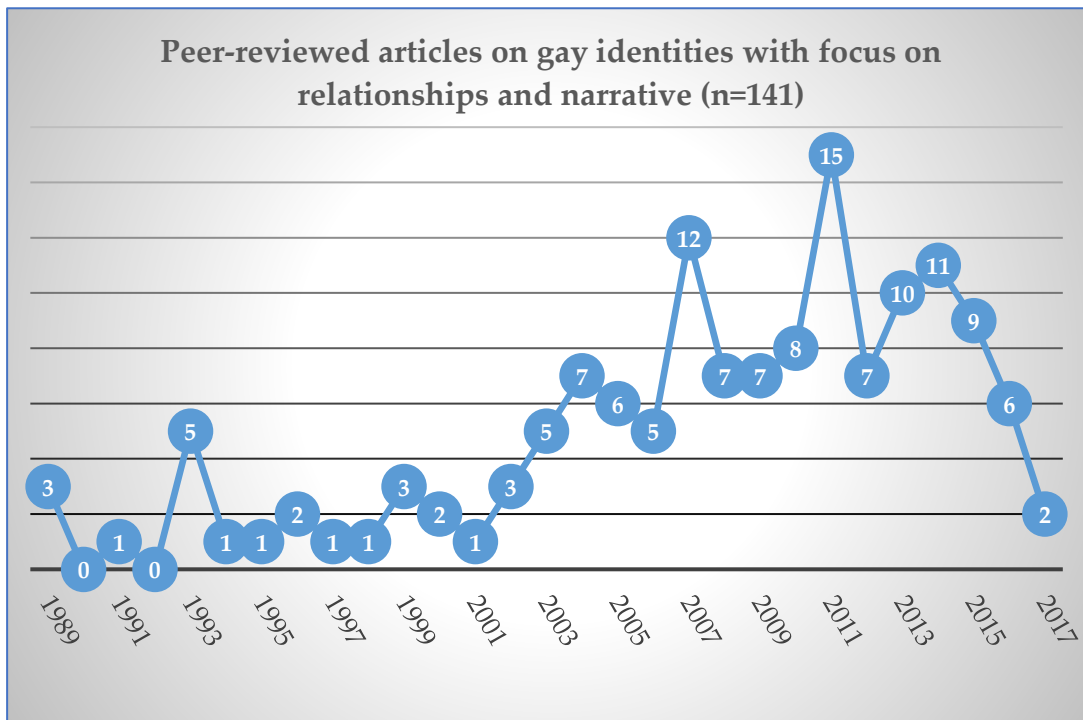


Figure 1 Chronology of this literature review

I observed a modest growth in interest in research on gay identities over these nearly three decades, with a peak of 15 articles published in 2011, possibly as a result of the number of LGBT+ movements that happened across the world in 2010. President Obama finishing the ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ policy; the legalisation of gay marriage in Argentina, Portugal, Mexico City, and Iceland; and the increasing online options to meet gay men: these are examples of these socio-political changes that might have affected the research production in that year. These articles reflect more specific, nuanced, and sophisticated approaches to gay identities; see, for instance, Trevor Hoppe’s (2011) article on the meanings gay men constructed around their positional identity as ‘bottoms’. In it, Hoppe identifies and questions scripted conceptions about pleasure and power that both give possibility to and constrain the ways in which gay men experience and explain their sexual practices and desires.

After organising the literature chronologically, I identified the countries in which the research was conducted or the population on which the research was focused. See Figure 2. This classification did not necessarily represent the affiliation of the researcher. For example, Gustavo Subero (2010) was affiliated with Coventry University, England when his research was published but it dealt with aspects of gay identity in Mexico. I thus counted it as research that addresses gay men's identities issues in Mexico, not England. In those cases where the research was a theoretical contribution or its data did not address a population located in a specific country, I registered those research pieces according to the researcher's affiliation. For example, Jeff Sapp's (2010) review of gay-themed books for children is considered as USA-based research because of Sapp's affiliation to California State University. This classification by geographical location helped me get a sense of the places where gay identities are explored, to identify comprehensive areas of research activity, to locate areas where this subject matter is understudied, and to understand research trends – if there were any – in order to understand the implications of these observations. The countries that dominated the panorama in this literature review were the USA, with 99 articles; the UK, with 23 articles; Canada, with 11 articles; and Australia, with 9 articles. Only four of these studies took into consideration populations in rural areas (Fenge & Jones, 2012; M. L. Gray, 2007; Kazyak, 2011; Whittier, 1998). It is important to keep this prominence of USA-based studies and underrepresentation of gay people in rural areas in mind, as many of the aspects that are discussed in their findings would be bound to the social, geographical, political, cultural contexts where the research was produced.

Drawing from the researchers' affiliation, I identified the disciplines from which the research pieces were approaching the subject. In cases where there were authors from different disciplines, such as the study by Gary Harper, Pedro Serrano, Douglas Bruce, and Jose Bauermeister (2015) which examines the role of the Internet in facilitating the sexual orientation identity development process of gay and bisexual male adolescents, I registered them as inter-disciplinary studies. Of the 141 articles I identified, the disciplines most interested in gay identity were clinical psychology, see for instance Gray and Desmarais (2014), and sociology, for example Heaphy, Einarsdottir and Smart (2013).

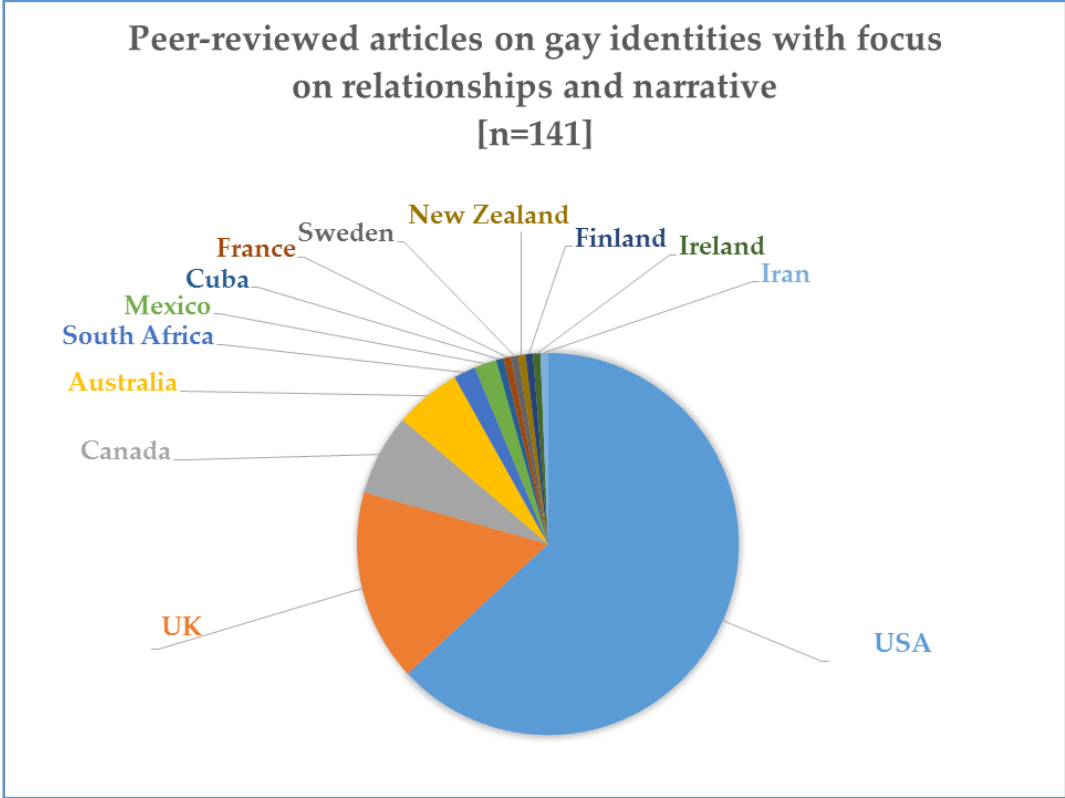


Figure 2 Research on gay identities by country

However, disciplines such as geography and communication are increasingly participating in the debate on gay identity. Emily Kazyak (2011) for example, in an attempt to analyse the connection between cultural and

personal levels of narrative identity, engaged in an examination of sexual identity constructions of gays and lesbians living in rural spaces. By drawing on rural-urban narratives, she concluded that participants made distinctions between 'urban gays' and 'rural gays' and constructed identities they understood as specific to the places they lived. In another example, Bond and Loewenstern (2014), from a communications perspective, used happy memory narratives written by lesbian, gay, and bisexual adolescents to investigate positive life experiences. Their aim was to understand what type of positive life experiences could improve adolescents' wellbeing.

With multiple disciplines approaching the concept, I observed a myriad of possible angles from which gay identity can be, and sometimes is, explored. From a theoretical perspective, the question of labels and their meanings are one of the most prevalent themes in the field's research community. When it comes to empirical papers and work with participants, however, the conceptualisation of gayness remains uncontested. This multidisciplinary approach to gay identities and relationships between men has contributed to substantial divergences in the field.

Once I finished this initial screening of the literature, I engaged in close reading of the articles in order to conduct a thematic review organised around major approaches and foci. This process allowed me to identify key research pieces that informed and connected with my research question.

To supplement this primary literature search, I inspected the reference lists in the articles I reviewed and located works that were frequently referenced across this literature and grey literature that did not feature in my original search. Ken Plummer's work on stories of sexual experience (1995) and Jeffrey Weeks, Brian Heaphy, and Catherine Donovan's (2001) work on 'families of choice' are examples of the research that outreached my original

peer-reviewed search. On a similar note, I expanded this systematic way of reviewing literature by taking into consideration the books that were recommended to me by my supervisors and colleagues. That was the case with 'Footsteps & witnesses' (Cant, 2008), which is a collection of histories of Scottish LGBT people of all ages and backgrounds and 'Narrating the closet: an autoethnography of same-sex attraction' (T. E. Adams, 2011); books that would become influential in my work because of the rich, sincere, and deep qualities of the narratives. Furthermore, these works were valuable because they give a voice to LGBTQ peoples so that they talk about their lives and identities in their own terms.

To orient the reader to a number of definitions of gay identity and central concerns, in the next section I discuss how the literature in question relates to my study.

2.2 Gay identity seen from a macroscopic perspective: Identification, collective identities, and representation of gay peoples

In this literature review, I identified and grouped studies that approached the phenomenon of how gay identities and relationships connect from a macroscopic perspective. With the purpose of tracking patterns of how gay people develop their identities, research from this perspective encompasses comparative studies, modelling approaches, and descriptive studies. These studies support their findings by recruiting large samples or testing theories developed from studies with large samples – see for instance Fassinger and Miller (1996) or Kann and colleagues (2011) – with a view to generalising how gay men behave, think, and feel.

2.2.1 Gay paths – developmental approaches to gay identity

Particularly during the late 1980's and early 1990's, scholars were interested in gay and lesbian identities and their developmental aspects over a lifespan. Researchers looked at the phenomenon aiming to generate conceptual representations of the typical gay identity. This is the case with Troiden (1989), who developed a four-stage trajectory model that is still influential nowadays. Broadly speaking, his model suggests that homosexuals go through a series of stages before they identify themselves as homosexuals and commit to living as a homosexual. His model starts with *sensitisation*, when the individual experiences feelings of marginality from other boys or girls during the pre-pubescent age; a feeling of 'being different'. *Identity confusion*: the stage where the individual recognises their same-sex desire and decides to explore or reject that desire, experiment with others or avoid it. *Identity assumption*, where lesbians and gay males decide to define themselves as homosexuals. *Commitment*: the stage when the individual decides that 'it becomes easier, more attractive, and less costly to remain a homosexual' (Plummer, 1975. Cited in Troiden, 1989, p. 63) than trying to function as a heterosexual.

Other identity formation models have contemplated a similar development that starts with the realisation of the same-sex desire, followed by exploration and experimentation with sexual contact, self-definition as homosexual, disclosure of identity to others (which has been widely known as 'coming out'), and celebration of sexual identity (RitchC Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000). From these developmental models, the disclosure or 'coming out of the closet' is one of the most widely studied processes in gay identity. Whether to predict its timing (Bogaert & Hafer, 2009), to understand the meanings it has for young gay adults (Fields, 2011), or to explore the apparent

parental reactions of 'mourning and loss' to their children's coming out (R. C. Savin-Williams & Dubé, 1998), this aspect of gay identity has received researchers' attention and has been widely incorporated into the public understanding of being gay, to the point that it has been considered a milestone (Floyd & Stein, 2002) and epitomised as a quintessential gay event.

However, the typical identity development trajectory has received some challenges as it has been observed that it does not describe the experiences of all individuals. Savin-Williams and Diamond (2000) explored how the transition from one stage to the other, namely, first same-sex attractions, self-labelling, same-sex sexual contact, and disclosure, were different for men and for women, suggesting that more men than women tended to explore sex first before identifying themselves as gay. This type of developmental approach to understanding gay identity is probably the most ambitious in literature because of its aim to integrate biological and cultural aspects and the intended explanatory scope. See for instance Bem's (1996) theory, which incorporates biological factors such as genes and brain neuroanatomy from empirical studies and cultural variables from social constructionism.

More recently, Rosario and her collaborators (2006) have explored how lesbian, gay, and bisexual identities develop once individuals adopt a certain identity and how these identities change over time. In a different study – but similarly to Savin-Williams and Diamond – Rosario, Schrimshaw, and Hunter (2011) queried the 'traditional' identity development trajectory and explored different patterns and their effects on psychological adjustment of youths. Although the studies published by Rosario and Savin-Williams have questioned the linearity of traditional developmental models and tried to represent the voices of people whose understandings of their identities do not

fit traditional models, it is important to remember that in their studies they still aim to understand the diverse LGB population from a macroscopic perspective and to reach some generalisations. In doing so, the nonconforming narratives of some people could be at stake.

Amongst the numerous studies on gay identity focused on lesbian and gay youth, there are a few of them that have focused on older lesbians and gay men. Friend's (1989) study showed that there are multiple inter- and intra-individual differences in how older gays and lesbians establish, maintain, and take care of their relationships with their families and other gay and lesbian people. Moreover, Friend's research showed that there are substantial differences in how older lesbians and gays see themselves and how their disclosures, concealments, and negotiations of their identities shape their relationships.

2.2.2 Attempts to define gay identity: The case of Men who have Sex with Men (MSM)

Inherent in the research on gay identity is the difficulty in distinguishing it from homosexuality and explaining why it should be distinguished, if at all. Throughout modern history, homosexuality has dominated scientific discourses. Jack Drescher (2010) explains that there have been three groups of theories that give accounts of homosexuality and its causes: theories of normal variation that argue that same-sex attraction occurs naturally, the modern 'born this way' narrative being one of these; theories of pathology, which view homosexuality as a deviation from a 'normal' heterosexual development; and theories of immaturity, which argue that homosexuality is a transitional phase before reaching heterosexuality. As early as Krafft-Ebing's (1900) 'Psychopathia Sexualis', homosexuality has been treated in medical terms. In contemporary psychiatric research,

homosexuality is no longer seen as a pathology (Drescher, 2010). However, because of its links to global health issues such as HIV/AIDS and other STIs, a number of studies on homosexuality come from health-related disciplines and hence focus on sexual activity. If it is necessary to define homosexuality for the purpose of the study, the question is usually dealt with pragmatically: 'Men who have Sex with Men' (MSM). This has been a label which does not compromise the understanding of people's identities but at the same time does not engage with people's meaning-making processes. The term MSM focuses on behavioural aspects in order to identify and tackle issues associated with sexual health (Rosenberger, Herbenick, Novak, & Reece, 2014) but sexual behaviour in itself does not explain gay identity.

A proportion of men engage in sexual activity with other men but they do not label themselves as homosexual/gay. For example, Jeffrey Parsons and colleagues (2006) conducted a study on assumptions about serostatus amongst HIV-positive MSM and they recruited participants through different techniques, two of which were by targeting predominately gay neighbourhoods and advertising the study in gay publications. These recruitment techniques suggest there is an underlying presupposition that some gay men were sampled but whether they identified themselves as gay or not was not entirely relevant for that particular study. The use of the label MSM served them for pragmatic purposes as they could focus on men's sexual risk behaviour with their unknown partners. The behavioural aspect was highlighted and the definition or meaning-making processes were bracketed. Following this same pragmatic approach, Parsons and colleagues (2013) investigated the psychological and behavioural impact of same-sex relationships on the health of gay and bisexual men. Although that study centred on health aspects as well, they did not use the label MSM and,

conversely, marked a distinction between gay and bisexual men by asking participants to identify themselves as such. Even though the term 'MSM' has been widely used in sexual health research, it is important to note that, similarly to 'homosexual', it reflects the ways in which researchers have constructed terminology to describe people's experiences and identities. I mention these studies led by Parsons in order to emphasise the substantial difference between investigating someone's sexual behaviour and someone's identity. The difference relies on self-identification and the meaning-making processes involved in that identity construction process, which are an important landmark in the investigation of gay peoples' lives as they acknowledge individuals' capacity to ascribe to or detach themselves from certain labels.

The concept of gay identity is a more recent construct and requires a more detailed explanation than the concept 'homosexual' (Michaels & Lhomond, 2006) and the term 'Men who have Sex with Men'. Being gay has become a multi-layered concept that surpasses in complexity the medically grounded 'homosexual'. Being gay does not involve just having sex with men (Malcolm, 2008), but also involves the search for coherence and meanings associated with that sexual attraction: it involves participation in social and psychological processes. The growing number of studies that work with self-identified gay men acknowledge individuals' agency by observing how they choose which labels they prefer to use. Coleman-Fountain (2014a) discusses this very aspect and concludes that individuals do not reject the labels 'gay' or 'lesbian' but they rethink and redefine their meanings, and reassess their prominence in their lives. In defining who is gay and what it means to be gay, I consider studies that give voice and empower participants to be of prime importance.

2.2.3 Identification with collective groups: perspectives from geography, media, and sociology

Research in this section centres on how broader demographic variables such as migration, income, and the establishment of commercial gay venues can shape the ways in which gay men relate to each other and how these variables contribute to the construction of collective gay identities. Research by Flowers, Marriot, and Hart (2000) and Haubrich and colleagues (2004) suggest that the establishment of 'gay spaces' such as bars, clubs, saunas and bathhouses, and other LGBT-oriented commercial venues has contributed to making the LGBT population visible. It has also made those people who attend them identifiable as gay and given them a physical presence that shapes public ideas about what LGBT people do. Their research also suggests that the scarcity of spaces where gay men can relate to each other influences their sexual practices as they might offer easy access to sex at the same time as constituting spaces that are personally safe (Haubrich et al., 2004, p. 27).

Studies on how gay peoples concentrate themselves in certain areas and neighbourhoods have given way to the term 'gaybourhoods' and queer-friendly neighbourhoods (Gorman-Murray & Waitt, 2009) and a growing number of researchers have dedicated their efforts to studying this phenomenon. Matthews and Besemer's (2015) paper on the locations where gay populations settle in Scotland shows that contrary to popular imagery in which non-straight households are portrayed with higher disposable income and more likely to live in affluent neighbourhoods, a disproportionate concentration of non-heterosexual people live in the most deprived areas in Scotland. Although this paper does not address individuals' identities, it focuses on complex social, cultural, and historical elements that attempt to

explain how LGBT people's identities intertwine with geographical, social, and economic elements and these elements contribute to the construction of their collective representations.

The relationship between gay identities and space is not limited to commercial venues or housing issues; events such as the 'gay pride' contribute to the representation and construction of a collective gay identity. Gray and Desmarais (2014) explain how these encounters or public gatherings involve self-assessment and negotiation processes, as individuals respond to the interpersonal environment and engage in self-comparisons with the rest of the group to evaluate the extent to which they fit into that cluster. However, this identification – or misidentification – with a gay collective can occur not only in the geographical space. Hammack (2005), in his holistic perspective of human development, explains that specific cultural models of sexuality portrayed in broader social discourses help to shape the way in which adolescents interpret their own sexuality. When adolescents experience and explore same-sex desire, they can observe and assimilate the experience in various ways depending on the available cultural models to which they have been exposed, creating a dynamic relationship between sexual desires, behaviours and broadly shared cultural discourses (Davis, 2015). Studies by Dhaenens (2013) and Gomillion and Giuliano (2011) suggest that given the increasing exposure to gay themes being covered in the media, adolescents who experience same-sex desire have access to the concept of 'being gay' as part of their everyday lives and it becomes part of their knowledge. They argue that increasing access to media representations of gayness facilitates processes of identification with those roles and influences identity-negotiation processes.

Rogers Brubaker (2009) raised some questions about social identity by saying that sexual minorities are grouped and perceived as homogeneous and cohered. This grouping process might give the individual a sense of belonging, which Brubaker challenges as a taken-for-granted and unreal notion of 'group' in social psychology. What is real, he argues, is a shared perception of being part of the same group. He raises awareness about people's engagement in processes of identification rather than identity construction. 'Identification' describes a process that justifies certain attachments to a group but it does not explain other intra-psychic processes. In terms of gay identity, Brubaker's arguments can be applied to people who have fought for gay civil rights, clarifying that they have not been gay people as a homogenous entity but individuals and organisations sharing a common objective during a specific period.

Identification with a gay community or with media representations of LGBT people are not the only social processes playing a role in gay identity construction. Identification with a collective seems to complement intrapersonal reflections and this can be mediated through the intimacy encountered in a relationship, both erotic and romantic.

2.2.4 Heteronormativity and the performance of gay men's identities

There is a paradigmatic element that scholarly literature on gay identity relies upon, sometimes uncontestedly, in order to underpin definitions or attempt to define gay identities. This paradigmatic element is the dichotomy heterosexual-homosexual, which is used by various authors (Chakraborty, McManus, Brugha, Bebbington, & King, 2011; Dilley, 2005; Downing, 2013; Heaphy, Yip, & Thompson, 2004) in order to explain gay identities in exclusive opposition to heterosexuality. This binary remains prevalent in literature and reflects heteronormative structures of power that inform the ways in which

individuals understand who they are. Feminist studies and queer theorists have made a point about how this dependability on this dichotomy constitutes an obstacle for people in defining their sexual identity in their own terms.

Judith Butler (1999) proposed that gender is the set of conventions that society tends to see as representative of a man or a woman, polarised as masculine-feminine; gender does not have to do with being female or male but with behaviours and symbols. With the idea that sexual identities represent a distinction between individuals, there is a difference that is socially ascribed to at or before birth and is then continuously reinforced through speech, acts, and social reinforcements. In cultures where heterosexuality serves as a reference to define all forms of sexuality, these reinforcements serve to establish a norm of sexual desire based on an illusory natural association between biological sex and gender. This is the association that validates heterosexuality as the master sexuality. Butler (1993) calls this argument the 'law of heterosexual coherence': a law that promotes and perpetuates a society where heterosexuality is not only compulsory but also 'natural'. As gender is an important element associated with sexual attraction (Diamond, Pardo, & Butterworth, 2011) and also with sexual identity, its discussion is relevant when assigned gender is challenged by the individual's sexual orientation. When sexual attraction creates a conflict with the expected gender behaviour, there is often a painful negotiation between the heteronormative culture; a culture that privileges heterosexuality as a supremacist sexuality (Butler, 2006). To investigate the understandings of the available social labels and the personal redefinitions of what is to be gay, researchers investigate gay identities by considering the heteronormative powers: the family support, the location where the person lives, and other contextual factors. Feminist theorists suggest that understanding oneself as non-heterosexual exposes the

person to making sense of a gay identity within a restricted frame which ill-prepares them for constructing a freer sexual identity.

Some research suggests that there is a growing level of acceptance and integration of gay people into the general community. Some gay couples are venturing successfully into practices that used to be accessible only to heterosexual people, such as parenting, adoption, and surrogacy (Dempsey, 2013), and gay and gay-friendly characters are portrayed in children's literature in an honest and accurate way (Sapp, 2010). On the other hand, there are scenarios in which homophobia compromises gay people's participation in society to the point that it can threaten their security and lives (Andersen & Blosnich, 2013; Sadowski, 2012). This contrast is evidenced by the legalisation of same-sex marriage in certain countries alongside same-sex parenting whilst, on the other hand, there are countries in which gay people do not feel free to express publicly their relationships and they are in danger when they do (Kann et al., 2011). Some gay people make unconscious or deliberate decisions that align their lives with these heteronormative discourses. Shonkwiler (2008) – drawing on Duggan (2003) – has explained this phenomenon as the 'homonormativisation' of gay lives, in which gay people assimilate, conform with, and sustain heteronormative values, practices, and structures such as legal marriage in order to access the institutions and privileges of the modern family.

But heteronormativity can also be resisted. Through culturally specific behavioural cues and performance, gay identity can be embraced and embodied, displayed and shared with others in order to create and reinforce gay culture. Since identity, as a self-reflexive process, is often confused with processes of identification and culture representation, research on how identity and identification work have been addressed by scholars from

cultural, media, communications and political perspectives. Robert Podesva (Podesva, 2011a, 2011b) has conducted research on linguistics to investigate sophisticated aspects of how gay identity takes place in conversations. He suggests gay identity is performed phonetically and has developed the concept 'the gay pitch'. The gay pitch is a situational/interpersonal use of advanced vowel variants and correlates with non-heteronormative prosodic patterns in voice quality and intonation. Podesva's research suggests that the use of gay pitch helps the individual to construct, perform, and negotiate gay identities and gain a sense of belonging, as it is often performed to convey social meanings about being gay.

From a legal perspective, Fassin and Salcedo (2015) explored how gay identity is addressed under immigration policies in their work with binational same-sex couples in France. When they asked, 'If not desire, what else might reliably define homosexuality?' (p. 1120), they faced the complex problem of addressing something as personal as someone's sexual identity and working out how it could be proved to an external body such as an immigration court. Fassin and Salcedo found that gay couples around the world in immigration courts have been asked to 'prove' their gayness by providing sex videos of the couple or answering questions about their sexual positions and other sexual practices. However, other resources to prove that an allegedly gay couple is a gay couple for real, involved providing knowledge of queer culture as in what shows they watched, books they read, or gay venues they frequented (Fassin & Salcedo, 2015).

Following the idea proposed by Judith Butler (2006) that performance is an important part of identity and intimacy, these studies by Podesva, Fassin and Salcedo showed that beyond sexual practices, there are popular representations of homosexuality. These representations account for some of

the ways in which gay identities can be made visible through expressive emotion, interpersonal conduct and by using cultural cues of performance and representation.

2.3 Gay identity and the relational perspective

Researchers on relational theories suggest that both the observable parts of identity – such as behaviour and verbal language – and the more private aspects of it – such as self-concept and the meaning given to life events – are affected by and embedded in relations with other people. Patrick Santoro (2012) speaks about a ‘relational dissolution’ that occurs with an intimate other, within one’s self, and with culture. Applied to gay men’s identities, relational approaches acknowledge that ‘being gay’ becomes meaningful in relation to others, especially other gay men who serve as points of comparison to appreciate, assess, and value aspects of one’s own self. In Santoro’s (2012) autoethnography, the intimate relationships he writes about reveal how ‘culture beyond the self plays out within the self, and how the self speaks back’.

Research on gay identity from a relational perspective explores how age, education, cultural backgrounds, multi-group memberships, and other elements influence gay people’s romantic, sexual, and emotional relationships. Furthermore, the research I grouped here keeps the connections between gay men at the core of their inquiry, supporting notions of relational or connective selves. Studies from a relational perspective acknowledge not only that identities change depending on specific inter-personal interactions, but also that individuals can accept, reject, negotiate, and transform specific aspects of these identities.

2.3.1 Gay men's identities in online environments

Online environments such as *Grindr*, *Squirt*, *Gaydar*, and other gay 'dating/hook-up apps' are an example of virtual spaces where gay men negotiate between collective identities and strive to construct their individuality. Rusi Jaspal (2017) suggests that gay men who create profiles on Grindr go through an individual process in which they acknowledge themselves as gay and decide to be part of a larger social environment where their individualities are de-constructed, reconstructed, and negotiated amongst the multiplicity of selves represented online. Presumably being part of that online environment allows them to get a sense of their identity but this identity construction process happens relationally, dialogically, as connections on these virtual spaces tend to work on a one-to-one basis and interlace with their offline realities (Downing, 2013). When talking with another gay man online, that space of conversation may give rise to an opportunity to intimate and get to know the interlocutor.

Whilst some researchers claim online connections have added complexity to the study of relational aspects between gay men, Roderic Crooks (2013) argues that Grindr resembles Pre-Stonewall modes of cruising and socialising as it shapes communication through the manipulation of limited cues, codes, and symbols. Crooks suggests that the Grindr environment restricts the ways in which gay men can interact with each other to three means of communication – text in public profile, direct private message and blocking users – within an already restricted online environment, making the establishment of relationships challenging. In alignment with Crooks, Antonella Villani and colleagues (2012) analysed how gay men and MSM connect with each other within *Qruiser*, a Nordic gay and queer online community, finding that the patterns of flirtation online exhibited similar

structures to real sexual contact networks. Broadly speaking, members of the online community who were physically attractive, younger, had a webcam, and were single, were more likely to be contacted by other users. However, one aspect of this study that is particularly relevant for my research is the influence of identity status in the profiles of that online community on the rate of contact by other users. Villani's study revealed that those who identified themselves and stated in their profiles they were homosexual/gay were more likely to be contacted by other users, in contrast to those who labelled themselves as heterosexual, bisexual, mostly straight, or 'curious'. Although there are no conclusions drawn in this regard, the attractiveness of the statement of 'being gay' highlights the importance that self-representation – even in the simple form of a label – has on others and on the potential for relationships to evolve.

2.3.2 The role of intimacy in gay men's identities

Understood as the fusion of love and sex, intimacy is rarely studied in gay men's research. Duncan and Dowsett's (2010) study is one of those uncommon research pieces that look at this integration of sex and love and how men make sense of it in their relationships and identities. Although their participants were a group of both heterosexual and homosexual men, in their study on Australian men's intimacy in late modernity, Duncan and Dowsett suggest that gay men have created "opportunities to separate sex and conventional couple-based intimacy in a challenge to heteronormative conventions of marriage and family" (p. 48). They seem to imply that there is some degree of empowerment in how gay men confront traditional forms of intimacy through sex, an implication that poses a question of how – if at all – gay men experience intimacy in non-couple-based relationships. Their findings suggest there is a gendered narrative that separates 'good

relationships' from 'good sex' in men's mindsets. This narrative seemed to be anchored in early modernity views of women's proclivity to emotional work and men's confinement to sex drive discourses. Although men in their study were able to challenge to some extent those traditional gendered views and state that the union of love and sex was something they aspired to have in their relationships, they appeared daunted by the uncertainty of how to achieve this ideal scenario.

Despite the fact that relationships and sexual behaviour are two of the most common themes in contemporary research on gay identity, relationships are taken as a topic which runs alongside gay identity and it is studied almost as an independent theme. As an example of this, Lawrence Kurdek (Kurdek, 2004), Michael LaSala (LaSala, 2013), and Paul Lynch (Lynch, 2002) have investigated sexual openness and alternative relationship arrangements to monogamy and found that non-traditional intimacy arrangements are a prominent topic in gay relationships. They have addressed the topic from the perspective of commitment, intimacy, and in comparison with heterosexual couples but they have not explored the willingness to experience these alternative intimacy arrangements in connection with identity aspects.

A very peculiar aspect of relationships between gay men attracted my attention and provoked my research curiosity. Some studies have shown that the first gay man that a young gay man meets is often the first one he has sex with too, and it frequently happens in a rushed, dangerous and anonymous way (Andersen & Blosnich, 2013; Balthasar, Jeannin, & Dubois-Arber, 2009; Boulton, McLean, Fitzpatrick, & Hart, 1995; Cant, 2008). Pondering why the first gay man one young gay man meets results in a hasty and potentially harming encounter, I asked myself whether a relationship with a man could be not only an act of erotic drive and longing for intimacy, but also an act of

self-recognition. Is it an act through which a young man in the process of understanding his gay identity achieves the understanding of himself as a gay man? I was tempted to explore aspects of togetherness beyond the briefness, beyond the 'here and now' of the encounter itself. I was curious about what happens in people's sense of self when an intimate encounter, when the act of being together, becomes meaningful. This occurrence may advance some understandings and conceptualisations which make the individual question the abstract gay identity to later engaging in a deconstruction-reconstruction process in which the individual gives it their own and new meanings.

2.3.3 Gay identities from autoethnographic perspectives

Understood as 'narratives of self', autoethnographies are "highly personalised accounts that draw upon the experience of the author/researcher for the purposes of extending sociological understanding" (Sparkes, 2000). The third group of literature I reviewed came from autoethnographic approaches to gay identities. Aiming to understand how gay people construct culture and how culture informs gay people's subjectivities, studies from this approach rely on the authors' voice as 'native experts', as 'insiders' of the gay culture. Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011) explain that "once at the service of the (White, masculine, heterosexual, middle/upper-classed, Christian, able-bodied) ethnographer, indigenous/native ethnographers now work to construct their own personal and cultural stories" (p. 278). These personal and cultural stories become first-hand knowledge that confers authenticity and authority onto these studies. I have included them in the section on relational identities because, arguably, autoethnographies are research pieces that consider the self in inextricable relationship with the social and the cultural.

The research pieces I reviewed in this section include autoethnographies by David Carless (2012), who addresses sensitive issues around sexual orientation and identity and masculinity in the context of school sport; Ragan Fox (2010), who analyses and illustrates how the education system and its staff do not appear equipped to understand or respond to the unique needs and concerns of LGBTQ students; Andrew R. Spieldenner (2014), who presents an intimate narrative about living with HIV/AIDS at the intersection with discourses of public health; Shinsuke Eguchi (2011), who offers a representation of the experiences that gay Asian-American men have with gender stereotypes; Patrick Santoro (2012), who centres the discussion on the body and how the body plays a crucial role in his relationships; and Tony Adams (2011) who, from a teaching and communications background, writes about 'the closet' and more broadly about the complex relationship dynamics gay men endure with their families, colleagues, students, partners, and strangers when gay identity is evidenced, highlighted, and contested in social interactions. These autoethnographers have written about being gay from their personal perspectives, from very different angles, and in doing so some of those simultaneously personal and cultural stories have expanded and challenged traditional ways of understanding gay identity. Their autoethnographies demonstrate that gay men are concerned with a wide range of issues with regards to their gay lives, gay bodies, gay relationships, and the ways in which their lives, bodies, and relationships have shaped who they are. Their autoethnographies demonstrate that no single approach or angle can be seen as the typical or normal representation of how gay men construct their sense of self or how their relationships and encounters with other men influence it. These autoethnographies are consistent with sociological and psychological discourses of homophobia, discrimination, and violence that are

often experienced by gay men. However, these autoethnographies go beyond these well-known issues and provide a complex view that makes room for the study of identity processes in experiences of homophobia, discrimination, and violence, and how they entangle with desire and eroticism. To cite an example, in his account of studying at Cy-Fair High School, Ragan Fox (2010) tells of how he used to take a longer, secluded route to cross the school in order to avoid the boys who insulted and hit him, those boys he feared most. But he also recalls how he fantasised with them and, in his sexual fantasies, he reflected on 'the illogicality of wishing to lick the lips that spit the word "Faggot!" in my face' (p. 127). This passage illustrates how in the well-studied themes that dominate the literature on gay men's sexual behaviours and issues with homophobia, there are unexplored areas that go beyond sex and discrimination, and give potential connections for improbable themes that autoethnography makes accessible.

2.4 Discussion of the literature reviewed

This literature review shows that studies of gay identity constitute a heterogeneous body of work. Perhaps because lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transgender, queer, non-binary, and other non-conforming people have gotten together for political reasons and activism purposes in order to advance the human rights and equality agenda, many scholarly papers tend to group, approach, and research phenomena on the LGBTQ population as a whole. Some of the studies I reviewed included not only gay men but also lesbians, bisexuals, and heterosexuals, and looked for comparisons between these groups. Although there are aspects that are, arguably, shared by all these groups, such as the discrimination and other forms of violence, the ways in which lesbians, for example, experience discrimination and violence might differ to the ways in which gay men and transgender people do. I consider

that when referring to identity construction processes, researchers who want to explore how lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgender, and other identities integrate naturally into society, or want to explore aspects of the LGBTQ movement as a political construct, need to remain aware of the peculiarities of the specific groups that integrate each letter of that initialism.

Another aspect I saw and assessed as problematic in the studies I reviewed is that gay identity is taken for granted as a concept in the vast majority of research papers. What exactly do they mean when they refer to gay men? That question is, for the most part, unanswered, probably because many studies have a pragmatic focus and look for solutions to urgent social issues. Gay identity tends to be conceptualised – if at all – at an operational level under behavioural, clinical, and public health connotations. Although there are studies that do substantial work to conceptualise gay identity in a more nuanced way, they tend to be from feminist perspectives and queer studies, which are normally theoretical in their approach and therefore lack fieldwork with individuals.

In terms of the region, research on different countries focussed on particular aspects that affect more directly certain geographical areas, which is indicative of the social realities gay people experience in different countries and make it difficult to generalise issues across populations. Their differences in theoretical and methodological angles also made it difficult to pool these studies together and constitute evidence of the complexity of the topic. It is also important to note that 86.52% of the literature came from the USA and the UK (70.21% and 16.31% respectively). There were some notable exceptions, such as Iranian research on the transformation of sexual identities in Iran by Korycki and Nasirzadeh (2016) and other few pieces, such as Alberto Guerra's (2011) work on how Cuban society has approached so-called sexual minorities

over the past fifty years, but the vast majority of the works came from two developed western nations. This poses the question of how gay peoples experience their relationships and make sense of who they are in those areas of the world that are underrepresented in research.

I observed that contemporary research is covered by many disciplines and each one approached the topic with a different objective: some studies tried to predict sexual behaviour; some others tried to challenge traditional conceptions of gay identity; and a few studies tried to understand how gay men feel and make sense of their identity. Since research in recent decades has been dominated by clinical approaches – such as population health studies – and despite the fact that research is aiming to gain understanding on the intra-personal aspects of identity, a large body of work on gay men’s identities is focused on sexual behaviour. After sexual behaviour, another aspect of research interest is the influence of broader sociological aspects, such as the effect of heteronormative and homophobic environments on the lives of gay people. These research trends are epitomised in the modelling approaches to understand gay identity formation. One of the most challenging points I found in studies from a developmental approach is that not all gay men’s experiences of identity construction can be described in terms of those models.

In general, although there are still current literatures engaging with models of gay identity (Davis, 2015) or gay identity profiling (Bregman, Malik, Page, Makynen, & Lindahl, 2013), there has been a diversification of research interests. Studies that used to see gay identity as a progression of stages with particular milestones and used those models to explain and predict gay men’s sexual behaviour are now finding in qualitative studies – particularly in autoethnographies – voices from the inside; voices from the native experts who might not find themselves represented in those studies.

Autoethnographic research has added nuances to the understanding of gay identities and has even given an 'anti-rhetoric', namely "a rhetoric that always simultaneously promotes and disavows itself renouncing its intent even as it amuses audiences and advances agendas" (Gilbert, 2004, cited in Fox, 2010, p. 137).

From a relational perspective, only a few authors have tangentially addressed erotic and romantic relationships associating them with identity, with processes of making sense and giving meaning. Intimate relationships, encompassing erotic and romantic encounters, are one of the most common themes in research papers on gay issues. Relationships seem to be central to the understanding of how gay men make sense of who they are and how these identities are represented at a collective level. Couple relationships and sexual intercourse remain a constant in the way that gayness is studied and represented to the world. Surprisingly, relationships have been studied with different purposes but scarcely as an element that contributes to the construction of gay identities.

In his research on identity negotiation between gay men, Andrew Cooper (2013) found that the vast majority of participants emphasised the significance of their partners and relationships in general as important part of their lives. His work showed that participants found in their relationships a 'safe space' and a source of confidence within a homophobic environment. He asserts that for gay men, relationships are an important part of their lives. His findings highlight that gay men look for love, intimacy, and commitment. Although Cooper does not put relationships explicitly as a way of constructing their identity, he remarks that participants in his study observed sexual non-exclusivity as an important part of their relationship agreements. His work is a relevant to my study because I see in it a suggestion that those relationships

and encounters, those civil unions, romantic dates, and sexual partners – those safe spaces – play a part not only in how gay men negotiate their relationship agreements, but also in how those relationships ‘shape’ the way in which participants make sense of themselves.

In conclusion, the literature I reviewed constituted a heterogeneous body of work. This body of work needs to be enriched with studies that contemplate other elements that contribute to gay identity, beyond the frequently studied sexual aspect. When there is need to study the sexuality of gay men, the interpretive voice of the researcher needs to meet the native expert voice of participants who explain what being gay means to them. There is a lack of studies on what relationships and sex mean to gay men, and the research on multicultural, multi-ethnic, non-Western gay men is also scarce. My research aims to contribute to studies on gay men’s identities by bringing together the romantic and erotic relationships and the ways in which gay men give meanings to those relationships. My research aims to illuminate the significance of erotic and romantic relationships for gay identity. In contrast to the analysis of gay relationships from a sexual health perspective, by paying attention to how gay men conceptualise their identities from a narrative approach, I explore something that has not been done often in research: I explore how these experiences of intimacy, both in the erotic and romantic arenas, intertwine with their sense of self.

3 | Philosophical and methodological foundations

3.1 Introduction

Having presented an overview of the relevant research on gay men's identities in the literature review, in this chapter I explain what I mean when I say 'gay identities' and clarify the methodological considerations that are implicated in my conceptual choice. Who is to define what it means to be gay? In answering this question, I explain why I think these identities are best approached through narrative and why I use men's first-hand accounts of experience as my primary source of information. These tasks require me to locate my research in relation to current philosophical debates on gay identities and narrative. These tasks require me to think of what constitutes evidence in research and, more specifically, to analyse the power implications involved in the attempt to understand such an intimate, subjective notion, namely gay identity. Drawing on these philosophical debates that delineate my ontological position – that is, the nature of knowledge; what I understand as knowledge – with regards to gay identities, I also explain the epistemological approaches – that is, the ways in which I can generate that knowledge – that informed my methodological choice and, overall, my research design.

3.2 Defining gay identity

When a father tells his friend 'my son is gay', both the father and the friend might assume they know what 'gay' means. When a young man tells his mother 'I am gay', his mother might assume she knows what 'gay' means. Whilst the father, the mother, and the friend might believe that 'gay' means that the son feels sexually attracted to men – that he has homosexual desires –

to the son himself, 'gay' might imply much more than a sexual attraction to other men. Let us think about the story of a young boy who cried with photographer Brandon Stanton (2015) whilst being interviewed for his project *Humans of New York*. "I'm homosexual and I'm afraid about what my future will be and that people won't like me." Those were the words of the eight- or nine-year-old boy. When I saw his picture and read the captions, I also saw his affliction. I remember vividly that image because it gave me the strong impression that, whilst trying to understand his identity, the boy was not only thinking about sex. Perhaps he was not even thinking about sex! What did he mean when he said 'I'm homosexual'? For the very first time, I was able to see that the term 'homosexual' was misleading inasmuch as the subjective meanings and multiple implications of their desires had outgrown the label. I realised that if I wanted my study to place centrally the meanings that gay men give to their desires and their relationships, as well the beliefs they hold about who they are, I needed to rethink the term 'sexual orientation'. For the very first time, it occurred to me that the term 'sexual orientation' was incomplete, if not inadequate, to encompass the implications and meanings that being gay brings to the individual. It occurred to me that the boy was perhaps talking about an identity he was still exploring and not about a sexual orientation. I wanted to trouble the concept: I wanted to ask that boy about his life; I wanted to be delighted to find out that his life had little to do with what science has defined as 'homosexual'.

In order to better understand the implications of conceptualising 'being gay' as an identity rather than a sexual orientation, I use William DeJean's (2010) paper, in which he describes how Jonathan, one of his students, hesitantly approached him to share his concerns about being a gay male entering the education profession. Years after their conversation, Jonathan

eventually left teaching because “negotiating his teaching responsibilities, combined with being a gay man in a large high school, was more than he wanted to handle” (p. 11). DeJean describes how throughout the years, there have been students approaching him with concerns about how they will be able to cope with being gay in the often homophobic settings of secondary education institutions. This anecdote tells me that being gay has implications on the gay people’s professional lives and the decisions they make because some working environments might be particularly challenging or overtly unwelcoming of gay people.

In another scenario, David Carless (2012) shares boyhood recollections in physical education settings, where his awareness of other boys’ bodies and his closeness to certain boys provoked feelings and desires that were vivid and passionate yet confusing, inexplicable, and fearful because there were no available narratives that described the experiences he was going through: the experiences of a boy who feels an inexplicable and unspoken connection with another boy. Charged with an unexpected, confusing, shameful, yet sublime eroticism, Carless’ paper shows that even if the same-sex desire might have been at the core of his experiences, his desire was not the cause of the confusion and shame he experienced. What seems to be one of the causes of his confusion was that he did not have access to information, models, or narratives that he could relate to or that could explain those experiences.

My third example comes from communication studies. In his paper, Dustin Goltz (2014) explores, through an intergenerational creative writing project, the seemingly radical differences between young and older gay men in the ways they understand the political, communal, economical, and cultural aspects of being gay. Two groups of gay men from different generations engaged in discussions, for example, about the ways they socialise with other

cohorts, their political and sometimes apolitical views on LGBT issues, or the dynamics of inclusion/exclusion in gay venues.

What I see in these three examples is that same-sex desire is not always at the centre of discussions on gay men's identities; that same-sex desire itself does not explain what being gay means; that gay men's accounts of being gay go further than their desires. These examples show that the terms 'sexual orientation' and 'sexual identity' are misleading because the above scenarios address situations other than or beyond the sexual. They show that leaving their profession, holding apolitical views on LGBT issues, or feeling something within them that distances them from the other children at school, is not directly related to sexual aspects of their identity. Most importantly, these examples show that being gay has multiple inter- and intra-personal ramifications that make the concept of gay identity a complex one. I have therefore reflected on the ways homosexuality and homosexual practices have been described throughout modern history as a psychiatric disorder, a sin or a crime and reached the conclusion that those descriptions rarely take into consideration the ways in which being gay affects a person in areas beyond these sexual aspects. Many gay men have noticed the negative connotations of the term 'homosexual' and have differentiated it from the term 'gay' (Michaels & Lhomond, 2006). Yet, understanding what being gay means is a complex task that has not been sufficiently explored. As I wrote in the previous chapter about the term 'MSM' (men who have sex with men), some men engage in sexual activity with other men but they do not label themselves as gay. In his study of heterosexually married men who have sex with men, Malcolm (2008) explains that being gay does not involve just having sex with men but also involves the search for coherence and meanings associated with that sexual attraction. It is that search for coherence and meaning that I am interested in.

'Being gay' involves participation in social and psychological processes that touch not only on sexual behaviour but also on many other areas of a person's life. I highlight this as a crucial point in acknowledgment that defining what 'being gay' means is a complex task. It is a task that, I would say, needs to be done by gay men themselves.

Hoping that at this point I have constructed a strong argument for it, in this thesis, when I speak about gay identity, I refer to a narrative act of self-identification in which an individual uses the first person of the singular to say 'I am gay'. I have explained that 'being gay' has multiple, intricate, competing meanings, so this research deals with the detailed biographical accounts that accompany the statement 'I am gay'. I prefer to use the term 'gay' instead of the term 'homosexual' and will only use the latter when it is appropriate to do so, for example if a certain author uses it in their study, if it features in the context of historic, legal, or scientific documents, or if participants in this research use it in their narratives. Having understood that 'gay identity' is an entangled concept that seems difficult to grasp, even to gay people themselves, in this thesis I have incorporated literature from different disciplinary approaches, as set out in the previous chapter, but I focus especially on literature that represents comprehensive, complex, open, meaningful narratives of what being gay means to gay men.

3.2.1 Ontological underpinnings of gay identities

My ontological position is that of a qualitative researcher using social constructionism to explore gay identity and how it relates to erotic and romantic relationships. My premise as a social constructionist researcher is that human experience passes through historical, cultural, and linguistic filters, which altogether shape our understanding of life. In the context of this study, my understanding of gay identity as a social construct is tied to its

context. It is therefore tied to the subjective ways in which every person interprets their gayness, which are interconnected with the historical, cultural, and linguistic particularities of an individual's life. Under that notion, I acknowledge that throughout my life I have been profoundly affected by environments, dynamics, relationships, and people's reactions to my gay identity; my history with partners and lovers from an early age; and by my political stance on gay issues. I believe that my personal background permeates every aspect of my understanding of gay issues. I believe that my gay identity colours my life choices, including my philosophical views for this research.

From this philosophical perspective as a social constructionist researcher, I understand identity as a process of construction of the self; a process of meaning-making and giving meaning to experience. The self, understood from the perspective of Paul Ricoeur (1992) as a self that becomes evident through the reflective act in which the person says 'I am'. Because gay men have come into existence in dialogue, discourse, and representation mainly as sexual beings, the *I* has been seen, according to Ricoeur, primarily as an *I* that exists in relation to another, as in 'I am gay because I am attracted to men'. In other words, the reflective, self-defining act of saying 'I'm gay' has been understood as a relational act between men; as an act that happens with, because of, and in relation to another man. To investigate that reflective act of self-construction, it is important to explore the underlying meanings given to those relational, sexual, romantic, erotic, intimate acts gay men engage in, whether real or imagined. It is important to explore how through their same-sex desires, encounters, and relationships, the person gives their own meanings to the socially constructed label 'gay' when they adhere to it.

As this thesis explores identity through the lens of relationships, I need to make clear what I mean when I refer to relationships. Because gay men have come into existence in dialogue, discourse, and representation mainly as sexual beings, I start by exploring those sexual acts that have seemingly brought gay men into existence. However, I look beyond the sexual. This means that I am not interested in the physicality or the mechanics of sexual acts *per se*, but in what those connections mean to those men. Robert Sternberg (1986) suggested in his triangular theory of love that love has three components: intimacy, passion, and commitment. Under this theoretical framework, intimacy is understood as feelings of connection between two people; feelings of closeness that are developed and maintained by both partners. On the other hand, passion or the erotic – grounded in an element of physical attraction and desire – facilitates the sexual connection between the couple and is seen as the motivation behind a loving relationship. Thirdly, commitment involves a conscious decision to develop and maintain a relationship in the long term. Drawing on Sternberg, because I believe that these components of love are present in the connections gay men engage, my understanding of relationships is loose in the sense that I look at those connections that can be centred or driven by intimacy, eroticism and/or commitment. I argue that the physical attraction that often leads to sexual encounters, the feelings of closeness that might lead to establish a relationship, and the commitment that motivates to maintain it, can be present in the relationships gay men engage in, sometimes altogether and sometimes separately. I am not only interested in exploring how loving relationships affect the narration of the self, I am also interested in the relationships that appear to be long-term, romantic commitments but might not be erotic relationships. I am interested as well in what happens to the narrated self with

those encounters that seem to be purely sexual, physical, ephemeral 'one-offs'. If in the eyes of science, religion, and law homosexuality has been defined through the sexual acts we engage in, I believe that those acts and those people who participate in those acts would hold some foundational qualities that we have incorporated into our life stories, into our sense of self. I think all these encounters hold much promise to further investigate what it means to be gay. Whether a relationship is loving, long-term committed, or physical and brief, or all the aforementioned, I think the self intertwines with these relational moments of togetherness. I thus locate my position as a social constructionist researcher who draws on narratives of those relationships and encounters to understand gay identity.

3.2.2 Epistemological foundations

As you might have noticed from my statement about the individual's ability to create meanings and my continuous mentions of stories and narratives, narrative is the epistemological foundation I use to understand identity in this research. Narrative implies that I work with people's ability to cognitively create knowledge through social processes and to give meaning through creating autobiographies (J. Bruner, 1991). Within this framework, I consider that people have a certain degree of agency to interpret their experiences and attribute meanings to them. In this particular case, I acknowledge that being gay has been represented in literature, in the media, in research, in religious institutions, in legal documents, and many other avenues. Gay men therefore rely on these existing discourses on gayness to create their own ideas of what 'being gay' means. As Ken Plummer (1995) states it, individuals tell stories about their intimate, sexual lives; stories which might not be personal truths, but parts of larger situational, organisational, cultural, and historical narratives, turning themselves into 'socially organised

biographical objects'. This view locates the individual in the middle of an intricate socio-historical context that seems larger and more powerful than their ability to produce their own personal stories. However, I also believe that as much as those discourses can be produced, incorporated and consumed, they can also be contested, resisted, and changed because the social and the personal are in continuous, inescapable interaction. Furthermore, narrative theories question the very idea of the individual; the illusory divisions between the social and the personal (Speedy, 2008). Narrative puts the personal and the social in the same space, in an overlapping, intricate relationship. The result is an individual who incorporates societal nutrients and a society that has individuals as its main ingredients; individuals and societies in an inextricable relation of mutual co-creation. From this perspective, gay identity is a phenomenon that is not only constructed from existent discourses of gayness but also constructed within the intimacy of a couple relationship, through random sexual encounters, through acts of transient togetherness.

Narrative, as my chosen approach to address how these relationships contribute to the individual's construction of their identity, implies that identities are subjects of social relationships and that gay identities are 'produced' within a personal, historical, and geopolitical context. Narrative, in this research, implies that when gay men talk about who they are, when they talk about *themselves*, their talking becomes an elaborated, meaningful story of a contextual self. In other words, when they talk about themselves and about who they are, they are talking about their life (Ricoeur, 1992). A life with meanings given to events that just 'happened', to experiences that were lived and then evoked and interpreted through narrations. Narrations become representations of those experiences, as Jerome Bruner (1986) suggested when

he challenged the idea of a life full of meaning and suggested that meaning relies on the way in which life is told; on the ways people describe their experience. In the telling of their experiences, individuals construct the Self, construct the world by narrating their autobiographies, engaging with the past, the present, storying events in a way that is worth telling (J. Bruner, 1991).

In order to narrate their experiences, one of the ways in which gay identities have been often described by gay men themselves and represented in research is as a series of causes, consequences, beginnings, endings, turning points and other narrative devices of the particular events that gay men believe are part of their process of becoming. For example, we can see that in order to tell their life stories, childhood stories are frequently used in gay men's narratives to explain who they are (Cover, 2011) but they also tell stories of social segregation/inclusion in family, school, and even national contexts. Storied happenings have shaped discourses on gayness and have influenced the ways in which gay men experience gayness and how their families react to it. However, there is a lack of discourses on how romantic and erotic relationships contribute the construction of a sense of self, hence the importance of investigating the meanings that they give to their encounters and relationships. I am therefore interested in how gay men construct their identities through encounters with each other. I explore how identities are modelled by these interactions, encounters, and relationships and how they story them, perceiving those happenings as if they were fixed and pre-given.

Under the premises of narrative, I acknowledge that people are the experts on their lives (Anderson, 2012a). The stories people tell and share are seen under this lens: relationships that are storied and stories which project meanings onto those relationships. However, I also see this personal capacity to create narratives under the scrutiny of the 'hermeneutics of suspicion', as

Paul Ricœur (1970) referred to a way of interpretation that goes beyond superficial, evident meanings in order to unveil less flattering truths. In this particular case, I consider that narratives are personal inasmuch as they are told by a person but both the narrative and the person take part in a broader social sphere from which meanings are taken, given, negotiated, and transformed. For example, I have written about some dominant discourses in research that present gay identity as a linear model for understanding how gay men as a collective develop their identity or how they follow a certain trajectory to become who they are. I have also written about how some of these discourses have even become hegemonic. I therefore wonder to what extent an individual who tells a story of developing a sense of being gay is telling a personal story and to what extent they are relying on available narratives portrayed in literature, in the media, in research, and elsewhere. In the story I used at the beginning of this chapter – from the series *Humans of New York* – it is clear that the boy who discloses that he is homosexual is addressing his very own feelings related to the experiences he is going through. However, whilst the feelings belong to him, he is also talking about a prospective future that relies on a borrowed, larger, well-known narrative that states that ‘some people don’t like homosexuals’. This shows to me that the agentic individual that narrative theorists conceptualise struggles to construct a sense of self within the limitations of larger, powerful, and widely spread narratives.

I thus situate my research under a narrative lens because I believe the best way to understand people’s views on their identities (as processes that are nurtured by their intimate relationships) is through their stories as a means through which people organise, connect, and interpret their experiences in order to make sense of their lives (J. Bruner, 1991; McAdams, 1997). My narrative approach to identity construction means in this research that: (a)

identity is formed partly by an agentic individual and partly by the social and historical contexts (Plummer, 1995); (b) the individual negotiates several nuances in the gradient of compliance and resistance to hegemonic discourses (Bourdieu, 1998); and (c) people use stories to construct their identity with 'hindsight' (Bathmaker & Harnett, 2010). The latter aspect refers to the concept of narrative identity, which explains how people understand their lives through stories constructed within a social frame. Within the social frame that delimits the rules and parameters for those narratives, individuals give coherence and meaning to the happenings in their life through written or verbal accounts. I look for gay men's accounts of their relationships with other men at an intimate level as an interest to discuss with them the meanings given to those experiences of eroticism and romance. In her book about masculinities, Connell (2009) wrote about hegemonic structures playing a role in identity formation and social construction of gender. She states that identity work is not just a matter of personal processes, even within a constraining social framework. Narrative identities acknowledge gay men's agency by recognising that there are opportunities to create a more personalised sense of self, but also that narratives of sexual identity can become narrowly defined and constraining. As limiting and constraining as the contexts where gay men live can be, their narratives are looking for understanding and looking for personal meaning.

3.2.3 Relationships in the contested field of research on gay men's identities

My perspective on relationships – as a broad sense of connectedness between men and gay identity, as an act of telling their life stories – finds some challenges, for example in some recent and traditional debates on being gay. When I say traditional debates, I refer, for example, to the nature-nurture debate in which researchers have embarked on biological inquiries in order to

find natural groundings for sexual orientation (Herdt & McClintock, 2000). In this regard, I dialogue with feminist studies and queer theory in order to question, amongst other notions, the traditional discussion of whether homosexuality is natural or socially produced. I join feminist theorists such as Butler (1993), Irigaray (1993) Calhoun (1993), and Greenberg (1993) in contesting patriarchal values that rely on biological arguments to justify social differences that perpetuate inequality and empower ideals based on heteronormative practices of coupledness, such as monogamy (Rubin, 2001). Although these observations have opened discussions about alternative ways of seeing sexuality and denaturalising gender and relationships, they have not done so without political implications. One of them emerges from the fact that social constructionist arguments challenge the discourse 'born this way', the political statement which has allowed the collective of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people to advance the movement for equal civil rights, such as marriage, adoption, and surrogated motherhood. By challenging the belief and activist motto that sexual orientation is biologically imprinted, the rights that have been already guaranteed could be put into question. The belief in biological reasons for behavioural differences implies that people have no agency or less control in performing the behaviour. As sexual attraction, like gender, has been considered by some LGBTQ scholars and activists as innate, one implication of some feminist approaches would put at stake the social acceptance that has been gained or the social policies that have been approved based on the assumption that both gender and sexual orientation are natural. Another difficulty in the nature-nurture debate comes from listening to what gay people think about their own gayness. Although I acknowledge the value of the advancements that queer theory has made to scholarly literature on LGBTQ studies, I need to be aware of the potential tensions created between

the voices of people who say 'I was born this way' and the voices of scholars who put these ideas into question. Whilst many gay men have found in the biology-based motto an explanation for their desire, queer theory throws doubts on the conclusions that self-identified gay men have reached about their own lives. Throughout the study I therefore remain aware of these tensions and acknowledge the agency of the individual to interpret their own reality and construct their own identities.

I acknowledge that my particular view of narratives and discourses will encounter challenges, some of them coming from the very narratives of gay men who might tell their stories from a perspective of complete agency. I am mindful that my position of considering the individual as the expert in their own life jars with the acknowledgement of larger narratives, cultures, and politics that show that the individual might not be as agentic as they might think. However, that agentic self that can construct its own story can be seen in the ways that people have responded to hegemonic, heteronormative discourses by challenging them and creating alternative narratives. This is the case with feminist studies and queer theory, as they launched a political statement that explores identities as subversive (Bunzl, 2000). The term 'queer', for example, is often used to encompass different non-heterosexualities (Ahmed, 2006) and represents a non-specific way of referring to lesbians, gay men, bisexual, transgender, and non-binary people. The term 'queer' still positions queer people as 'other' but does so by taking a term that was used to offend and insult and redefining it as an act of empowerment. They have transformed the term 'queer' into a subversive identity that resists the dominant heteronormative order.

When I spoke to participants in my study, I was mindful of this tension of the individual's agency within constraining discourses. I was also mindful

of this when I wrote this thesis, to make sure that their views are represented in this text. In order to do this I relied on feminist principles I have adopted, such as the invitation to make the values and beliefs that underpin my interpretations transparent (Mason, 2002), minimising the power imbalance between researcher and participant (Bondi & Fewell, 2016), and clarifying that in the research process both participant and researcher are collaborating in the interpretation of the phenomenon in question (Etherington, 2007). This leads me to spell out my stance towards traditional knowledge and ways of understanding social phenomena, including the self. When I say traditional knowledge about gay identity, one of the main issues is the understanding of it as a progression of stages – the developmental models I spoke about in the literature review – through which the individual goes as a way of evolutionary process. An idea of going from disintegrated or fragmented to an integrated or complete identity. As a qualitative researcher from a social constructivist perspective, I state that knowledge is historically and culturally specific (Burr, 2003), and that history and human nature are not in linear progression (Freeman, 1998). Evidently, as a socially constructed concept, 'gay identity' is subject to these arguments too. I therefore view critically those linear explanations of becoming.

3.3 Narrative as my chosen methodology

'I consider being gay among the greatest gifts God has given me', that is what Tim Cook, CEO of Apple, told the press in 2014 when he officially communicated to the world that he is gay (Neate & Hern, 2014). In that single sentence, there is a story of a man who believes being gay is a divine giving and he declares the positive assessment he makes of that gift. This is an illustration of how people makes sense and communicate their lives in the form of stories. Narrative is the theory that studies how people create those

stories and give meaning to them as a way to make sense of the happenings in our lives (Gottschall & Wilson, 2005).

Methodologically, this research is founded on the premise that people give meaning to their lives through narrations of their experiences. For these narrations to exist, people use a number of devices which help them to organise the random material that emerges from their daily experience (Mayer, 2014). Turning points, kernel moments, stories of redemption, stories of victory: these are all some of the 'tools' which set a milestone in the individual's life as a way of setting beginnings and endings in the continuity of their lives (Phoenix, 2014). One of the most studied 'moments' in the lives of gay men is the 'coming out' which makes reference to the moment in which the a public statement is made by the individual acknowledging himself as a gay man. To how many people this statement is communicated varies from person to person: it can be communicated to as few people as one friend only (Poteat, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009); to the gay man's parents (Lee & Lee, 2006); or it can be as public as millions of followers on YouTube (Stone, 2013), or to the international press. The key feature about the narrative of the 'coming out' is that there is an aspect of externalisation, a social aspect of communicating it to someone. Although it is seen as a moment in which the person tells he is gay and why he is so, for the man who is telling it there is normally a process of self-acknowledgement which involves deliberation and deep thought about when, where, how, and to whom to tell it (T. E. Adams, 2011; Bolen, 2014; Carnelley, Hepper, Hicks, & Turner, 2011). Although my study is not focused on the coming out stories, the coming out is relevant to my research because it shows a relational aspect which comes to light when the individual tells he is gay: in stories of coming out there is an aspect of acknowledgment about 'the other' who contributes to the gay identity. As explained in the ontological

underpinnings of this research, people give meaning to their identity partly from the social and partly from the personal, which makes it a construct that interacts between the intrapersonal and the interpersonal. Interestingly, relationships being one of the most recurrent topics in the stories of gay men, it has not been said how these stories, when constructed, help to make sense of a gay identity. When the individual lives the experience of loving someone, of being rejected, of waiting for a call from him, of crying for the missing man, of seeing him flirting with someone else, of being hidden from their friends or relatives; it is through transforming those happenings into stories that the individual can make sense of their life. It is through narratives that the individual can organise those happenings.

3.3.1 Research methods for the generation of stories

In order to listen to narratives of relationships, I presented a work scheme of open dialogue to which gay men had the opportunity to agree, disagree, question, challenge, and reject during the whole process. As I valued their stories as real for the individual, first I confirmed my interest in the stories gay men told about their erotic and romantic relationships and how these entangle with their life stories. Secondly, I valued the power of the personal stories; the accounts of individuals that might not match what large studies have portrayed about gay identity but I valued those stories as having the power to exemplify what happens with broader social phenomena (Flyvbjerg, 2001).

Although I mention the phrase 'listening to their narratives', I need to emphasise that my research on processes and relationships implies an acknowledgment of dynamism. Stories are not necessarily there, ready to be collected. Perhaps the individual has reached a fixed idea of certain relationship, but this idea might change through the conversation. The

questions about the erotic and the romantic that I bring to the conversation imply a collaborative construction of the power that the erotic and the romantic have on the individual. My influence on the conversation is part of the meaning-making process. By listening, asking, interpreting, assuming, corroborating, clarifying, and even just by being there I will influence the way in which those stories are told. I appreciate that both my experiences and values and their experiences and values substantially influence those conversations and their analysis (Anderson, 2012a, 2012b).

This research will thus be focused on the premises of narrative as methodology and will draw on interviews as a method through which participants address their thoughts, feelings, and stories about how they understand their identity as gay men. I claim that an approach to understand identity can be made through narrative and that an approach to gay identity in particular can benefit from the analysis of relational aspects between gay men. Having established that I am starting with the idea of gay identity as one that is socially constructed, I emphasise my interest in gay identity as subjective and as subject of transformation and change. My focus, therefore, is on the large, intricate, detailed life stories of the ways in which gay men give meanings to their life and the explanations they give to those stories. It is important to note is that I see myself as an active part of what is being researched and I am not only aware of the impossibility of being separated from the research, but I am also aware of the idea of this shared construction of the narratives. I recognise that individuals, with their own assumptions, experiences and different backgrounds, do not have a master narrative in which there are patterns to understand. Rather, I think of multiple narratives which contribute to the on-going construction of gay identity which exists in their broader social context. I am looking forward to listening to and co-

constructing these narratives through our dialogue about their romantic and erotic interactions because I see identity as an ongoing process, as an inquiry, as a question that people ask and answer (Lawler, 2014).

As the past also takes place in the present (J. Bruner, 1991), I am interested in understanding men's current and past relationships. My aim was to work within a narrative form of understanding and analysing contextual and highly detailed accounts of what erotic and romantic relationships mean to gay men. Consequently, my parameter to produce knowledge was to talk about participants' perspectives and meanings of those relationships and their relation to identity. Conscious about the dialogic space that these conversations would be in, I took the stance of the emic or insider perspective, which means that I studied their identities as social realities from their own perspectives.

3.3.2 The use of unstructured interviews

When thinking about how I would explore the topic with participants and what type of conversations would be the best, I considered focus groups as a possibility for the data construction. I have conducted focus groups in the past and I appreciate they are helpful in exploratory stages of research, especially when agreement or debate is required to explore divergent views. Although I acknowledge focus groups would generate opportunities for interaction between participants to spark perhaps polemic discussions and thus illuminate the topic (Stewart, Rook, & Shamdasani, 2007), I think the dynamics in the group may entice participants to join a team in order to express a shared narrative. This phenomenon can also be present in other sorts of interactions such as an interview, however one of the decisive elements in my decision to opt for interviews rather than for focus groups is the fact that the dynamics on the group are not central to the research.

Another type of data gathering method I considered as part of my research design was the 'dyadic interview' (Morgan, Ataie, Carder, & Hoffman, 2013), which initially seemed coherent with my topic as it has been used to study specific types of pair relationships (Torgé, 2013). Interviewing couples, namely gay men and their partners, seemed relevant for my research inquiry but later I realised that, since a successful dyadic interview requires an existing relationship between the two interviewees, many potential participants would be left out. For example, men who have been in relationships but their partners currently not present in their lives, men who have not had a sexual contact but they have experienced desire, or men who have not been involved in a relationship but have wanted to be. On the same token, men who were in a relationship but their partners were not willing to participate in the research, or men who do not want to be in a relationship at all would be excluded from my research. These possibilities would have denied access to potential participants who could share enlightening life stories. Furthermore, I thought that the dyadic interview, like focus groups, would centre on the dynamics of the couple rather than on the identity construction process.

After considering the aforementioned possibilities, I saw individual interviews as the most suitable methodological approach to start these conversations. As the nature of my research question is exploratory and I am looking to engage in the co-construction of qualitative 'data', one-to-one interviews would allow me to enquire into the meanings interviewees give to their relationships, their motives and intentions. One-to-one interviews are a suitable setting for participants to tell their stories: they provide the researcher and participants with the opportunity to clarify and explain in detail the meanings attached to the narrated experiences, at the same time as they would

make room for flexible-in-depth inquiry (Mason, 2002). The use of interviews as a methodological approach for this study drew on the view of reality as constructed from a set of personal stories, which, as a group, form a narrative identity. Interviews would facilitate and support the participants in formulating themselves in multifaceted narratives that would be reflected by the researcher. Thus, I learned about participants' inner lives by way of interviews (Silverman, 2007).

Since I was interested in interviewing a diverse group of participants and posing this theme of sexual and romantic relationships in intertwinement with identity, I interviewed gay men from various ages and backgrounds. Issues discussed in the interviews would touch upon their lovers, partners, unrequited love stories, and other forms of relationships that emerged from the literature review on gay men, as it showed the prominence of them in the lives of gay men but I would explore their connections with identity construction processes. I was therefore interested in listening to what gay men themselves had to say about what those relationships meant to them. My underlying assumption was that the other in romantic/erotic relationships contributes to the way in which the *I* makes sense of their life and constructs a sense of self.

I engaged in one-off unstructured interviews with participants in my study. In order to balance the power relation between researcher and participants, I aimed for horizontal relationships between the interviewer and the interviewee. This means that I valued their expertise on the subject matter and therefore, besides my research schedule, I would not need a set of questions because they could decide the direction of the interview and would tell their stories in their own terms. It was about two persons connected by mutual aspirations trying to gain an understanding of what their relationships

and encounters meant in their lives. It meant that each interview was in itself a relational practice (Silverman, 2007). The term 'relational practice' implied the acknowledgment that stories depend on to whom and why they are told. I understand that a number of elements played a part in the way that the narratives were told. For example, the context of the conversation (it was a doctoral research, it was conducted in the UK, it was done in English, etc.); the researcher's background (my assumptions, personal story, ethnicity, appearance, cultural baggage, academic training, etc.); the interviewee's background (their age, their mother tongue, marital status, social class, education, physique, their abilities or disabilities, etc.); and the unique relationship between interviewer and interviewee. These elements did not affect negatively nor positively the interview process but I acknowledge that they exist and that they are going to be combined in a unique way as a product of the research relationship.

4 | Methodology in action

4.1 *Introduction*

Having explained the philosophical foundations that support my methodology and research design, I now explain how I conducted my study. I discuss the practicalities and unexpected situations that emerged throughout the process and how I addressed them.

As I explained, my literature review showed that sexual encounters and relationships are two of the most common themes in research about gay men. Sex and relationships seem to be central to the understanding of gay lives to the point that people find it difficult to talk about being gay without mentioning those aspects. In contrast to the analysis of these aspects from a sexual health perspective, I explore how self-identified gay men narrate experiences of sex and relationships and how through them they engage in an identity meaning-making process. The theoretical framework of Sternberg's (1986) triangular theory of love helped me to gain an initial understanding of those relationships that literature specialised on gay men seemed to differentiate as either passionate sexual encounters or committed long-term relationships. Following Sternberg's theoretical guidelines, I asked participants how they make sense of the interaction between their romantic and erotic relationships and their sense of identity, and what these relationships meant in their lives as gay men.

4.2 *Finding participants*

4.2.1 **Inclusion criteria**

Potential participants for this study were: (a) men, who (b) were able to communicate in English, (c) were at least 16 years old, (d) had experienced

sexual desire towards men, (e) had participated or longed for a romantic relationship, and (f) had self-identified as gay.

4.2.2 Exclusion criteria

Those who did not wish to participate in the study and those who did not meet the inclusion criteria.

Additional aspects such as ethnicity, first language, nationality, educational background, socioeconomic class, amongst other aspects became relevant at the analysis stage but I did not exclude potential participants based on them.

4.2.3 How many participants?

Based on the inclusion criteria I established for this study, I did not expect the recruitment of participants to be excessively difficult. As I did not pursue comparisons between participants to develop a master theory; a moderate number sufficed to generate content threads within participants' interviews. As 'moderate' is a vague term, in order to determine the number of participants for the study, I used Crouch and McKenzie's (2006) argument as a conceptual guideline, which sustains that best qualitative research is based on a number of participants that can stay in the researcher's head as a whole. They state that no more than 20 participants is a suitable number. Building on their argument, I believe that aiming for a number of participants that can remain in my mind as a whole was a way to honour and respect their narrations.

As it was my intention to delve deeply into their narratives in an aim to generate a subjective understanding of how they construct a sense of identity, I was mindful that I would have to deal with 90-minute interviews (approximately) which would each generate around 45 pages of transcription. I also acknowledge that interviewees bring multiple characters to their stories,

as narrations are inhabited by many people and thus become very complex. In this scenario, the larger the number of participants, the more limited my chances would be to engage in depth with their narratives.

In alignment with narrative as the approach that guided my analytic method, I emphasised the importance of focusing on a reduced number of participants. The detail and depth that this exploration required could only be achieved by analysing a limited number of participants (Creswell, 1994), a number which allowed my analysis to praise the distinctive qualities of their stories (Bold, 2012).

Given the aforementioned arguments, I aimed for 12 participants as a way to maximise my opportunities to execute appropriately this intricate process of narrative analysis in the available time. This number would facilitate appropriate planning, conducting and transcribing interviews at the same time that it would allow me to engage in the analysis of elaborate narratives to answer my research question.

4.2.4 Research location

I intended to conduct this research entirely in Edinburgh because its population is diverse and comprises a mixture of people from a wide range of cultural backgrounds, ethnicities, socioeconomic statuses, and educational levels. I welcomed this aspect of diversity because it would show a variety of voices. Recruitment proved to be more difficult than I expected, however, so in addition to interviewing participants in Edinburgh, I travelled to different locations within the UK in order to meet participants. These locations included Durham, Lancaster, London, and Manchester.

4.2.5 Recruitment

Different types of calls for participants included:

- (a) Online advertisement in local forums, social media, professional networks, and websites advocated to the LGBTQ population.
- (b) Advertisement in libraries, shops, community boards, LGBTQ associations and venues, and other community centres that allow posting calls for participants.
- (c) Advertisement through flyers passed hand to hand to personal contacts and in strategic locations.

I sent specific messages to strategic contacts who helped me to contact people who met the inclusion criteria. I attached to those messages the ethical approval details and the information sheet about the study (see appendix 2).

Interested participants contacted me at their convenience through email, mobile phone, or profiles on Facebook, Twitter, or LinkedIn. I discussed the study with potential participants prior to the interview and when they agreed to proceed, we set an appointment at a convenient date and time. The venue was selected at the participants' preference choosing from a university venue, their workplace, home, community centre, or any other place that offered the possibility of conducting a private conversation.

4.3 Ethical considerations

As a mental health practitioner and researcher in a field that touches upon intimate aspects and sexual themes, I was conscious of various ethical deliberations to which I would be constantly exposed. Accordingly, I aimed to base my decisions and actions on ethical values, decision-making models, and ethics codes. The ethical decision making model by Herlihy and Corey (2014), the principles summarised by Tolich (2010), and the Ethical Framework for Good Practice in Counselling & Psychotherapy (BACP, 2013) are good examples of these. Equally importantly, I was in constant reflection,

discussion, and under supervision with regards to the ethical precepts that would guide my choices during the research work.

Throughout this study I also used relevant literature to address future concerns of a varied nature. I group these ethical considerations into four main categories: (1) data management; (2) confidentiality; (3) vulnerability and sensitivity; (4) insider position; and (5) researcher safety. These domains contemplated concrete questions that I needed to consider before starting my interviewing process.

4.3.1 Data management

In order to be transparent about how I managed the information once I obtained it, I assured the following conditions were met:

- (a) I audio-recorded every interview and wrote field notes once every interview finished.
- (b) I kept both the written and the digital material confidential by storing documents in hard copy (such as consent forms and printed transcriptions of the interviews) in a locked cabinet and audio recordings in a folder on a password protected computer, backed up to secure cloud storage.
- (c) I did not label any file related to the participants (interview transcripts, consent forms, audio recordings) with their names. I assigned a pseudonym instead.
- (d) I assured participants that I would destroy the consent forms, the audio recordings of the interviews, and their original transcripts upon successful completion of my PhD.
- (e) I will retain the anonymised transcripts for up to five years after completion of the PhD for purposes of further scholarly publications.

4.3.2 Confidentiality

I explained to participants that the information discussed with me during the interview would be part of my PhD thesis and that it may also appear in academic journals or conference papers but I clarified that their names and other data that could make them identifiable would be kept strictly confidential.

There was one participant who wanted to be known by his real name and 'renounce to his right to anonymity' (Wiles, Crow, Heath, & Charles, 2008). Although his wish to do so may have followed from current evaluations of his life circumstances, and might have been a sign of pride and empowerment, I considered there was always a possibility that in the future he might regret his decision. I discussed with him this possibility and also brought to his attention aspects of 'narrative privilege' (T. E. Adams, 2008), which he reflected on and realised that it was difficult to determine who 'owns' the narrative. Thus, in order to take care of himself and his relatives, friends, partners, and other people involved in the narratives, he decided that it was best that he remain anonymous.

One of the ways in which researchers have negotiated tensions between the right to refuse being anonymised and the duty to protect participants from the consequences of being identifiable is by giving them the chance to select their own pseudonyms (Wiles et al., 2008). I saw this alternative as the middle ground between two defensible arguments and offered this course of action to the participant, which he accepted.

4.3.3 Vulnerability and sensitivity

Do I consider that participants of my study present specific qualities that make them a vulnerable group? In contrast to some studies that consider people from the LGBTQ community to be a vulnerable population (Gandy,

2015), I did not define participants in this research as vulnerable persons just because they were gay. The so-called 'sexual minorities' are a diverse group and only some of their members in particular contexts experience risk. Following this argument, I value participants' agency and do not categorise them as vulnerable *per se*; instead, I consider that my research question brings to the fore highly sensitive topics and I would analyse how to address emerging issues on a case-by-case basis.

As sexual encounters or romantic relationships were difficult to share for some participants and others were in a vulnerable situation, the space that a one-to-one conversation allowed was beneficial for both the research and the participants, as a private space where they were treated with caring ethics. This intimate conversation gave participants the chance to expand on the central theme, the opportunity to raise issues, ask questions in return, and embrace complex responses. Sharing stories of intimacy in a non-judgmental setting gave participants an opportunity that they might not have had but for a research interview (Finch, 1984). This opportunity to share was valued as positive by participants. However, for one participant the interview process caused him distress. Although at the end of the interview he assessed it as relieving and cathartic, I acknowledge that it was also distressing for him. As research must not harm participants, one of my main concerns at that point was the assessment of the situation and at what point the participant's distress could have become harmful. This was one of the most important ways in which the organic conversation, as proposed by Etherington (2007), was helpful because it allowed me to sense all the participants' cues, helping me to identify their needs for support and containment. At the same time, it avoided the interview becoming a disturbing experience for them.

By asking all participants if they wanted to continue or not, or by reassuring them they are not compelled to continue if they felt disturbed, I ensured they were aware that the extent to which they participated in the interview was up to them. I evaluated the possibility of pausing the interview to give the participant some time to decide whether he wanted to continue or not, or even aborting the interview if necessary. I put these options on the table for discussion and told him he could decide whether he wished to continue or not, not only as ethical measures to safeguard the participant's wellbeing but also as an attempt to equalise the power in the research process by making it clear that the interviewer was not completely 'in control' of the situation. These alternatives draw on the model proposed by Herlihy and Corey (2014) in which the participant should be involved in the decision-making process.

I was mindful that the relational aspects of the interview would mean that the interview could also prove to be a distressing experience for me, as a researcher. One of the ethical situations I faced and needed to consider was the extent to which participants' emotionality touched my own feelings and made me feel upset. To address this ethical issue, I addressed my own emotions through a self-reflective process (Herlihy & Corey, 2014) which helped me to remain aware of my own wellbeing during the interviews.

4.3.4 Insider position

As I identify myself as gay, which influenced my research throughout the whole process, it became important to monitor my rational and emotional responses to what participants said. Reflexivity was helpful as a means of maintaining self-awareness of how my own accounts influence my research process (Finlay, 2003). As I converted conversations with participants from embodied narrations into texts, reflexivity made me more aware of the ways in which these stories are transformed and how my own life story influenced

my involvement in the study. As a transcript is an object of interpretation – in the form of memories of the interviews – before the researcher even starts the ‘official’ analysis, the interview process was impregnated by reflexivity as the principle which allowed me to challenge my own assumptions and interpretations (Pillow, 2003).

In a different light, the fact that participants knew that I am gay might have made them assume that we had certain shared knowledge and they could have taken some meanings for granted. To deal with this issue, I informed participants of my aim of understanding their own stories in as much detail as possible. My self-reflective process was crucial as my own experience as a gay man must not cloud participants’ narratives. Verification, clarification and expanding on the topic (Neukrug, 2012) were important interviewing skills, not only as methodological aspects of the research, but also as ethical guidelines.

4.3.5 Researcher safety

Whilst I anticipated that interviewing participants at their home could bring unforeseen safety issues for me as the researcher, excluding this possibility might have caused inadvertent exclusion of participants and/or silenced potential participants who could not come to other locations (for example, people suffering from mobility issues). Such mobility issues aside, for some participants their house could have been the most suitable location for the interview. In previous reflections on this issue, I saw myself in a pendular movement between interview them at their homes or exclude this option. The rationale behind the exclusion would be based on experiences of researchers who have done studies on sexual themes (Grenz, 2005; Morton, 2010; Wimark, 2014) and their narrations of how the interview situation has been sexualised by some men who participated in their studies. Regardless of

the gender of the interviewer or the sexual orientation of the interviewees, some participants were flirtatious in a subtle way, whilst others overtly offered the researchers to witness or participate in sexual acts.

When it comes to research on sexual themes, there is no agreement amongst researchers about the best place to conduct interviews. Whilst Morton (2010) decided to conduct her interviews on the sexuality of male swingers at coffee shops, Grenz (2005) opted for conducting her research about prostitution in an office setting, and Smith and collaborators (Smith, Grov, Seal, Bernhardt, & McCall, 2015) arranged their interviews with male escorts at the escort agency. Weeks, Heaphy, and Donovan (2001), however, went to participants' homes if that was the preferred option. Coming from an ethnographic tradition, Sanders (2006) immersed herself in the worlds of female sex workers and conducted interviews, engaged in conversations, and observed different practices in venues such as night clubs, saunas and brothels.

Whilst reading these studies, I reflected on how the tenor and content of interviews would be influenced by the venue in which they were conducted. I understood that it was likely that some interviews would cover more sexual topics than others, and when that were the case, participants would require an environment which did not make them feel concerned about being heard or observed. The privacy that some topics required was crucial for the research and needed to be taken into account when selecting the venue, hence I decided to allow research to be conducted at participants' homes if that was their choice, but if it were, safety measures were considered.

I provided my mobile number to participants to allow them to contact me. Grenz (2005) described how she was able to identify some participants whose motivations were overtly charged with sexual desire. When contacted

through the phone she was able to get a first impression of the participants' motivations, evaluate risks, and avoid potentially problematic situations. As a second filter, I sent potential participants the consent form via email, as Wimark (2014) describes how some potential participants started an email dialogue which suggested sexual interests in the researcher rather than in the research. As a security measure, I then reported the date and time of the interview to my first supervisor. I sent an email containing the participant's name, home address, and any other relevant contact details. Once the interview finished and I had left the participant's house, I contacted my supervisor via telephone to communicate that interview had concluded. My supervisor then deleted the email and its contents. The message would only have been opened if I had failed to check in after the interview and he could not contact me. In those circumstances, he would have opened the email and contacted the police. Since I conducted only one interview at a participant's home, I only used this strategy once.

Although there were not significant problems in the vast majority of interviews, the sexual content of the conversations led to two participants making comments of a sexual nature towards me. Coinciding with Sanders (2006), these comments were infrequent and when they occurred, they constituted only sexual innuendo. In those cases I was able to manage the situation through dialogue and matters did not escalate. Having read extensively about the scenarios researchers involved in studies on sexuality normally face, I addressed those difficulties through dialogue and particular techniques, such as avoiding accepting drinks from participants, avoiding flirtatious rapport, and avoiding interviewing them in pairs (Shaver, 2005).

4.4 *The interview process*

4.4.1 **Preparing for the interviews**

Participants would have read an electronic copy of the information sheet in advance and I would have made the consent form available to them before we met.

As part of the rapport establishment, I would introduce myself as a researcher and as a gay man. As other researchers (Evans & Barker, 2010; Haldeman, 2010; Malley & Tasker, 2007) have suggested, disclosing that I identify myself as a gay man is congruent with the value of transparency. It can also serve as a way to try to minimise the power imbalance between interviewer and interviewee, and might help us both to see the relationship more horizontally. It can also facilitate dialogue if participants know that I, the interviewer, would be understanding and empathetic about their stories, not because gay men have a predisposed empathy but because the topics addressed in the interview are interesting in my personal life as well.

The next phase in the interview process was to introduce (a) the main theme of my research and (b) the focus of the interview, which I phrased as follows:

“In general, what I am trying to understand in this research is how gay men make sense of the interaction between their romantic and erotic relationships and their sense of identity. Particularly in this interview I want to talk about your romantic and erotic relationships and what these relationships mean in your life as a gay man”.

The above phrase constituted the only fixed statement in the unstructured interviews. Since the number of emerging themes would be too numerous and complex to be reduced to a set of questions in a structured or semi-structured interview, I saw any attempt to shape even the most open

questions as a dilution of what could become a detailed and complex conversation. In other words, there were no set questions, therefore the dynamics of the interview relied on my counselling skills (Neukrug, 2012), such as active listening, clarification, asking open and closed questions, gestural responses, empathetic responses, self-disclosure, and summarisation, just to name a few. These helped me to develop an organic dialogue with the participants.

Because I acknowledged that the unstructured nature of the interview scheme I proposed could generate doubts in participants' minds about what I wanted them to talk about, I developed a document entitled 'interview schedule' (see appendix 5). The interview schedule was a series of simple notes to myself with key aspects of the interview that I could use, just in case either the participants or I struggled to find topics of conversation during the interview. I developed it aided by my literature review, as I included themes which are generally covered in studies in the field of gay identity and same-sex relationships. In practice, the interview schedule was not necessary as the interviews developed naturally, as open, fluid, and 'organic discussions' (Etherington, 2007) based on what mattered to each participant. In order to achieve that, I tried to facilitate the conditions for participants to narrate their romantic and erotic stories in their own way. However, since I wanted to avoid assumptions about terminology, in all the interviews I did use the final guideline in the interview schedule, which addressed the meanings that 'being gay' had for them and was phrased simply as: 'what does being gay mean to you?'.

4.4.2 Starting our conversations

When participants and I met, we normally met somewhere close to the venue where the interview was going to be conducted and we shared some

time walking towards the place. During that time I talked about who am I and how this research started and gave a brief explanation about how their stories would be valuable to my study. Once in the interview location, I made clear that given the unstructured nature of the interview (Anderson, 2012a; Etherington, 2009) there were no prepared questions because I wanted to know what was important for them and explained that they could also ask about me if they wanted. I explained aspects of confidentiality, data management, their rights, my duties, and asked them to sign the consent form. Then I turned on the audio recorder and the conversations unfolded after my opening question. This question caused surprise, nervous laughs, confusion, thorough reflections about the concepts involved, and a few participants wanted some guidance on what to share and where to start. After those initial moments of reflexive hesitation, they talked extensively and evocatively about their experiences.

The content of their narratives, however, was not the only element playing a role in the 'how' and 'why' these stories were told. My professional aims, my ideas about gayness, my knowledge on the matter, the things I ignore, my ethnicity, my experience as a counsellor, my appearance, age, the way I speak, and my personal history all played a part in the way participants perceived me and reacted towards me. But the opposite is also true: participants' personal qualities had an impact on how I felt and behaved during the interview. I can thus say that these stories are the product of the distinct relations between participants and researcher and the particularities of our connectedness. It was my objective to establish a favourable research relationship; a sense of connectedness with each participant. With some of them the relationship was established and maintained effortlessly. With other participants, interviews required my constant and careful attention to the

words said, the circumstantial aspects, and the relational elements. Although these palpable differences had an impact on the dialogue, it is my belief that these are natural because each interview is an unrepeated encounter that presents different challenges to the people involved. The uniqueness of the interviews meant that the differences in approach just needed to be acknowledged so the conversation could fructify.

Since in my narrative analysis, which I explain in the next chapter, I have included a substantial portion of the interviews in an attempt to give context to the stories, the reader will appreciate that some of my questions and responses to what participants brought to the conversation were sharper in some cases and softer and more tentative in others. This practice of including considerable extracts of the interviews will help the reader to follow the flow of the conversation and will make moments of the interaction during the interview process transparent, leading you – the reader – to make your own interpretations as you follow the text. An element that becomes prominent in the interview process, and is depicted in the excerpts, is my concern with time and place. It is evident that I ask questions regarding cities, countries, and dates partly because, as Bruner (1986) suggests, in order to think about the world in storied terms, we need to think of them in terms of time. This is a similar approach to that taken by Labov (1972) who proposes questions such as ‘Where did it happen? And when?’ in order to guide and orient the narrations and provide structure to the stories. Alexandra Georgakopoulou (2007) states – and I agree – that these elements of temporality and spatiality are not only a backdrop against which the stories develop but constitute an intrinsic part of the plot. This was evident for most of the stories told in this research, which were associated with travelling, migration, and other forms of mobility linked to specific personal and historic events. More theoretical,

methodological, and ethical questions, such as why did I tend to centre on time and space, may arise whilst reading the research findings chapters. What was my rationale behind a question? What was the decision-making process I used when deciding to abandon a certain topic? Why did I use self-disclosure? Why did I not ask something that seemed to be an obvious step forward? Why did I act with some sort of familiarity with some participants? These are examples of questions I anticipate the reader to have, and for those I will provide different answers.

4.4.3 Managing disclosures

In my opinion, the interview process is a unique experience that involves conversational skills that both the participants and I have developed as part of our personal and professional history. These personal and professional backgrounds – which can be taken as our life circumstances – combine with what we represent to each other during the interview, and from these distinctive encounters the stories emerged as acts of generosity and trust. Acts of generosity in which these men were open enough to share their experiences with me – and I shared with them as well – and intimate aspects of our lives were revealed. I believe the participants were prolific in their narratives and these were meaningful because I paid careful attention to the relationship with them and listened genuinely to what they said. But I am also mindful that interviews keep some events in seclusion: not all that we have in our minds is for sharing; there are reservations that we all have, whether for self-protection, for shyness, or for self-respect. For many reasons we all keep information for ourselves.

When participants withhold information it can be unnoticeable to the researcher and even to themselves, they simply omit something

unintentionally. They can, however, also state it overtly as did Nick, one of the participants in this study, during his interview:

“I don’t really wanna go into great amount of detail but I had some sexual relations, relationships with boys at school.” (Nick – interview)

The statement and the tone of Nick’s voice when he said these words made clear that whilst he was willing to mention his sexual relationships at school, he was not inviting any follow up. There is a pattern of markers, such as pauses, in oral stories and spontaneous speech that makes the interlocutor locate a central unit (Gee, 1986). Anything that emerges from the central point adds to or clarifies the main topic and the verbal message is then complemented by body language or changes in the voice. Tuning the researcher interventions to the verbal and non-verbal cues of the interviewees is a task that is assessed on a case-by-case basis. I could elucidate there was an important topic to be discussed in Nick’s comment but as this was part of a bigger story and he was clear about not wanting to address it. We continued with the interview and did not touch upon that topic again.

There were other moments in which information could have remained private but after an assessment of the situation, I decided to explore the topic further. An example of this happened with Karpathos, another participant, who struggled to share his story about being deeply and painfully fond of someone: *‘It’s not easy for me to talk about this.’* The development of the conversation and my decision to explore the topic further did not obey exclusively to this phrase; it also relied on an emotional connectedness with the participant. There is an ambiguity in the phrase, about whether or not to ask more; ‘it is not easy but I will do it’ or ‘it is not easy and I prefer not to do it’. In that particular case, the decision was of an ethical nature. My perception

of the situation allowed me to ask further questions since I considered that he had the strength to talk about it, but most importantly, that this was a topic he wanted to talk about.

An important aspect that also played a role in the telling of these stories was my self-identification as a gay man. In all cases, I perceived a sense of initial trust that participants deposited in me which was a product of my self-identification as a gay man. Even participants who were not openly gay or preferred to be discreet about their relationships showed their willingness to talk about very intimate aspects of their lives. I partially attributed this to the fact that I am gay and therefore I can understand their circumstances. Some participants implied that they would have not spoken so freely had I been a heterosexual man. Clearly my self-identification as a gay man influenced the interview situation. This is an example of how, sometimes purposely and sometimes inevitably, I brought part of my experience to the conversation.

Overall, those acts of sharing or self-disclosure provoked different dynamics in the dialogue. I had the impression that some participants trusted me more and disclosed some vulnerable aspects of their lives that otherwise they might have not shared. With other participants I experienced a feeling of mutual reassurance; they talked generously – and probably did not need my disclosure in order to keep going – however, I think we needed a mutual sentiment that confirmed: ‘we are part of the same group, we’ve gone through similar experiences here’. With one participant I barely spoke about myself, since his readiness to talk and his storytelling skills immersed me in a process of active listening and genuine fascination that did not require me to open up about my own experiences. In some instances, my disclosures were the

product of my identification with the stories they were telling and my own emotional investments projected onto them.

4.4.4 After the interview

Once each interview had concluded, with the audio-recorder off, I asked them how they had found the process and asked for any feedback they might have had for me. We also discussed whether they had in mind a pseudonym by which they wanted to be identified. Once we talked about choosing pseudonyms, we thanked each other for the conversations. These comments provided a sense of closure which I complemented by giving them the post-interview form (see annex 4), which would serve for specific purposes, for example, thanking them for their generosity in giving their time and insights about the topics addressed during the interview, and informing them their right to be updated about the research in the form of a summary of the preliminary findings.

When I asked them whether they wished to remove or change anything from the interview, only one participant asked to keep one part of the interview secret. With the exception of one participant, everyone requested to be updated about the preliminary findings. After I concluded that preliminary analysis, I contacted them to share with them that report. Seven out of ten participants acknowledged and commented on it: they said they found it interesting and insightful. Two of them did not comment on it and the other participant was not interested in receiving the report.

4.4.5 Starting the interview transcriptions

When on my own at home, at the university, at the library, or wherever I chose to work that day, transcribing the interviews, I started a different

relationship with these men: I started a relationship with their memory, with their image, with their absence. My journal notes reflect on phrases that caught my attention and my emotional reactions during and after the conversations. Then a second dimension started when I transcribed the audio recordings: my earphones brought the conversation to life again allowing those brief encounters to continue over and over. I transcribed the interviews verbatim, aiming for a 'full and faithful transcription' (Cameron, 2001) but focusing only on the thematic content and meanings shared during the interview rather than on accents or vocalisations. This stage of the research process set the foundations for embarking on the analytical process, which I detail in the next chapter.

4.4.6 Reflections about interviewing these men

Six potential participants did not confirm their participation. One of them explained that after careful reconsideration it would be too embarrassing for him to talk to a stranger about his erotic experiences. Two more considered they wanted to do a virtual interview rather than face-to-face but I declined that offer because the data management would have been compromised: it would have been difficult to get hard copy of the consent form with participant's signature; the quality of audio-recording could have been compromised; and I would be limited in the emotional support I could provide in case the interview proved to be distressing for the participant. The other three potential participants did not continue the arrangements for the meeting even though, initially, they seemed willing to participate. One participant decided to withdraw two days after our interview was conducted because he did not consider how much he would disclose and thought some aspects he shared could make him easily identifiable and his sexual behaviour could

negatively influence his public persona. Ten men remained in the study and decided to speak to me (see table 3).

Table 3 Participant's pseudonyms, age ranges, and nationalities

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Age range</i>	<i>Nationality</i>
<i>Luca</i>	Early 30's	Spanish
<i>Karpathos</i>	Mid 50's	Requested to keep unknown
<i>Arthur</i>	Mid 50's	Australian
<i>Maurice</i>	Late 20's	English
<i>Giovanni</i>	Mid 20's	Italian
<i>Manoel</i>	Early 30's	Maltese
<i>Malone</i>	Mid 20's	Irish
<i>Gustav</i>	Late 40's	Maltese
<i>Nick</i>	Early 50's	English
<i>Cameron</i>	Early 60's	Scottish

Interviewing these men was an empathic process of identification with their stories. Although we were strangers, in some respects I experienced a feeling of closeness that contributed to understanding, as if we, somehow, had known each other for a while, as if we were part of the same brotherhood: our gayness. A sense of belonging to a culture that centred on our attractions but goes beyond them, touching upon social processes of identification; shared sentiments of self-awareness, such as certain reluctance to speak publicly about our relationships or attractions towards other men; our coming out stories, early or late, private or public, surprising or expected; our episodes of discovering erotic desire; our stories about the first time we discovered romance; our experiences with the gay worlds we visit periodically or live in more permanently. Those stories, which I felt were particularly close to my own experience, make me say 'we' instead of 'they and I'. When I talk about the men who participated in these interviews, their narrations give me the familiarity we acquire when we have an insider perspective (England, 1994;

Reed-Danahay, 1997) but my quality of researcher listening to their stories and analysing them puts me in between (Siddique, 2011).

Amongst all the recollections, feelings, thoughts, anecdotes, questions, doubts, and concerns that could have been shared in the context of the interviews, participants made decisions to talk about particular aspects of their lives. Of course, as a start point, the opening question framed the themes that were expected to be shared. As I have stated, my interview 'schedule' had only one opening question that touched broadly upon my research topic. Thus the idea of erotic and romantic relationships set the content around which the conversation developed and from there participants made conscious and unconscious decisions about where and how to start. Each individual reacted to these themes in their own personal way and I reacted, of course, in response to them. From that opening statement some participants hesitated about the direction they needed to take. In order to facilitate the conversation after that initial hesitation, it was normally enough to emphasise that there was no specific route and that they could talk about what was most important for them. Clarifying the non-directive aspect of the interview and the conversational style of it was easier to exercise with some participants than with others. I found myself in some occasions asking 'too much' because I needed clarification about aspects that participants seemingly took for granted that I understood. I also found myself struggling to follow the participant's narration and I focused on something about their discourse rather than on the content of their discourse. For instance, with some participants I was captured by the emotional struggles they seemed to be going through, and I felt somewhat compelled to 'do something', to intervene more as a counsellor than as a researcher. These were moments that blurred the boundaries between the

processes of counselling and research. I shall talk about them in the discussion of findings and in the relevant participants' monographs.

These reflections had the purpose of exposing some of the ways in which a number of elements such as my questions, my presence and the participants' presence, my empathy, and broader social aspects contributed to the way in which the stories were told. If one or two tiny circumstances had been changed, the conversations might have been different. I might have asked something else, or participants might have responded differently. These stories become a somewhat fortuitous coming together of circumstances, which builds upon the premise of these narratives as a co-construction between researcher, participant, and their specific circumstances.

5 | My approach to narrative analysis

5.1 *Introduction*

Narrative is a fertile soil for analytic approaches. There are a number of theoretical and methodological perspectives available that allow us to engage with the narrations that grow in this lush and fecund field. This variety of approaches to narrative analysis makes the decision to privilege one over the other a difficult one. Since this research is an exploration of identity understood as autobiography, as a making-sense of life process by means of stories, I required an approach that allowed me to identify the plot in participants' narratives but bearing in mind that the stories were not the ultimate goal of the study but the medium for the construction of identity.

Identity takes shape through telling (Ferguson, 2009); story is the origin of identity and story is ceaseless emergence, it is continuously giving space for possibilities and experience. Since the experiences that were narrated by the participants in this study are best understood within the context of their lives, I needed a method that allowed me to see their stories as a whole. Some approaches to narrative analysis focus on short stories or in the conversational exchanges during the interview, but I needed to see participants' life narratives before seeing the themes they were bringing to the conversation because I believe that it is holistically that stories and identities are best interpreted. As put by Catherine Riessman (1993), some people knit together a number of themes into coherent and extended accounts that make a categorisation process difficult. Applying thematic analysis to the accounts of these men would fragment what is an extended narrative.

Thus, aiming for a method that would help me to locate the interview extracts and allow me to answer my research question without losing the

context and richness of their detailed life stories, I developed an analytic approach. This approach allowed me to map the interview transcripts and visualise the places where their narrations addressed the intertwinement of identity and erotic and romantic relationships. I thus tailored a narrative analysis method aided by a combination of (1) Labov's and Waletzky's (Labov, 1972; Labov & Waletzky, 2006) structural approach to narratives; and (2) Dan McAdams' analytical devices for personal narratives (McAdams, 1997; McAdams & Bowman, 2001; McAdams & Guo, 2014). I complemented these analytic approaches with a series of theory-driven analytical features that helped me to identify (3) the erotic and (4) romantic relationships; and their (5) intertwinements with identity processes. Altogether, these analytic features constitute my analytic toolkit to understand their life narratives as a whole, make sense of their contents, and determine which parts of the interview transcripts were relevant to my research inquiry.

5.2 Analytic proceedings – Maurice's story

For this section, it is my aim to explain how this narrative analysis method looks in practice. To illustrate the process, I have used Maurice's life narrative. Maurice is a student in his 20's from Manchester who has been in a relationship for nearly three years. What you are going to see in the following pages are excerpts of the 54-page interview transcription with Maurice accompanied by an explanation of the analytic method.

5.2.1 Characters

The first step in this process consists of 'colour-marking' the text (at this stage of the process I worked with hard copies of the transcriptions). I highlighted **in blue** all the people that are present in the narration, explicitly or implicitly and regardless of their importance in the participant's life. These become what are 'characters' in terms of Labov and Waletzki's (2006)

guidelines. Since this is a first-person account, the participant is the protagonist and other people present in the account are main, secondary, unfolding characters – those who help the story to develop – and incidental characters, just to name a few. In order to identify the text provenance easily, Maurice’s text is aligned to the left and my interventions as interviewer are aligned to the right.

Maurice:

I’m in a relationship now. [‘Relationship’ implies a connection with someone = character 1]

A romantic relationship but [Information that complements character 1]

It’s not really an erotic one at the same time,

Which is a bit confusing

Ehmm, but it works and we’ve been together for a few years. [‘We’ as a special character?³]

But I really find it hard to merge the two.

I don’t know why that is. So we’ve argued a little bit about it.

And things like that. And we do have sex, but quite rarely, really.

And it’s more as if we were close friends

Or family or something like that.

Edgar:

Mhh. For how long have you been together?

Nearly three years.

And how did you meet him or how...?

Oh, we met through a friend who, I’m not really friend with anymore. [‘Friend’ = character 2]

[Laughs]

³ Instances where the participant refers to his partner and himself as ‘we’ will have analytical implications, in contrast to the times when a participant refers to them as separate individuals, i.e. ‘him and me’. I will address this differentiation later when I talk about romantic intimacy.

But it wasn't someone close, and we just got on, [‘Someone close’=still talking about character 2]

And I was just coming from a long term relationship. [This implies an ex-partner=character 3]

So I wasn't really looking for a replacement. [Potential new partner]

But he was really nice and

Like treating me well and I gave it a go.

I went through this process with the entire interview transcript for each participant and some characters who at the beginning were just ‘an ex-boyfriend’ or ‘a friend’, were later identified by name. In this case, highlighted in blue are all the people that have a name in the story, such as ‘The Two Tonys and Jack⁴’, three of Maurice’s partners. All the people who are not mentioned by name but by the role they play in Maurice’s life, such as his mother, sister, nephew, ex-boyfriends, friends, online friends, landlord, neighbour, colleagues, classmates and guys he has slept with were also characters. Similarly, I identified all the people who do not play a direct role in his life but are present in the narrative as members of society as a whole. Examples of such people are ‘straight men’, ‘women’, ‘transgender friends’, and ‘gay men’.

Finally, I identified all people who are not mentioned in the narrative but are implicit in the narration. For example, when Maurice mentioned that he was having ‘one night stands’ it is implicit that he met some people for sexual encounters, or when he mentioned ‘there are bars in which you know you’ll be propositioned’. In the passive sentence ‘you’ll be propositioned’ it is implied that someone is going to make a proposition to someone else. Reading the sentence in the context of a gay bar and in the context of his narration, it

⁴ Pseudonyms.

could be assumed that those who might make the proposition are gay men, however, since this is uncertain I have categorised it as 'an unknown someone'. Some of the characters remain unidentified throughout whereas others are identified later, for instance, 'character 1' became his current boyfriend, Tony. This work of looking for characters in the story ends when, after a thorough revision of the whole interview, I have listed all the people involved in the participant's narrative.

5.2.2 Orientation in Time, Space, and Circumstances

Once I had identified all the characters, I proceeded to identify the 'orientation signs' (Labov & Waletzky, 2006). To do this I highlighted **in green** all the sentences that orient the story in time, place, and circumstances. The timescale can be as short as the immediate past (moments ago), to a longer scale (years ago), or even in a timeframe beyond the participant's life (in the past or in the future). Similarly, 'place' can be understood as macro-geography (different cities, countries, continents), it can be seen in a micro-scale (in a bedroom, under the desk, across the road) or even in a virtual space (online). This mapping process can be very clear as Maurice's comments about 'We came to Manchester to see the university' or 'he lived 300 miles away'. There are a few geographical locations involved in both sentences: Maurice and his friend went from the village where Maurice lived at that time; to visit Manchester and the University of Manchester. The village is not mentioned in this sentence but was mentioned in a previous segment of the interview, which also builds upon the idea that the narrative is best understood when taken as a whole.

*From what you said before, that you...
That he still shows this attraction for you
And you've engaged in sexual activity*

Even if sometimes you don't want.

Ehm, what makes you go?

What makes you do it if you don't want to?

*'Cause I care about **him** and I want **him** to be happy.*

*So, **I** just do it.*

*A lot of the time **I**'d rather just go to sleep.*

*So... Ehm, **I** don't know if this is normal stuff*

*That happens to **people who have been together for a while** but*

*Because **you** hear about **people's parents** being together*

*But **sleeping in different beds**. [Orienting sign related to sleeping arrangements in the household]*

*Things like that. A lot of **my friends' parents** are in that situation.*

Stuff like that. I don't know, really.

*It's just, **I** feel **I** should be doing it.*

*Whether **I** want it or not.*

***Not all the time, a lot of the time** [Orienting sign related to the frequency of sexual relationships]*

I just say no.

"Go away".

*But if that upsets **him**, I don't want to upset **him**.*

I can see. It can be really difficult to address...

Have you talked about this?

*Yeah, **we've had a few arguments before** [Orienting sign related to undefined period in the past]*

*And **we** almost split up because of it.*

But because of the other feelings that aren't sexual,

***we decided to stay together**. [Presumably, the same undefined period in the past]*

This colouring stage leads to further analytic processes. Some of these phrases could seem meaningless if taken in isolation, but when observed within the context of the whole interview, they take more or less relevance. At one point during the interview, Maurice talked about one of his ex-boyfriends and how he travelled from an unspecified place 300 miles away from Manchester just to meet with him. The fact that he mentions the distance instead of mentioning the place adds emphasis to the fact that his ex-boyfriend travelled a distance just to meet him. This is a useful piece of information, not only to orient the story but it is also relevant to the meaning-making process. For example, there is interpretive potential when that comment is compared to another passage in which Maurice mentions a prospective boyfriend who did not want to continue seeing him because they lived apart: *'I'm miles away...'* as cited by Maurice. But Maurice's evaluation of the explanation suggests the distance was not a convincing argument for him as stated here: *'Even if it's only about 30 miles away which is half an hour on the train'*. This illustration is a guide for contemplating the narrative as a whole.

Not only geography plays a part in the construction of the stories; there are other ways in which participants orient their accounts, one of which is time. A sense of time is identifiable when participants state it overtly through sentences such as: *'I was 20'*, *'I haven't spoken to my mum in 15 years'*, or it can also be more implicit, *'when I was studying at Manchester University'*, which can only be put in a timeframe in the context of the narrative as a whole: he was enrolled in another course in another city, in another university. Sentences thus interconnect with other parts of the interviews in which explanations are given by the participant.

Orientation aspects can also refer to actions that happen in time and geography but under specific circumstances.

*What happens when you get involved
In these sideline relationships or encounters?
Adventures?*

It tends to be when I'm drunk.

Really. And if I'm going out with friends that...

I will get drunk and get over a man.

Not that I don't go out intentionally to do that.

And I don't do it when I'm sober. [The circumstances in which sexual encounters happen]

It's just... if someone comes on to me I just reciprocate it.

And if we go back, and it happens, I feel guilty afterwards.

Because, it's not something that I want to do.

When sober, I don't know if it's something I want to do,

It's just something that comes up when I'm drunk.⁵

5.2.3 Complicating Actions and Crisis of the Self

A crucial point of this analytic process comes when I look for the complicating actions (CA) according to Labovian structural analysis. Complicating actions can apply to concrete situations that disrupt the sense of flow in the life of the participant and are underlined in navy blue and marked with this symbol [CA]. This reflects a complication in the story and comes through in analysis: in addition to making the pragmatics of the individual's life more difficult, complicating actions [CA] might also have the potential to complicate the individual's inner life. Following Steph Lawler's (2014) suggestion that in popular culture identity is considered a concept that comes to the fore when the individual is in crisis, there is a possibility that the

⁵ These actions also orient the text in time and space but have the particularity of suggesting circumstantial aspects of the inner life of the individual.

complicating action intersects with the aspects of identity that are directly relevant to my inquiry.

To identify these identity-crisis passages there are some guidelines I designed: in the sentence the complicating action [CA] should normally accompany the first person "I" and make reference to a particular inner process of self-representation. To identify them in the text I also underline these complicating actions in navy blue and visually locate these sentences by drawing a stormy cloud to symbolise the crisis of the Self next to the text.

Ehm, I've had like homophobic comments and things

That were made when I had my first boyfriend when I was 16.

Ehm, everyone was bringing their partner to this party that we had when in college.

And... So I brought mine.

And... Some of the boys from school started to call me all sorts of... [CA]

—He was a bit older because he was in his 20's—

So he stood up for me and I was like, backed up.

But I still felt quite vulnerable

Because all I was doing was being with my partner, as everyone else.

But because mine happened to be a man, it was apparently a bad thing.



That was quite frustrating, really.

I can imagine...

But meanwhile you brought him, which I think it's really great.

Because, I mean, regardless of the response from people but you dared to bring him.

I think, I've lost my mum for being gay.

So I thought:

"It can't get much worse than that, so just bring him along and see what happens".

So, he was my first partner, and yeah, it didn't end well because

We went out to this club, I was 17, I entered being underage,

But because he was 20 they allowed us both in.



And **he** ended up... I saw him kissing someone else. [CA]⁶

5.2.4 Result and Evaluation

The result (R) in Labovian analysis often refers to the perceived consequences of the happenings in the life of the participant or the outcome of the story. These perceived consequences can be quite concrete, such as leaving university as a result of not having money and the necessity to work, as will be seen later in Maurice's narrative. The result can also take the form of an insight, realisation or turning point that makes identity settle and gives the individual a confirmed sense of Self. In the paragraphs below, I marked this segment with an arrow pointing to the sentence or passage and the sign [R] next to it.

What... what does this first relationship add to your sense of Self?

Or to your whole story as a gay man?

I think in a way it was liberating because...

I thought I didn't have to pretend

That I liked certain **girls** I used to pretend:

"I really fancy **her**", when I didn't.

So finally I could say "I fancy **this man!**" ←[R]

Ehm, well, it was good to go with that but

The relationship wasn't that close

*I mean, **we** got on well, and I was able to have sex which*

–I didn't have anal sex at that point, it was just, you know, other stuff–

⁶ This narration of his college party constitutes: (1) a complicating action for the plot because the schoolmates presumably attacked him verbally, this event became a corroboration of what he had already experienced in his family environment, that gay relationships do not enjoy the same acceptance that heterosexual relationships do; and (2) a moment of personal crisis and meaning making, as his boyfriend defended him from people who attacked him but betrayed him by kissing someone else.

Ehm, but it was nice to be able to, just be able to do that, really.

And even though I was only 16-17, I feel as if, I don't...

I feel as if I were too young to start with that sort of stuff but...

I wish I had waited until I was a bit older but... ←[E]

Ehm, too young to start with...?

Having sex. Looking back, I don't see 16 years olds as adults.

Because, it's, when you're older,

You notice the gap in maturity and different ways of thinking...

And I sort of feel that when my nephew,

Because my nephew is four years younger than me.

So when he was 16 and 17 and he came out as gay I was really protective

And didn't want him to see anyone, or anything like that because

I've been there and I got hurt and just sort of...

As if he wasn't ready for that kind of thing because I don't think I was. ←[E]

Paired with the result [R], there is often an evaluation [E] of the narrative through which the individual gives a judgement about the outcome of the story. In this case, Maurice gives a contested review of the account: he says 'it wasn't great' but 'in a way it was liberating'. He thus praises that relationship and the first sexual encounter with that guy as a connection which let him resolve something about his life story, something that he perceives as advisable to happen (since he says it was 'nice' and 'good' to live that experience). However, there are also series of counterstatements that he addresses, simultaneously casting a shadow over the relationship by saying he was not mature enough to engage in it. At this point I need to consider whether retrospective evaluation is relevant. For example, when an event occurs, it can be experienced at the time as positive – having a boyfriend – or negative – being let down by a boyfriend. When retrospective evaluation is

applied, however, the positive experience might become a negative one, for example by considering that it was too soon to have a boyfriend and that the boyfriend was not good for him. On the other hand, a negative event might be viewed more positively over time, for example by considering that being let down by a boyfriend taught him a good lesson. This tension between evaluation at the time and evaluation now is considered during the analysis.

5.2.5 Small Stories within the Life Story

Maurice's story is aligned with what is understood as a 'life story' because it covered a significant proportion of his life, from when he was a teenager to present. However, this life story was formed of small stories: events that were part of the participant's life and could stand by themselves (Georgakopoulou, 2007), and because they have a plot, they have the potential to be analysed as units of meaning. However, since they are part of a bigger trajectory, I see these small stories as episodes. Small stories are embedded in the larger narrative but are demarked by cues of beginnings and endings that allowed me to see them to some extent separately. To identify them in the text I signalled them with the legends "*Beginning*" and "*End of Story*".

And what happened after him?

I met someone else. ← "*Beginning*"

Online. Because again, you don't have anywhere to go.

You can't really go to a club because you're too young...

We went on a few dates and got together, and he actually,

And this one confused me, to be honest, because

When I was 17, nearly 18, I was looking at universities and

We came to Manchester and we did the tour,

And we looked for accommodation and we did the tour...

We did everything together, he was really supportive.

He was actually younger than me just by a year.

So he had it the following year.

He was interested as well and we were both looking around.

And then it all seemed well, and we arranged to come up.

The first week and stay and all of that.

But then I got an email from him, he didn't even phone me or anything like that.

He just said:

"I feel as if now you live in Manchester

Which is full of gay people and I'm miles away..."

– Even if it's only about 30 miles away which is half an hour on the train –

He was like:

"I feel as if you aren't going to care about me anymore so we should just split up".

And I haven't seen him since...

He wouldn't answer my calls or answer my emails.

He just decided that I was going to cheat on him...

He felt threatened by the city.

And we hadn't had sex or anything either, we were just, dating...

We were together, but we hadn't decided to take that step.

After my last experience I wanted to try and do it more slowly and let it evolve.

So, I was with him for about three or four months.

And it seemed very promising... From what you were telling me.

Yeah, I was really excited about it.

And it seems he was a very good guy, accompanying you

In all this thing that was important for you...

Yeah, I would've liked to stay friends with him

But he just completely blanked me out.

And that was it. ← ***End of Story***

5.2.6 The Erotic and the Romantic

Something that is not part of the Labovian analytic toolkit but is crucial for my research inquiry is the question of 'the erotic' and 'the romantic'. I needed to identify in the text the passages in which these erotic and romantic relationships were considered. The scope of circumstances considered to be erotic or romantic was determined by each participant: some of them engaged in an inquiry of 'what is erotic' and then provided explanations; some participants equated erotic relationships to sexual relationships; and some talked about these erotic encounters without giving much detail about their definitions. The same thing happened with the term 'romantic relationships': some individuals equated them to 'long-term relationships'; others equated them to 'love relationships'; and some were interested in understanding what a romantic relationship is before starting to share their stories.

The method of locating these moments was partly theoretically and partly organically driven, following participants narratives. In terms of the erotic, it was more organic because participants spoke directly about those experiences. I thus identified content related to (a) seducing or being seduced by someone, whether the seduction ended in physical contact or not; (b) recollections of living highly pleasurable moments of sexual gratification with someone, physically or online; (c) experiencing strong urges and sexual drives to which participants responded reflectively or unreflectively; (d) sexual encounters which left the participants with ambiguous feelings; and (e) experiences that were not only sensual but also loving ones.

For the romantic aspects of the narratives, on the other hand, the content was less easily identifiable because not all participants referred to this topic as overtly as they did to the erotic one. Helped by theories of intimacy (Jamieson, 1998), love (Sternberg, 1986), and romantic love (Cleary, 2015), I

located romantic content related to (f) partnership and companionship; (g) communicative intimacy and emotional intimacy; (h) commitment and trust in one person; (i) a shifting in focus from 'I' to 'we'; and (j) considerations or concern for the beloved's wellbeing. Ultimately, because this is a study that privileges the emic perspective, I took the stance of a researcher who praises and values the understanding of the realities participants experience. There is thus not a master definition of 'the romantic' and 'the erotic' but an approach that used the participants' own definitions of the relationships that are being analysed.

I'm 28 now.

So I was 19 when I split up with Jack.

And then 22 when I got with Tony, he was my previous ex.

Tony... so you had been with him before...

Oh, no, no, no, that was the first time...

Not my current boyfriend, my last.

They're called both Tony, which is confusing.

Okay, okay.

So... he was the one who I met online

Just, 'cause I was going out and I was meeting people and

Sleeping with them [As previously he equated sexual desire/sexual activity to erotic encounters]

And going on a date [Within his story, going on dates is equivalent to make romantic attempts]

And it not working...

But I used to play all these online games and things

And there are social games and stuff you get

When I was like a teenager I used to play.

So like... What kind of social games?

It's like role-playing games, they're called.

It's a bit geeky but you go online

And you have these characters and you can play together

And interact with each other.

You try to win, whatever.

All sorts of...

So you play with people you know or with people you don't know?

People I know and people I don't know, really.

Whoever was playing, really.

'Cause you can join rooms with people you know.

Or you can do, go to... around and talk to people, whatever.

So it's all sorts of games.

And because I was feeling quite lonely I was there quite often.

So, nothing was working with these people.

I was meeting and dating and having one night stands.

So I got talking to Tony, who lived... ← "Beginning"

It's interesting you said about the proximity thing because

He lived at the other side of London;

So he lived about 300 miles away but we got on really well.

And he came up to visit.

And we got on quite well.

He came explicitly to visit you...

Yeah.

Just to visit me, after we were talking together for some time.

And we had like a group of friends online

From all around the world who we both spoke to,

He was included in that.

Ehm, I'm still in touch with some of them...

I'm still in touch via Facebook and things like that.

People from America or in Canada;

All sorts of places.

...But yeah, so he came to visit...

How did you feel when you knew he was coming?

It was nice

'Cause even though I never met him, I sort of had feelings...

We've been talking so often

Of course... you... yeah, feelings...

Yeah, without physically meeting but

When we did physically meet it sort of cemented,

Because I've been on dates with people I've met on dating sites before

And we got on really well, but when we met it didn't work.

It's like: "Oh, no. Okay". But with him it was exactly the same...

So he came to visit.

We got on really well.

We, ehm, ended up starting a relationship.

And then, after a while he moved up.

To live with me.

5.2.7 The Intertwinement of Self and relationships

Emphasising that this research looks at the interaction between relationships and their connectedness with identity, the focus was on the meanings associated with the intersection of these three elements – the erotic, the romantic, and identity – and not on each element alone. Deconstructing the stories was not the ultimate goal I was pursuing; these stories were the medium through which I aimed to get a sense of the individuals' identities. In order to achieve that, the narrative mapping process was a necessary step. Since identities become more prominent when an individual is in crisis

(Lawler, 2014), I used this principle to pay particular attention to moments of crisis as noted before, which coincides with Labov's idea of a 'complicating action'. With these elements already mapped out, the coloured and signalled text provided me with indicators when I was looking for a particular intersection: the one between the erotic, the romantic, and the results (complicating actions-crisis moments).

I call this intersection, this meeting point between the three elements, 'the intertwinement'. I saw 'the intertwinement' in action in phrases such as: *'it was quite erotic at the beginning but now it has dwindled all the way'*, which were evident forms in which Maurice, in this case, highlighted these moments. Other passages required more sophisticated analysis. For example, following his narrative I got a sense that for him words, sentences, and whole passages associated with 'romance' were close in meaning to 'love' and 'feelings'. This can be seen in phrases such as *'and I still care about him, and I still have feelings for him'* or *'if I had been single at that point I would've said yes... Because he was someone I loved'*. I coloured **in yellow** the parts of the text that spoke about romantic relationships and coloured **in pink** all the parts that spoke about erotic relationships in their own terms. For some participants' narratives, the stories of the erotic and the romantic were mostly detached and that could be seen by the colouring. However, there were passages that combined the erotic and the romantic as one single event. In those cases, I highlighted them with both pink and yellow, which automatically revealed **orange highlights** which aided my analysis. Where critical moments of the self, indicated by the stormy cloud, coincided with highlighter marking moments of erotic and romantic intimacy, I dedicated time to closely analysing the text because those narrative passages were likely to be identity-forming passages and represent 'the intertwinement' I was looking for.

In the following passage Maurice narrates how he and his boyfriend were living in distress because one of the neighbours was harassing them for being gay.

*I wasn't working at that point, I was on benefits
And trying to find a job, and then I got a job a few months later—
But, [my boyfriend]— because I was getting benefits
And we were living together — he wasn't entitled to them—
So we were both living of hardly anything and we couldn't move out.
And we were putting up with this guy who was harassing us for being gay...
When we were down to confront him about the TV
And I was like: "look turn it off, it's 4AM. Could you turn it down?"
And he'd turn it up.
And he'd do things like ring our doorbell at midnight.
So we'd wake up and he'd just stand up with his finger on it.
And if we went out and confront him,
He would threaten us because he didn't like gay people.*

That's awful...

*So, the landlord took his side as well.
So, I was shocked but Tony was really traumatised.
To the point where he ended up with social phobia.
So, we managed to get away...
And we moved out
But he stayed with the social phobia and he was too scared
To... leave the house and get a job.
And I got a job at that point, I was working 60-70 hours a week to,
Just to look after us both.*

What were you doing?

I was doing support work for people with learning disabilities.

So it was quite intense.

Yeah, both physically and emotionally.

So, I was working 7 days a week, a lot of time.

And never saw him but I was working so he could stay with me.

So, with him, I did have both, the erotic and romantic relationship.

It was quite strong; it was the first one I had been long-term.

Really.

Two years and a half...

Yeah, around that time. Yeah, I tried to keep that together.

But in the end, I do still have feelings for him, we're still friends.

And I still care about him a lot.

I think just because he had those issues

Brought up by that neighbour



It ruined it for us, really.

Because in the end he couldn't cope anymore.

And I just said:

"Look, you need to go



Because I'm burning out just working this much

So I can look after both of us, but I need to cut down"...

So I just said:

"You need to go back with your parents"

And we split up. ←[R]

Even though I still loved him

We just, yeah, decided practically it wasn't working.

So he went away and he got some counselling and all of that.

And, came back to Manchester to go to university...

After, about a year...

So he got better.

He got over his problems.

And he came back and said, "Hey I'm back, can we meet up?"

And I was like: "Yeah, yeah, yeah; great."

So we met up and he was like:

"Look, I've come back to Manchester to see if we,

Now that I'm better, I'm fine, I'm at uni..."

He was still interested in you.

Yeah, but, by that point I'd been with my new boyfriend

About three months, so I said "I'm sorry, I'm seeing someone else."

And at that point I was really excited.

I was really enjoying the relationship so I said: "Sorry"

He got really upset, he was like:

"I really thought we could pick up where we left

Because we split up because we couldn't be together practically,

Not because we fell out of love."...

It was just, awkward.

I sort of, if I had been single at that point

I would've said yes.

Because it was a bit,

Because he was someone I loved... ←[E]

And it made me really sad for him because...

We're still friends, he still lives here.

And he's gone from being really shy

Instead, to go really outgoing and working in a bar...

Oh wow, that's something!

He's in one of the other unis,

And he's one of the committee for the LGBT society.

So he knows a lot of gay people

And he's a big part of that community now. ←[R]

So it's nice to see that he's changed. ←[E]

Yes, it's like... this kind of development.
Like growing, and overcoming his problems...
And overcoming his social phobia and transforming it...

Yeah, definitely!

I mean, if anything, he's more out there than I am, really.

He's more confident and goes out more often than I do...

And I still care about him, and I still have feelings for him.

And we're still friends, so...

Have you met after?

Yeah, yeah, we see each other quite often.

Because we go to the same clubs and all of that.

I went to this literature event with him recently, and we go to the scene together.

Ehm, how is it, this relationship with him? How is it now?

There's a bit of tension there, sexually of course,

Because we never lost that attraction or anything.

We just had to split up, we had no choice. ←[E]

Ehm, so it's a bit odd but

He's got a boyfriend and I got one.

So nothing happens... ←[R]

5.2.8 The Abstract

Labovian analysis asks the researcher to provide an answer to the question "what is this story about". This is perhaps the most challenging part of the analysis and is partly reflected in the 12 months that it took for me to finally answer this question for all the life narratives. Since Maurice was prolific in his narration, there were several stories contained within and feeding the main plot, these small stories could be analysed in their own and

would provide important elements to the thematic analysis for the cross-sectional analysis of the data. However, these small stories were not giving me a satisfactory answer as to what Maurice's story was about.

After going through all the analytic points, I had a provisional answer which was 'this is a story about the gay community', then 'this is a story of engaging in relationships through test and learn'. At the same time, I had a recollection of my talk with Maurice in which he introduced Manchester Gay Village into the conversation. When he started talking about it, I perceived a change in his voice, it was quite subtle but still noticeable; an inflection, a different quality that was accompanied by certain vividness; and certain assessment about how he would share this with me; trusting but still reluctant, almost excited to share but still hesitant, as if he were opening a door to his intimate place and assessing whether I was worthy of being invited in. That moment during the interview has accompanied me until now as I write this text but I had been unable to explain why, amongst all his accounts, this particular phrase stayed with me all this time so vividly. I realised that Maurice's transcription had a particular combination of colours that repeated across the whole interview as a pattern. That combination showed me that the complicating actions and crisis of the Self usually occurred in the intimacy of the household or in places that he considered home.

In conclusion, by using Labov's and Waletzky's approach the narrative analysis benefits from getting a panoramic perspective of the story: (A) Abstract – What is Maurice's story about? (O) Orientation – Who is involved? When did it happen? And where? (CA) Complicating action – What was the challenge or obstacle? (E) Evaluation – What is your take on that story? (R) Result – How did it end? These elements served as a guide to get a sense of the main topic of the interview: its 'characters'; temporal and geographical

context; and the overriding feelings associated with that story. Since this approach presented some methodological limitations such as the difficulty of using it with partial stories and identifying smaller units of analysis, I also relied on some of the narrative devices by McAdams to clarify, for instance, aspects of context when the story is not particularly time-oriented; key life events and to explain what marks the end of one event and the beginning of another; high points and low points; turning points; vivid scenes; memorable moments or episodes; life challenges and coping skills; ideological setting, religious and political views; and important values.

Through this analytic toolkit, I detected that the intertwinement between identity and Maurice's erotic and romantic relationships occurred in passages with specific qualities. Geographical qualities, such as having to travel outside the village to meet people who otherwise would not be able to meet in the locality; having had to leave home when his mum turned her back on him for being gay; finding in Manchester Gay Village a place where he actually fitted in; moving in with a partner because he could not afford the place alone; splitting up with one of his boyfriends which meant that his ex-boyfriend had to move out of the city and go to live with his parents; or having to leave a flat because the landlord and a neighbour were harassing him and his partner. These qualities of micro- and macro-geography were closely related to crisis of the self and were all associated with moments of intimacy. Those excerpts helped me to elucidate what his discourse tells me about him as a person and about gay identity as a concept. Thus, for answering the question 'What is Maurice's story about?', the places where he has inhabited have become a life theme and are connected with processes of identity construction, which make me believe that this is a story about 'family and home'. 'Home' in a far more subjective way than the reference to the place

where one lives, and 'family' in a far more complex sense than the grouping of words 'mum', 'dad', 'daughter', 'son', and 'nephew' can convey. 'Home' is an example of an essential word we use frequently, but when explored further, we see they it not as easily explainable as we might have thought. Could an entire country, one of its cities, or a town be called 'home'? Could 'home' be a mobile place? Could it be the case that 'home' is not necessarily about the place but about the emotional qualities of a place? There are parts of the conversation that intrigue, inspire, and reveal. The ways in which Maurice has mapped the gay village through clubs and bars makes me wonder, could the gay village be home? Could someone be home?

Having explained how I mapped the text and how this process provided me with units of meaning in which the intertwining of self and relationships was evident, in the next two chapters I present the narrative structural analysis that constitutes my research findings. First, I present in an idiographic form the structural narrative analysis of identities – as I just explained – for five participants. After these findings in idiographic form, I present in chapter 7 an overarching narrative that encompasses the findings as a cross-sectional analysis.

6 | Findings – idiographic analysis – five men

6.1 *Introduction*

Having explained the methodological approach that I developed in order to determine the contents of the interview that would be analysed, in the following sections, I attempt to give you a glimpse into the lives of five of the men who participated in this study. By presenting these life stories, I discuss some of the findings that I identified through the narrative analysis of their interviews. I have selected these participants – Giovanni, Gustav, Malone, Nick, and Cameron – for three main reasons. First, their life stories are strongly linked to the core elements of my research inquiry, namely the intertwinement of identity with their erotic and romantic relationships. Secondly, these participants' life stories engaged with themes that were 'unusual' in the sense that the angles from which participants talked about them have not been explored in the literature. Thirdly, the ways in which the interviews with them developed provided material that is best analysed as part of extended narratives, in contrast with other participants, whose narratives comprised shorter stories best suited for a cross-sectional analysis. The rest of the participants' stories – Luca, Arthur, Maurice, Manoel, and Karpathos – are covered in the cross-sectional analysis of findings in the next chapter.

6.2 Giovanni – A socially constructed, postmodern, sexually centred, and altogether quite impossible-to-describe idea of being gay

In a white and nearly unfurnished tutorial room that overlooks a garden all flowered by the spring, I interviewed Giovanni. He told me that whilst walking towards the room he was asking himself 'what exactly is a gay identity?'. Giovanni is a young scholar in social sciences and this was evident at various points during the interview from his comments, which were impregnated with sociological knowledge of theories and ways of understanding the world in critical terms. Giovanni started with a conceptual discussion of identity: he questioned terms and gave generic examples before talking about personal experiences. His academic background played a crucial role in the way he talked during our time together but, in addition to being a social scientist, his Italian roots were also prominent throughout the conversation. Since he strongly identifies himself as Italian, in this chapter I will use these two identities – the social scientist and the Italian man – to introduce a perspective of social roles that he uses alternatively to define himself – in similar terms to Goffman's (1971) theory of the self in the everyday life – and to talk about what being gay means to him. Giovanni described his multiple social identities as roles that are, or are not, 'at stake'; identities that are 'relevant' or 'might not count in specific situations'. In this chapter, you will see that what Giovanni, the young Italian scholar, will tell in his own terms also gives the impression of matching McCall's (1966) theory of role identities. In this theory, the multiplicity of roles that the individual performs requires them to organise a hierarchy of prominence that will reflect the relative value each role has for the person and their conception of Self. The aspect of 'performing' or 'doing' is a key element to consider here as it is clear

that for some of these identities, Giovanni seems to rely in what he *does* in order to respond who he *is*.

‘Well, identity... define identity, because identity can be a lot of different things... identity means “who you are”... I think [gay identity] it’s just a... of course it’s part of who you are but it’s not necessarily the main aspect of who you are... I mean, sexuality is an important part of who you are but it’s also... like, it’s part of a lot of different things. It’s also very contextual... if you’re in a gay bar, of course it’s a prominent part of your identity. But if you’re, I don’t know, working at uni, it might be something that it’s just there but... it’s not prominent... For example in a context where lots of people are international... for example in the university, the fact that I’m Italian is more... relevant... Of course we have a lot of identities and the identities that are more prominent in certain environment, in certain social contexts depend on the context itself...’ (Giovanni – interview)

Giovanni offers here the setting that helps to understand what he means by ‘gay identity’ when he refers to this term throughout the interview. For him, identity is the answer to the question ‘who are you?’. Identity emerges as a response to a matter that requires resolution or discussion; it involves a reflection on the subject who asks. The response, although personal, is attached to the circumstances in which the question is asked. Implicitly, Giovanni says that it is perhaps the circumstances, the social and material milieu where his identity is performed and/or permitted, that triggers the question in the first place. A gay bar would thus make him say ‘I’m gay’, whilst a UK university makes him say ‘I’m an Italian scholar’. Giovanni sees a clear interaction between his subjectivity and the environment in the way that he profiles his identities. This idea will prove to be a key element in the analysis of this narrative because the environment in which Giovanni and his

subjectivity interact and will raise the question of how the social and material milieu informs the understanding of that gay identity. Theorists have not agreed on a master theory of identity but they have contributed to elucidating different aspects of it. One of the aspects on which they have reached a certain consensus is the appreciation of two basic domains of identity: an external part, which is displayed to the world, and an internal part, which concerns an intimate component. In his early works about identity development and as a metaphor of the stage, Goffman conceived the self as an entity which, having many aspects, features or sides, could be performed by the individual to the world by acting out a specific role within the society. In Giovanni's narrative, I will explore the internal part; how that intimate aspect of identity exists, is shaped, and changes depending on the environment and social context. The social contexts Giovanni talks about are of different types: some of them are geographical spaces such as a country, city, or place with its specific cultural rules; others are conversational spaces that happen with people Giovanni has been in touch with; and a final type of context is associated with activities that he does and put him in particular conditions.

'For example, if I'm discussing about neo-liberalism with my friends, the fact that I'm gay or not, is simply, it's not at stake... It's nothing to do with the conversation. So my political ideas, my ideologies, and my stuff is what matters... The fact that I'm centre-left or left-wing is what matters at the moment. So even the fact that I'm Italian, although even if people who talk to me know that I'm Italian... it's just not... it's not that it's not important to me; it's still part of my identity and of course, part of my ideas are affected by it but it's just not, what it's at stake at the moment.' (Giovanni – interview)

In this example, the conversational space his friends and him created is the context that puts his centre-left or left wing ideology at the core of the

discussion. The social and political issues surrounding neo-liberalism make his political identity become more prominent while his national identity and gay identity become less obvious. Still, he incorporates some nuances in his narration by saying that his political views are affected by other identities. The notion of a plurality of identities that coexist in him but take relevance depending on the context would imply that their relevance is context-dependant. However, when he says part of his ideas are affected by identities that are not visibly at stake, that contextual quality can be contested. I would argue that the ways in which these identities are socially constructed might allocate pre-determined values or significance that make some of them more relevant than others. Giovanni's understanding of identities puts them in a dynamic process in which they go to the foreground or background depending on the circumstances, but it is not clear where their boundaries lie. The nuances he hints at when he mentions his ideas are affected by other identities seem to emphasise this very point although he appears to downplay it.

'It's a bit something like my nationality. It's just there... it's not that it doesn't allow you to be something... more... or something else... not in a sense that you cancel the fact that you're Italian or that I'm Italian, for instance. It's just there... but... it might not count in the specific situation.'
(Giovanni – interview)

When I asked about what would be specific situations where gay identity comes to the forefront, he offered me a view of the whereabouts of the boundaries I was trying to understand.

Well, of course in a romantic relationship or if I'm going to... I don't really go much to gay bars but if I go to a gay bar or if you chat on these online apps, like Grindr or whatever –I'm sure you're familiar with those– then, of course, it's the part that matters most. Or if I'm

discussing about sexuality with my friends... Or you know, we're talking about relationships, even heterosexual relationships that my friends have. Then, of course, the fact that I bring: "of yeah but... actually in the gay world it's a bit different." Then, of course... it would matter. But it's context-specific.' (Giovanni – interview)

Grindr. Gay bars. Romantic relationships. Discussions about his sexuality. In the above quotation, Giovanni conceptualises his gay identity as an aspect of himself that takes prime relevance in four scenarios that can be classified in two overlapping dimensions: one that is spatial and another that is relational. In other words, when he is romantically involved with someone or when he looks for someone on Grindr, he is talking about an aspect of his identity that positions him as part of a dyad in a sexual-romantic relationship. Through this dyad, his gay identity comes to the fore. The other dimension of his conception of identity has to do with the spatiality in which those relationships take place. In virtual environments, such as online apps, and physical venues, such as gay bars – both of which being examples of the spaces in which connections between gay men can be made – Giovanni constructs a gay identity that only exists in spaces that are dedicated to gay men. In those environments his gay identity comes to the fore. These four scenarios he speaks about demarcate gayness as an aspect of his life that – besides the gay bars, where a social element could be more predominant – is dedicated almost exclusively to sexual and romantic relationships.

These specificities of relationships and spaces set the foundation for the way in which he experiences his life as a gay man and the scope of this identity, with the implication that being gay might not be that relevant to discussions on neo-liberalism, Italian national politics, or the implication that being a gay man does not influence greatly his position in those themes. His demarcation of gay identity as a predominantly sexual-relational aspect is confirmed by his

comment on discussions with friends about 'sexuality'. However, this view on gayness was slightly disrupted by his own narrative when he said that things in the 'gay world' are 'a bit different' to heterosexual relationships. The very notion of the existence of a 'gay world' offers an interesting idea to be explored in order to know more about the particularities of that world, its peoples and their customs.

6.2.1 Being gay as a secret identity – with some people you can share the secret

What do gay men *do* that makes them gay? I did not ask this question to Giovanni but I ask it of myself whilst I write this chapter. What makes me ask this question is his comments about the contexts in which his gay identity is at stake, which involve certain activities that happen in those contexts. Presumably Grindr and gay bars are the spatial contexts, whilst romantic relationships and discussions about his sexuality are the activities. In reference to the activities, it seems it is the *doing* and the *talking* about sexual and social relationships with and about gay men that profile his idea of what being gay means. This idea of the exclusively gay – or gay themed – contexts will return in the following passage when Giovanni talks about coming out to his family and friends. You will see how the *talking* of an iconoclastic symbol of gayness – the coming out – will put this identity at stake. However, as a preamble, I want to bring to your attention another aspect that Giovanni does not mention but can be presumed from the way Grindr works and that relates to the *doing* of gayness, where *doing* is shaped by hiding. As Grindr's founder, Joel Simkhai describes (Vernon, 2010), there is a scenario common to many teenagers present and past: not knowing other gay guys. With that background to his young adulthood in which he found the dating scene frustrating to navigate, he developed an app that would help him answer the question: 'Who else here, right now, is gay? Who?' (Vernon, 2010). The app has facilitated connections

between gay men but it has done that within the same secrecy that has surrounded gay men throughout the years. Gay men have become more visible to other gay men who also use the app, which provides a potentially safer environment in which they can be openly gay and look for connections. The very existence of such an app and its popularity demonstrates that gay men are still wanting to answer the same question that Simkhai asked: 'Who else here, right now, is gay? Who?' and Grindr helps to identify them.

This apparent detour about Grindr is relevant because Giovanni's experience of coming out hints at a need for gayness to become visible at the same time that it remains hidden. In other words, Giovanni's concern about revealing he is gay to a small number of people but that it then becomes public resembles the dynamics of Grindr, where he sees other gay men but someone without the app would not know. It is a network that finds a way to share the secret without giving the secret away. As being gay is not integrated into people's mind sets and heteronormativity is still the dominant discourse that regulates people's understanding of gender relationships, Grindr users paradoxically become visible whilst still invisible. We come out to our friends and family but want them to keep our secret. We tell others like us that we are here through Grindr, because Grindr is about 'being among your peers. Socialising. Being part of your community' (Vernon, 2010) but we remain invisible to the rest. In order to strengthen his position on the context-specific relevance of gayness, Giovanni explained how the geographical-cultural differences between Italy and the UK – where he lives now – have shaped an important aspect of his identity as a gay man with regards to the aspect of 'coming out':

'I'd have to mark a big difference between where I'm from in Italy and the UK... in the UK I've never had any

problem. It's really like an advantage. And, of course, I'm also in the university bubble, in a sense, but I find that here being gay it's really not a thing. ...in Italy I wouldn't just say: "Okay, I'm gay" to anybody that I just met... I grew up also in a small town. So, if you say you're gay it means that you're telling... everyone. ...It's not just private; everybody knows each other... So, whenever you go... Of course, all my friends know, my family knows, but it's kind of more reserved and private thing. It's... because if you're telling anybody on the street everybody would know... That could be a problem in a cultural context which is not as, open-minded or as tolerant as... but here I haven't had any problem.' (Giovanni – interview)

The atmosphere of tolerance and open-mindedness that Giovanni attributes to the UK as compared to Italy is interesting in itself, but it becomes more interesting when I realise that the main difference he picks up on is that in the UK being gay is not a problem – it can even be an advantage – whilst in the small town he grew up in Italy, admitting he is gay would make his gay identity public and 'everybody would know'. In his mind, Italy demands selective disclosure or partial concealment in which, rather than a clear revelation, the scenario he describes is more of an invitation to others to participate in his secret. When I was listening to his account, I did not find this situation odd or peculiar; I could actually relate to his experience as I have found myself negotiating circumstances in which I assess whether or not I can say that I am gay. Can I tell this person? How would they react? This shared experience did not allow me to see at the moment of the interview the irony of the situation in which 'coming out' – one of the acts that has been regarded as paramount in someone's understanding of their gay identity – and its association with pride and liberation (T. E. Adams, 2010) was, in fact, concealed by a veil of privacy. The careful act of telling particular people he is

gay, rather than an act of airing it and making it public, seemed to be an invitation to others to share in the secret.

Later in the interview Giovanni described Italy as a very catholic country and cited that religious background as one of the main factors that does not make the country ideal to publicly admit he is gay. Of course, the broader cultural forces that dominate a country's views are important factors in a person's decision whether to be openly gay or not, however, he acknowledges that although Italy is not as tolerant or open-minded as the UK, it is not as intolerant as some other countries. The following quotation will let me expand on this concern of the scenario in which everyone knows and will also let me propose that the more 'open-minded' context in itself might not be the most important thing that motivates someone to 'come out'.

'It's still Italy... so, although it's a bit backwards in terms of gay mentality than the UK, it's not if I were from Tunisia, or Saudi Arabia... if I was from Russia or... if you probably are from one of those countries, then, I guess the mental cost to do it, or even the legal cost of doing it... it's just different... Unfortunately it's still a thing. But yeah, it's still... a western country... unfortunately still very catholic. But yeah, I'm also from the north, which is the most open-minded part of Italy...' (Giovanni – interview)

A sentence of death, or prison, or being thrown from the top of a building were comments we made during the interview as real life scenarios that gay people from other countries face as the possible consequences or 'costs' of being gay. These were mentioned as a way to clarify that even if not entirely welcoming to gay people, our respective home countries are not 'too bad'. This sense of not being 'too bad' allowed us to put into perspective how a more accepting environment can help us to come out more easily, since in the host culture, being gay does not represent a problem. This interpretation

can be open to further exploration though, as the context itself might not necessarily be what makes a difference but rather how the individual experiences the new context. In other words, it could be possible that for someone who has lived all their life in the UK, the UK might not represent the open-minded culture that Giovanni describes, but it represents it for him because his mobility affords him a new perspective to experience what he could not experience at home. In the following quotation he explains how the host environment actually allows him to disclose his gayness because of the newness of the environment and the possibility of a beginning that it represents.

‘And also, here it’s easier because... in a sense you start anew... So it’s not that people... If you have people that you’ve known for twenty years... and then you need to tell them that you are gay... it feels much more... although you can do it, but it feels more... it has a mental, a psychological cost to it... Like “okay, I need to tell them something that they might haven’t noticed, or I’m not sure if they might’ve noticed.” Whilst here... you start... it’s easier to just... you meet a person and then “okay I’m gay actually”. Like you just start from the beginning.’
(Giovanni – interview)

The psychological cost of Giovanni’s idea of coming out in Italy seems to represent an effort or a sacrifice but the benefits of the act are unclear. This act of disclosure also seems to represent an interruption or a fracture of a sense of continuity that has been stated over the years; there is a perceived change in how others would react to the knowledge of him being gay. From his account, it could be interpreted that being gay privately allows him to project a sense of continuity to the external world. Conversely, revealing he is gay to others who have known him throughout his life would imply a process of estrangement in which a new identity would need to be presented. Giovanni

faces the emotional strain of breaking the silence nobody has dared to break – even if they might have noticed – by addressing something they have not talked about in twenty years.

After further exploration of the psychological cost of avoiding discussing what was not meant to be known, Giovanni reflects in the next extract about how the consequences of his disclosure have not had the dramatic effect on his relationships with others or on how they perceive him that he imagined they would. The major effect of breaking the silence seems to be on himself.

‘In the end it never changes... all my friends and... people have been always very supportive and... So I’ve never had any... In the end nothing really changed. It was more a change for me, than for them. For them, it didn’t really matter...’ (Giovanni – interview)

There is an interplay between external and internal forces in Giovanni’s view. The support he has gotten from his family and friends has impacted on how he sees himself as a gay man, as a man or as a person. That external support allowed something within him to be appreciated differently. Whilst listening to him saying that it was a change for him, I found myself wondering whether that change had had a positive or a negative effect on him. When I asked him what exactly this change was, he revealed something that partially answered my question.

‘You need to reveal something that, in a social context that is not as open or as, yeah, open I would say, as you might be used to... It’s something you need to reveal as soon as you... I wouldn’t call it a weakness but, it’s something that might make you vulnerable... in a sense... I would say so... Right? It’s just that you need to reveal an intimate part of yourself. Which is not socially, it’s not necessarily socially accepted. But in the end nothing changes, so every time, with all my friends,

every time, when I told them they were like “oh, okay”, “it’s alright”. But nothing changes. It’s more for you, once you’re ready to do it for yourself then it’s always you. It’s never the other people.’ (Giovanni – interview)

Being gay emerged in his speech as a weakness – even if tentatively – when previously he had said it could even be considered an advantage, at least in the UK. This is an indication of the ongoing process of meaning-making in which Giovanni is engaged. Beyond the personal level, this apparent contradiction could show how being gay might not represent a problem within his inner circle of family and friends, but it might be different on a larger scale – in his community, city, or country – as he explains how it is not accepted by some sectors of society or by all societies. The unacceptance he mentions could be one aspect that explains the conception of being gay as a weakness. The aspect of vulnerability that he brings to the conversation reveals how the possibility of being harmed or attacked is attached to his views on gay identity. The accepting responses he has received when he has come out to his friends and family highlight the immense power that larger anti-gay groups have on individuals, even for those individuals who count on the support of their inner circles. Furthermore, this gives an impression of the potential harm to which individuals without these support networks could be subject. In this case, Giovanni did not seem to have experienced direct or overt forms of aggression against him because of his gayness; as he expressed, it has been acceptance that he has received and the perceived change that has come after the revelation has been always for him. This fact makes me think that those anti-gay groups and institutions have imprinted their oppressive discourse strongly enough in dominant social discourses such that even men like Giovanni – who is surrounded by people who accept him – are still cautious of how being gay can make them more susceptible to attacks,

discrimination, or believe that revealing this aspect of themselves can cause them certain loss.

6.2.2 It needs two people to be gay – with some guys you can create discourse

This sense of vulnerability poses questions about the circumstances in which it becomes worthwhile to come out. Understandably, if the cost of coming out seems higher than the benefits that it brings, Giovanni could have decided to maintain the secrecy. However, there seems to be an instance in which it becomes not only relevant, but necessary:

‘Until you’ve got a partner or you’re dating somebody, [being gay is] not necessarily something that you need to reveal... People don’t necessarily ask you “Do you like girls or guys? Or something else...?” It’s something that you don’t need to reveal straightaway, unless you want to. And it’s something that... when you start dating a person, then you’re like “well, I’m actually dating someone, and it’s a guy... I’m going out with this person and it’s a man”’. (Giovanni – interview)

Concealment, materialisation and disclosure are three concepts that I want to focus on in the above extract. The fact that people do not necessarily ask whether he likes girls or guys could be related to the heterosexual matrix (Butler 2006) that assumes heterosexuality is the norm that regulates all individuals (‘most people are heterosexual therefore I assume Giovanni is heterosexual’) but beyond the assumptions made by others, there is a noteworthy practice embedded in his narrative when he says ‘it’s something that you don’t need to reveal straightaway’. The fact that he does not *need* to reveal it might highlight an oppressive discourse that maintains gay people in obscurity and gayness as a concept – from an insider perspective – inaccessible to the public domain. This silencing process that Giovanni and other gay people have been a part of keeps the state of knowledge on gayness and its

peoples at a minimum and the provenance of the limited information that filtrates to mainstream discourses is dubious as it might not necessarily be coming from gay people themselves. In Giovanni's understanding of being gay there is an assumed sense of privacy that is practised by him and extended to his social circle in a way that the act of revealing his own gay identity comes as a personal decision. This suggests agency and a thoughtful resolution that is commonly understood as the personal process of coming out. Although widely acknowledged in research and in general culture, I explore some aspects of the often taken-for-granted process of coming out. For example, I want to think about the elements that might perpetuate the idea of gay identity as an aspect that does not need to be revealed or that is initially concealed.

As Giovanni explained at the beginning of the interview, he has multiple identities that come to the fore depending on the context. This understanding matches the Goffmanian concept of 'roles' that people play when they are performing specific positions in groups (Goffman, 1971). These roles are not unique to him but shared by other members of society in the form of social groups, organisations and categories (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Even if the idea of a uniform social gay identity would be difficult to sustain given the assorted subjective qualities that each gay man uses to define it in his own terms, there is a certain common understanding Giovanni relies upon in order to adhere to the so-called gay identity. This common understanding, to this point in his narrative, is synthesised by two main aspects: the intimate nature of a relationship with another gay man and the primal secrecy that confines that relationship. It is the secrecy – widely represented by the closet – that has provided one of the most distinctive and ostensibly essential symbols that underline gay identities (T. E. Adams, 2010). Whether Giovanni decides to be outspoken or reserved about his gay identity, the conception of gayness as an

experience that is lived privately, even if it is only during a transitional period, can be problematic because it anchors gay identity in a sense of archetypal secrecy. Whilst some individuals might challenge that secrecy through continuous coming out negotiations between themselves and their environments (T. E. Adams, 2011), others might not be able to do so.

The problematic quality of this strong association between 'coming out' and 'gay identity' relies on the fact that it also implies an equally strong association between 'staying in' and 'gay identity'. In this light, gay individuals will be metaphorically coming into existence from an inevitable position of hiding and clandestinity. As seen in Giovanni's narrative, telling someone that he is dating a man seems to be a smooth revelation but if observed closely, the apparent smoothness actually shows the circuitous route that he takes in order to prepare the conversation for the message that is going to come next. Rather than saying: 'the man I'm dating is...' or 'I've been dating the most stunning man and...' he needs to preface his announcement with a gender neutral phrasing 'I'm actually dating someone' and 'I'm going out with this person' before specifying that it is a man. The oblique approach to conveying the message suggests that the complex social apparatus that fosters heteronormativity also silences gay people in very subtle ways to the extent that even in the friendliest scenarios, with people he is intimate with, and for a person who is young, well-educated, and self-assured, Giovanni conceives his gay identity as something that might not be convenient to reveal. As he phrased it, being gay does not *need* to be revealed. This makes me question whether the discourse that presents the coming out of the closet as a personal process, a personal decision in which a gay identity does not need to be disclosed until the individual is ready to do so, could be a discourse that reinforces an overpowering idea that gay identities do not need to be

disclosed. As Tony Adams (2010) writes, because gay identities do not have visible traits that can make them visible, they need to be validated by ways of discourse.

6.2.3 With some guys you can have sex

Unless he is dating someone, Giovanni does not think it is necessary to reveal he is gay. From personal to relational, there becomes the process that allows Giovanni to bring his understanding of gayness to public life. As I discussed already, it is suggested that before meeting another man who reciprocates his feelings, Giovanni understands gay identity as an intra-personal process that does not require socialisation. However, when there is an actual relationship between him and a man dating him, his gayness occurs, as if it were socially born through a relationship with another gay man. Gay identity in this framework seems to transition from being just an unseen, private, internal notion to being an exposed, vocal, full-fledged person. This metaphor of gayness as a concept that transits from the private to the public self, from being a thought to being a body, a person, and from being personal to being relational, invites me to see the importance of verbalisation of someone's romantic relationship. Furthermore, it shows me the momentousness of dating a man in the construction of Giovanni's gay identity. It makes me think that, if he had not dated anybody, this identity could presumably remain silent in other social circles. To complicate further the conditions of the coming out, I bring to your attention that Giovanni is not talking about *any man* but a *certain man* who is worthwhile speaking about with his friends. As explained in the quotation below, there is a distinction between two 'categories' of men: 'boyfriend material' and 'sex material'. These were the classifications Giovanni used to identify the men he sees in online environments such as Grindr.

'If you just start talking with a person and – at least to me – it's very easy from the first few messages you can see what the other person is interested in and if you're interested in the person or if it's just, maybe a nice body and that's it... And you realise after three messages... that apart from sex there's not going to be anything... So, sometimes... in my head I have the sex part, which is like: "okay, I can meet this person just for a hook-up". And then there is like the relationship part and I would never meet for a hook-up first... If I see that this person is interesting... sometimes it's not that you click but, online you feel that it might be... the conversation goes on, flows very easily... "What do you do? What are you interested in? Blah, blah, blah. For how long have you been here? Blah, blah, blah." And then of course you ask more questions and it just flows... None of us would ask to meet just for sex, it just happens... "Shall we go for a coffee or a pint? What do you think?" ...and then you meet... whilst with a person that you're going to meet just for sex, it's generally just after four or five questions. "What's your role in bed?" Even before four or five questions... Well, if it's the first one I don't even answer... When the first question is: "Top or bottom?" I'm like: 'Oh God! At least say 'hi'!' ...you know, like a little bit of effort.' (Giovanni – interview)

The way in which Giovanni categorises the conversational dynamics he has experienced in online environments depicts a tension between having interest in the person and wanting sex with the person. 'Boyfriend material' and 'sex material' are two seemingly descriptive categories of the practices in online environments; practices that are tied to conversational patterns on the one hand and to physical appearances on the other. This tension is implicitly descriptive of gay identities through the roles that people play in people's relational lives: whilst an engaging conversation could open the possibilities for a relationship, if that relationship seems unlikely, a 'nice body' can be enough to trigger a sexual encounter. It is not clear whether a fluid and

engaging conversation would be enough to promote a relationship in the event that the accompanying physique is not 'a nice body'. This subdivision of identities extends to sexual roles that make reference to the position of penetrating or being penetrated in sexual activity and summarise the roles in further categories such as 'top' or 'bottom'. Because of the apparent restrictive qualities of these categories, I wonder whether there could be in this narrative a person who embodies all of them. Is there a man who is simultaneously sex material and boyfriend material, top and bottom? This restrictiveness seems to be addressed and resolved in a passage where Giovanni describes a brief encounter with a man in Germany.

'Sometimes it's not necessarily that the person is not interesting... as a boyfriend material, but they might be here just for the weekend... For example... Last year I spent a month in Germany. And I met this guy... he's actually a lecturer in a University... we met knowing that I was there only two more weeks... you cannot expect anything. We met because of sex... but... we went for a pint before. And we just clicked and then... for those two weeks we actually saw each other a few times. And now we're still in contact... but you know that nothing's gonna happen. Because we live in two different countries... But he's a very nice guy. And... we never thought that something more could happen. Because... it would make it impossible. To work it out... we said, "Just keep in contact"... I saw him once, actually, again... because I went to Germany for a conference... It was fine. It was fine... but, of course, there was no expectation... he's a good friend. Well, it's too much to say that he's a good friend, I mean he's a friend... We're in contact at least every two or three weeks: "How's it going? How's it going with your job?" And it's just, it's fine. But... It would be impossible to be in a relationship. We're far away... In that sense I'm very rational... we live two thousand kilometres from each

other. It would be really impossible to be... something more than a friend with benefits.' (Giovanni – interview)

The episode of the encounters in Germany illustrates an occasion in which the lived experience put categorisations to the test by making Giovanni realise that even though it would be unlikely to develop into a relationship, the episode developed into a friendship. His hesitance when he originally said that man was 'a good friend' poses questions about the social roles that pervade Giovanni's discourse on gayness, which aligns with the widely represented roles of men who are available for sex or available for a relationship. The possibility of friendship appears to become an alternative only once the other two possibilities have been tested and exhausted. This interpretation was later reinforced when Giovanni described his impression of relationships and sexual encounters in the gay world.

'I guess, with online... no, it's not online dating, probably the gay world it's so much easier to have sex than to have a relationship. Right? ...you might find it's quite easy, I mean, if you really have the urge and you don't mind who you're going to [have sex with] you can have sex every day. If you're not too picky. Whilst, really finding somebody who you really enjoy spending time with and sharing your time, and do things... I mean, you can do things in bed but... you can do activities together. And you can travel, you can just have meals together. Cook together. That's what a relationship is for, you know? And sex is part of it, it's an important part of it but it's not just it... And, I guess, yeah, when you start having a conversation with a nice person then you would probably meet without even knowing the sexual roles. Because it doesn't matter. At that time. And then you can later figure it...'

(Giovanni – interview)

Enjoying a conversation with a nice person seems to momentarily overrule the need-to-know sexual roles. The well-structured role identities Giovanni spoke about from the beginning became less important when

identities such as 'top' and 'bottom' give way to other roles that make him see the person beyond those roles and privilege the process of getting to know them. It is observed that the mutual interest in the conversation makes that conversation possible and desirable. However, an easiness and readiness for sex between gay men is perceived in the narration to the point that Giovanni relies, once again, on role identities when he mentions someone could have sexual encounters every day – presumably with a different man each time – and there would still be abundant opportunities to have sex. Not far from this view, artist Mischa Badasyan engaged in a project to have sexual encounters with 365 different men in the course of a year (Levesley, 2016). Badasyan's project echoes here Giovanni's view; a view that denotes the normalisation of gay men's readiness for sex. The way Giovanni considered – but retracted – his view on the online environments as factors that could facilitate that sexual availability, illustrates that he attributes sexual readiness to gay men themselves as an inherent quality and overlooks the ways in which these online environments are designed to promote certain practices and hinder others. It overlooks that Grindr in particular does not promote deep, meaningful conversations with people and, instead, it 'returns gay socialising to a system of secret signs and symbols' (Crooks, 2013) in which concise self-descriptions and a few telegraphic exchanges must suffice to get a sense of the person behind the screen. But the portrayal of gay men's readiness for sex did not appear with Grindr. An advertisement published in 1969 in a gay magazine showed a picture with the 'essentials' for the summer gay holidays: an unzipped suitcase containing nothing but small tubes of Vaseline, suggesting that it would be sex and not sightseeing that gay men wanted from their holidays (Hilderbrand, 2013). The fact that Giovanni appreciates the possibilities of a relationship seems to offer a counter-narrative to the hyper-

sexualisation of gay men but it also inadvertently offers a more nuanced perspective on the two restrictive options of being 'boyfriend material' and 'sex material'. I observe these nuances in how he does not restrict himself from the sexual part nor from the possibility of a relationship, even though he has adopted the discourse, but his struggles to identify his German episode as an episode which was not exclusively sex but not exactly a relationship nor a conventional friendship. This example tells me that his narrative is heavily influenced by available discourses that over-simplify the relationships of gay men to the point that, even if he tries to stretch the limits of those categories and play with the relationships in his own way, Giovanni struggles to define gayness in his own terms, as you will see in this final passage:

'What does 'being gay' mean exactly to me? Pfff! That's a difficult question. Well... First of all I have to say, that most things in our world are socially constructed... I worked in Thailand for six months. And [there]... sexuality is conceived in a completely different way... Before they even came into contact with western culture there was not even a term for 'being gay'... if you live in a place like this – and you have a lot of Thai friends – then you realise: "...being homosexual is really a social construct". Of course there is some biological things, but when you come into contact with these other ways of seeing things... You realise that... your previous idea of being gay is... a cultural idea... If I remember the way homosexuality is discussed now in 2016 compared with what was discussed when I was a child, it's a completely different thing. So... What does 'being gay' mean exactly to me...? Again... It's... Well... It's very relativist... it's very difficult to answer... That's something that... I would need to think about it... Probably also the fact that I am a social scientist... I'm more like: "Yeah, socially constructed"... this kind of postmodern idea... "it's just contingent"... Like the way you think about... not just sexuality... a lot of things that we think we are. Yeah... But I avoided to answer!' (Giovanni – interview)

6.3 *Gustav – I'm a married man, I have no plans, no real, concrete plans to leave my wife and find a man*

Formally dressed, carrying a small black briefcase that makes him look like an ambassador, with a firm handshake and a polite but straightforward approach, Gustav greets me at the train station. I have the opportunity to establish a pleasant rapport with him whilst walking to the university room where the interview takes place. I find him to be a confident man who tells me a well-structured story for which he has some elaborate interpretations. As you will read, this is a story of a child who grew up lacking – and suffering from the lack of – his father; and a story of a child who was emotionally wounded by his probably also wounded mother. This is also a story of a man who lacked self-confidence throughout his teenage years and a young adult, and who was bullied by his colleagues in his first job. This is also a story of a man who has struggled and is still struggling to come to terms with being – or not being – gay because he is not sure what 'being gay' actually means. This is a life story Gustav has perhaps told a few times before – if only to himself – so I have the feeling he was prepared for a chronological and neat narration of life episodes. However, as his steady rhythm and fluent speech are interrupted when he starts talking about the meanings of his story, it seems he was not prepared to explore some of the implications behind his narrative.

It became apparent that I was also unprepared for some aspects of the interview. I was not prepared to listen to him saying: *'I have had relationships – sexual relationships – with men and with women, should I speak about them both? Or should I just speak about the men's part?'* I answered with a hesitant: *'I think... about both...'* and, for a moment, I experienced the awareness some people probably experience when a man they assumed to be straight tells them that he has also had sexual relationships with men. Although he never shared

stories of actual sexual relationships with women he told me that sometimes he fantasises about group sex with both men and women: *'Sometimes it's just a man fucking me in all places. Or giving him a blow job or whatever. And sometimes it's a woman'*. And he would tell me that when he fantasises with a woman he actually feels 'more of a man'. Upon his disclosures, I mentally revisited the inclusion criteria for participants in my study and tried to double-check if the call for participants specified anything about sexual relationships or fantasies with women. At the same time I asked myself why I was promptly weighing the sexual aspects up against the meanings he attached to them instead of just listening to him. It bothered me that I felt uneasy about his relationships with women when I consciously knew it could be captivating and eye-opening to listen to his story. That was the very beginning of an interview through which he and I learned about the challenging and ever-changing nature of what being gay means to this man and to me.

Throughout this chapter I analyse the life story of Gustav, a man who recognised through a dream of his early childhood that he fantasised about *'males, males, males'*. This dream was a part of an ongoing interest in men that would transform into exploration, into attempts during his teenage years to go to a gay club in his native Malta. Then I will include a passage that illustrates the materialisation of his fantasies during his university years, when he attended a conference in Belgium and met a guy with whom he had his first sexual encounter. Although consensual, the sexual relationship was an act of violence that would contribute to a perception of gayness as dangerous and troublesome. That first encounter portrays a young man who frees the desire that consumes him. In that scene, Gustav tries to satisfy an urge that eventually returns, stronger than ever, leaving him with painful memories. I will follow him to his adult years, when he gets married to his wife and I will be a

narrative witness of how he has experienced other encounters with men in parallel to his family life. I will describe how, in the first instance, these encounters with men have transformed his desires into relentless longings that demand to be gratified but he commits to suppressing them. Overall, by following Gustav's life story, this chapter offers a view on resistance and compliance, to Self or society, or perhaps to both. By the end of the text, I will use Pierre Bourdieu's (1998) 'acts of resistance', Michael Bronski's (2000) 'the pleasure principle', and Raewyn Connell's (2000) 'the men and the boys' to connect this personal narrative with aspects of power executed by dominant discourses that construct heterosexuality and gayness.

6.3.1 Like a cat who was declawed

Whilst I review the interview transcript I observe an orderly arrangement in his narrative, a clear context of his life circumstances, strong impressions of himself and the people who have been important in his life, a detailed description of the happenings and the meanings associated with those happenings. Seeing the interview transcript reminded me of my impression that being with him in the interview room was like being taken for a well-organised tour of the highlights of his life.

'In my childhood... I was overprotected... my parents are divorced, I did not know my father so I was one of those boys who would have no paternal influence... That... contributed a lot, to the sexual confusion I was going to experience in later life. But... apart from the fact that my mother was very domineering... she also had this thing about speaking about my father – against my father – so that whatever I did, even if I stack up for myself: "It's like your father!" So I became like a cat who was declawed. I had nothing to defend myself because... as I grew up, I didn't know how to stick up for myself. I had been so badly discouraged and so badly hurt, my boyhood was... a bit of a mess.' (Gustav – interview)

'Mess' and 'confusion' are two words that I want to highlight from the above complex narrative. I particularly select these two because they become important settings in Gustav's narrative world. He used them throughout his narrative, either directly or implicitly, to explain to me and to himself that his sexual desires are somehow linked to his parents' divorce and to his father's absence. It will become apparent throughout his narration that it is precisely 'mess' and 'confusion' that he has tried to tackle and resolve. One way in which he has tackled these anxieties is by chronologically organising a narrative that connects happenings and episodes. Those connections, once made, provide him with coherent causality that helps him understand and justify the decisions he has made. One of these decisions, for example, is his determination to honour the commitment he made when he married his wife to stay with her come what may. As it will be seen later in this chapter, honouring this commitment has contributed to alleviating the mess of what he calls his 'sexual confusion'.

From the above quotation I also want to bring to the reader's attention that even though his mother and father feature extensively in Gustav's story, they are not presented as visible characters in the plot but as offstage disembodied figures. His father, for example, was always physically absent from the family life but was nonetheless brought in by Gustav's mother in the form of criticism. It will become apparent for you that Gustav's father has no voice for himself and no physical presence that would allow us to gain an impression of him, of who he was, what he did, or what he used to say. It also seems that his only appearances in the narrative would be unsettling ones: when little Gustav would attempt something unsuccessfully, a worn, simplified, and obscure memory of his father would come across through his mother's voice to emphasise that there was an attempt that had been

unfulfilled. The phrase 'it's like your father' would be so powerful that Gustav has worked hard to define himself against the indelible imprint of a father who leaves their children behind. And like a defiant act against his mother's premonition of imminent becoming, he actively constructed himself as a paternal figure; one that is actually present for his children and for other young people he has met over the years. This phrase has remained with him to adulthood as it still colours his narrative in a way that, even in his 40's he uses it to define his own identity as a father who does not abandon his children. But before talking about his 40's, he talks about the teenager who did not feel accepted by his peers as part of the community of boys, contributing to his sexual confusion.

'If I look back at my adolescent years... when you actually form your own sexual identity, even there, there was some sort of confusion. But all I can say is that I identify as male and I've remained proud of my male identity throughout my life. I never went through the confusion that some people go through: "Am I man? Am I woman?" That never happened to me. I've always been proud I'm a man. However, I noticed, when I was 12 years old, 12 or 13, sort of prior to the pubescent stage or quite approaching it, I used to dream a lot about boys. But it could be... because... I was feeling so much the odd one out at school, it could be that my sort of attraction to boys, wasn't actually a sexual attraction to boys. It was a desire to be one of the crowd... For instance, I used to dream... that we would be kidnapped and we would go to this island and there would be only boys. But there were not sexual, erotic dreams, there would be of being one of the crowd... where I would be welcome to the community of men.' (Gustav – interview)

The reiterated expression of pride in being a man seems to be challenged by his dreams of boys; he has always been proud of being a man, however, as if it contradicted what was just said. His oneiric imagery seemed

to be incompatible with his idea of manhood. His confidently expressed pride contrasts with the unknown feelings that his attraction to boys provoked in him. Whilst his identification as a man is spelled out with certainty and a sense of having solid foundations, the attraction to boys is expressed tentatively and he hints at a certain sexual attraction, although it is almost immediately taken back. The fact that he clarifies twice the non-sexual non-erotic nature of his dreams can invite multiple interpretations, one of them, as he provides it already, is associated with the wish to be part of the group of boys, which makes sense in the context he described in the interview of not feeling integrated at school. Associated with this interpretation, is the idea that Gustav seems to consider a narrative of sexual development when he says that it is in the adolescent years when he – the adult – thinks he was forming what he calls his sexual identity.

The notion of a gay identity that develops in adolescence and becomes a fixed, immobile identity proved to be an underlying concern for him. Later in the interview he explored the idea of sexual fluidity but he seems to find an obstacle for that fluidity in this early narration, because the notion of forming one's identity in the teenage years reappears and makes him question whether he should commit to a 'stable' identity now that he is in his 40's. Building upon this narrative that equates the desire for men with sexual confusion, I want to bring to your attention how, from an early age, Gustav had taken possession of a discourse that sees desire for men as problematic: because he is a man, he should not desire men. This view connects with what Connell (2000) describes as a gender order that relies on a large structure of relationships, and regimes, and institutions to spread dominant views of masculinities and makes individuals observant of these sets of rules. This gender order is clear in

Gustav's view of the exploration of desire as an equivalent of sexual confusion but it will become even clearer when he speaks about being a married man.

As a supplementary comment on this quotation, I ask you to remember the oneiric image of the island where the boys were left after being kidnapped; a scene that can be used as a resemblance of the isolation and detachment that his desire implied for him. In order to be welcomed to the community of boys, to be part of the crowd, he had to be taken to an island. Was an island the only place where the desire for men could be explored? Who was the person that took them there? Who were the other boys? It is an intriguing avenue that I will also explore later in this chapter because it is better understood in combination with other images of similar qualities that he depicts throughout the interview. Now I continue into his university years and his sexual awakening, where he would connect his studies with a first attempt to resolve aspects of his sexual interests.

'When I was in university, and I had done this foundation course... my life started to change. I started to know more what I wanted of myself –sexually– ...You might also say: "What does it have to do the academic with the sexual part?" ...At university I was sort of now, realising: "Listen, there are different ways of looking at things, it's not just this one way" ... I went to this course on personal skills. And I said: "Yes, this is what I want to do for the rest of my life". And in fact it is what I have done... interpersonal skills... how to communicate, how to be assertive... how to help people being better than they are... It was sort of my introduction to social work... And I never looked back.' (Gustav – interview)

Gustav introduces the university setting as a life-changing event. Joining university meant joining an institution where there was scope for thinking differently and for the discovery of unfamiliar possibilities. It marked a turning point in his life, because when speaking of university he introduces

for the first time in the interview the idea of his sexual desires not being reprehensible but being acceptable. *'There are different ways of looking at things'*: I see that phrase as a paramount narrative device that he has used to understand his desires differently. As it will be observed, one of the main consequences of becoming a member of the academic world is that he did not have to change his desires; what he has done instead is changing – or trying to change – the way he thinks about his desires. Thus, communication and assertiveness are key aspects to keep in mind, as it seems that his understanding of sexual desires come in direct relation to his ability to express assertively what he wanted. The quotation provides an example of where, following his newly discovered capacity to think differently and to express his wishes, he decided to explore a gay bar and also explore sex with a man whilst doing an academic trip.

'Sexually, all of a sudden I became sexually alive... but... it was a bit of a mess. Not a bit of a mess, a lot of a mess. So, my first sexual encounter was with a man. I had gone to this seminar in Brussels... and I went to this gay bar... I think it was a state of madness. Because I had already tried in Malta but in Malta I was shy... I went to the door but I never went in... I never had the courage... Then, I was in Brussels, so I got chatting to this taxi driver, was a young guy. And told him: "take me to a gay bar". And he did...' (Gustav – interview)

This passage illustrates the convergence of forces playing a part in Gustav's narrated life. His wish to explore spaces where he could meet other men whose desires were similar to his contrasted with restrictive and worrisome conceptions of gay spaces and gay people. It is seen in the narrative that in order to explore he needed to overcome shyness, he needed to be courageous, and he needed to gain confidence. These required abilities suggest that his understanding of sexual encounters between men were

conceived as frightening experiences that could not be endured without adequate preparation or without the adequate qualities: confidence, courage, and determination. This can be observed in the implicit internal process of developing strength to tolerate the mess and to deal with the madness, just in order to be able to cross the threshold of the gay bar. The distance and anonymity that Brussels provided him were decisive aspects that allowed him to explore in the flesh what in Malta he had only imagined. The descriptors he uses to convey his state at the time – mess and madness – impregnate his narrative with a feeling of fear and sense of chaos that, whilst in his home country were enough to suppress his desire, in a foreign country his fear was not only unable to suppress it anymore but it actually became the motor of his sexual desire. His sexual desire made him alive. However, it was not a winsome coming to life but one that seemed monstrous.

Before that anecdote, Gustav had not considered integrating gayness into his sense of self but, as seen in the quotation below, the passage from imagination to actual experimentation made an identity as a gay man come briefly to the surface. When I asked what was the difference between Malta and Brussels that allowed him to enter the gay bar, he responded that it was the anonymity that would provide a safe space to examine whether his new way of thinking was as he had imagined it to be.

[In Brussels] nobody knows me. I was ashamed of myself, of my gay identity. Today Malta is a bit different than perhaps it was in my young youth. But don't forget... I didn't have many friends. It was basically what I had learnt at home. This is why I am linking university to my sexuality... from my closed person, to my opening... It gave me confidence to say: "I believe enough in myself to go into a gay bar". And I got chatting to this guy... And I tried to kiss him. He didn't kiss me... We were speaking in French. So, the language

was a bit limited, because I did know some French but I don't know a lot of French. But enough to understand that we are going to go to a room. That we wanted to go to a room. And get fucked. And that's exactly what we did. We went to a room and we fucked. In a hotel... We went, again, in a taxi, and went to the hotel. I mean, he did all the talking to the receptionist and that, and then we entered in the room, I got undressed, he got undressed, and we started to fuck...' (Gustav – interview)

In this particular extract I ask you to focus on three aspects that have direct impact on how he understands the concept 'gay'. The first aspect is the previously unspoken feelings surrounding gayness, which came to the fore in the form of shame. The second aspect is the kiss he wanted but did not get from the guy he met at the bar. The third aspect is the sexual experience he wanted and he, indeed, did get. I consider it important to focus on the kiss and the sexual encounter because they represented – and still represent – two pillars upon which he has built his idea of what is it to be 'properly gay'; a concept we will address shortly. The shame is important because it seemed to be one of the main obstacles to him being more compassionate with himself and more accepting of his feelings and desires.

The first and only time in the whole interview that Gustav appropriated a gay identity by saying 'my gay identity', was an act of joining a gay collective. This appropriation of the term was promoted by the sexual act and the shame that surrounded it gave it a quality that remained with him for years. The fact that he had experienced sexual desire before but had not assumed himself as gay suggests to me that the passage of sexual initiation was crucial in his understanding of what being a gay man means. With no friends to support him, he went through the exploration of the gay bar alone and then, in an ironic analogy of the confidence gained at university thanks to

his communication skills, the encounter with that man proved to be difficult precisely in the communication arena due to language limitations. Gustav was exploring for the very first time a gay space, in a foreign country, in a language he found difficult to use. The experience depicts an impersonal act that adds a sense of isolation to the shame and the fear. Then, the specification of his attempt to kiss the guy and the rejection received is intriguing; he does not explain how it affected him but the very act of mentioning it indicates it was significant. It will be revealed that the meaning of the kiss relates to emotional intimacy, which in the above passage of the agitated encounter was unachieved, as suggested by the individuality of their actions.

The rapid staccato in Gustav's speech, still resembled in the transcript, exposes the frenzied chain of happenings and gives the impression of a thrill of eagerness. Gustav tried to kiss him. The guy did not kiss him. They went to a room. They entered the room. One gets undressed. The other gets undressed. They fuck. The passage comes across as a cascade of events; small units of actions that project the episode as stills in which one does something, the other does something, one attempts something, the other rejects, one proposes, the other follows. Two men separated by each other's individuality, the individuality and self-sufficiency of the *I* – *I* tried to kiss him, *he* did not kiss me; *I* got undressed, *he* got undressed – and two men united in the *we* by the pursuit of the apparently common objective of the sexual encounter – *we* wanted to go to a room; *we* entered the room; *we* started to fuck. Actions of a mostly synchronized dance that finishes once the *I* is self-sufficient again. As the story continues, it seems clear that it was pleasure that Gustav was expecting from the encounter but he did not get it.

'...looking back, it was very violent. I think it was the wrong way to approach the whole thing. If I had to

advice anybody, I wouldn't tell them to do it. One. I had a very big scare of HIV. And that scare has remained with me now. But, now my scare was actually quite realistic. Once we fucked... Well, he fucked me. I couldn't fuck him because I was too nervous. My dick didn't go up. But he fucked me and he fucked me hard. And I told him: "Fuck me, fuck me, fuck me!" "Fuck, fuck!" But I don't know why! Because he actually was hurting me. It was an unpleasant experience, actually. But I wanted to try and see that pleasure that people speak about. I knew that, somehow, there must've been some pleasure in the end... But it never came... So this actually put me backwards... not forwards. Because it's a different relationship, than if I meet the guy and fall in love and kiss him...' (Gustav – interview)

At the time of the encounter, the eagerness, the rush, and the expectation of discovering 'the pleasure people speak about' were stronger than the violence and the hurt. Stronger than his big concern about HIV. His big scare of HIV, mentioned also in other parts of the interview, condenses a number of cultural discourses which have thoroughly associated the virus with gay men, as if one could not exist without the other. Such association has shaped the way in which Gustav conceived sexual relationships between men and lingers in his stories in a recurrent way. From this encounter in Brussels he did not get HIV but he got pubic lice, which made him visit for the very first time a sexual health clinic, leaving a near-to-indelible impression on him. This nearly ever-present scare may not be uncommon for men who have sex with men, as HIV has been paramount in the history of human sexuality, portrayed with specific notoriety in gay men's sexuality. What is interesting in Gustav's narrative is that the big scare is alleviated if the sexual encounter makes room for emotional intimacy and if he gets to know the person with whom he is having sex. The comparison between the hypothetical relationship in which he 'meets the guy and falls in love and kiss him' and the factual

relationship he got involved in whilst in Brussels, which was aloof and impersonal, makes an apparent love-sex dichotomy in which sex is dangerous and love is protective. The man Gustav met was willing to engage in anal penetration but unwilling to engage in a mouth-to-mouth kiss, arguably in alignment with powerful social discourses that reduce sexual activity between men to an act happening between the penis and the anus. This account coincides with several stories of discovery (Cant, 2008; Carrillo & Fontdevila, 2011) in which men focus their energy and attention in the anal penetration but seem unprepared for kisses.

6.3.2 When a kiss is an act of resistance

In the development of his narrative, Gustav tried the kisses first and, after that proposal was rejected, he did what was next on his thoughts: 'fucking'. The reasons for that succession of possibilities, from kisses to 'fucking', from emotional intimacy to sexual activity are unexplained in Gustav's narrative. They seem as taken for granted, portrayed as the only options, as if in the impossibility of finding intimacy, the only option left was sex. As if, in order to learn about his desire and his identity, the only path left was through the sexualisation of the body. It is interesting that Gustav had not experienced gay sexual encounters before and he did not have friends who shared his desire and questions but yet was clearly aware of the complementarity of the penis and the anus. The fact that he was expecting it, longing for it, and expecting to get 'that pleasure that people speak about' shows that, even in its unspoken and hardly visible qualities, gay identity is to the exclusion of everything else known through that complementarity of the penis and the anus. It is a seemingly available master narrative that is hardly questioned by gay men. How do we connect with other gay men if not through anal penetration?

Having said that, I also consider it important to observe that even if the encounter did not lead to emotional intimacy, the fact that Gustav did want emotional intimacy, shows that he intuitively tried to resist that master narrative and, in that resistance, he was making room for love, intimacy, and tenderness. This possibility of love, intimacy, and tenderness seems to be one of the fantasies that makes Gustav consider his life differently, regardless of shame or fear. These signs of resilience, of willingness to embrace his desires, seem to appear in relation to a loving partner but also in relation to a group. As shown in the next quotation, his exploration of the gay scene and the idea of getting to know people who identify themselves as gay was a prominent aspect of his life. He describes the thought of joining a group in which other self-identified LGBT people gathered. As a way to get involved in this exploration of the self, Gustav showed signs of longing for a community and he thought of finding it in the space that a university in a faraway island provided.

'I had got this book from this university of Ireland; University of Cork. To study for a master's degree, and I was thinking of doing a master's degree in Ireland. And one of the reasons that were attractive to me was, not the university, never mind the university, what attracted to me was that it had an LGBTI group... So I said: "If I go to do my master's degree in Ireland I can join the LGBTI group". But I didn't because then, I said the money issues, and other issues. But I didn't have security, I didn't have that belief in myself, you know: "I can go there and make it, and be happy". I just didn't. I depended a lot on Malta, on my family. On what I was used to. And, the Gustav who just leaves everything and comes to England and says: "Better hell it's gonna work out!" That was not the Gustav of 20 years ago.' (Gustav – interview)

To his wish of kissing a guy as a representation of the possibility of a loving relationship, was added the idea of joining an LGBTI group, which could be seen as a representation of being part of something broader, a possibility of having a place where he could feel happy. I interpret these two longings – the kiss and the LGBTI group – as complementary parts of the inter-relational qualities of gay identity. It is evident that the desires and the meanings associated with those desires are experienced by the individual, however the individual derives those meanings from their relationships with others. In this case, from the kiss with a man he would get the loving aspect in coupledness and from the LGBTI group he would be part of a collective that would mean belonging and, tentatively, happiness. The idea of happiness associated with joining the LGBTI group shows that in spite of the shame and fear, Gustav aimed to succeed in living a life in which being gay could have positive connotations, even if implicitly being gay meant leaving his country and his family. It is clear in his narrative that the possibility of a life in which he could be gay was constructed on the impossibility of staying in his country and staying with his family. He constructed an idea of a gay life through leaving what he knew and starting in a different place, with different people. Since the membership of a group and the associated sense of belonging, the support of friends, family, and partner were aspects of his life that were unfulfilled, the happy scenario Gustav strived to construct proved to be unlikely because he lacked the supportive elements associated with perceived happiness. In this individual attempt to marry happiness and gayness it is observed that there was, again, a personal effort to construct a counter-narrative of an affirmative gay identity in spite of the social scenario that made such a task look improbable.

Instead of pursuing the improbable task, he decided to get married to the woman he was introduced to by a couple of friends. This decision did not require him to fight the larger powerful structure of heteronormative values, nor did it require him to go against the gender order that puts romantic heterosexual love as the foundation of marriage and family (Raewyn Connell, 2000). His marriage has been, from the beginning, a resource that he has relied upon in order to construct an identity that provides him with a stabilising narrative. His marriage is one of the most prominent elements in his life and he actually uses his civil status as a narrative feature in order to understand himself privately and to portray himself socially. He does not identify himself as heterosexual, nor gay, nor even pansexual, as one of his friends invited him to consider. In his narrative, those terms are inadequate to express how he feels and instead of using those labels, he simply says he is married. Being married seems to put on hold any inquiries about labelling by privileging the commitment he has made to his wife and children and any attempt to explore further seems futile.

'I'm married. I have children... It's no longer: "I'm inhibited because I'm scared because people won't like me." In fact I'm not scared of that at all. That people won't like me. Today I know it's quite acceptable, you can be gay and you can be happy... It's not only the issue that I'm married but it's also the issue that I'm the father of two children. If I wasn't married... I might even consider, perhaps, leaving my wife... But, if it was just me and her it's one thing. But now it's me, her, and the kids; which is different. And even... Although I'm speaking like this: "Leaving my wife" I say it but I don't really mean it... I can't really imagine myself leaving my wife... in one level I suppose it's there but... If you go deep down in Gustav, no, I love my wife. And I'm a family person, actually. And, one mustn't forget that I didn't have a family when I grew up... you can't imagine

how much I want to give that love to my children... So, there are all these issues which go in the picture, it's not just this question a question that... today I can leave. I don't even think I can. Now, you might tell me: "But Gustav, are you trapped?" When I'm hypersexualised, that's how I feel. When I'm fantasising a lot about men, etcetera, etcetera, I feel very trapped.' (Gustav – interview)

Being married becomes a constraint to the point he says he feels 'trapped' but at the same time it protects him from the fear and shame that he felt in the past and that may partly remain in him. The competing conceptualisation of his marriage being restricting and yet protective is paralleled by the idea of being gay as a hope for happiness that is simultaneously dangerous. The ambiguous narrative seems to say that it is his desire for men that makes him feel trapped – a menace to his stability – but it also seems to say it is the marriage itself that corners him. His status of 'married man' is associated with a discourse of man-woman relationship surrounded by the idea of being in the company of his family, a loving environment in which he perceives himself as an altruist through giving love. Meanwhile, that narrative also suggests that gayness is incompatible with the concept 'family' and implicitly constructs gayness as individualist because, if embraced, it would be centred on himself with little consideration of others. This incompatibility of gayness and family aligns with Connell's (2000) explanation of how the gender order allows men to even have bland straightforward sex with each other but it treats sex as an adventure from which involvement beyond sex can hardly emerge. This conception of gayness seems to favour Gustav's current situation as a man married to a woman and invites him to remain in that position.

When he speaks about feeling 'hypersexualised' he refers to this urge or need to have sexual contact with men, and although his phrasing would superficially imply that when it comes to men he is exclusively interested in them on a sexual level, that is not the case. In his life story, he narrated several episodes of longing for intimacy and love and yet, when he refers to his desire for men, he says it is his hyper-sexualisation. To argue against the myths of our time, Bourdieu (1998) suggests in his 'acts of resistance' that there is a process of inculcation in which a narrative is spread through different media until it creates a discourse that has social force and obtains belief. In this case, the narrative that is widespread is the hyper-sexualisation of gay men, to the point that, even if Gustav might have wanted different things from a relationship with a man, it is the sexual aspect that he has managed to articulate. This might be tied to the very existence of gay identity in the public knowledge, as the *sexual* in the term *homosexual* is a cultural inheritance that gay men got as part of the concept that interpellates us; the concept *homosexual* that brought us into existence, first and foremost, as sexual beings. Although Gustav talks about the social acceptance that gay people enjoy nowadays – and it seems to contribute to his own personal acceptance of the idea of being gay at least in his fantasy – his language describes a gay identity shaped only by the sexual aspects of it. When I detected this apparent contradiction between what he had described previously and the hyper-sexualisation he was verbalising, I asked him to expand on that aspect. In the crossroads of a concept of gayness that puts the sexual and the emotional in tension, he allowed himself to play with the idea of finishing the commitment that makes him feel trapped but safe. Paradoxically, it is that feeling of being trapped that has allowed him a year-long reflection about what it means to be gay.

'...what I understand by gay it's not just the sexual encounters, it's that you're in a steady relationship, you live together, you love one another. You live for each other. You share together. That sort of gay relationship. I mean, that's what would be the gay relationship I might aspire to. I don't aspire to go to a gay man and just fuck. It's just a mistake.' (Gustav – interview)

In his description of what being gay means, I observe that Gustav engages in ambiguous flirtation with the idea of being in a relationship with a man. He describes a gay relationship based on togetherness, mutual love, and stability. Through his description, he tentatively admits he wishes for a steady relationship with a man. However, the ambiguity lies in the overwhelming importance he puts on the relationship itself. In order to unravel this comment, I need to emphasise that Gustav has talked about gay feelings, gay desires, gay temptations, and other forms of attributes that explain his emotional and sexual attraction towards men. He has – through these feelings, desires, and temptations – formed what he calls 'a disposition' or an inclination towards loving and desiring men. This disposition is insufficient for him to say he is gay because, as the above quotation shows, a loving relationship would define what a gay identity is. In his understanding, the gay disposition balances with a gay relationship and together form the two main components that define someone's gay identity. It is noteworthy that although he talks about both components, he concludes that the hypothetical relationship would be the determining component of a gay identity. It is noteworthy because that type of relationship is precisely the one he has with his wife: a steady relationship where they love one another. The way Gustav speaks about relationships contains an undeclared statement in which he wants to be viewed through the lens of his commitment and not through his feelings for men. This is reinforced by the deliberate depiction of the family he did not have when he was a child

but was able to construct as an adult. In trying to form that family he suppressed his desire and, as it will be seen in the quotation below, in a symbolic act of farewell to an identity he used only briefly, he engaged in sexual activity with his long-term friend, almost in a ritual passage just before getting married.

'I did make some attempts at having sort of, a gay relationship. One of them was my best friend... I sucked his dick and he sucked my dick. I wasn't scared of STI's now. But we didn't really do very much. It was just kissing and sucking. There was no fucking involved... I wasn't scared because he was a friend and I knew him... if you know the person well, and the person tells you: "Listen, I haven't been with anybody" Or: "I've tested and I did the test and..." It's okay, you know? You know the person is okay. If you know the person or you don't trust him... For us, didn't mean much. It wasn't really, you know: "He's my boyfriend, I'm his boyfriend, we're holding hands, we're going out, we're living together." It's not that sort of relationship. It was this sort of exploration... It was more on the level of discovery... Anyway... Today I'm married and he is married. He has a child, he has a boy and I have two [children]... He's happily married...' (Gustav – interview)

Knowing each other and trusting each other, the two men sucked and kissed each other. Being married – not to each other – they have kept the secret of their exploration, of their discovery, for some time. Although it is unclear what they discovered, I observe in this narrative an encounter between two men who were in similar positions in their exploration of the gay life; sensing the terrain but not ready or sure enough to engage in that life. Gustav at least believed in the possibility of a life together and seemed to be interested in a relationship, as he overtly said he made some attempts but his now best friend did not hold the same beliefs. Not being able to form a relationship with him, Gustav decided to bring him closer to him by making him the best man at his wedding, symbolising his closeness and being witness of the union that meant

the decision to form a family. His mention of STI's appears again but this time the fear is alleviated by the intimacy he had with him. It is observed how the discourse of STI's could be attached to the unknown and to a collective gay identity that remains as a strange other. Once the gay identity is personified by someone close, otherness transforms into familiarity. Familiarity, with its capacity to make inner fears disappear, allowed him to explore with his friend.

What the quotation shows as well is that the relationship with his friend was downplayed, despite it involving sexual activity, despite there already being an aspect of intimacy in it, and despite it being the moment when Gustav eventually got longed-for kisses. The encounter 'didn't mean much', Gustav says, perhaps because for them, on a personal level, it was only a sexual exploration. Perhaps on a macro level 'there was no fucking involved' and, 'it didn't mean much' because how do gay men connect if not through anal penetration? That it did not mean much can be challenged or at least questioned. The encounter with his best friend and best man possibly meant 'a lot' but not necessarily the things that match up to what the master narrative of the hypersexualised gay men says these encounters mean. Whilst marrying a woman meant the promise of a family and acceptance in the wider society, being gay would mean renouncing the family he desired and fighting for acceptance in the society he wanted to be part of. The relationship with his best friend actually meant the loss of things that he was not willing to lose. Could it be as well that heterosexual hegemony has influenced our narratives to believe that sexual relationships between men do not mean much?

'Had I been younger, and had I been like I am now, I would've been gay. Had I been able to think and talk like I am talking today... twenty years ago, I would've been gay. But I was not able to do this... So, my relationship with my wife... Wrongly, I told her about my thingy with

my best friend... I confessed, because I was scared I had HIV. Because I had this very, very, very bad cold. Probably was the bloody flu. But I never had the flu before, or this type of flu. And it just wouldn't leave. So, after four weeks I broke down. I said: "This must be HIV". And, of course, it wasn't HIV... So, that sent our sexual relationships backwards, and we've never had sex since then.' (Gustav – interview)

Complementing what has been said before, the fear of HIV is imprinted in Gustav's understanding of sexual relationships between men. His first sexual experience and the pubic lice that came from it contributed to the negative connotations he had already associated with being gay. Thus, the secrecy, the STI's, the fear, and the damage that his marriage suffered after the confession have contributed to construct a concept of gayness that is far from positive. 'I'm not properly gay'; 'if I were completely gay'; 'I have gay fantasies'; 'I have gay feelings'; or 'I have gay temptations': these are phrases Gustav used to distance himself from an identity that would be overwhelming. Through his words he creates a narrative in which being part of a steady couple is the determining factor and confirm the ideal of what being gay implies, and by extension, he describes himself through his marriage.

6.3.3 I chose to have a family

In a battle of competing narratives, the following quotation allows us to observe how Gustav sees his marriage as an anchor that moors him to a safe place, where 'safe' means being away from his desire to be with a man. In contrast, he sees gayness as 'the pleasure principle', as described by Michael Bronski (2000): a sexuality that is divorced from reproduction and offers a critique of monogamous marriage, restrictive gender roles, and nuclear family; some of the things that Gustav values most. As with many battles, there seems to be a winner when, through his self-description 'I'm a married

man', he avoids describing himself in terms of his attraction and seems to wish his gay desires to vanish.

'I have chosen. I chose to have a family. Nobody told me: "You must have a family". In fact if you tell me: "Gustav, if you had, if the magic fairy came with the magic wand, what would you wish?" I would wish that the gay thoughts go away and leave me in peace. And I'd stay with my family. But I know they won't. I know that tonight –although I'm now speaking like this: "I'm not going to have gay thoughts"– tonight when I'm masturbating, by myself... But again, I have no problem with that, ironically enough. I would have problem if I actually meet someone and I kiss him and we fuck. Then I would have a problem.' (Gustav – interview)

How did his dreams of going to Ireland, joining the LGBTI group, and being happy transform into monster-like thoughts that do not leave him in peace? How did his erotic dreams and romantic longings transform into dark persecutory presences? To what extent has Gustav chosen the life he has lived? His narrative suggests autonomy and agency in his decisions; nobody told him he must have a family. Perhaps nobody told him directly but society showed him. Where is the line between individual choice and choice based on indoctrination? Perhaps what society did tell him was the lay of the path gay people follow. Narratives of HIV, a lonely life with no family, and much impersonal sex detached from emotion pervade social discourses about gay men. Although individuals perform acts of resistance against those largely spread narratives, it is a Herculean endeavour for a person to pen a narrative that defies those strongly anchored conventions that make a kiss an act to be afraid of. It is admirable and yet horribly hurting that what individuals do to resist those narratives is resistance through kisses and love – but not even kisses and love are enough – and gay identities are understood as acceptable

but in deeper levels are conceived as indomitable haunting ghosts that will not leave us in peace.

After seeing that his 'big scare' is not primarily HIV but now extends to a kiss and 'gay thoughts', it seems that Gustav's early acts of resistance are fewer now. What is left is compliance. 'Today I'm a married man': Gustav repeats it dozens of times as a reminder for me – and perhaps for himself – during the course of the interview. On a few occasions he says he is married as a way of clarifying the commitment he has made to his wife to remain with her; sometimes he repeats it to express the satisfaction that his decision has given him for the love he feels for his children. He also says he is married to remind himself of the joy of being part of a family, specifically because his family gives him the opportunity to transform himself into the father who was absent from his childhood. But being married also causes him a feeling of being constrained, of being left with no alternatives but to live a life that seems incompatible with the feelings and desires he has for men. Ultimately, being married helps Gustav to describe himself in terms he finds acceptable and to create an identity that allows him to live a life that is safe and – to some extent – fulfilling.

Gustav's story showed me my struggles to remain open about identities that resist categorisation. And by showing me my struggles, Gustav's narrative simultaneously showed me my narrow views on the existent complexity of human meaning-making skills. It tells me that the term 'gay' is a complex concept that is co-modified by the users of the term themselves but also by external members of society. As I write the word 'complex', I recapitulate how he is a man who does not claim to be straight; he tries to resist dominant discourses that describe gay men as highly sexualised but he has sexual fantasies with men and women and he flirts with the label gay. He is

a man who has had – and sometimes enjoyed – sexual encounters with other men, he also has enjoyed sexless loving relationships with men, he is married to a woman he loves, and his best friend – the best man at his wedding – has been a lifelong adventure partner in his explorations of gay desires. Yet he allows himself, with nostalgia for how unlikely it sounds, to dream of having the loving relationship he longed for from a very early age. Gustav has lived all those narratives, and although he sometimes privileges one over the others, his story makes room for a plot twist in which his gay thoughts may lead him to actually meet someone and kiss him and fuck him. Then he would have a ‘problem’. At the time of the interview he was all that, he was all his competing narratives; for all purposes and with determination, so far as I could see, and I was left marvelled and puzzled at how he managed to do that.

6.4 Malone – *I'm a man who happens to be gay rather than a gay man, an identity constructed through sameness and resistance*

'I'm a man who happens to be gay, rather than a gay man'. Malone says this in the first minutes of the interview. With this statement he declares he does not want his *sexuality* to be a main descriptor of himself. *'I've never really wanted... to identify, or to, you know, use homosexuality as a descriptor of me, or my identity or my personality'*, he says by way of explanation. Our talk continues and he questions why 'being gay' plays such a prominent role in some people's lives, illustrating his question through recollections of men he has met who use 'gay' as one of the first words to describe themselves. This causes him discontent because, in his view, people are just people, not 'gay people'. At some point he tells me he was attacked on the street for holding his boyfriend's hand in a city he considered to be progressive and gay-friendly. He also tells me he remembers his mother saying when he was a child that she is okay if she sees two women kissing on TV but not if she sees two men. I listen to him describing how he used to be afraid of even say it – "I'm gay" – in his head; how he recounts a scene where his father would be driving him to school and he was so afraid of even thinking those words: 'What if adults can actually read your mind and they just don't tell you?'. I listened to an old story of how he used to pray every night for God to make him straight. I listened to a recent story of how he attended an amusement park and one of the guides expressed their negative views about being gay. I kept listening and in his narrative I could hear his pain.

In this text I will discuss how Malone, disillusioned with the misconceptions that construct a prevailing negative portrayal of gay men, decides to distance himself from that collective identity as much as he can. He rejects any behaviour that can be seen as stereotypically gay, prefers to attend

straight bars, and usually befriends straight people. By doing this, he attempts to construct a personal narrative that differs from the social representations of gayness. In this text I will also discuss how he is constructing a personal narrative from the very intersection of powerful narratives of gayness, gender, and heteronormativity. In an attempt to delineate the implications of this endeavour in his identity construction, I dissect his narrative and address subtle modes in which he articulates his discourse. I contrast them with the politics of meanings, and finish by saying that Malone is ultimately reclaiming gayness as a property of gay people themselves and resisting a reality that entitles others to produce discourses that do not concern them directly.

Before being gay, he is a man. His self-description of 'a man who happens to be gay, rather than a gay man' privileges manhood over gayness. The question of what does it mean to be a man becomes important as it is coloured by his conceptions of gender and its performance. I will come back to expand on how gender is performed later in this text. For now, the meanings Malone associates with the concept 'man' also become important as I understand from his explanation that 'being a man' is a broader category that can encompass a number of qualities and still be intact: he can be a young man, an intelligent man, an articulate man, a white man, and still be a man. His manhood, is not challenged by holding those qualities. I wonder if he would find the need to say he is a man who happens to be young, or a man who happens to be white. His phrase makes me wonder how many qualities the term 'man' can hold without being challenged. In trying to answer my question, I think of it not as a question of *how many* but *which* qualities are compatible with the meaning of 'being a man'. I wonder whether the terms *young*, *intelligent*, *articulate*, and *white* would modify the category *man* in the same way that the term *gay* does. From his emphasis on decentralising gayness

from his identity, it appears that *gay* modifies *man* in a way that *man* is challenged, questioned, and put at risk. Let us read this extract from the interview, which illustrates his efforts to decentralise gayness from his identity and, in doing so, it seems he puts himself in the middle of contradicting realities.

‘I haven’t really ever felt that my relationships have influenced me, and my identity. And... That said, I’m getting married and I guess... That relationship does define me as a person to some degree but I think that’s outside of the fact that it’s a gay relationship. I don’t know, personally for me, whether or not the fact that my fiancé is male means anything... Because my identity, I just, I get out, I hang out with straight people, and... I talk about my relationship with my parents like it was, as if he was a woman. There’s no differentiation.’ (Malone – interview)

Malone’s explanation seems to be along the lines of what Savin-Williams (2005) describes as ‘the post-gay’. The post-gay is defined as gay youths who embrace their sexuality but do not see it as a defining feature of their identities. These young people, as they are discovering a more accepting environment, are less explicitly invested in these identities. Malone’s appreciation of himself as a man who happens to be gay moves his gayness away from his identity. The reasons for that might be slightly different to the accepting environment Savin-Williams describes, especially considering the background stories Malone shared with me, in which his immediate family circle was a source of stress for him if his gayness came to their knowledge. Later in the interview, when he expands on the differences between the meanings he gives to the terms ‘gay man’ and ‘a man who happens to be gay’, a search for equality between gay people and heterosexual people becomes apparent through his discourse.

Interestingly, Malone's question of whether the fact that he is engaged to a man means anything relies on an institution that has been historically associated with heterosexual relationships. On the one hand, Malone portrays a scenario of equality where his relationship is integrated to his social and family life unproblematically but, on the other hand, he says he speaks about his partner 'as if he was a woman' and this makes me wonder about the ways in which he uses that phrase. Initially, it could appear he uses it as a way to convey the sense of ordinariness he speaks about. However, in the following quotation it can be observed that Malone could be privileging and using the model man-woman relationship as the norm to which man-man relationships should aspire. In his childhood Malone understood that being straight was the norm and he wished and prayed to be 'normal'. Meanwhile, he conceived that being gay would mean to be in another less desirable position.

'...What brought me to that point was definitely that it just would be much easier to be straight. And I kind, I was already odd, I was the nerd, and I was a bit, I don't know, "unusual" as a kid. So, having another thing [being gay] to set me apart, was just: "No". I didn't want it.' (Malone – interview)

This understanding of gayness as something that would set him apart, something that would differentiate him, has been a process that started in his childhood but accompanied him into his adult years. Although now he has come to terms with being in a loving relationship with his long-term partner and he does not wish to be straight, at some points it would appear that what he desires is the sameness that straight people enjoy. If Malone's aim is to equalise his relationship by saying that 'there's no differentiation', I draw some parallels from the way he describes himself as an 'unusual' child and implicitly wanted to be straight as a wish for sameness. It is important to remark that he did not wish to be straight because of the attractiveness of being

straight to him but because he associated positive consequences with it, which would allow him integration rather than the projected negative consequences and alienation that being gay would bring. In a similar fashion, the idea of getting married could be a re-edition of that child who did not want to be an outcast. Although Malone the adult is better equipped than Malone the child, could getting married be part of a complex unconscious strategy he has created to identify himself with that group that affords sameness? When I asked about the reasons for getting married, Malone told me something that partially resonates with this explanation.

‘That’s a good question, about why... I don’t know if I have an answer for that... But I guess partly, probably because that’s what you do, right? You fall in love, you get in a relationship, and you get married... Partly is that, I suppose, we’ve been together for so long and... we were never in a strong position in our lives. And, like we’ve never lived together. Because we’ve just never been in a position where we both have jobs or anything like that, or I was living in the country. So, I guess... Bear in mind that it’s like... saying to both ourselves and other people that this is actually a serious relationship and, we plan to spend the rest of our lives together, and we’re making a commitment to do that... And I guess, it’s kind of a status symbol of family...’ (Malone – interview)

The explanation Malone gives about getting married because ‘that’s what you do’ seems to reproduce a discourse that used to be available only to straight people. It would appear that his relationship has been colonised by mainstream heteronormative marriage. It would seem that his relationship now rests on a wider and dominant form of regulation of relationships. Understandably, gay people might see these rituals as desirable, because we have participated in them too, at least as witnesses of those legally recognised unions, and now, not being only witnesses anymore but also protagonists of

those rituals, 'that's what *we* do too'. To complete this reflection, I share something I found very revealing: Malone and his partner were 'never in a strong position' in their lives. Of course, I acknowledge the practical aspects Malone refers to, such as money, career, and other pragmatic aspects, but I cannot avoid thinking of the significance of him acknowledging their current strength and how it is concurrent with their prospect of marriage. Is it the possibility of marriage that is allowing them to feel strong? Could it be that underlying in his narrative is the belief that now they are strong, like straight people? Malone's narrative suggests to me that he is conjuring strength by association, by doing what straight people do, they will be strong like them, they will be joining the 'in-group' rather than being stuck astride as 'the others'.

The extracts of the interview that I have presented here, as far as I can see, have used heterosexual relationships as the axis to define what 'normal' and what 'ordinary' is. In other words, it is ordinary that straight people marry, it is ordinary that heterosexual men talk about their female partners with their parents, it is ordinary that straight people have their own families. That sense of ordinariness is why Malone uses those examples to compare his own relationship and make it clear that he speaks about it *like it were* a heterosexual one and about his fiancé *as if he were* a woman, and one of the reasons why he wants to get married is because marriage represents family. As he continues questioning whether the gender of his partner has any impact on his identity, he suggests that it is practically meaningless. This meaninglessness could be seen favourably, not only for his particular case, but also for other gay couples who aspire to equality. If gay couples were not seen any more as out of the norm, and their presence were as unproblematic as it is

in Malone's family then attention could be paid to other aspects of the couple rather than to the genders of the couple.

In the next quotation, I could argue there is disapproval of the people whose gayness overtly plays an important role in their lives.

'I've known people... and... it's probably not great but I don't quite, I quite don't... I don't like it –a straight person wouldn't have their sexuality as part of their identity– but I've known people who, if you ask them to describe themselves in a couple of words, 'gay' would be one of the words they would use, and I don't see why your sexuality is given such a prominent place in your life, 'being a gay man'. Whereas someone who is straight wouldn't even enter their mind; it's just the status quo.'
(Malone – interview)

By mentioning that a straight person would not have their sexuality as part of their identity and that it is just the status quo, I interpret that Malone is making a claim for inclusion, a plea about how being gay should not be a reason for individuals to conceive themselves differently. However, he makes this plea for equality by trying to overtly minimise the differences between gay and straight people; a plea for equality through sameness instead of acknowledging the differences that create diversity. This search for sameness between gay and straight is later re-addressed when he tells me about how his presence is an innocuous or even more, welcomed in straight communities:

'We're moving to gay people are mainstream... I can, I go to a straight bar and I would act the same with my boyfriend as if I were in a gay bar... there's a destruction of the barriers. So I don't think we need a gay identity, I think it's something that people cherish, and it's great to hold on to, but I don't think, fundamentally that exists – personally –. Everyone is individual. But maybe, somebody cherishes it and you want to talk to them.'
(Malone – interview)

In the two previous quotations, there is an interesting tension. In one, by saying *'I don't see why your sexuality is given such a prominent place in your life'* he seems to say it is wrong and unnecessary to claim a gay identity. In the next one, by saying *'I think it's something that people cherish, and it's great to hold on to'* it seems he slightly shifts his position, understanding that although unrequired, some people show emotional investment in that identity by cherishing it. His personal understanding of the current state of affairs on gay identity aligns more and more with the findings presented in 'The New Gay Teenager' (R. Savin-Williams, 2005). In his book, Savin-Williams introduces the case of some couples integrated by women who lived fulfilling lives without identifying themselves as lesbians, and explains how a growing number of young people in same-sex relationships are doing the same, and as a consequence, the idea of gayness as a focal point in the description of people's identities is – for some – fading. These views of unnecessary labels, the inclusion of the gay population in the broader society, and how individuals interlace broader discourses with their personal narratives are themes for analysis in themselves, so I am not going to focus on them. I needed to mention, however, the way Malone conceptualises his identity as a starting point that provides context for what comes next. In the following sections I analyse the narrative of a young man whose sexual desire has been affected by the prejudiced portrayals of gay men in the media and the prejudiced opinions of people he has been in touch with. You will read how Malone is trying to counterbalance these oppressive narratives with his efforts to live according to the ideals of sameness and ordinariness to which he aspires.

6.4.1 Joining a collective identity

As explained, up to his teenage years, Malone expressly refused to embrace his desire for males. At that point in time, the reason for that was

centred on his fear of being rejected by his family. There have, however, been some moments where his attitude to gayness has been more accepting. This acceptance has been associated with his close involvement with other men who have identified themselves as gay, as seen in the following extract, in which Malone speaks about his first recollection of starting to question his own attitude to being gay.

‘Probably when I was 16, one night I met this guy, and – he’s just a friend– and he was so comfortable in his sexuality, and I kind of thought: “Maybe, maybe it’s not so bad.”’ (Malone – interview)

It was through seeing that his friend was ‘so comfortable in his sexuality’ that Malone thought that ‘maybe’ his own sexuality was not bad. This person, who showed a positive portrayal of being gay, can be observed as the first of a number of people that have contributed to a transition of gayness from being a crisis, a source of shame, and a quality that needs to be hidden, into being a less troublesome quality. I find support for this idea in a later connection Malone made, with a man he was involved with intimately.

“...Frank, he’s my best friend now. And, he’s best man for my wedding. And we used to have sex regularly. When we were younger. And it was never a relationship. But I think it complicates things... future reflects on it, so I think it’s probably a really bad idea... he came out to me... He was... I was the first person he came out to, I think I was 16. 16 or 17. And I think I was just like: “Oh my God! Another gay person!” And then I kind of got really drunk so I could tell him that I was gay as well. And, and then I think it was just like: “Oh! Okay! Let’s have sex!”’ (Malone – interview)

With Frank, Malone has experienced not only a sexual relationship but a process of discovering the Self in what he perceived before as the Other. Through his phrase ‘another gay person’ and the previous recollection of the

guy who was 'so comfortable in his sexuality', I observe that Malone could verbalise he was gay as well and, by doing that, he found sameness through an identity he previously considered to be the Other. Identifying himself with his peers was the first step in getting a flavour of how it would be to join a collective identity. Although it felt appropriate at the time and it was mostly positive, there were aspects that made the process of joining the collective 'gay men' identity troublesome. One advantage was that by joining the collective identity Malone allowed himself to enjoy with Frank the experience of sexual contact and friendship, and later with his current partner, a loving long-term relationship. However, with intimacy also came a number of negative attributes and stereotypes that are associated with that collective identity and it is those attributes that he has tried in the past to reject and still does in the present.

'Stereotypes can be positive and negative and... some people think gay people are promiscuous, and more prone to STI's, and they're gonna murder, and rape children, and all these horrible things, and then other people are: "gay people are good at design, and bad at sports"... That sort of thing... I don't buy into that; that you have to be in certain way... And I'm a little bit effeminate but that's fine... but you know, I don't go to gay bars. I just don't... I don't want other people to tell me how I should live my life or how I should be! ...I would never do that to somebody else.' (Malone – interview)

The above quotation contains Malone's emotional reactions to the implications that identifying himself as gay has for him; the fact that some people would think of him as a stereotypical gay man is related to his rejection of the way in which society has represented gay men. I find it important to remark on the discursive subtlety in Malone's narrative. Gay identity *per se* does not seem to be what Malone feels apprehensive about. What he seemed

to reject and be fearful of as a child, and seems to be negotiating nowadays, is the idea of being part of what society conceives with contempt and disapproval. In other words, he does not want to be – again – the Other. These social portrayals of gay men have caused his active resistance to be one of those stereotypical gay men; resistance that he expresses through language, through his sophisticated analysis of the meanings of gayness, and perhaps through his strong refusal of one of the activities society has used as an epitome of gayness: anal sex.

6.4.2 No anal sex, please

Following Malone's thoughts is easy, I find him very articulate; a confident speaker. I praise his arguments as clever ones. I am as excited to say he is clever as I am to say he is handsome. But I ask myself whether it is relevant to say I find him clever and handsome. I think it is relevant and I will tell you why. When I first saw him, sitting on a bench, waiting for me in the lobby, I wished he were not the guy who I was about to interview. His handsomeness and model-like beauty would make me nervous and I would feel terribly inadequate in front of him. It happened that it was indeed him who I was to interview. Surprisingly, neither the symmetry of his face, the glow of his hair, the fullness of his beard, his immaculate skin, nor the sapphire of his eyes were a distractor for me. Admirer of manly beauties and often intimidated by their sole presence, I wondered why I did not fall into the abyss that Malone represented for me. We actually discussed several topics, questioned our respective views on those topics, exchanged stories, and were curious about our experiences. Overall, I had an intellectually stimulating and nerve-free conversation with him. I do not hesitate to say he is a clever man; I do not fear being redundant since you, the reader will notice it – if not already

– even without me saying it. But why did I hesitate, for months, about whether I should address aspects of his physical beauty, or not?

Given that he gave me so much thought-provoking material for my analysis, the idea of presenting to you a remembrance of his bodily presence seemed pointless as it was his ideas that captured me and I remembered so little about his body. However, it gradually became a necessity to take a perspective that contemplates how his body is shadowed by his ideas but entangled nonetheless to them. When analysing the closing remarks of the interview, I realised Malone was giving me one of the answers as to why his body had been absent during some parts of his narrative. In those last exchanges of the interview, Malone’s narration of his inner world addressed his body only to say how he uses it to protect himself: he closes his posture to avoid people approaching him and to avoid people being nice to him.

‘I always do this, with my shoulders come in, like to protect myself... I definitely think that, when people are nice to me, it kind of makes me uncomfortable. Yes, it makes me uncomfortable...’ (Malone – interview)

With his head and eyes pointing at the floor, his arms crossed on his chest, as if he were cold, Malone exemplifies how he *protects* himself from people who are nice to him, by avoiding communication. From that phrase, it could be interpreted his discomfort might be a psychological discomfort but it can also be a physical one, maybe an existential one. During the first part of the interview, the voice of ethics told me to respect him and avoid a voyeuristic gaze, a sexualisation of him and his body. So I did not try to explore the details of his sexual life, not even when themes of sexual activities came to the conversation; I would listen to a comment on sexual relationships he would make in passing and I would wait to see if he wanted to expand on them, which did not happen. Then, there was a point of the interview in which I felt

as if a Cartesian veil were covering my inquiry by privileging thinking, by addressing identity mainly as a relational aspect that happens in the intra-personal world and detaching it from the body. I wondered if I was de-sexualising the interview in the same way I had, somehow, de-eroticised Malone's presence. Alfred North Whitehead's (1958) said in one of his lectures, as a way to convey the taken-for-granted approach to the body: 'no one ever says here I am, and I have brought my body with me'. During our discussion about identity and the erotic, I found myself trying to understand how Malone's ideas were connected to his body. Echoing Whitehead, I think Malone and I have taken for granted his body in the interview but, furthermore, I would think Malone has overlooked the ways in which his views of heterosexuality as the norm have affected his body. Having realised that, and overcoming my hesitation, I decided to address the sexual aspects of his relationship. 'If it's not too intrusive to ask, may I ask how is your erotic... the erotic part in your current relationship? With your fiancé?'

'Ehm... This is something that I guess... I've kind of had issues, a bit, before, in terms of... I never wanted Callum because of my sexual attraction to him... My relationship with him has never been based on sex... And, he's more normal in that, it's based on sex and everything else... But... there's a cool period in the relationship for everything; you wanna have sex. And, I don't know, didn't have an appetite for it, I think I was stressed as well. And it really bothered him. And... Everything is fine now, like, we're back to it; kind of normal, healthy relationship, but... for me sex is never really... important. And I think it is for him... But it's definitely not important for me. I can go for... a while, a while, while without it being an issue... I guess I've always valued all the other stuff more... than sex.' (Malone – interview)

The sexual dynamics within the couple, as described in his explanation, have been difficult to match between them both and, in spite of the current

reconciliation of their sexual activity at a behavioural level, it seems their desires have not been as reconciled as perhaps they would have expected them to be. Interestingly, by implication, he sees his own perspective as 'less normal' when he states that his partner's interest in sex is 'more normal'. Whilst listening to him saying that sex is not important and that it has never been, I remembered other passages in the interview that jarred with the unimportance he was attributing to his sexual life. Accounts of his sexual fantasies, recollections of some of his sexual encounters with previous partners, and the intimacy he had with his long-term friend Frank, suggest to me that Malone's comment about the sexual dynamics with his current partner overlooks some of the narratives that might be filtering through their relationship. One of these narratives I refer to is a widely extended representation of gay men as highly sexualised: a representation that Malone himself spoke about. In his overt disapproval of stereotypes because of their generalised simplification of gay men, I wonder if one of the ways in which he is showing his resistance to these representations is by downplaying the importance of sex in the relationship.

Part of what Malone shared later was that he does not engage in penetrative sex, and that, if he *had* to do it, he would prefer to penetrate rather than be penetrated. The act of a man penetrating another man, as explained by Foucault (1979) has been historically conceived as a sinful *act*, the act of sodomy. Later in history, the act became constituent of a *subject*, the homosexual. Although this shift from act to subject has given ontological birth to a new species, as Foucault said, both act and subject have had negative connotations, established and regulated by the church, the law, and science. It is comprehensible that Malone and other individuals do not want to be part of that. The use of the label 'gay' has been one of the ways in which people have shown resistance and agency to define themselves. However, 'gay' as an

identity still carries associations with the former 'homosexual' as seen in Malone's personal narrative, in which he uses 'gay' and 'homosexuality' somewhat interchangeably. If the act of a man penetrating another man has been one of the quintessential elements that constructs the term 'homosexual', it seems understandable to me that Malone refuses to use it as part of his identity. And he tries to do it by rejecting the very *act* that served to conform the *subject*.

'Eh, I had two bad experiences once. While doing anal sex. And I think both of them have tainted me a little bit. So... The only one night stand I've ever had I was 18. I didn't really know what to expect. And I didn't think it would involve anal sex. And it did. And I really wasn't comfortable with it. And... But I kind of was in his flat when I was... So we do it... And... Then the other one was when I was younger. With my ex-boyfriend. And... He like... leaked. And it was really gross... So, after that I freaked, it freaked me out a little bit. And... My digestive system isn't great and I'm the most paranoid that... I don't know, something gross is gonna happen and... You know? That sort of thing.' (Malone – interview)

Acknowledging how difficult it was for him to share this story in the interview, I replied to his comments with empathetic responses and disclosing some of my own stories. So I talked and he listened to accounts of how in the past I agreed to do things when I was not necessarily sure about doing them, and how preoccupations about hygiene are common concerns for a number of gay men, including myself. He receives my response well and that invites him to continue talking, which I appreciate. Thus, in a first dimension, I view his lack of interest in engaging in anal sex as a reaction to those upsetting bodily-based recollections of his early experiences doing it. However, as Jonathan Kemp (2013) suggests, for a comprehensive view of the anxieties surrounding the sexual uses of the male anus, we need to consider not only the actual horror

of faecal matter that is fundamental to the fears of a sexualised anus but we also need to acknowledge the gender discrimination that is at work.

Malone's personal stories also contain a layer of socially constructed perspectives on sexual relationships with which he seems to struggle; perspectives that look at sexual relationships as an exercise of power of one person over the other. The first hint of this comes when I share with him an account of me bottoming for former boyfriends of mine, and Malone, as if needing to clarify something very important, specifies that he does not like bottoming. When I listen to this, I question whether being a subject of penetration would be a quality that his concept of 'man' could withstand and remain intact. I kept listening.

'...I would consider myself, if I was to do it, a top. I just, I really don't like bottoming... but I'm still conscious of all of those things. And... the other person. And I've always been, even with me not being the person who has to do them, 'cause it's like... it's like they're putting a lot of effort into it: "So you have to enjoy this and to be grateful for it"'. (Malone – interview)

'So, you don't do any penetrative sex' –I said, trying to clarify–.

'No. I think... He [his fiancé] would like to, and I think he's more interested in that region. Than I am. And... I think I've kind of made him stop trying because I feel bad about saying no. But I just, I don't feel comfortable... I just kind of: "Oh, I haven't showered since this morning". Something like that, you know?' (Malone – interview)

'Aha. So it's mainly a hygiene issue' –I replied, trying to follow his thoughts–.

'Yeah, I think so. It's no anything to do with, like a... like the actual act of penetrating. Yeah. That, psychologically doesn't, necessarily, bother me. It's the hygiene and the

“what if’s” and the... That sort of thing... I also do things... there is like a... again, this sense of, kind of, using... I don’t know. Like... like you’re using the person.’ (Malone – interview)

‘Like what you said before about... about coming on his face’: I mentioned this because he had shared with me the feeling of guilt he experienced when in one occasion he ejaculated on his partner’s chest and face. Even though his partner did not seem to express any discontent, the guilt remained with him.

‘Yeah, it’s... the person getting the pleasure from that situation is me and Callum is just there to facilitate that. And I don’t really like that, I hate, I don’t like sex that doesn’t feel reciprocal. I really like reciprocal sex. That would be something I really enjoy; when I can tell that the other person is enjoying himself... ‘Cause otherwise what is the point? ...Especially if you’re in a relationship. If it’s anonymous, maybe you don’t care. And, it helps if the other person is somebody you care about, then, obviously there’s... you treat him something similar... I’m presuming...’ (Malone – interview)

In the above quotation there seems to be four elements that come together. First, the hygiene concerns that seem to point to the ‘the horror of shit’ that Kemp (2013) describes as a phobia surrounding sexual uses of the male anus, conceiving it as a particularly problematical site of anxieties. Secondly, it seems Malone feels pressured to do anal sex in order to be gay, and consequently, he resists that. Thirdly, he fears he could potentially abuse his partner if he focuses on his own pleasure.

Finally, Malone seems to be concerned about mutuality in sexual encounters and pleasure and enjoyment seem to be an aim. However, there seems to be room for exceptions to this mutual enjoyment when the partner is a random stranger, there is concern that his partner does not become a

subordinate of Malone's own pleasures. But why is it different in an anonymous encounter? Since sexual encounters with strangers are common for some gay men, these have been researched extensively (Groves & Crow, 2012; Groves, Starks, Rendina, & Parsons, 2014). Understanding their impact on sexual health is crucial, but I am bracketing the health implications of anonymous sex and I am focusing on the liberating effect that it seems to have on Malone's concerns. When I asked him how his partner reacted when he ejaculated on his face, Malone responded he was fine with it; his partner does not see it as a subordination and yet, that response does not ease Malone's worries. This strong apprehension makes me think that the difficulties in enjoying his sexual life with his partner could be tied to portrayals of gay men's sexual power, which are often depicted as self-centred and predatory. Thus, his reaction to that is to reject those narratives.

Arguably, connected to Malone's reliance upon man-woman relationships and spaces to explain aspects of his life, his conception of the ways in which sexual relationships operate between gay men have been influenced by some of the issues that are on current debates of gender. One of the debates I am specifically referring to is Judith Butler's (2006) concept of the heterosexual matrix. Malone was, from his early childhood, immersed in discourses of binaries such as man/woman, heterosexual/homosexual, masculine/feminine: these concepts working in opposition have moulded his understanding of what is expected from him as a man. For starters, it is expected from him to be masculine and heterosexual. Since, according to Butler, gender is not natural but a collection of acts that convey a socially constructed convention of what being a man is, I find Malone's narratives as a collection of acts that try to adhere to heteronormative ways of living, even if he loves another man. As Shonkwiler (2008) suggests, one of the standard

narratives of homosexuality describes men whose identities are defined through sexual encounters that, altogether, constitute a failure in the development of what is considered in a heteronormative framework to be mature and adult. The vivid awareness that Malone conveyed when he addressed all his concerns about the misconceptions and prejudices surrounding gay men, suggests to me that Malone is endeavouring to subvert the standard narrative of the gay man who is defined by – and reduced to – his sexual activity. The task, however, is attempted through the strategy of playing along with heteronormative standards, in which anonymous sex is perhaps not allowed. Maybe contemporary gay relationships have made themselves worthwhile of being compared to straight ones, only if gay relationships dispose those qualities that put them in the place of subversive sexualities in the first place.

‘When you add that [the attack he suffered from holding his boyfriend’s hand on the street] to... news reports about, or opinion pieces about gay men being promiscuous... you know: “they cannot hold a relationship and they’re dangerous to children...” That... does affect you... I’d be surprised if anyone, honestly wasn’t affected by that. Because then you start wondering: “Is it true?” ...and you probably do shape your behaviour and what other people think of you. Or what the perception is of you. Either you embrace it and you go all out loud about it, or you try to restrict that and maybe, maybe, if gay men are seen as promiscuous, you, you get people either taking that and going with it, or people shutting down their sexuality.’ (Malone – interview)

Malone seems to conceive a binary system that classifies gay men’s responses to the stereotype of the hypersexualised gay men; a system that is difficult to escape. In the first category, there are the gay men who embrace the stereotype of hypersexuality and promiscuity, and in the second category

there is a group of men whose response to the stereotype is to restrict their desire. This categorisation, in which he seems to implicitly locate himself, does not allow him to take a third position in which he could disregard the stereotype and choose something that is in agreement with his own feelings and desires.

I kept listening. I listened to young, clever, articulate, handsome Malone who loves his long-term partner. And through this listening, I witnessed the entanglement of forces in his construction of the self as 'a man who happens to be gay'. In this entanglement I acknowledge the active role he plays in the creation of a very personal narrative and I weigh the broader and oppressive forces that he tries to fight against. And whilst I listened, I wished with all my heart that in that fight he is not inadvertently neglecting himself.

6.5 *Nick – Cruising and a summer of human connectedness*

Nick's job requires him to drive all over the UK and, as would be expected from someone who spends much of his time behind the wheel, he has good knowledge of roads and traffic laws. From what we talked about during the interview, I could see that his map-reading and navigation skills help him not only to orient himself in the world but also in other areas of his life, from the metaphors and analogies of the road that colour his communication, to how his visits to cities and towns have facilitated sexual encounters with men. It was in the intimacy of his car, nearly 30 years ago, that he developed a friendship with one of his colleagues, and from that friendship originated his first and subsequent sexual encounters. It is by car that he travels all over the UK, for work, but it is also by car that he discovered, explored, and re-visited the most exciting cruising areas in the country.

Cruising was a central topic that filled a good part of the interview, and the one I am relying on in order to explain one of the aspects which has helped Nick to construct his gay identity. Over the years, 'cruising' has been part of the gay vernacular to describe the search by men for sexual activity with other men, predominantly strangers, often furtively, in public spaces. In research, the term has been grappled with by scholars and its meaning varies depending on the author (Aveline, 1995, p. 202). In general terms, however, it describes the pursuit and agreement of sexual activity with strangers in public environments (Frankis & Flowers, 2009). The way I am using the term here is in alignment with Nick's very own words to describe the practice:

"Cruising is generally outside in a secluded area; a wood, a car park, or a canal foot path, spot under a bridge; somewhere that people go to, for that purpose."
(Nick – interview)

These venues, which are often favoured by men to engage in sexual activity because, as explained by Reece and Dodge (2004), they “are public enough to allow for a constant turn-over of potential sexual partners but private enough to facilitate a variety of sexual behaviours”. Although sexual activity is central to cruising, I will explain how Nick has drawn upon his experiences to narrate passages of his life that have identity-making qualities. With two examples of his most memorable recollections in cruising places, I invite the reader to examine those experiences from two different but interrelated perspectives. The first one looks at the erotic power of the encounters as an opportunity for human connectedness, community, and belonging. The second perspective looks at cruising as a subversive activity that symbolises a conquest of the public space. Altogether, these two perspectives build upon Nick’s sense of self: the first one brings the erotic to the forefront as a constructive force, in the light of what Lorde (1984) describes as discovering our subjectivities through the embodiment of the erotic; and the second perspective adds to the collective identity of gay men as a group that resists oppression through rebelling against the secrecy that society has confined our relationships.

In their study on the impact of the locales in sexual culture, Flowers, Marriott, and Hart (2000) remark that cruising focuses mostly on pursuing “sexual acts, rather than sexual partners”; in other words, this is people engaging *in* acts, rather than *with* the people who participate in those acts. The pursuit of sexual acts seems to be the main foci of cruising, and initially, Nick’s account reflects this view:

“These people are people who come into your life and go out of your life in a space of half an hour or an hour maybe. So, I’m not generally expecting any more than just... some physical entanglement... I don’t really want

to know a lot about them or get to know them... they're not people that I'm sort of engaging in a social level. Yes, I'm using them but they're using me too. For a specific purpose for a specific time... They're doing their thing. And you're doing your thing and there's a clear, set of roles that you each play... There's not supposed to be anything more than that." (Nick – interview)

The description of this kind of encounter seems to be limited to the physicality and practicality of them and aligns with the view that Flowers and his colleagues (2000) propose: practical, mutually convenient, and clear expectations are the distinguishing qualities of those sexual encounters. The description also portrays individuality: 'they're doing their thing. And you're doing your thing', Nick says. Although both individuals in the encounter seem to need the other for the implicit pleasure to occur, each individual is responsible for his own pleasure. It is pleasure that emerges from the physical entanglement, perhaps also from the emotions and closeness, but it is uncertain as Nick does not mention it in this specific quotation. What he does mention is the act of coming and leaving; the temporality of those encounters, and the clarity of expectations. There is a quality of the ephemeral, a quality of accountability, and a quality of inevitability in what Nick describes. Those people come and go from his life and it seems inevitable, but he does not seem to want anything different to happen. The way he accepts that is by being responsible for his own pleasure and his partners being responsible for theirs, resembling Max Stirner's (1995) concept of ownership in which it is the individual who owns their body. As a consequence, the individual owns the sensations that emerge from that body. In the entanglement of bodies Nick finds pleasure, but he cannot subdue his partners, nor can his partners subdue him.

At the time of the interview, Nick mentioned in passing that he had not engaged in sexual activity with his long-term partner in the past six years. This lack of sexual contact between them and the role that this aspect plays in Nick's understanding of their relationship could be a line of analysis in itself. I mention it here in order to provide context to one of the reasons why cruising is an important – crucial – activity for him: without those encounters he would not have sexual relationships at all. And sexual encounters are important to him. Very important. However, I can only wonder whether cruising could also be distancing him from his partner and a fulfilling sexual life together.

6.5.1 First memorable recollection – the erotic as human connectedness, a virtuous circle of loveliness

Although in his understanding of cruising Nick seems to enter into sexual relations with men for the pleasure they provide and not for *them*, certain passages in the interview suggest to me that the interaction with his sexual partners – however brief – has deeper and more long-lasting meanings for him. One of them is the power of a mutual connection that relies on subtle, organic, and intuitive cues of communication to invite people to engage in a meaningful encounter:

'The best experience I've ever had cruising was one summer's afternoon and it was a place near Thetford, in Norfolk... a wood with a... big layby. During the day there's a cafe there. And people walk in the woods and I think there's a canal or a river near there as well. But as it gets darker... it becomes a cruising area... I can't remember how it initiated but there were these two young guys... I would've been in my mid 30's... And they would've been in their early 20's. They were lovely... They were playing with each other... And they invited me to join them... I was probably watching them, and you know... you get two sorts of looks. One of them is certainly: 'Fuck off! You're bothering us. Leave us alone'. Or the other one... And they're beckoning me

over. And I wanted to join in. And we ended up naked. And, just enjoying each other. In every conceivable way for... half an hour or so... It was wonderful! ...That's the happiest experience I've ever had, of that type of encounter. Which wasn't set up, wasn't planned... It's just a happy coming together of circumstances... I went away that day so happy. It was just marvellous! And no expectations of it happening again or meeting them again. It's just... a happy one-off.' (Nick – interview)

I remember that during the interview, when Nick was telling me his stories, I thought he would tell me all the graphic details of his physical entanglements. I was expecting that the bodies of the protagonists in the action would feature in some scenes of love-making, much like Walt Whitman (2005) graphically described them in 'spontaneous me': with his 'arms and hands of love, lips of love, phallic thumb of love'. Nick was not as illustrative as Whitman was, perhaps because of the context of the interview itself, perhaps because of me, but also perhaps because the physicality of the physical entanglement affects the person's mind in a more transcendental way than it affects their body. It was as if the meaningfulness of the encounter was not something afforded by their bodies alone.

I thought Nick told the stories of how he has met men and shared his body for years and years with them without getting tired, as if that meeting and sharing stirred up his pleasure and fulfilled the desire of being desired. Only later did I find out that being desired was not the only thing Nick was thinking about. He would meet those men with faces darkened by the night, because he was looking for newness, expecting that from that newness something different would happen in his life. 'There's gonna be always another [man] around the corner', Nick said at one point in the interview. This approach appears to me to give him tranquillity: what he did not find in the current encounter could be found in the next one.

That encounter with those lovely guys in Thetford seemed to be the one when newness finally delivered its promise; the promise that something would happen in his life. It might have lasted half an hour, it might have been a one-off, but it is not time or repetition that made that sexual encounter meaningful. The fact that it happened many years ago and he still remembers it tells me that it was special; the reciprocity in the erotic could have played a part. With his gaze, Nick told them he desired them, and when they reciprocated his gaze they made the erotic deal. The erotic, as suggested by Snyder (2000), makes room for the sensual and conscious connection of bodies, environment, other persons, and also importantly, a connection of selves. The look Nick got from them seems to be the beginning of this happy experience: the look constituted a non-verbal invitation to be part of that moment with the enjoyment of the three men, the enjoyment in the spontaneity of the encounter, in the happy coming together of circumstances in which everyone enjoyed each other in every conceivable way.

'Excitement. Sexual Fulfilment. And the unknown' are explanations Nick gives when asked about the meanings these random encounters have for him. Based on them, I thought these were self-centred encounters; that these satisfied his excitement and his sexual fulfilment. However, I later realised that in this particular encounter with the guys in Thetford, his satisfaction came from the mutuality; his satisfaction was found in the pleasure of physicality but also in what seems to be an encounter in togetherness:

"...sexual experiences, to me, they have to be mutually satisfying between me and the other person, or people. And, they have to be fun. Sex shouldn't be taken seriously... It's not a work or something. It's the most fun you can have in your life, really. For... a short 'ish' period of time. And that was just, hugely pleasurable. For me and for them. And the fact that it was pleasurable for

them was pleasurable for me. And I guess that the fact that I was finding it pleasurable was pleasurable for them. It was, it was a... a virtuous circle of loveliness.”
(Nick – interview)

This experience offered me a more nuanced understanding of the experience of cruising. The individual nature of sexual encounters described previously, of each person doing their own thing, suggested that pleasure was obtained *from* the act, or *from* the other, but not necessarily *with* the other. As described by Nick, the concept of ‘using’ the other or being used by the other, and the idea that there is always another man around the corner, initially resembled Max Stirner’s (1995) ideas in his text ‘The Ego and Its Own’. Stirner writes about the man as a concept which does not differentiate one man from another; the man is just a generic concept; a man ‘*who, as he is called Hans, could just as well be Peter or Michael. You see in me not me, the bodily man, but an unreal thing, the spook, a man*’ (Stirner, 1995, p. 156). As described initially – each one doing their thing – Nick appeared to be participating in an act where he was liberated from any shared responsibility for the other. There was in his statement an overt liberation that put the power in the self and there was also a sense of unimportance to whom the person was. However, in his later description, the ‘virtuous circle of loveliness’ shows a group of people connected not only through their bodies. That virtuous circle envisions an act that does not restrict people and separate bodies from minds; the circle portrays a group of people connected through the erotic and grounded in the interrelationship of bodies and selves. Nick’s cruising reminds me of Qian’s (2014) paper that suggests the mutual engagement and emotional bonding apparent in gay men’s cruising in public parks is far from straightforward. Qian observes that some cruisers lament that the instant sex that happens seems to hinder the development of long-lasting and stable relationships.

Whilst I acknowledge the argument of how exclusive these competing practices seem to be, I remain aware that Nick might not be looking for a long-lasting relationship, as he already has one; he seems happy with the briefness of the encounter. However idealised, however romanticised, Nick's account depicts pleasure that is shared; it provides us an image of pleasure that depends on the other and that feeds the other and the self in unison.

It was that pleasure in unison that made me think of reciprocity as an encounter of selves. Whilst Nick mentioned on several occasions stories about sexual encounters, there was in all of them an individuality accompanied by a certain longing. It was as if the stories he mentioned were highly pleasurable experiences that occurred in the presence of the other but – almost – in spite of the other. The story of the guys in Thetford reminds me of a passage in 'a boy's own story' (White, 2016, p. 31), where the narrator, filled with awe, discovers that 'sex between two men can please both at the same time'. Similarly, it seems Nick discovered that the pleasure of the other could also become his own pleasure and that his pleasure could also be someone else's pleasure. With this pleasure that inundated everyone, it seemed his longing had been fulfilled through the erotic. In light of Lorde's (1984, p. 56) understanding of the erotic, that sharing of bodily and psychic joy could have made the sharers close enough to see each other and understand each other, and making them realise that the distance between their selves has been bridged by their joy. That discovery of pleasure that revolved around togetherness is maybe what makes Nick wish he could speak out loud: 'every time I go there, I hope that something similar might happen.'

6.5.2 Second memorable recollection – this is my world!

It is December and whilst on my way to the Tate Britain museum, walking and somewhat lost in the streets on London, I feel out of my element;

the confidence I feel in Edinburgh is now lost. I am about to cross a street, the name of which name I do not remember, and I have to wait for the bus to pass. It is the service 24 and when I read its destination, I suddenly feel there is something I know. I think of Nick even though I was not thinking about him at that moment. It has been months since I interviewed him but I see him clearly in my mind, with his sparkling eyes and the enormous grin on his face, bringing me – with his account – to London. The bus has the green light, I want to take a picture of it, as if I were watching a distant galaxy with my bare eyes. But I am too slow, the service 24 passes by and I am only able to see it going. It goes towards Hampstead Heath.

“The best place in the country for cruising is Hampstead Heath, in North London. That has been famous for decades and decades. I can recall several times over the last ten or more years when I’ve been there in the summer; July-August time, ten, half past ten at night, when there’s still light in the sky and is still warm. I spent one of those long, hot, sultry days. And you go there and there are, literally, dozens of guys walking up and down the parks; they’re cruising.” (Nick – interview)

I remember Nick’s narration and I realise there is pride and joy in his words that come not only from the connections he has with the guys he has met there but also from the space itself, and the feelings that that space holds. I listen carefully trying to understand how the exposed availability of public sexual encounters gives him pride. As he advances in his story, I can picture him in those sultry days, contemplating men; one, two, another man: ‘to see him pass conveys as much as the best poem, perhaps more, you linger to see his back, and the back of his neck and shoulder-side.’ (Whitman, 2005, p. 89). I once again expect Nick to talk about their bodies, I await for the moment he talks about how the body of man ‘balks account’. I expect Nick to ‘sing the body electric’ but the Whitman-like accounts do not occur. This interview was

very erotic to me and yet his mention of the body was scarce. When trying to decipher how the erotic is present in this conversation even though the body was somewhat absent, I realise I have been interpreting the erotic in a narrow way, reducing it to its bodily dimensions and the psychological connotations that emerge from the bodily dimensions. I now read his account and I see the erotic qualities I felt during the interview emerged, yes, from my expectations of knowing more of his stories, but also from a much broader understanding of the erotic.

“You know when somebody is cruising. They’re walking around, scuttling off the park into the bushes with somebody or they’d be standing there, fiddling in their trousers, hands in their pockets... Somebody’s come from the office, they still have a suit and a briefcase or backpack; some of them are students, for the way they’re dressing; some of them are in groups; some of them are chatting; some of them know each other; some of them are regulars... And if anything happened, if anybody was attacked, you can be certain that everybody would come to that. Well, no; the closeted ones would all run in the other direction, but there would be a good enough group of people to see if there was any issue. That’s the happiest place. And I go there wherever I can, which is not very often but... It’s a really nice place. I have literally walked around there with an enormous grin, or trying to conceal an enormous grin on my face; it’s just... I feel: ‘This is my world! This is my safe place; these people are all doing exactly what I’m doing and having a great time!’ Everybody is. Everybody is!” (Nick – interview)

The dominant approach to research on cruising sees sex in public spaces from the perspective of the risks involved. In their review of the literature on men engaging in sex in public spaces, Frankis and Flowers (2009) detail that one of the centres of interest in qualitative research has to do with the risks associated with cruising, those risks being predominantly

homophobic violence, stigmatisation within the gay population, police arrest, and the transmission of HIV/ AIDS. During the interview, Nick rarely touched upon the risks involved in cruising, and when he did, it was only tangentially. What I read in his account is a sense of connection in which the guy who comes from the office, the student, the newcomers and the regulars share a type of 'joy' gay men have been denied. And when recovered, they have realised the erotic has made them capable of truly feeling (Lorde, 1984), not only with their bodies but with their selves. In the almost idyllic Hampstead Heath, Nick and other men have explored their sexuality, for starters, but they have also been reminded of their capacity for developing a strong sense of belonging. This makes them feel that if something happened, if someone was attacked, many would come to help. The erotic has empowered Nick – and seemingly a whole community of men that gather in Hampstead Heath – to appropriate its parks and reclaim the spaces gay men have been denied by heteronormative society. Whilst growing up as part of an oppressed minority with the need to live his love in silence in his school years, Nick went back into the closet after trying to come out in his childhood.

“I sort of tried to come out at school. Which was, very much, not a good idea... We're talking about the early 80's at this point. And... It wasn't the sort of supportive atmosphere that you might possibly find these days... So I kind of rather quickly went back in again. And repressed that, I think. For a number of years...” (Nick – interview)

Nick now does not seem to fear others: he would not go back to hiding, and most importantly, does not fear his erotic power. In her 'uses of the erotic', Lorde says that when 'in touch with the erotic, I become less willing to accept powerlessness, or those other supplied states of being which are not native to me, such as resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, self-denial.' (p.

58). I see Nick's rejection of these states of being when I ask him about his experiences of coming out nowadays to his colleagues, friends, and people he has just met. He responds quickly and confidently:

"No trouble at all. Partly because I've got a lot of experience. Ha! But partly because the world is different now anyway. They're not allowed to be offended anymore. They're not allowed to express shock, revoltingness, horror. Even if they feel it. The world is different." (Nick – interview)

Whilst I recall his voice full of confidence and entitlement saying that nobody is allowed to express their negative views, I think that both the world and Nick are different. Nick now enjoys a world that – on the surface – is less rejecting of the gay selves of men and women who love each other. But at the same time Nick faces subtler ways of oppression, one that still sees and judges cruising as an activity through which gay men look for unsafe, reckless, anonymous sex. This judgement comes without the realisation that it is a heteronormative-patriarchal society which has pushed many gay people to hide their desire, and as a consequence, to look for alternative spaces to live out that desire. I see that Nick and in his community of men are engaging in something powerful beyond the sexual entanglement; I see how they satisfy their needs in harmony with others, and in so doing they create a group in their Hampstead Heath. This grouping process gives them a sense of belonging; a shared perception of being part of the same kind. From this shared perception of belonging, I see that Nick and perhaps other individuals partly construct a collective identity. Finally, I see the paradox of how the invisibility that gay men were obliged to live in, transformed into its opposite and became a desire that is lived in public – perhaps still in the dark – but yet in the public space. A space that was conquered through the erotic power that

has put gay men together, helped them to build a sense of collective self, and transformed a public park into their safe space, into the happiest place.

6.6 *Cameron – an identity that is natural, discovered, and developed through the pleasures and wrongness of desire and the erotic*

Sitting on a brown sofa with his legs crossed, looking at me directly in the eye, inquisitive and cautious, elegantly put together, a man dressed in dark trousers and blue-striped shirt listens to me. After another sip of his tea, he starts talking. His name is Cameron. He gets quickly onto the topic of identity, and onto a discussion of its entanglement with relationships. One of the first things I notice is that he is inclined to understand identity as a component that is given, natural, and essential, in alignment to what scholarly literature on identity classifies as essentialism. The discussion of whether someone is gay as an inborn trait or as a product of social processes is a topic that he proposes and expands on, making it somewhat conclusive:

‘There’s always a big debate about, is a person gay by nature or nurture? I certainly would’ve thought, if I had to make any sort of guess, which is all it could be, I would guess that is more nature than nurture. I mean, I know a family where out of four brothers, three are gay and one only is heterosexual. That suggests to me that it’s... more nature than nurture.’ (Cameron – interview)

This point, which he puts across early in the discussion, is not a central to his understanding of his gay identity; he does not come back to it and does not dwell on it. However, what he does with this comment is set a backdrop narrative that helps him to see gayness as an inherent component of who he is, making it indisputable to others and (most importantly) to himself. With that ontological setup, the happenings that would map his life story occur in the framework of an immutable attraction towards men. Later in the interview, when it was to conclude, this quality of immutable would prove to facilitate the construction of an identity that is affirming and reassuring:

‘[Being gay] means to me that I’m living my life as it is intended.’ (Cameron – interview)

Over the duration of our conversation, among tea and biscuits that helped to soften his flirtatious gaze, Cameron told his life story as a story of discovery of desire. His boyhood became an enquiry when that discovery of desire hallmarked a beginning; a genesis story (Mayer, 2014) that shows an upward movement and development after that realisation. His accounts follow a chronological sequence, a reasoning along the lines of uncovering an attraction that existed since he was a boy; something that was felt but had not been seen, known, or understood:

‘I was in the boys’ brigade; a youth organisation, and it used to have camps. Every summer. And I had heard that what happened during the night was that boys would creep around the tents, and the other ones would do things like pull the pyjama bottoms off and blacken the boys, you know, down in the nether regions. And I didn’t want to go to the boys’ brigade camp. In case I was aroused. If this happened.’ (Cameron – interview)

He discovered desire – which he equates to arousal – through his boys’ brigade story; mental imagery of mythic qualities that was also charged with angst for the unknown. This fantasy of an all-male environment is the beginning of one of many events that he has connected as a sequence. This sequence is part of the construction of his narrative identity. I am not saying he did not have a narrative identity before that fantasy; what I am saying is that his idea of Self became problematic when it clashed with his desire. That clash made him question who was that Cameron, because the Cameron who sought desire – the one who was aroused in presence of other boys – was somehow incompatible with the Cameron who had not experienced that desire. At that point he had not experienced anything that allowed him to materialise that desire and, furthermore, he did not have an available narrative

that was relatable to his fantasies. His desire had lived only in his imagination, and for that imagination he lacked words.

From memories of his early childhood to recent recollections of his early sixties, his life story depicts a series of events in which men were present; some of them as his actual partners or lovers, and some others as mental representations. Although his initial take on his identity is told under an essentialist basis, his further understanding is more in alignment with a relational framework; as in the anecdote of the boys' brigade, where he constructs a narration that positions himself as a reflexive being in relation to the 'Other'. Drawing on Paul Ricoeur's (1992) ideas of narrative identity, Cameron realised that the Other is a human being that holds seemingly opposite qualities to his own. These contrasting qualities trigger questions about the Other in relation to himself. The recognition of the Other with the consequential questions about the Self brings an aspect of Sameness. As a term, Sameness has different meanings in Ricoeur's proposals; the way I use it here is twofold. Firstly, I use it to describe how a human being – in this case Cameron – faces an interruption in his sense of Self for experiencing a desire that is non-normative. The non-normativity of desire comes from the socio-historical context in which Cameron lived at that point; not having a social identity that he could ascribe to or identify with as a boy who desire other boys. That Other is represented by the boys, who seemingly do not share his desire. It was in that particular social context that those boys were simultaneously the source of attraction but could also be source of alienation. This sense of alienation represented an interruption; a crisis in Cameron's understanding of Self and its implications in his life. Secondly, I use Sameness here to describe how the non-normative desire gave Cameron a sense of individuation that allowed him to position himself as a reflexive person,

acknowledging that he was not the Other but that something in the Other resonated within him.

6.6.1 A desire that is wrong... well, not wrong but it needs to be secret

Alongside desire, his understanding of the Self has been tied to an element of secrecy that started as early as the anecdote of the boys' brigade and accompanied him over the years. Cameron perceived his arousal could put him in trouble if his young body reacted with excitement, if his young aroused body had betrayed him showing to other boys something he did not understand but still considered wrong. That was one of the first events that would contribute to making him associate the experience of desire with secrecy. With the boys' brigade camp fantasy as the example he used to illustrate his desire, Cameron implied that this feeling had lived within him for a while but always as a private experience. Desire was constituted both as a source of excitement and a conflict that troubled him. It was his troubled Self that made him question feelings he had not followed through. In spite of not having experienced physical contact with anybody, his imagination was playing a part in his concerns. It was desire causing him both arousal and a sense of wrongness:

'I wasn't really aware as a young man, of those desires, of what they meant. Why I was... almost the way I was. I was conscious that I was attracted to men but I didn't understand that it was a sexual thing... I don't really know, but I sense that there was an awareness... I knew that I was aroused... down below, so to speak. But I didn't know why I was aroused. Or what it represented, but I knew there was something wrong with it... Well, not wrong but there was something there.' (Cameron – interview)

That inexplicable sense of wrongness did not respond to desire itself – which paradoxically caused him pleasure – but it responded to the anxiety of

experiencing a non-normative desire; a desire for which society did not offer an overt narrative that explained it or a Sameness with which he could identify. The perceived wrongness and consequential secrecy would be reinforced by a later experience during his teenage years when, unexpectedly, a stranger masturbated him in the darkness of a cinema.

Cameron was suddenly pulled into the tantalising cavern of the unknown, where he got more pieces of information that were otherwise inaccessible:

‘The first time I ever had, what I think was a sexual experience, was in the cinema... I was sitting there and the next thing, someone sat beside me... It would’ve been pitch-black. And then... The next thing, a hand was over running to my knee. And then... developed from that and he obviously... Well... he masturbated me. I didn’t really know what was happening. I had no idea what was happening to me... I mean... I didn’t really know about that aspect of life... I have to emphasise that things were much more hidden forty years ago... And they weren’t discussed publicly. So, it was a rather steep learning curve.’ (Cameron – interview)

With the confusion of being approached by a faceless stranger, without a narrative that allowed him to name these happenings and what they meant, and without the elements to see the event as potential sexual assault, Cameron started what he calls a learning curve that set those activities in a clandestine territory. His own desire, which needed to be hidden from his peers in the boys’ brigade, and the faceless stranger, whose desire hid in the dark, constituted two pillars of secrecy and furtiveness that would colour part of his identity throughout his life. Even nowadays, when these matters do not need to remain secret, he reflects upon the deliberate concealment of his gayness:

‘Perhaps I’ve regretted, well, not regretted... I’ve never been openly gay with friends, neighbours, or anyone

else... Is that moral cowardice? I don't know.' (Cameron
– interview)

The experience of the cinema comes across to me as a rude awakening that might have played a part in how Cameron makes sense of this identity as a gay man, mostly through recollections of sexual activity and interpretations of desire, sometimes him being the one who desired and sometimes being the desired one. With the experience of the cinema, Cameron realised not only that there were other men who felt attraction for other men, but also that some men actually acted upon those attractions. That happening might have contributed to the construction of a sense of Self through a process of identification with an Other that felt similar to him. Continuing with Ricœur's ideas, the Other, represented here by the stranger who masturbated him in the cinema, was not necessarily an alien element to the Self, but it was an element that helped to answer the questions "who is the Other?" and "who is the 'I'?". That Other served for two purposes simultaneously: to ask "who was that Other that masturbates teenagers in the cinema?" and to define the Self by a process of identification. Including that stranger in his narrative of how he understood his gayness might have allowed Cameron to answer: "that Other has desires like me". This process of identification becomes more apparent through the following story, in which Cameron tells how he tried to act upon his desire in a similar yet gentler way; by inviting one of his school friends to the cinema:

'I used to seat beside a chap –a school friend– and we used to seat at the back row of the science class... there were high benches. And you sat on stools. As supposed to individual desks. So there were long tables. And he and I used to rub each other up. On our legs. Nothing more. There was no touching or beyond. Only rubbing legs with each other. That was highly excitable to a young teenage guy... 15-16 it must've been about that age. And I can remember I said to this guy: 'Why don't

we go to the cinema?’ It used to be a cinema... that showed what was described in those days as continental movies. Which were... very, very mild porn-type things. Erotic, yes, but... very, very mild... And, he and I went there. And sat, we were rubbing legs. And then I thought afterwards: ‘We need to bite the bullet’ so to speak. ‘We need to do something more about this.’ And I suggested we go into the toilets. But... he didn’t... for the remain of that weekend... I was desperately anxious that he would expose me at school. For doing this... But he never did.’
(Cameron – interview)

Under Ricœur’s (1992) view on narrative identity, the way in which Cameron acted upon the relationship with his school friend could be explained partly by the idea of how, when an individual finds their personal narrative being part of a larger narrative shared by others, it allows them to feel identified with – and within – others and gives them the capacity for action. Having been found by the stranger in the cinema and with the untold emotions that the encounter provoked, Cameron could have realised that the desire he had experienced was experienced by others too. This can be seen also as a process of understanding the ways the Other acts. Cameron’s own words ‘*it was a rather steep learning curve*’, could indicate he was in the construction of a personal identity that relied on learning through customs and practices of those who felt similar to him. In his learning process, it seems Cameron uses this faceless stranger and other men – and his experiences with those men – not only to illustrate important events in his life but also, more importantly, to conceptualise who he is in relation to the Other. By inviting his school friend to the cinema and to the toilets afterwards, Cameron was acting upon the desire in the way that Ricœur views the Self as a Self that acts. It is important to notice that a Self that acts is also a Self that, first of all, is affected by the Other’s actions. The Self manifests itself concomitantly as receptive of actions that are performed upon it, but also as an actor. As it gradually becomes

apparent throughout a selection of some of his pivotal encounters with desire and the erotic, relationships with men constitute the core of what Cameron leans on to give meanings to what 'being gay' is. It will also become apparent that through those encounters he defines the Other and by doing that, he engages in a process of understanding and re-understanding of the Self when desire is at stake.

6.6.2 When Cameron visualises that gay men can have, besides sexual encounters, relationships

The next time Cameron found an Other that brought him closer to an understanding of the Self in Sameness, was the first time that he engaged in penetrative sex with a guy. This again happened secretly but this time consensually, in a typing pool when he was a university student:

"I did go to what was a famous public toilet at that time – a pick-up place – and I picked up this attractive, blond-haired guy who was probably two or three years older than me. And we, he – his father was a caretaker in one of the financial buildings in Edinburgh – so we went back to this building and, that was the first time that I was active, sex wise... I penetrated the guy. First time ever. It was completely unknown to me... It was quite exhilarating." (Cameron – interview)

As it is read, the fact that there was a place that was 'famous' for these activities shows, first of all, that there was already a notion of how men with this desire could go and meet other men with the same desires. Besides the availability of that knowledge that dictated the conditions of those encounters, there would be still some aspects of this narrative that were unknown to him. One of the most significant ones is, of course, the penetrative sexual activity he engaged in. However, the reader should remember that Cameron had already imagined and experienced some sort of physical contact, therefore anal sex became an addition to that knowledge. What Cameron had not been

exposed to – and that encounter would become the first time – was the idea of life in partnership, when the blond-haired guy, inadvertently showed him that there were Others who were in long-lasting relationships:

“[The blond-haired guy] wanted to meet me and we met the following week... and he introduced me to his partner. I don’t know how aware he was about that; they didn’t live in the same place... So we met and we went to a pub... And I was really taken with... the second chap, he was dark-haired, he was really – to me – extremely attractive... he was devilish... he had a sense of unpredictability about his behaviour which is quite charming... So, the three of us went back to this... typing pool... That was the first time that I was ever penetrated. The guy with the dark hair penetrated me... I had never experienced anything like that. So, that was... Well, quite mind-blowing... And it ended in a sour note because, the first chap was annoyed, with the second chap. For... showing his attentions more towards me. I just assumed that I’d never see the two of them again. And then about a week or so later, I was at the university waiting in the queue for lunch. And this chap must have been seeking me out, the second chap with the dark hair. And... he asked to meet with me. So I had a... very casual relationship with this chap... I was quite besotted by this guy. I can’t really explain why but his looks, his manner, two or three years older than me. That’s quite significant at 18... I was still living with this couple, who would be in their 70’s at that time. In a small flat. So my mother bought me a flat. To move into. And I hoped that this chap would come in with me but it never happened... He moved on to new pastures. I think he was... always wanting a new adventure.... I just accepted that that was life.” (Cameron – interview)

I do not know whether before that encounter Cameron had wished to live in partnership with a guy. What the aforementioned account suggests to me is that meeting that couple opened the possibilities of first thinking of and, secondly, pursuing a relationship for himself. Whether the dark-haired and

the blond-haired guy separated after the threesome with Cameron, I do not know. I cannot say whether the element of secrecy played a part in their subsequent encounters. What I can say, however, is that the very act of meeting others who established more long-lasting bonds based on mutual agreement would become part of his narrative identity and would expand the larger narrative of how gay men relate to each other. Seeing beyond the sexual nature of encounters with men was a view that expanded and persisted throughout Cameron's life. Although the dark-haired guy never lived with him, there were others who did, and it was through those long-term relationships that Cameron has elaborated a personal narrative that has continuity at its core. Living in partnership is something that appears to be crucial for Cameron, to the point that he has privileged this aspect over desire:

'I had another sort of longer-term relationship with a guy who was... two or three years older than me, as well. Someone that I wasn't particularly attracted to... I didn't really find him attractive-looking. But we were standing outside a meeting place, if I can call it that way... And he said: 'Why don't we come back to my flat and have a coffee?' And we went back and one thing led to another. So we became a relationship. But I never ever felt the strength of desire. With him. I think a lot of that was down to... apart from the fact that those acts were illegal, in those days, there wasn't a huge... open gay community in a place like Edinburgh, or in Glasgow; so, the field that was open was much more limited than it is today... You felt it was a bit like the expression Hobson's Choice; you didn't have any choice. There was only a limited number of guys of your own age that were prepared to live a life that was... in those days considered quite unconventional.' (Cameron – interview)

The idea with which Cameron finishes his comment is descriptively compelling: the willingness to live what was perceived as an unconventional life. With illegality and oppression being commonplace, it was difficult to find

people who were openly gay and were prepared to endure the impediments that were institutionalised in Scotland at that time. Those conditions make the fact that Cameron wished to establish a relationship and live in partnership, even though he had to live against social norms and even though his desire had to be put on a second place, even more significant. With his current long-term partner, he experienced the stability that has allowed them to live as a couple but desire had been secondary, finding it difficult to integrate it to his relationship.

6.6.3 When desire and continuity happen with the same person

In spite of being together for a few decades, Cameron did not bring his partner into the conversation until late on in the interview, which intrigued me. Although there are a number of interpretations for the complex narrative I am going to address, the one I chose to elaborate on is associated with the erotic and secrecy. Cameron first commented on his partner when speaking about his long-term relationship being in crisis. In what he describes as an exchange of assets, Cameron told me two stories of erotic engagement with two guys at two different points in his life, whilst being in this long-term relationship. Those guys received payments in order to have sexual encounters with him and Cameron maintained them in secret. Those relationships have marked two turning points in his life for different reasons. The first guy who was involved in sexual encounters with him, a university student, made Cameron feel besotted and became paramount in his sense of Self. I suggest that had to do with the reciprocity in finding someone who corresponded to his desire not only sexually and erotically, but also gave him the continuity of a relationship. Even if was mediated by money, that relationship integrated the desire and the continuity he had been looking for since very early in his life. That student reflected Cameron's desire in a way

that surpassed the ephemeral qualities of the sexual encounters and also expanded his conception of the relationships he could establish with gay men. Among all the stories Cameron told me, that one seemed to be the only one in which the erotic was reciprocal. In all the previous ones he was either the one who looked at others erotically or the one who was seen erotically. The fact that this one was reciprocal made it not only meaningful, but also one that made him question and look at himself in a different light:

‘He swept me off my feet, I have to say. I never thought that at an advanced age, in many respects that I could be head over heels... About someone... I cannot even tell you why I allowed myself to be besotted... I was always brought up never to betray my feelings; always to have a stiff British upper lip. Never to lose one’s temper, always to be cool, calm, and collected... And, I met this chap on a regular basis for two years. Possibly more. I was, of course, helping him out. If I can put it that way. He was a lovely chap. So... it did come as a huge surprise to me that I became quite infatuated. Three or four years ago... And I was not under any illusions that he was loving me, or anything like that... I’m not that stupid. But... I would’ve thought that in any relationship where there’s an exchange of ‘assets’ – money –... there’s a danger that both parties end up despising each other... In situations like that, one has to be very concerned about... allowing the person to be treated as graciously and respectfully as possible. And I would hope I managed to achieve that to such an extent... Although I don’t see the person – he’s no longer in Britain – he still keeps in touch... on a very regular basis, which I find (a) encouraging and (b) quite flattering, that there was a genuine... warmth there... I wasn’t under any illusions that there was love. On his part... But... there must have been an element of eroticism on his part. I certainly did find it quite erotic; being in a position where I was able to give money for those things. I would see it as... a mutual advantage situation...’ (Cameron – interview)

This was only a fraction of the part of the interview that Cameron dedicated to remembering and reflecting on this relationship that clearly remains very important for him. Although the aforementioned story is a complex one, involving a number of elements that offer angles for analysis – age gap, cultural differences, money aspects, the mention of ‘love’ or the lack of it, among others – for the purpose of this paper I focus only on two elements: the secrecy that enshrouded this relationship and the erotic qualities Cameron attached to it. Secrecy, once again, creates the atmosphere that has coloured many of his stories. This time Cameron is not a teenage boy trying to conceal his arousal from other boys. He is not confused about what he is experiencing; unlike the fantasy of the boys’ brigade, he is content with the experience of that desire. Unlike in the experience with the stranger in the cinema, Cameron is engaging in a relationship that is reciprocal, that is consensual, and that developed over time. Unlike 40 years ago, Cameron now has a narrative that allows him to clearly identify himself as a gay man enjoying experiences with a young man; Cameron lives in a social context that has a different view on relationships between gay men, and overall there is an available narrative that allows these relationships to exist publicly and legally. However, the effects that this social context has on the personal narrative with which Cameron frames his identity are still unclear. He maintained that relationship with the student in secret. The reason for the secrecy has to do with his current relationship. His partner, a man of a similar same age to him, was unaware of this side-line relationship and when everything came to light, it was, in Cameron’s words, ‘*a tortuous experience*’. Although now he relies on a different social context where gay relationships are valid and legal, his personal narrative is still influenced by oppressive power, perhaps the same oppressive power that made these matters unspeakable in the past.

6.6.4 Living between contrasting narratives

Both Cameron and his partner were engaged in a relationship based on a social discourse that places monogamy at the core of it, but simultaneously their relationship sits within the customs and practices of gayness, which do not necessarily harmonise with the idea of a monogamous relationship. From what Cameron had learned, gay men used to meet furtively in pick-up places and engage in somewhat ephemeral encounters. The steep learning curve he faced when the stranger masturbated him in the cinema, the threesome with the dark-haired and the blond-haired guys, and other encounters, were not happenings that promoted the idea of a monogamous relationship. It was through desire and sexual encounters that he learned most of what he knew about being gay. Yet, perhaps from a wider normative discourse of coupledness, they decided to make their long-term relationship a seemingly monogamous one, even though Cameron was seeing other people. His demonstrated interest, both in the long-term-stable relationship and the long-term-erotic relationship, shows that he was living between narratives: one that centres on monogamy and stability, one that praises the adventure and the erotic, and one that says that sexual activity is experienced anonymously and furtively.

Although all those narratives have shaped his identity as a gay man, it is through those that touched upon the erotic that he gives meaning to that narrative identity. In other words, his sexual relationships with men and his experiences of desire have aided the construction of a plot that maps where, when, and how things happened. Sex and desire have created the structure of his life story. But structure and plot do not equate narrative. It is mainly his experiences with erotic desire that provide a suggestion of meaning in his life. The stories of sexual encounters and desire add to the plot and sometimes the

strangeness and exhilaration dramatise that plot with ambivalent undertone. Those stories leave, however, the ways sexual experiences impact on his sense of self in the territory of the unknown, in contrast to other narrations of his youth and adulthood, which he describes through complex elaboration of the details and with identity-making qualities. This would be the signature of his interview, among his stories of relationships with men, the ones he imprinted with transcendental attributes are the ones that are charged with erotic content.

6.6.5 The erotic as a powerful, creative force

Although there are many possible ways to define desire and the erotic, to apply my epistemological approach, I draw on the definitions that participants use to refer to the terms that are relevant to the research. In this case, during the interview Cameron used desire to refer to the experience of attraction that is tied to sexual arousal and mostly conveys a bodily experience that briefly touches on emotional content. On the other hand, he used the erotic more obliquely, bringing together symbols, meanings, mental imagery, and interactions that played beyond the realm of touch, conveying a sensual and subjective experience. Whilst his desire often leads to sexual activities that become markers in his life story, his experiences of the erotic address transcendental views not captured by the experience of a sexual encounter. Also, the erotic often stood by itself, without necessarily connecting to a sexual encounter; the erotic could just linger on the dark hair, the devilish smile, and charming attitude of the chaps with whom he has been besotted.

This view of the erotic as a transcendental and meaning-making force is relatable to Audre Lorde's (1984) work 'sister outsider'. For her, the erotic is a source of liberating, creative, and informing power. This power, says Lorde, has been suppressed repetitively at various levels by other social forces that

limit it and distort it, equating it to sexual intercourse or pornography. Especially in oppressed groups, this distortion becomes an impediment to seeing the erotic as the force that allows individuals to see themselves as connected beings, able to create richer and more complex narratives. This is observable in Cameron's distinction of the desire, which focuses on the physicality of sexual activity, and the erotic, which focuses on feelings and meanings surrounding the relationship with the person. Whilst the customs and practices of desire within gay men offered him sexual encounters hidden in the dark, the erotic within him comes as the metaphor of 'the kernel within herself' that Lorde mentions in her work; the erotic being an energy that strengthens and empowers her experiences. Comparably, the erotic has made Cameron reclaim a more intimate relationship with a man, from an early age, even if that meant to defy laws and conventions.

This liberating power of the erotic is exemplified by another relationship when, in a narrative reprise of fortune, Cameron met another guy with whom he engaged in a side-line relationship. This time, however, the secrecy did not last long. Something happened in this human connection that made Cameron bridge the narratives he had seen as incompatible for all those years. By inviting that guy to participate in a threesome with him and his partner, Cameron not only enhanced the sexual life of the couple, but also expanded their understanding of what it means to be in a long term relationship, challenged their ideas of monogamy, made more transparent their communication in regards to their wishes and concerns, and overall, released the creative power of the erotic:

'Eventually I met someone... And I enjoyed that. And I thought: 'The only way I can do this partner of mine to be a bit more reasonable, is to employ the theory: if you can't beat them, join them.' So I suggested... I kept

saying... that I would really like to see him with... another guy... And he said: 'Oh well, I'll think about it'. And he put it off, and he put it off, and he put it off. And I could really never know when my partner – despite all these years – when he speaks to me, I never really know what he means... He's very evasive. I think it's purely a cultural thing and his... family background; quite stern parents... But anyway, he came along... I booked a hotel. I was really apprehensive about how it would work out, but we went back to the hotel and... it went very well and... Initially... my partner kept on saying: "Oh this is new to me. I'm totally new to all this! I'm not in my comfort zone." Well, after a few months of doing this I think he's very much in his comfort zone.' (Cameron – interview)

As Ricœur puts it in 'time and narrative' (1984), desire that is unable to provide a narrative is a desire unable to construct history; the succession of events narrated by the individual do not suffice for the creation of their identity understood as Self. Selfhood involves not only a sequential narrative of events, but also a sense of responsibility to reconfigure and accept and promote changes. My appreciation of the influence of the erotic as a creative force comes across in Cameron's narrative when he speaks about how he decided to break the pattern of a life in duplicity; living a life of hiding relationships, not noticing that by doing that he was suppressing himself in the way society had suppressed gay desire. By living between narratives, Cameron tied himself to a desire that was unable to co-exist with the erotic. Whilst desire itself provided a plot in Cameron's story, when desire happened in combination with the erotic it gave meaning and created not only plot but history:

'It's quite ironic to think that two people have been brought together because of the presence of a third party. It's amazing that, one would think that that would cause a division, and it's produced the exact opposite effect. He

[his partner] was much more restrained, now he's much more comfortable with life, he's much more relaxed. And I have to say that is quite a turn on for me. To be, having, sexual relations with another party... We're three.' (Cameron – interview)

Sitting in front of me, comfortably embraced by the sofa, when he talks about the erotic this man's eyes look up and a grin appears into his face. That grin tells me he feels at ease with how he describes his life now. I have a sense of admiration for him; for the way he appreciates his gay life now and how he defended it before, however difficult it was. The Cameron who is giving me this interview differs to the one who was trying to know what his feelings represented when he was a child. The Cameron that tells me his story has a cultural narrative, one that, even if dependent upon the cultural conventions and language usage, has merged some elements of the contemporary views on gay identity and intuitively rescued the potential of the erotic. With those elements, Cameron has written a narrative history in the Ricœurian sense and shared it with me from a place of empowerment.

'When I retired a few years ago, I did go through a period of unsettled times. 'What did I do in all those 40 years? Could I have done better in life?' I had a successful enough career but nothing inspiring... I went to university, I studied a subject that I enjoyed but... 'Could I've done something better? Could I've been a journalist?' ...I did have that terrible feeling for: 'Oh, was that all a waste of time?' Not that I didn't have a successful career in terms of monetary rewards, I didn't dislike my work either; I wasn't one of those people who hated every Monday morning... But one thing that never crossed my mind was: 'Have I regretted living a gay life?' Not one iota. I'm living my life as it is intended... As a gay person.' (Cameron – interview)

7 | Findings – overarching analysis – ten men

7.1 *Introduction*

The ten men who participated in this study offered me personal stories about their lives in connection with their views on the concept of 'gay identity'. From the transcribed conversations I had with these men, set out in the previous subchapters, I organised detailed texts that provided a wide view on their narrative identities, where narrative identity is understood as close in meaning to autobiography. Those subchapters provided a special viewpoint as a narrative witness to the ways in which individuals create meanings through telling stories. The selected interview extracts offered interpretations of how those stories are made from the intricate interaction between powerful macro narratives – such as gender, heteronormativity, and religion – and more personal narratives located in family, school, and workplace settings that altogether shape these men's understandings of their experiences of being gay. Of crucial interest was the role that romantic and erotic relationships played in the creation of meaning around being gay. It would be intuitive to believe that those relationships, for being participants' first-hand experiences, correspond to more personal narratives, however, they are informed by broader macro-narratives that are socially and culturally produced and then consumed by individuals. This made it necessary to look more closely at how participants constructed their life stories at the convergence zone of personal, social, and cultural narratives.

Multiple men, featuring in erotic and romantic stories, populated the text and enlightened unexplored areas about collective identities and selfhood; where collective identities refer to the assumed commonalities between gay men as an abstract whole, and selfhood is understood as the personal life story

that gives the person a sense of individuality and uniqueness. It is through these stories of intimate relationships, whether they refer to intimacy of the bodies and/or intimacy of the emotions, that I now, in this overarching chapter, analyse the key themes generated when approaching the research inquiry of how gay men make sense of the interaction between their romantic and erotic relationships and their sense of identity.

This chapter then deals with themes rather than with the individuals' stories, such that Arthur, Cameron, Giovanni, Gustav, Karpathos, Luca, Malone, Manoel, Maurice, and Nick may be mentioned less because the focus will be on the key themes that their narratives as a whole convey. In contrast to the individual narratives set out in previous chapters, here I develop these overarching themes by doing a close reiterative reading of each interview transcript and coding its contents in what became a four-dimensional representation of their experiences of being gay with a focus on relational aspects.

7.2 Gay men's narratives of their erotic and romantic relationships – relational aspects in the making of gay identities

The analytic process I developed consisted of an ongoing engagement with the narratives that started – in its written form – with the transcription of the interviews and double-checking with audio recording, to continue with the initial coding process, for which I used the software NVivo 11. As my analytic strategy was data driven, I coded the interview content even if at the beginning it did not seem entirely related to the focus of my research question. From this initial coding, I identified four superordinate themes which are summarised in Figure 3.

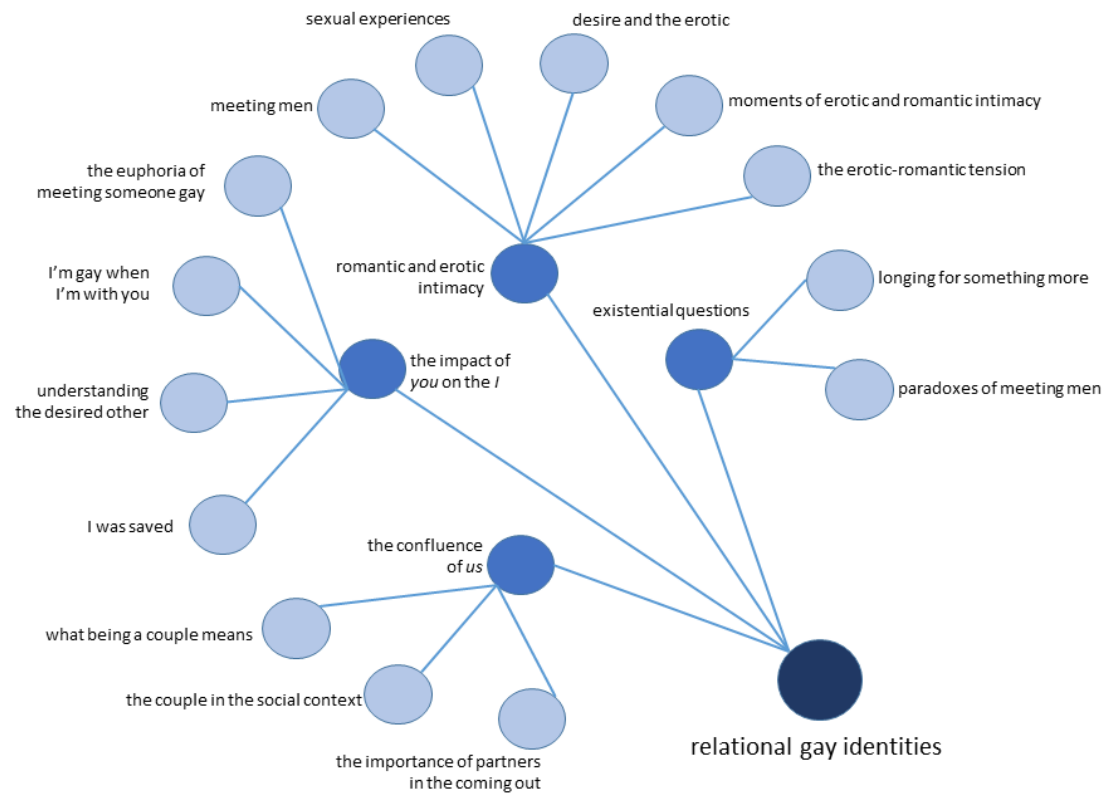


Figure 3

Representation of participants' experiences of being gay with focus on relational aspects

In a framework where the term 'relational' refers to the ways in which participants connect with other gay men romantically and erotically, this section is devoted to exploring the relational aspects in participants' narratives and explaining how these relations become crucial, both in their identity construction and in the meanings given to that identity. In order to expand on these meanings, I deconstructed and organised participants' narratives in four dimensions that explain how their encounters and relationships – actual or imagined – with other men have shaped their understanding of their identities. These dimensions are (1) the impact of *you* on the *I*; (2) romantic and erotic intimacy; (3) the confluence of *us*; and (4) existential questions. I generated 14 nodes, through which I attempt to show how narration operates as a meaning-making process and how the relationships participants engaged in had identity-making qualities.

7.3 Dimension 1 – the impact of 'you' on the 'I'

In the process of making sense of what being gay meant to them, participants said they needed models and sources from which or whom they could learn about gay-related topics but these were limited. Common sources were the media, literature and pornography because these were the only windows through which some aspects of gayness were visible. These windows were, however, scarce and sometimes they had negative undertones. Another way in which these men reflected on their identities and constructed a personal sense of who they are was through meeting and interacting with other gay men. This played an important part in participants' ongoing process of understanding what being gay meant to them. In contrast to media representations, literature and pornography, meeting other gay men provided a real-life understanding of how to bond and connect with their peers. It was

often thanks to a connection with other gay men that participants felt liberated, more confident, supported and, overall, accompanied. Those connections also gave rise to confusion and frustration, and fuelled their yearning desires. The complexity of those interactions does not allow me to say that they had positive or negative effects on the construction of their gay identities but it requires me, instead, to analyse the intricacies of the relationships and interpret how they affect gay men's sense of identity.

The 'other gay men' and their interactions with participants are the focus of this section entitled 'the impact of *you* on the *I*'. As previously described, sometimes implicitly and sometimes quite explicitly, participants' sense of who they are was modelled, modified, questioned, challenged, changed, or shattered through their interactions with other gay men, who in their quality of partners, boyfriends, fiancés, lovers, friends, friends with benefits or fuckbuddies impacted on who was the *I* that spoke about being gay. This main theme is subdivided into four subthemes that explain in detail these men's experiences: (a) the euphoria of meeting someone gay; (b) understanding the desired other; (c) I was saved; and (d) I'm gay when I'm with you.

(a) The euphoria of meeting someone gay

Participants told stories of how at various points in their lives, they were romantically or sexually involved with men; even if they did not find them physically attractive, even if they did not feel they were compatible, even if they did not really know them, or even if they could not find a convincing reason to be with them. Other than the fact that they were gay, those men with whom participants had sexual encounters or long-terms relationships did not make them feel certain about being with them; being gay seemed to be everything and at the same time it did not seem to be enough. Manoel

addresses this very point by explaining how he did not find enough elements to form a strong connection with the first gay man he was involved with, except for the state of intense excitement and happiness that stemmed from the fact that he was meeting someone who was gay as well:

‘November 2005... I met [a] guy and we dated for three months and in the end I didn't like him... I think it was just the euphoria of meeting someone... He was talking about marriage and... I was like: “I just met you!” ...Education wise, we're in different levels as well. I was at university and he was... I don't wanna sound... pretentious, but he was doing like waiting for a shop and he was older than me, and wasn't educated, so I couldn't connect.’ (Manoel – interview)

Similar education level, compatibility and deep knowledge of the person seemed to be elements Manoel considers to be important in order to start a relationship with someone. However, that intense excitement expressed in his narrative was enough to override those important elements involved in his decision to date that man. Manoel later explained he believes gay men tend to be eager to engage in sexual or romantic relationships with other gay men because of the limited spaces and opportunities to socialise with their peers. Manoel says that, even if gay men meet in daily life situations, it is difficult to know who is gay and who is not. This sense of not knowing who is gay may contribute to the building up of a sense of isolation that supports the decision to relate to men they do not find particularly relatable.

Stories about getting involved in relationships or sexual encounters without knowing exactly why they got involved, were abundant. Such stories were expressed as an urge to be intimate. The explanations participants gave for those relationships were associated with their memories of younger years when they had not seen or met anybody who was gay. Growing up with no gay men around to relate to left them with a feeling of being alone with their

feelings and desires. And when they finally met someone gay, it became an occasion of genuine excitement and illumination. It became an opportunity that needed to be seized because there was a perception that there would not be another. Malone talks about this same eagerness to meet and – in this case – have sex with a stranger but his narration of the excitement to meet another person like him adds some nuances in terms of an eagerness to know if that person was gay, eagerness to recognise and corroborate someone else's identity:

'When I was 14, I think I met another [gay man]... I had such a crush on this guy. But he was like 30 and I was 14. ...I was at this conference thing with my parents... and they're having some food at one of the bars... and, this guy asked us if he could sit next to us. And he did... he was... a little bit flamboyant but not too flamboyant. And he was talking to [a woman] and I was all the time like: "Is it his girlfriend or is it his sister? ...Oh my God!" I was so stupid but I remember... I was trying to give him the eye! At 14! And I was like: "Maybe he'll follow me into the bathroom!" I don't know what I was thinking! I had no experience of anything... to do with cruising or anything like that sort of thing but: "I just want sex!"' (Malone – interview)

The eager boy, the unsuspecting stranger, his suspected gayness, the desire to know, the impossibility to know, the unaware parents, the furtiveness, the rush, the need to communicate through gazes and looks, the boy that seems unable to speak to the stranger and wants sex with him instead. Malone's story, in its brevity, depicts a great number of difficulties in meeting and interacting that might be familiar to a number of gay men but I want to focus on one aspect: the sense of scarcity that infuses Malone's account of the encounter with that man. It gives an impression of the unavailability of other gay men with whom he could speak or connect. Given that Malone had briefly

met and spoken only to another gay teenager, the potentially gay man at the conference would have been only the second person Malone identified as gay. This lack of connections put Malone in a situation of isolation, as he did not have anyone else to talk about what he considered unspeakable. Besides his age and his flamboyance, the stranger is not depicted in detail, which suggests to me that what mattered to Malone at that point was that that man might have been gay and nothing else.

This account and other participants' narratives depict the meeting of another gay man for the first time as an event full of intense emotions, full of certain excitement they had not experienced before. Because gay men tended to remain invisible in participants' lives, the emotions associated with meeting a gay man for the first time seemed to resurface in later years and affect them in following encounters. For a couple of participants, this urge gradually decreased once they started meeting other gay men. However, the need to relate to other gay men, just because they were gay, reappeared, even if they did not necessarily act on that feeling. Some participants commented on how, at various points in their lives, they settled with a man only because the man showed interest in having a stable relationship and living in partnership. Since there were no other gay men around who were ready to do that, Cameron compared the situation with the expression 'Hobson's Choice', where 'you didn't have any choice' and Luca expressed it as the feeling of being 'the last man on Earth' who found another species.

Altogether, the experience of meeting another gay man – mainly but not uniquely for the very first time – was of particular significance in these individuals' lives. The identity-formation qualities of these events can be observed in how the emotions they provoked were fundamental in the exploration of their feelings towards men and in many cases, to confirm a

sense of a gay self. Malone's narrative of eagerness to meet that man, have sex with that man, and corroborate that that man is gay, links into the next subtheme, in which I suggest that a non-definitive list of acts such as meeting with, talking to, having sex with, getting the attention of, or being observed by another gay man contributes to the formation of personal sense of what is being gay.

(b) Understanding the desired other

Many of the thoughts, stories and recollections participants told during the interviews were clear attempts to gain an understanding of a person with whom they were, or wanted to be, involved romantically or erotically. In this theme I use these accounts to explain how in *understanding the desired other*, participants understood aspects of themselves. The extract I use to make my case relates to Gustav's experience of knowing and desiring one of his friends. This desire that spans decades has made Gustav think about his friend's identity but his thoughts have revealed more about himself than they did about his friend:

'Gerald, I've known him since I was 13 years old... We never had anything sexual. He's had his sexual encounters with both men and women... never with me... probably that's why our relationship has lasted so long... you might ask: "Gustav, are you in love with this guy?" In a way yes. But it's not expressed through sex. But yes. Have I ever fantasised with him sexually? Yes... it's just thoughts, they come and they go. Does he know I fantasize with him? Yes, he does. Does he fantasize about me? Yes, he does... I find it confusing myself... This thing about Gerald... He doesn't see himself as gay, although he has had gay encounters... Yet we can speak one another about these gay feelings, we can express this love about one another... in a non-physical way... obviously... there are all these gay tensions... they grow both in my life and in his life. So, am I gay? There is this

notion, this notion of this transience, which doesn't fit in the literature... "Are you gay or not?" ...in reality it's, it's a cycle. And, how do you express that cycle is entirely up to you.' (Gustav – interview)

In this extract, Gustav emphasises two qualities of his friend: that he has had sexual encounters with men and women; and that does not see himself as gay. Although Gustav shares these same life circumstances, he identifies them first in his friend and it is only later that he refers to his own position. Gustav appears to attempt to resolve his confusion of how Gerald 'doesn't see himself as gay, although he has had gay encounters' and this provides him with a platform on which to address his own questions. It is through trying to understand the other that he can construct new meanings about his own identity. This is particularly evident when he poses the question about being gay or not, and rather than answering with a definitive statement, he brings a sense of temporality by offering his view of the cyclical desires that add a tone of non-permanence.

This self-understanding derived from understanding the other implies that individuals engage in the co-construction of gayness through observation, interaction and dialogue with their peers. It also suggests to me a sense of empowerment; a sense of individuals controlling the meanings they give to their identities and claiming their right to do so. This making of identities rather than adherence to identities that have been made socially available is reinforced in the next theme, in which an intimate encounter or relationship can make a massive difference in someone's course of life.

(c) I was saved

Saved from the hopelessness of relationships, from being trapped in drug consumption, from blatant discrimination, from verbal violence: in this theme I group participants' accounts of how a personal connection – whether

a partner, lover, or friend – made them feel as if they were rescued from imminent danger at particular points in their lives. In the first one of two quotations I use to explain this idea, Arthur tells of how his acceptance of living solo – which was undesirable but seemingly inevitable – was changed when he met his current partner, with whom he created the conditions to live together:

‘Michael is my man, he’s the one who made me recover my faith in mankind. After years alone I simply thought I would be single for the rest of my life. I’m easy, I fall easily for my partners, but the man who wants to have my heart needs to be someone very special. And finding special is not a simple task. And Michael is very special.’
(Arthur – interview)

The restoration of his faith in mankind resonates with a narrative shared by Manoel, who mentioned how his life was changed by the meaningful connections he has made with friends on the meet-up groups he attends. Manoel had started to consume drugs after being offered them by one of the men he met via Grindr. He associates his drug consumption with the moment he engaged in unsafe sexual practices. After a night of regret and once the effects of the drugs passed, he worried about the impact of his decisions and went to a sexual health clinic, where he was tested and cleared of any sexually transmitted infections. This episode made him reflect about the type of connections he was really looking for. He started to look for alternative options to socialise, having reached the conclusion that Grindr was not the right environment for him. He found and became interested in meet-up groups, an online-based social network that aims to connect people who share similar interests and encourage them to have in-person meetings and support each other. In contrast to Grindr, the groups he joined were oriented towards establishing friendships or doing outdoor activities, and through those drug-

free spaces, they helped him to construct more long-lasting relationships. As expressed in the next quotation, these in-person connections contributed to saving him from what he calls a collapse:

‘In those four months I was doing drugs I was cancelling all, avoiding having meetings with friends. Just because I was spending my money on drugs... I was too tired and I just wanted to sleep... I deleted Grindr... to stop it [going to meet men for one-off sexual encounters and have drugs] ...Now I go to my meet ups and I feel really good because... suddenly I’m meeting people and I don’t have to rely on this mobile app... I’m still going to meet ups since the actual collapse... meet ups are, to me, the best way... to actually meet guys and potentially something else happens... To me, it happens more naturally when outside, speaking to people, and we just... go naturally... and things might go further, more naturally... you're more free to be yourself, I think.’
(Manoel – interview)

Manoel’s and Arthur’s narratives have in common the depiction of a critical point in their romantic lives. One of them because he had accepted to be single even if he desired to live in partnership, the other because he was impetuously meeting people whose interests in sex and drugs were seemingly incompatible with the idea of having a long-term partner and meaningful friendships. Whilst the title of this theme about being saved might give an initial impression that the individuals are rescued by someone or something else, it is significant that in each there is an act of engagement with life in which both Arthur and Manoel showed initiative and implemented actions to make the changes they wanted. These changes could only be made in reciprocity, in mutuality with the other and they both acknowledged throughout their interviews the importance that their relationships have had for them. Arthur cultivated a long-distance relationship with his partner, sold his company and eventually left Australia to live with his partner in the UK. Manoel stopped

taking drugs, sought professional help, decided to avoid his meetings via Grindr and opted for different environments and dynamics in which to meet people. Whilst both narratives tell stories of men who made changes for themselves, their partners, lovers, and friends played an important role in facilitating those changes, not only by motivating these changes but also by directly impacting on the co-modification of their ideas of what being gay means. As seen in the next theme, participants' narratives express how their sense of identity not only becomes prominent when in relationship with a partner or lover but sometimes it is those connections that bring their identities into being.

(d) I'm gay when I'm with you

The abstract qualities of the term 'identity' and the apparent simplicity of the term 'gay' made participants struggle to communicate what being gay meant to them. One of the aspects they relied upon in order to articulate their ideas and bring the abstraction to concreteness, from their thoughts to the narrative, was their special relationships with men they found significant. The specialness of those relationships cannot be pinned down to specific qualities but it can be said that, in many cases, those relationships eased their uncertainties, calmed their anxieties, and allowed them to iron out the making-sense processes associated with the often distressing experiences they lived as gay men. In *I'm gay when I'm with you* I explain how participants cemented their understandings of gayness through those special relationships. In contrast to other connections, these in particular gave them a sense of roundness to identities that were harsh and rough.

To give an example of the identity-making qualities of these relationships, Karpathos describes in the next extract how he had had dates and one-off sexual encounters with different men for years without identifying

himself as gay. But it was his relationship with a man with whom he lived and for whom he had feelings that appears to have contributed to him assimilating an identity that until then had made him feel alienated:

'I wasn't gay, before him... I was just another bloke who banged boys every now and then, for fun. But I was straight, it's hard to explain but my sex life with guys didn't have to do with me... I was straight. Because I knew what I liked, but that was all. There wasn't need of anything else... This need, for him, for someone... I changed... by means of him, by means of my partnership with him.' (Karpathos – interview)

The physicality of the sexual acts with unidentified men is described as an intermittent activity that, aside the momentary pleasure, did not have other effects on him. As encounters of bodies that did not touch his sense of self, his previous sexual encounters were compatible with his identification as a straight man; a compatibility that his relationship with his then lover did not offer. This change, from identifying himself as straight to gay, goes beyond the use of a label; this change implied bringing into existence a man who was able to relate to another on more levels than just a sexual one and, in doing so, created possibilities for two individuals to coexist in the consonance of their identities. Presumably, because his partner was outspoken about being gay and because they lived together for several months, Karpathos found himself in an environment that allowed him to experience something that his previous encounters had not offered. Whilst the reasons for his change are unclear, what seems to be clear is that for him, a relationship had elements that were consequential to the acceptance of an identity that was, otherwise, improbable.

Selected for the compelling description of his feelings of being set free from a strong oppressive force, in the following quotation Maurice describes

the sense of empowerment that he got from his first relationship and how it led him towards the expression of his gay identity:

‘He was my first partner and, yeah, it didn’t end well because we went out to this club –I was 17, I entered being underage, but because he was 20 they allowed us both in– and he ended up... I saw him kissing someone else... That was the first time I went to a gay club. So, that wasn’t a great experience... I met him online... there were these chat rooms, so I went into the gay chat room and... he was available... I come from a village where there are not many people around... so yeah... with him, it was because he was the option. The one option I had. I was attracted to him and I just had sex with him... It wasn’t a great experience for a first relationship, or for first sexual encounter but... I think in a way it was liberating because... I thought I didn’t have to pretend that I liked certain girls; I used to pretend: “I really fancy her”, when I didn’t. So, finally I could say: “I fancy this man!”’ (Maurice – interview)

In spite of Maurice’s partially negative assessment of his first relationship, it is noteworthy that his experience with this man led him to recognise that he did not need to express heterosexuality by saying he liked certain girls. This relationship, however unfortunate, motivated a change that resulted in the externalisation and proud embracement of his desire.

With *I’m gay when I’m with you*, it was my intention to highlight how the stories of tribulation participants shared depict a difficult process of understanding their desires, feelings, and longings and how those longings, feelings, and desires – although unexpected and many times unwelcome in their immediate circles – were alleviated by the special relationships. The relationships became an opportunity to foster self-understanding and, in many cases, participants came out of them with a sense of being transformed, with a different understanding of who they were.

In this first dimension of the relational aspects of identities, I grouped together the narratives that convey the momentousness that erotic and romantic relationships have in the understanding of gay identities. Through them I demonstrated that, whilst participants assimilated, repeated, and sometimes re-interpreted representations of gayness obtained from available discourses; it was often through the intimacy of their relationships and encounters with other gay men that participants created meanings that felt fair, unique, and appropriate to them.

Dimension 2 – romantic and erotic intimacy

In this dimension, I grouped together entire stories or isolated episodes of erotic and romantic intimacy as narrated by participants. Given the subjectivity involved in the use of the terms 'erotic' and 'romantic', some participants also engaged in attempts to theorise what they understood 'erotic' and 'romantic' to be. I decided to include those theoretical explanations in the extracts because they provided context to their stories. The following narratives, therefore, deal with the factual at the same time as they deal with the conceptual. Overall, what I analyse here are the forms in which these men express their experiences of intimacy in words and the resultant intertwining of those narratives with the participants' sense of self. In this intertwinement of selves and relationships that the narratives provide, I also address stories of participants' relationships. From the moment of planning to meet someone, the actual moment of meeting someone, and the process of getting to know them, to the moment they started a relationship with them, I analyse participants' narratives of their thoughts, feelings, and actions of being with someone dear to them. The concept 'relationship' is defined here in terms of the meaningfulness that participants attributed to their connection with

someone, regardless of the time they had been together and regardless of the label they had given to their connection.

In the following subsections, I explain how I divided this main theme into six subthemes that explain in detail their experiences and the meaning-making processes associated with them. These six subthemes are: (a) meeting men; (b) desire and the erotic; (c) sexual experiences; (d) the erotic – romantic tension; (e) moments of romantic and erotic intimacy; and (f) what I dream of when I'm with you.

(a) Meeting men

Finding men to have sexual encounters with was not difficult; there was a commonality observable in participants' narratives of a sense of immediate availability of men who would be willing to engage in some sort of sexual activity. As was illustrated by participants' accounts of how technologies such as mobile applications could help for those purposes, it became clear that participants found meeting men through sex not to be a problem. It was Nick who said that 'there's gonna be always another [man] around the corner' and Giovanni's comment complemented it well when he said that 'if you really have the urge and you don't mind who you're going to [have sex with] you can have sex every day.'

Although the idea of having sexual encounters with random men was mentioned and sometimes implied, there was another clear idea that most participants expressed overtly. This was their wish to establish a meaningful relationship, beyond the sexual encounters. In *meeting men*, I collected the narratives that detail how participants pursued those meaningful relationships, with men with whom they wanted to explore more than sex, and how these initial stages happened. Prolonged socialisation was a common and fundamental element that facilitated richer and more meaningful

encounters between gay men, which eventually transformed into relationships. In the next quotation Manoel explains how he met a man with whom he felt an initial connection that gradually developed into a romantic-erotic two-month relationship:

‘In the same pub where I’m going to tonight... Yeah, I met him, like tonight... that was in one of the first meet-ups. And we were texting... “How are you?” ...I became really gradually looking for him at meet-ups. And then in August, it happened that in one of these groups – in a gay walking group, when we were on a hike – I told him on a Saturday: “What are you up to on Sunday? ...I’m meeting with my... ex-housemate for drinks to catch up... feel free to join”. You know, I told him: “Unless you want to come tonight; I’m meeting with some friends and we are going down to Soho.” And he went, and it happened; we liked each other. And then, we were meeting twice a week...’ (Manoel – interview)

Manoel’s narrative describes a progressive mutual interest between him and his friend. That they had the chance to get to know each other in different social environments over certain period, allowing them to develop an explorative relationship which gave them the opportunity to experience sexual encounters at the same time as getting to know each other in other areas of their lives. Having the chance to socialise might seem like a basic element in the process of establishing relationships but very often participants found themselves in situations where that chance was non-existent or difficult to obtain.

From socialisation, camaraderie between gay men emerged as a crucial theme. Having gay friends was expressed as very important because these friendships helped in three major aspects: to learn about gayness, to feel at ease and talk freely, and to feel understood. All participants’ narratives expressed how in spite of the movement of gay topics into mainstream social

circles, being gay remains somewhat invisible and there are few sources to truly learn about gay themes. This added importance to having gay friends; for some participants one friend sufficed, for others, it was vital to have several. But in all cases, gay friends helped to learn about things that otherwise would be extremely difficult to access. A common remark was that these friendships often became, started from being, or nearly became sexual in nature. The histories of their friendships included – not always but often – men with whom they were sexually involved at various points in their lives.

This sexual involvement with friends triggered, in some participants, a question about whether their sexual contact affected positively or negatively the quality of their friendships. The responses to that question were divided: some argued that sexual involvement was positive; some argued it was negative; and some implied it was necessary.

The second reason why gay friends were very important came down to the fact that participants could create environments in which they could talk freely about aspects of their lives that were relevant for them and would be difficult to address in other social situations.

Thirdly, gay friends were important because there was a sense that they could better understand some issues than their heterosexual friends. This perceived better understanding was due to gay friends being ‘insiders’, having gone through the situations and difficulties common to gay men. In Malone’s account of how he met his long-term partner and fiancé, friendship and relationship overlap in a way that shows the importance of this camaraderie in the exploration of relational aspects:

‘I met him and his friends at the same time and I started spending a lot of time with them as a group. And... It was kind of... he kind of got friend-zoned a little bit... All my

interactions with him were in a friends group, and it became kind of, it felt weird or something like that when we kissed, it was like kissing a friend... so, I broke up with him after I explained what the situation was. And then, we continued hanging out and: "Oh... these feelings are back". So, we started again...' (Malone – interview)

In this case, Malone's friend became his boyfriend, then his friend again, then they went back to being boyfriends, and at the moment of the interview they were engaged. Blurred relationship boundaries were not uncommon in participants' lives. Their relationships could develop in different forms, for example by being best friends after being partners, some were never a couple but they still explored sexually with each other, others would be in a relationship but they would have friends with whom they could talk and have sex without interference with their friendships. What I conclude from analysing these narratives is that the process of meeting men involved an entanglement of relationships that were difficult to define. This entanglement often made participants ask themselves 'what are we?' and required them to talk about their relationships in order to define them. By doing that, they not only developed unique ways of being with the other, but their relationships also contributed to defining them as individuals.

(b) Desire and the erotic

Reflecting on what 'erotic' meant to participants revealed interesting perspectives. I often found myself immersed in their reflections and witnessing acts of sense making as they occurred, as if insight was gained through our intimate conversations. On other occasions, I felt I was participating in an unconscious seduction that was difficult to escape, and the fact that it was difficult to escape felt helpful at the same time as it felt risky. I experienced those seductive moments as elements that oriented the

conversation whilst also giving me a certain awareness that they could get us lost in the narrated experience of the erotic. Sometimes rooted in the physicality of someone's body; sometimes rooted in the fantasies of an extraordinary encounter; in the actions preceding an encounter with someone; in the visual cues gotten from a potential lover; in the bodily sensations provoked by a desired other; the erotic was described as the urge to be with the other in a sexual connection, for real or in their imaginations.

Nick was one of the participants who, from a very early stage in the interview, asked himself what the erotic was and, being unable to produce a conclusive response, he shared his experiences of being in an open relationship that allowed him to pursue sexual encounters with other men. It was through the re-telling of those sexual encounters that the erotic was brought to the interview room and near the end of the conversation he made sense of it and was able to articulate his understanding of the erotic by using dancing as an analogy. In the next quotation, he explains how the erotic is born and develops from the desire to be with someone and the challenge to get that someone's interest:

'Perhaps, [that is] where the erotic comes in. Because dances can be erotic without being sexual. Because... underlined in dances it's just a mating ritual... Isn't it? It's really... We just adapted what peacocks and other birds do when dance with each other. And all the rest happens... We just turned that into a certain, certain formalized form. Sometimes very informal. Some sort of art. But actually it's still just two people assessing each other and seeing if they wanna get down and dirty, yeah... so dancing... it's erotic. In fact, your dance partner, they may not be remotely interested in you, but that's what you're going for in that dance.' (Nick – interview)

The many ways in which participants defined the erotic is summarised in the above quotation: the sexual as the bodily engagement; the getting down and dirty; and the erotic as the experience of desire and the motivation to act on that desire. Nick emphasises the relationship between two people who see each other and feel each other, testing whether they desire each other, whether there is mutuality, and whether there is an opportunity to transform the desire into something sexual. He also highlights the dynamic aspects of the interaction by saying that there might not be initial interest from one of them, but the other will focus their efforts on instilling that interest. This clarification illustrates the relational qualities of desire: it might not rely on fixed, unchangeable elements but on the rhythmic sway of the inputs, responses and exchanges when two people allow themselves to be affected by one another.

For many, the erotic came as an uncontrollable force full of mixed feelings. The erotic lived exclusively on the unattainability of the fantasy and lingered on the thoughts of something that caused them feverishness and pleasure at the same time as it caused them angst and trepidation. The erotic was powered by their desire to be with someone; it developed in the fantasy of a possible encounter and was fed by the improbability of its happening. Let us observe this quotation from Cameron's narrative as an example of the above explanation and an illustration of how the erotic lives in the possibility, in the promise, and even if it does not translate into something sexual, the erotic remains in time and seems to transcend the sexual:

'I used to seat beside a chap –a school friend– and we used to seat at the back row of the science class... on high benches, there were not like the normal low desks, there were high benches. And you sat on stools. So there were long tables. And he and I used to rub each other up. On our legs. Nothing more. There was no touching or

beyond. Only rubbing legs with each other. That was highly excitable.’ (Cameron – interview)

The repeated acts of rubbing their legs together did not involve any further physical contact but it happened on several occasions, releasing the pleasure day by day and feeding the expectation in each science class. It was probably that expectation of something more happening which made the act, in Cameron’s words, highly excitable. Similarly, Gustav told a story that relates to this idea of the erotic as the lingering desire. In it, he hints of some unspoken questions about why one of his long-term friends has touched upon erotic comments without them leading to sexual encounters:

‘I’ve shared my feelings also, but we never had sex, with this boy called Gerald. And, recently I was talking to him on Facebook. And he’s also had sexual relationships with men, but we’ve never had sexual relationships together... Somehow... And... we talked... and, I told him: “Why don’t you come to the UK for the weekend?” I was hypersexualised... He knows I like him... I told him. And he told me. ...it’s reciprocal... And there’s a lot of love there, actually. I love this guy... and he loves me, but there’s no sex... Ironically enough, funnily enough.’ (Gustav – interview)

Gustav’s description of feeling ‘hypersexualised’ refers to his desire, which has impregnated his friendship and often emerged through their conversations. Whilst he has described sexual encounters with other men, it is on those occasions when he is unable to make the encounter happen that the erotic qualities emerge, prolong, and grow but might not resolve. As a progressive increase in the desire and the pleasure that emerges from that desire, Luca also describes, as shown in the next quotation, how whilst the sexual and the erotic can be integrated, there is a distinction between them and how the erotic adds a delightful quality to the interaction:

'We [gay men] love, we love attention... Sometimes I don't care much about the sex but I used to love, I love, I think I love more the flirtation, the process than the sex... And I enjoy sex very much, but the whole thing; the crescendo moment, meeting somebody, and feeling that tension, feeling attracted to you, and this and that, I love that!' (Luca – interview)

As an enchanting interaction between him and his potential lover, Luca describes how the process that leads to the sexual act seems to be more delightful than the sexual act itself. What he describes as the 'attention' seems to equate to the interest triggered in the other and how that interest manifests in the pursuit of the sexual encounter. That encounter might not always happen in reality but it might unfailingly happen in their fantasies.

In their very own ways of expressing ideas, participants seemed to agree with the distinction of the sexual and the erotic as two types of relational concepts. The erotic being distinguished by the clear emphasis on the cues received from the other, the provoked responses, and the shared elation between the two; the sexual referring to the physicality of the bodies, and although not exclusive of the erotic, it could certainly exist independently. With this idea of the sexual acts as encounters that can happen without being erotic and, sometimes, without clear understanding of how they will affect the individual, I introduce the next theme, which touches upon those meetings of bodies.

(c) Sexual experiences

Participants engaged in sexual experiences for many different reasons. One of them was pure and simple sexual desire: a desire that was implicitly felt in the body and distinguished from the encounters where emotions are more consciously involved. Arguably, some participants made simple distinctions between encounters that were exclusively sexual and encounters

that were something more, or something else. In this theme, I analyse those narratives of the sexual. I use these accounts to explain how participants created new or modified existing narratives of what sexual encounters mean to gay men. I will show how those meanings are interlaced with gay men's sense of selves. Nick's explanation of his sexual encounters clarifies how, even if there might have been other motivations, the interest in sex was at the core of them:

'I've had a lot more of, shall we say, erotic relationships in my life. Than romantic... And most of those have been anonymous or semi-anonymous. I might have the person's name. I might see them again. But that isn't important. Ehm... Erotic is not the word, is it? ...Because erotic seems to imply... a sort of level of forethought or... some kind of... ehm... some sort of planning... some sort of... not quite, candle light dinners but... if it's gonna be erotic then it has to have some sort of clouding or some kind of fetishism attached to it. But that isn't necessarily... well, that's almost never the case. It's just purely sexual... So, I prefer to term it as sexual, or purely sexual relationship. In other words, the heart and soul of it is only sex. There's no other agenda there. So, that sort of relationship, if you want to call it a relationship even... That sort of encounter is the most common... If I meet somebody in the woods and it's dark, I might... they may or may not... be covering their face, to some extent, in a hood or a hat... I'm having next to no conversation with them anyway... So [their face is] no longer important. In fact, the body type is much less important and their age is much less important. And all the other things that I use to filter out... on an app.' (Nick – interview)

One of the first distinguishing factors between a purely sexual encounter and one that involves something erotic is the very ability to isolate the sexual acts from secondary motivations. An element that aids this distinction is the focus on the sexual act, compared to the focus on the

relationality of the exchanges. Whilst the erotic seemed to be experienced in relationality, it could be said that the sexual is experienced in individuality. This ability to appreciate the sexual gratification in itself seems to enable the person to isolate it from the fact that sex happens with someone else. In Nick's explanation of the differences between the erotic and the sexual, it is evident that he manages to get involved *in* sexual activity with men without getting involved *with* them. This is highlighted in the anonymity and unimportance given to the person's name, body, face, age, or the possibility of seeing them again.

Malone, when explaining that he enjoys sexual activity that happens in emotional synchronicity but he nevertheless also makes room for encounters that might not have that emotional component, echoes this narrative of the individuality in sexual encounters:

'I don't like sex that doesn't feel reciprocal. I really like reciprocal sex. That would be something I really enjoy; when I can tell that the other person is enjoying himself... 'Cause otherwise what is the point? ...Especially if you're in a relationship. If it's anonymous, maybe you don't care. And, it helps if the other person is somebody you care about. Then, obviously... you treat him something similar.' (Malone – interview)

Anonymity emerges again as an element that facilitates sexual encounters in which the individuals get pleasure *from* the other but not necessarily *with* the other. Malone emphasises that he enjoys reciprocity in his sexual encounters and believes in the integration of emotional and sexual qualities in his relationships, yet still says that in an anonymous encounter 'maybe you don't care'. This reveals an apparent difficulty in the integration of narratives. In one of these narratives the individual seems to be aware of the benefits of getting pleasure with the other, rather than from the other. The

other narrative seems to normalise the type of encounters that focus on the body: the ones in which men get pleasure from the other; and the ones that promote individualistic pleasure as opposed to relational pleasure. The difficulty to integrate both narratives lies in their incompatibility, as one of them highlights the beauties of relational sex, whilst the other normalises the practicalities of individualistic sex. I use these competing narratives to introduce the next theme, which seems to be intrinsically linked to a tension between the erotic and the romantic.

(d) The erotic-romantic tension

Encounters that are ephemeral yet erotic and relationships that are romantic but lack eroticism: these are examples of contesting situations participants dealt with on a regular basis. Those who were single did not struggle to find sexual encounters but they were not always fulfilling and, furthermore, they were not always erotic. Those who were partnered did struggle to bring or maintain the erotic aspects to their relationships. It appeared that most of them – both the couples who had been together for decades or just a couple of years and men who were single – found difficulties in integrating their erotic and romantic lives.

Although there was no unanimous definition of what ‘romantic’ means, there was a certain consensus that the romantic happened in the context of an established relationship. There was also a general agreement about the romantic aspect involving a sense of affection or love between partners. This romantic aspect was perceived as a necessary ingredient for a long-term relationship. Similarly, the erotic aspects were commonly referred to as a sensuous pleasure motivated by the visceral sexual desire. Whilst there seemed to be a wish held by participants to align the erotic desire with their

romantic feelings – and merge them in their relationship with a single person – those wishes often resulted in a continuous sense of tension between the two.

The way in which the romantic and the erotic seemed to be lived by participants as forces acting in opposition to each other is summarised in this quotation taken from Luca's interview transcript:

'When I was growing up, I think you kind of fantasize about... having... like a romantic side and erotic side... like the whole package, but in the gay world I think it's very separated, I think it's pretty much separated. You know... a lot of people who are in relationships and they, they're in a long [term] relationship... they have this romantic side but later they have lots of these promiscuous relationships out... It's like they can't have everything. Most of them... can't have everything... with the same person.' (Luca – interview)

The remarks Luca makes here derive from his observations of other people's relationships but also speak, partly, about his experiences with his own long-term partners. It is noteworthy that he normalises this tension by saying that it happens in the 'gay world', which seems to be part of a larger narrative that he ascribes to and builds upon. As one of the most popular themes in participants' narratives, other participants shared stories that echo Luca's views. Take for instance, one of Maurice's first comments during the interview:

'Well, I'm in a relationship now. A romantic relationship but it's not really an erotic one at the same time, which is a bit confusing... but it works and we've been together for a few years. But I really find it hard to merge the two... I don't know why that is. So we've argued a little bit about it. And things like that. And we do have sex, but quite rarely, really. And it's more as if we were close friends or family or something like that.' (Maurice – interview)

Relationships like Maurice's were not uncommon; participants found it difficult to bring together these two apparently different domains. One of the reasons could be the very notion that they are separated in the first place. This notion was so strong that it has a somewhat well-established binary representation of long-term partners versus one-off sexual encounters or, as put by Giovanni, a classification of men who are 'sex material' versus the ones who are 'boyfriend material'. Some participants found ways to overcome this tension and worked on the integration of erotic and romantic aspects; others had specific arrangements within their relationships to deal with the issue; some just hoped they would eventually meet a person with whom they could bring these two elements together; and some others did not believe it was possible and accepted it as it were.

In Manoel's narrative, I found an example of how this tension not only troubles men who are in long-term relationships from which they do not get an erotic thrill, but also those single men who want a relationship but all they seem to get is sexual encounters:

'Eh, I had many sexual encounters in the past. Probably like many other gay men. Ah, but... I think I've reached a point in my life where –I'm not saying that I don't have sexual encounters or that I don't do, like one night stands but– I do want to reach a point where I have my own boyfriend... I lived in London for ten months and I tried two relationships. But in the back of my mind I still wanted to, you know, to experience other, other men. And then I moved to this small town, a south town in Essex; I had a job there. And suddenly I realized... it was more difficult to meet gay guys... So, you start appreciating more the few you have. And... I think from there onwards a relationship became really a priority... Then I came to London two years ago, and I'm still thinking that I want a relationship. Because when recently came I was still looking on Grindr. And most of

them, just ended up on sexual encounters.' (Manoel – interview)

The desire to have his own boyfriend but still have the opportunity to experience other men was not an isolated experience. Participants seemed to share the desire Manoel had in the back of his mind. What seems crucial here is that there is some sense of fixity in the narratives that focus the sexual encounters on the acts, whereas the relationships seem to focus on the persons. This is more clearly shown when Manoel refers to having a boyfriend, or when he started to have a greater appreciation of the gay men he had met: his focus moved to the people.

Now let us look at the beginning and the end of the quotation. In both cases, Manoel mentions 'sexual encounters' with a focus on the act: he does not mention he met *men*; he mentions he had sexual encounters. He speaks as if the sexual acts could exist on their own, without the participants. This can be directly connected to the ways in which participants perceived three fundamental concepts: sexual acts, relationships, and the erotic.

I explained how sexual acts were understood as predominantly physical connections in which people participated, to a great extent, individualistically. On the other hand, the erotic was defined by the ongoing reciprocity of the desire between potential lovers. These ways of understanding the sexual and the erotic could partially explain the difficulties in bringing the sexual element to a long-term affectionate relationship, because the task seems to combine two strong narratives, one that neglects the person and one that focuses on the person. With participants finding themselves at the centre of these divergent narratives of the sexual encounters and the long-term relationships, the erotic and the sexual, and the romantic and the erotic,

I introduce the next theme, which concentrates on the moments participants indeed authored their own narrative of integration and erotic togetherness.

(e) Moments of romantic and erotic intimacy

The diversity of ways in which participants experienced the romantic and the erotic makes the task of talking about them as a whole a difficult one. Whilst the struggles to integrate the romantic and the erotic in their relationships were many, I also found that every single participant dealt with the struggles in their own way and there were moments in which integration was possible. With a sense of togetherness and truthfulness, those remarkable moments became landmarks in their lives and helped them to review what they wanted and who they were. The diversity of forms in which they experienced this intimacy and truthfulness presented one striking commonality. This commonality had to do with participants' involvement in challenging current macro-narratives and representations of gay men's relationships. What I present in *moments of romantic and erotic intimacy* is a collection of accounts in which participants re-framed and reinterpreted their experiences of relationships and encounters with men in a way that they were able to see, appreciate and celebrate this confluence of the erotic and the romantic in their own terms. I start with Arthur's account of his current relationship because his narrative provides the clearest example of a merger of these erotic and romantic qualities:

'Michael's way of making love has a soothing power, it's like watching the stars or the sea. It shows you the grandness of the universe that it's impossible to be worried about your dull problems... There's so much trust between us, so much love, and we have the most erotic sex we've ever had; he takes my body passionately but also blows my mind away... we fit perfectly together in each other's sexual needs. We've been together for two years and our sexual life is even better than before...

Some people talk about a 'honey moon period', where couples have a peak in their sex drive but it later declines. Well, it hasn't declined for us but quite the opposite, it's improved because we know each other better and we're more intimate, we satisfy each other both physically and psychologically, because sex is here [in the mind] too. That's why I say that making love with Michael is like watching the stars.' (Arthur – interview)

Awe and scepticism. I must say I experienced awe and scepticism, firstly when listening to a narrative of a relationship that sounded marvellous; secondly because the literal perfection in which that relationship is described touches upon the incredible. When analysing the narratives of other participants and seeing their struggles to incorporate the erotic and romantic in their encounters and relationships, I kept wondering how it was that Arthur seemed to have found the way to do it in a seemingly unproblematic way. One of the explanations I have for this is perhaps the simplest and simultaneously the most difficult one: he believes it is possible.

It is the simplest explanation because he does not have sex; he makes love. Furthermore, he does not only make love; he watches the stars and the sea when he does it. He does not say that his partner takes his body, but he says that he takes it passionately. He says their sexual connection has improved alongside their intimacy. It is the simplest explanation because in order to allow this confluence of eroticism and romanticism to happen, he needs to believe it can happen. And it seems he believes. At the same time, it is the most difficult explanation because believing implies that the couple – and sometimes the individual alone – engages in a battle against the overpowering macro-narratives that set out scenarios where relationships are inclusively sexual, romantic, erotic, loving, and long-term are difficult – if not impossible – to find. It is difficult and simple, simple but difficult because the

individual has to override narratives that describe how couples go through a 'honeymoon period' and their sex life declines thereafter. As seen in his narrative, Arthur is not unaware of those narratives that dictate how individuals supposedly live their lives.

Perhaps the physicality of the sexual experiences Arthur has with Michael are not dissimilar to those that other participants have had; what is different is Arthur's enthusiasm – which is still evident in the written account – which encourages me to accept his oral account as an indication of the proposed romantic and erotic reality. This idyllic portrayal seems possible because of Arthur's resistance to those narratives that say gay men cannot have a satisfactory sexual life in a loving long-term relationship. In his act of resistance, Arthur has also created stronger narratives that he embraces with love and enthusiasm and feeds them with his actions, but also importantly, through his discourse.

In the following quotation from Karpathos' narrative of his only long-term relationship with his former boyfriend, I show how in order to make the erotic and romantic meet, the strong oppressive narrative of secrecy and furtiveness that surrounds gay men's sexuality had to be broken:

'We were on the beach and I was reading, and he rolled over to give me a kiss and in one second was on top of me. Two men... on the beach, one on top of the other, kissing, in swimwear! That was pornographic! ...I felt embarrassed, completely unacceptable. I told him not to do that but he said "shut up", and kissed me again... I was seeing if there were people watching. There were not many people... it wasn't a very popular beach, but still. You don't do that in front of people! ...Although, I have to admit I liked it... It was disgusting, but I felt... alive. Living fully... it's really hard to explain, I didn't want it, I didn't want to make that in public, it was disgusting, offensive to others, to us, and to our privacy.

But I couldn't say no... I simply couldn't. I said no, but my body said something different. And it was brief, just matter of seconds... but... that was... when I felt more sure about his feelings for me. Actually, that day was the day when I invited him to come with me to the UK. And he came eventually...' (Karpathos – interview)

The pornographic, the exposure, and the sense of 'living fully' are the aspects I want to address here, because these I find key to unravelling how the erotic and romantic operated together in Karpathos' narrative. That he considered the kiss as pornographic imagery connects with the scandalous behaviour he attributes ambiguously to the act itself, to the act of kissing in public, and to the act of kissing in swimwear in public. Would it be different if two fully dressed men kissed on the beach? Because he was checking if there were people around, I interpret a sense of self-surveillance in which an internalised sense of wrongdoing seemed to regulate his behaviour to the point of saying that kissing his boyfriend is offensive to others, therefore it needs to be private. This sense of privacy seems to apply only, or mostly, to men, as he emphasises his concern by saying that 'two men' were kissing.

I see that a narrative of oppression was resisted, challenged, and eventually broken when he admits he was living fully. It seems that the enjoyment of his sexuality had been signified as pornographic but that kiss on the beach seemed to make him aware of certain feelings that made the experience richer and more complex than what he had considered as wrong. The sense of 'feeling sure' about his boyfriend's feelings seemed to have challenged the simplistic idea that a kiss between men only lives in the imagery of pornography. It was the acknowledgement of that experience as both sexually arousing and emotionally fulfilling that allowed him to create a different narrative. In it, he could invite him to the UK and they could do something unprecedented: live together.

The rupture with known narratives and the creation of new ones was the most striking commonality in participants' stories of moments of romantic and erotic connectedness. As shown in both of the above quotations, participants' feelings were not determined by a kiss or by having sex with their partners; their feelings were determined by the meanings they attached to the kiss and the sexual activity and by how they expressed those meanings through their discourse. Those meanings made them trust someone, learn from someone, appreciate someone, believe in someone, or allow themselves to love someone. Those acts of believing, appreciating, learning, and loving highlight the importance of the relational as opposed to the individual aspects in the construction of new narratives that, as a whole, helped participants to view their lives differently.

Dimension 3 – the confluence of us

In *the confluence of us*, I discuss themes of togetherness in their relationships; themes such as a couple working out their conflicts, a couple enjoying their successes, a couple thinking tandem. In contrast to the occasions on which participants faced obstacles, enjoyed achievements, or simply went through the mundane of life, but did it in their individuality, *the confluence of us* contains stories in which they transited their thinking from the perspective of the *I*, to thinking from the perspective of the *we*. Although not all participants were in a relationship at the time of the interview, all of them had experienced some sort of meaningful connection at some point in their lives. Interestingly, being in a long-term relationship or having had more long-term relationships did not translate into more *we* moments. Also, being single or having had little experience of long term relationships did not equate to greater thinking from the perspective of the *I*. The result of this analysis is a

collection of narratives organised into three themes entitled (a) the couple in the social context; (b) the importance of partners in the coming out; and (c) what being a couple means.

(a) The couple in the social context

Once participants had gone through the process of meeting someone, getting to know that someone, and establishing a relationship with that someone, there was a realisation that they – together – represented a different concept to those around them. Instead of seeing the individual, others would see ‘the couple’. Instead of seeing the same individual, others would see the participants in a different light. The couple or the individuals as part of a couple would become a new and important domain through which participants created meanings and constructed aspects of their identity. Some participants said their relationships contributed to defining their identities as much as their professions, nationalities, ethnicities, and other important aspects of their autobiographies did, and this contribution was often illuminated when the couple interacted in social circles.

In the next quotation, for example, Cameron explains how in spite of how private he was about his romantic life, this privacy was more difficult to maintain when he started a relationship with his current partner, decades ago. Whilst as a single man his privacy was unquestioned, when he started a relationship and his partner moved in with him, the relationship brought his identity to the fore in the workplace:

‘It would’ve been much better had I been born 40 years later. And I wouldn’t have to go around with this shadow of living a sort of double life, that you still have to do to certain extent in some of the circles I move in. But it’s manageable. And it’s quite, it’s really, it’s nobody’s business. I remember one of my... I got a new boss at my workplace and he was a bit of... brutal. In

some respects... And he said to me –he must've been listening to office gossiping– and he said to me: "Oh, you live with your partner, don't you?" And that was when the term 'partner' was just coming into vogue. And I just said to him: "My partner? Oh, you mean my flatmate." And I said: "Oh no, he lives with me, I don't live with him, he lives with me." And I said it, basically, to tell the chap to mind his own business.' (Cameron – interview)

Cameron's opening statement about the social conditions in which he lived in his youth reveals the oppression he experienced growing up. This oppression made him conceal his relationship to his boss and obscure his identity as a gay man. It is significant that the relationship itself constituted a source of well-being at the same time as it constituted a source of concern due to its unconventional nature at that time. That relationship, in the social circumstances of the time, required him to veil his life in partnership to others.

How do these oppressive social forces and the relationships that improve an individual's sense of well-being inform their identity? In Cameron's narrative, I observe how this tension between forces disturbed his sense of privacy, with society being the main force that put the self-representation in conflict. In Maurice's narrative of what it means to him to be in a relationship, I find a clearer explanation that resonates with other participants' experiences as well. In it, Maurice reflects on how these relationships seem to deeply affect one's sense of individuality and autonomy in a way that he does not like. Individuality and autonomy seem to be particularly important when the couple interacts in social circles:

'[Being in a relationship] It's... in a way it's just sort of a good thing because you've got always someone there. And you can rely on him, and you always put the other first. And things like that. And... a lot of my friends are friends of him and vice versa. So, we've got like a group of friends together, so we've got like a social role as a

couple. Which, I don't know if it's a good thing or a bad thing. In a way, because I don't really want to be defined as "these two people", I'd rather be myself. And... when we get invited to things... If I'm get invited he gets invited, he's always invited and I don't really get to spend a lot of time on my own with my friends anymore. Because he's always included. Which is fine most of the time, but sometimes you just want to be with other people. Rather than your partner...' (Maurice – interview)

That his partner is always there seems to give Maurice a certain sense of permanence and reliability that he finds comforting. But that permanence seems to take something out of his sense of self. The invitations they receive to participate in social events show how well integrated the couple is in wider social circles. That in turn shows the openness they have about their relationship and the positive circumstances they find in the social circles they are part of. However, the feeling that the social role they play defines them as 'these two people' makes him realise that he prefers to be 'himself' and makes him assess the situation in terms of the positive or negative impact that tandem identity has on him.

Although the assessment of the impact of these shared identities differed from one participant to another, they all acknowledged that their relationships changed the way they were seen by society and the way they see themselves. Their realisations became an ongoing process of reflection and negotiation between their personal identities and their identities as a couple. This ongoing reflective process often led to an understanding of what being in a relationship meant to them. It is those meanings that I introduce in the next theme.

(b) What being a couple means

Finding love. Cosiness and domesticity. Becoming at one with the other. Having condomless sex. Discovering what they truly wanted. Renouncing their wishes for the sake of the other. Moving away from home. A merging of souls. Sharing happiness. Sharing chores. Sharing lovers. Experiencing adventure. Travelling together. Forgiving. Being forgiven. Settling in life. Being able to come out to their parents. The possibility of being authentic to themselves.

Each participant expressed their own views of what being in a relationship meant to them. The list could be extensive, even never-ending. The ramifications of those meanings affect so many areas of their lives that in analysing their intricate narratives I risk oversimplifying them, which is not my intention. In *what being a couple means* I try to identify the common elements that participants referred to when talking about being a couple and, ultimately, how these sense-making processes had an effect on their identities.

When looking for these commonalities I observed that participants often offered meaningful comments when they evaluated their actions and feelings after the couple had gone through crises and difficult times. In the next quotation, Arthur narrates how he and his partner reacted after their condom broke whilst they were making love. The episode, which could have been extremely distressing in other circumstances, helped them to be more certain about their commitment to each other:

‘Many men, sadly, would have to cope with the consequences [of an STI] on their own... An STI is a bad thing to have, but not as bad as being abandoned because of that. It would be different if you get it for cheating on your boyfriend, if you deliberately lie... and break the agreement you have. That destroys the trust. But... we were just starting our relationship, we were

together for a couple of months when that happened – when the condom – ...we didn't know our status... we hadn't talked about HIV or anything like that, but that actually helped, because he said: "I'm clean" and I said "I'm also clean". But we felt this security, not... about being clean, because... even if you tested negative last month, if you had another relationship, even if protected, there are still risks... It's... impossible to be 100% sure, but... my certainty wasn't about our... status, it was... the confidence that, not mattering if we were unaware... of a latent disease, we'd remain together nonetheless.' (Arthur – interview)

The two different scenarios – one in which he deals with an STI alone and one in which he does so with his partner – are representative of a particular meaning that Arthur and other participants attributed to their relationships. Surrounded by trust, confidence, and tranquillity, the particular meaning I refer to is the sense of strength as a couple. A sense of being stronger in togetherness. The crises participants faced in their lives were many; it is difficult to categorise them and difficult to convey the feelings they provoked. However, there was a common view of the couple as a source of strength to cope with the difficulties they encountered. With this, I do not intend to say that all couples were an infallible source of strength nor that individuals alone were not strong, resilient, and resourceful. Rather, I found that the participants often felt that their difficulties were more manageable when they were in a meaningful relationship. Taking the example of the visit to the sexual health clinic, which is a critical situation that could resonate with other men's experiences: I can see that whereas a couple of participants mentioned those experiences as worrisome and lonely, Arthur's narrative differed from because he dealt with the situation as a couple. As they later got tested at the clinic, they did it not in order to relieve their own worries, but as a way to ease their partner's worries. They took STI tests to make the other feel reassured.

Closely associated with this strength and reassurance given and received from all participants and their partners, there was another meaning participants gave to their relationships, that of considering their partners and incorporating their partners' needs into their thinking in a way that meant they could think together. Taken to different levels, all participants talked about a clear awareness of their partner's needs. Gustav for example described love as 'leaving everything for the other person'; for Maurice it was about 'putting the other first'; for Giovanni it was about always thinking 'what the other person might think, might feel about' in 'any decision'.

Overall, what participants' narratives of their lives in partnership had in common was a strong sense of belonging. Perhaps because of the different types and levels of oppression faced by LGBTQ people, the sense of belonging in a couple might result from a feeling of alienation that participants experienced in other areas of their lives. In the context of a meaningful relationship, they could find a compelling and essential form of belonging that was otherwise beyond their reach. Because after listening to certain words there is nothing else to be said, I close this theme with belonging as a key element that connects participants' understanding of being in a relationship. I find this is best illustrated by Malone's narrative of his fiancé, in which one senses the warmth coming from the love and belonging that transpired for this self-defined unromantic man:

'I could spend every single moment of every single day with him and that wouldn't annoy me. We have similar interests but not completely the same. And... he's my best friend. And, and... every time he's not there I miss him. Even when he's there I still sometimes miss him because I know that I'll have to go back to Edinburgh. And... I love his friends, I love his family; his dad calls me son number two. And, there's nothing about this

relationship that is bad... and it's really, really clear and makes sense... I think he's the best fit for me and I'm the best fit for him.' (Malone – interview)

(c) The importance of partners in the coming out

Settlement. When talking about their partners, participants shared compelling narratives of what I would call identity settlement. Having a partner, or even the idea of having a partner, proved to help them resolve personal concerns and issues regarding their identities. As catalysts in their identity-making processes, partners facilitated, provoked or accelerated the resolution of disputes that emerged from the incompatibility between larger narratives and participants' wishes to create their own personal ones. Of course, being open-ended and flexible, these narratives would be stable for certain period, until that sense of settlement would be affected by another critical situation. Thus, crisis, resolution, and stability are concepts I address here but, ultimately, in *the importance of partners*, I explain how these concepts are consequential to the identity settlement that participants went through, aided by their partners.

As if there were calm in the aftermath of the family confrontation, Luca, who has now an open dialogue with his mother and she welcomes and celebrates his long-term relationship, described vividly how their mother-son relationship was not always like that. In the next quotation, he explains how he confronted his controlling mother when she threatened him for bringing his first boyfriend home:

'My first boyfriend... I was at the last year of high school. I introduced him... Of course, I didn't introduced him as my boyfriend but... she knew, she knew... She was very cold, she went to the room and that was it... I remember [my boyfriend and I] were in the sofa... And she was like: "Why did you have the door closed?" We kissed in the sofa... I was 18. And she got very angry, and very

strange. And she was like: "I'm going to tell your father what kind of people you're hanging out!" And I was: "Why are you saying that?" And I don't know... these phrases of movies [would] come and I would say: "Tú a mí no me jodes!" [Don't fuck with me!] And I never swear but, sometimes you need to... be like that with her.' (Luca – interview)

A subject that this mother and son had never broached in spite of the years of bullying he had experienced at school, because of what children and school authorities named as 'Luca's sexuality', was first discussed when Luca's first boyfriend came home. The visit of the boyfriend provoked a confrontation with his mother's authority and empowered him to defend the relationship that was important for him. The way things are now, open and transparent about Luca's relationships, gives a sense of settlement to the unspoken family tensions that were present but unaddressed. How would things have been if there had been no boyfriend to make visible, to provoke discussion of the subject that neither mother nor son had dared bring up? One can only wonder.

But before settlement occurs there needs to be turbulence. Other participants expressed that belief through their stories. Manoel clearly sees this idea in his future. He had not talked about being gay with his parents and worried that his revelation will distress his mother especially. Up to the moment of the interview, he had not talked about it because he found it irrelevant if there were no boyfriend to introduce to his family. The potential boyfriend becomes a motivation to come out to his family; the boyfriend also seems to represent the complement to his identity as a gay man, as you can read here:

'I don't think I want to tell her because all this is going to trouble her... I would tell her, but when I'm in a relationship... But I'm single, so it's not a priority. I don't

think they need to know, in the end. Sometimes I think, they need to know I'm gay. But at the moment I don't find it necessary that they know. Because what's the point? I'm still single... I only need to tell her when I'm actually seeing someone, then of course I'll tell her I'm seeing someone... The idea of having a boyfriend, you know, you complement each other in life and it makes life easier and better. Even, despite being gay.' (Manoel – interview)

The anticipation of the trouble his revelation would cause to his mother makes Manoel hesitate to come out. The internal conflict is evident in his narrative as he thinks his parents do not need to know but right after that he debated what he had just said. Revealing he is gay comes as an internal debate that seems to be resolved by the existence of a boyfriend that would make the coming out a priority. A partner in this narrative is portrayed as a character that would help his identity to unfold. But beyond the disclosure of his gayness to his family, the easier and better life he foresees constitutes a beautiful promise that is more difficult to achieve as a single man.

The stability and sense of settlement that partners facilitated did not affect only participants' identities but it also extended to other areas of their lives, such as feeling satisfied with the places they lived in, with the achievements they have made, or with their financial situations. This settlement could also reach other people in their immediate environments. Take for instance this quotation from Nick's narrative, which addresses some of the meanings his relationship had for him, but also is an example of how a stable partner is not only key for the individual but also has the potential to influence others around them:

'What does [being in a relationship] mean? Stability. Safety. Certain cosiness... Being valued and appreciated. Not that it's always the case but it's the aim anyway... Just... General sort of cosy domesticity, I suppose. It

doesn't, to me, mean much about adventure, or new stuff... or excitement... I'm not saying it isn't good. But it is kind of... samey. Flat... I see a change. Enormously. My nephew... He is gay and he is... 24 or 25... When we came out he was about 16 or 17... No trouble at all... No big deal at all... The world has changed. At least the world I live in has changed... I know very much that... one of the things that made it easier for him to accept himself... and come out was to know he had a gay uncle. Who seemed to be coping okay. Reasonably stable. Had a boyfriend. Had a long-term partner... He could see both of us... So I think that was one of the things that made it okay for him.' (Nick – interview)

Perhaps as part of a group of people that has been constantly challenged for the relationships they have and pursue, Nick appreciates the monotony, the routine in his relationship because it gives him the safety of a solid ground that has proved to be difficult to find. This view on stability and safety that Nick described resonated in other participants' stories too. In this particular one, is important to emphasise how influential the image of the couple was for his nephew, making his identity easier to accept and embrace. On a similar note to my question about Luca's story of his first boyfriend, I wonder here what effect Nick would have had on his nephew had he not been in this long-term relationship. When seeing the way Nick talks about himself as the gay uncle who 'had a boyfriend' or 'had a long-term partner' and the nephew 'could see both of us', the presence of the partner seems to complement the description in a way that gives a sense of roundness and steadiness to his identity. I do not intend to express it in terms of positive or negative, I only want to say that those meaningful relationships aided sense-making processes in participants' lives. Settlement and roundness. Controversial perhaps but that seemed to be the importance of partners.

Dimension 4 – existential questions

Many stories of participants' lives were structured, complete, and polished. Some others were not. The narratives of the erotic and the romantic that participants shared not only revealed descriptive plots and the meanings constructed around them, they also revealed questions and reflections, overt and unspoken, which added an unfinished quality to their narrations. This quality of 'unfinished' was often linked to complex and intriguing content, sometimes articulated by themselves, sometimes left raw and tantalising. It is that intriguing content that I aim to analyse here in this dimension, which I entitled existential questions. The existential comes across as a suggestion that through erotic and romantic relationships participants tried, many times unsuccessfully, to make sense of an identity that seemed troublesome and perplexing outwith those relationships. Even if some of those relationships were painful and hurtful, participants seemed to engage in them regardless of the potential negative consequences, as if when searching for lovers, they were looking for meanings. Subdivided into two areas – (a) the paradoxes of meeting men and (b) longing for something more – I address here those narratives that left participants and myself asking 'hows' and 'whys' about their relationships.

(a) Paradoxes of meeting men

Participants in the study expressed difficulties in meeting men with whom they could develop meaningful relationships. Sexual encounters seemed to be abundant and easy come by; meaningful relationships not so much. Participants associated these difficulties mainly with the environments where gay men could congregate and socialise. A unanimous narrative described how gay men, for different reasons, gather only in spaces – physical or digital – advocated for LGBTQ people. Virtual chatrooms, mobile apps,

cruising sites, gay bars, saunas, public toilets, or meetup groups for gay men were the only places where these men could interact with their peers. Many participants disliked the idea of having to attend specific venues in order to have the chance to hang out with people they like. They did not, however, think they had an option. Similarly, they thought the available digital spaces facilitated sexual encounters rather than social connections to get to know people in depth. Participants who wanted to establish a relationship mentioned how it was most likely that online apps and websites would lead to sexual encounters, and although disappointing, they would not refuse it if the opportunity arose.

Not wanting to meet exclusively for sex, not wanting to meet exclusively at gay venues, and not wanting to find men exclusively via gay web pages and apps, but still doing all that, constituted a paradox of their relationships. This seemingly inevitable contradiction made them reflect on their decisions and their motivations behind those decisions. Their reflective processes often led them to pose some questions that would influence directly their self-understanding. These questions, reflections, and contradictions are what I address in *the paradoxes of meeting men*.

To illustrate these paradoxes I cite Malone, who dislikes the idea of going to gay bars and yet it was at a gay bar that he met the man he is going to marry:

[I met him] ...on a gay bar... Well, when I was single they were very good. I guess that helps, being in a relationship, when you're not looking for somebody, it doesn't matter what bar you go to.' (Malone – interview)

Malone seems to imply that being single restricts the places a gay man can go in order to meet people; he seems to state that for a gay man it matters what type of bar he chooses to go, otherwise he would limit himself on his

opportunities to meet a potential partner. Similarly, Manoel seems to imply that although he now sees Grindr as a futile attempt to find something more than sex, at some point it was the main avenue through which he could try to establish meaningful connections:

‘When recently came [to London] I was still looking on Grindr. And most of them, just ended up on sexual encounters... And ...I guess... last year I saw Grindr as being pointless.’ (Manoel – interview)

Both narratives exemplify the paradoxes of feeling that, in order to meet their peers, they need to do it in spaces they do not necessarily find appealing, just because those spaces seem to be the only ones that are available. Both narratives seem to explain that the physical and digital environments play an important role in how gay men can interact with each other. However, it is the next quotation from Karpathos’ narrative – who does not like meaningless sexual encounters but explains how his first thoughts when meeting a man on a first date were sexual ones – that poses a question beyond constraints of the spaces. His narrative locates the paradox in something more fundamental. In this story, Karpathos narrates how he was meeting for the very first time a man he had been talking to for some time; both of them were very interested in getting to know each other, with the possibility of a relationship:

‘I wanted to have... a delightful dinner, a very light-hearted dinner. That’s how I like it... We met at [the train] station. It was five, it was dark already, I told him at that time because I wanted to take him to bed. I was awaiting for ripping his briefs off. I wanted to fuck his brains out, but at the same time... I wanted him to beg for that. I knew it would happen... Surprise-surprise, when I saw him he was all from tip to toe a dapper guy, a dandy... We were pretty sure, we talked a lot about... we both want a relationship, a serious one. I’m the type of guy who loves for life. Not one year or two, not even for ten, but for life. And he stated in his profile, and in

several conversations, that he wants a relationship, a proper one. So that was the purpose of the date. We both knew that.’ (Karpathos – interview)

Karpathos and his date seemed to have avoided the constraints of the online and physical spaces that privilege sexual encounters over meaningful connections; they were not going to a gay bar but to a restaurant for a conversation over a dinner for two. They had shown their mutual interest in a relationship and yet Karpathos’ forethought of meeting at certain time of the evening in order to elicit a sexual desire and his descriptions of the sexual intentions for the meeting, are explanatory accounts of the concurrence of the immediate sexual desires and the long-lasting relationship pursuits. That he wanted a first date that would lead to sex at the same time that it could lead to a meaningful relationship makes me think that perhaps the spaces where gay men can meet are limited, but these limitations should not limit the potential of the opportunities that emerge from them. There seems to be a belief amongst participants that men who engage in sexual encounters just want sexual encounters and nothing else. This belief that becomes narrative or narrative that becomes belief could be restricting their vision more than the gay bars and more than Grindr itself. Let us read this quotation from Karpathos’ narrative:

‘Gay men. You just need to have a look at their profiles in any, any website, they don’t put anything there about who they are, they just put their pictures, very explicit ones, cocks and holes everywhere, nothing for the imagination. And that’s the message, if you see a picture of someone’s arse it’s clear they’re not interested in a relationship, they just want –sorry for my French– to be fucked. They’re one night standers.’ (Karpathos – interview)

Remember that Karpathos previously described how in his first date he was interested in a long-term relationship and in having sexual intercourse on

the same date. He described his explicitly sexual and romantic interests without difficulty. However, in his evaluation of what sexually explicit pictures on Grindr mean, he observes a solely sexual motivation. We saw a similar narrative in Manoel's quotation: he was interested in a long-term relationship, perhaps as much as he was in the sexual encounters he accepted on Grindr. These narratives were echoed by others in the study. What these comments show me is that participants engage in sexual encounters – they provoke them, they accept them, they co-create them – and they make those decisions for several reasons, two of which are the genuine interest in the pleasure of immediate sex and the concurrent interest in a long-lasting relationship. Karpathos has no objection to a romantic dinner with expectations for a future relationship as a potential sexual encounter. Manoel did not seem to have an objection to looking for relationships at the same time as he was looking for sex. Others did not have an objection to these practices either. They did not have difficulties in believing in the concurrent interest in sexual encounters and in relationships when they experienced those interests themselves. They showed difficulties, however, in believing that others could have the same interests. This paradox seems to be rooted in a narrative that separates their sexual interest from their interest in relationships, a narrative that darkens their views of others and does not allow them to see that when they talk about sex and relationships, they are talking about the same thing.

(b) Longing for something more

Men in the study engaged in different types of relationships: casual, stable, erotic, romantic, long-term, friendship-like but touching on the sexual, and many other undefined connections that blurred categorical understandings. In all these bonds – past, present, or imagined – men showed a wish to find something more; something beyond the relationship itself.

Sometimes it was a straightforward wish, such as partners appreciating and honouring the human connection, even it was a brief one-off encounter. In their numerous attempts to meet someone, participants expressed an overt desire to have a meaningful connection, especially not via the dating apps, as these were perceived as leading mostly to unexceptional sexual encounters. They were looking for something beyond that. Sometimes participants yearned for something that was difficult to articulate, such as a glance from someone who would prove their existence with their gaze. In *longing for something more*, I analyse those evocative passages, those in which participants wished to be approached by someone, to fall in love with someone, to be seen by someone. And when some connection occurred, the very act of being seen seemed to be more transcendental than the sexual encounter itself.

Luca expresses nostalgic feelings when seeing one of his friends with his partner because it reminded him how difficult it was for him to find someone. That nostalgia led him to question the reasons for the sense of invisibility he experienced during his college years and, although his life circumstances are different now, his narrative still carries a sense of longing that could have been alleviated by a glimpse, touch or relationship with someone:

'I went to an exhibition yesterday, from a friend, Niall. And he's a young guy; his boyfriend – both of them are artists – and I was looking at them, observing them how close they are, and I was thinking... "How amazing it would've been to meet someone in college." ...I was talking about that with... Catherine, and I said: "Oh, look, Niall and his boyfriend look lovely." ...because you watch movies, American shows –and I love movies, you know– when you're growing up and people [meet] somebody in college. Like in Felicity, or something like that. And you know? Nobody ever tried to flirt with me

in college... nobody ever said hi, or anything, nothing. Nothing. There was one guy who worked in the library; he looked at me. But that's all. Apart of that, nothing. And I ask: "What's wrong?" (Luca – interview)

The deep longing Luca expresses in his observation of the two boyfriends is emphasised by the simplicity of his wish: to meet someone in college. It would seem as common as it would be difficult if nobody dared to flirt, contact, or show him interest. The way Luca remembers how the man who worked at the library saw him intensifies the longing to be seen, to be noticed, to have a boyfriend who corroborates their existence through the reciprocity of the attraction. This sense of the unattainable resonated with other participants, who referred in more indirect ways to the elusiveness of those relationships. Giovanni expressed this longing in a subtle but vivid way when he spoke about a very special two-week affair in Germany:

'I've never been even in the mental state of asking: "Would it work if we were together?" Because, I just knew... That it's not... He's a friend with benefits. If we wanna call it that way... if I wanna be with someone he needs to be in Edinburgh... Distant relationships... they can work... but they're very hard. And you need... more time, as a start... If I was... in Germany for several months so we would've built a relationship there... Because I'm sure that if we... were together for longer in Germany... probably... it would have developed. It would've developed into something closer to what it could be considered a relationship. But... you need the time to build something. And then, at distance you can somehow work it out... but we had two weeks... It was nothing... We are in contact but... we are too far... If he was in Newcastle... But, you know... It's Germany. So... even just cost, and time... it's not something that you can take flights every month... You would never be able to... finish work on a Wednesday evening and just say: "Okay, shall we meet for dinner?" "...Shall we just meet for watching a movie together?" ...this is important

when you try to be with someone. This is something that counts... I'm here in Edinburgh... there's no way he's going to leave Germany... we wouldn't be able to be together. Even if he wanted, even if we were both in the mind-set to say: "Okay, let's build something" ... And, and it's fine, it's not that I have any... regrets... It's just that it's not possible... and it's fine. There's nothing you can do. And it's good to hear from him sometimes... and chat a little bit... But, that's it...' (Giovanni – interview)

The number of hypothetical scenarios Giovanni thought about – if they had had more time together, if the distance was less, if either of them could relocate, if they wanted to – makes me realise the intensity of his ambiguous longing. A longing he is perhaps reluctant to express but his narrative shows the unspoken wishes that he might have had to have the time, to be closer, to have a common mind-set, to relocate, to be able to fly. To Giovanni's statements, I now add a question, a wonder. What would have happened if one of them had dared to want – borrowing Giovanni's words – something closer to what could be considered a relationship? To me, Giovanni's narrative of 'we are in contact but... we are too far' is a prime example of the troubles of finding someone and the troubles participants experienced of being too far away even when they connected with someone. Inasmuch as this narrative poses questions about time and distance, it makes me think that if two weeks are 'nothing', it is not surprising that one-off sexual encounters are a meaningless non-existence. It also shows me that 'far' does not always refer to a physical distance, but when that is the case, the longing seems to be even more intense.

In the next and last quotation of this theme, which also addresses aspects of distance and connection, I present Arthur's narration of the preparation of his journey from Australia to the U.K. in order to reunite with

his partner. In it, you will read how Arthur seemed to be paying an emotional toll of pursuing his life in partnership:

'I did start an email addressed to him. One of those nights around midnight but did not send it because it was full of sad emotions, about how much I missed him and wanted to be with him. I didn't want him to see my sadness about us being apart... I only wanted him to see the absolute positive joy of us being together. But I think that more than anything else in the world, I would've loved him to hold me in his arms while we looked out of the window of the dining room over Darling Harbour, and do nothing more than smile into each other's eyes... That night I was so exhausted, physically and psychologically, that I wished we didn't have to move, I wished we were there, together, in Sidney.' (Arthur – interview)

The psychological and physical exhaustion and the overt wish to not have to move, expressed in the above quotation, and the transcontinental journey more generally, represent a metaphor of the endeavour and determination that long-term relationships required, as described by him and other participants in this study. Arthur's idea of enduring his sadness alone and presenting a joyful performance for his partner seems to sacrifice his own feelings to privilege the wellbeing of the couple. Whilst Arthur decided to prioritise the relationship, take the journey, and move to the UK pursuing his life in partnership, in Giovanni's story, I observe how he foresaw the difficulties that a long-distance relationship would bring and he and his friend decided, on pragmatic terms, that they would not even dream about it. With many nuances in between them, these two approaches – 'I am willing to fly for you' versus 'I cannot dream of being with you' – represent the ways in which participants established relationships, always longing for something more.

These longings, expressed by all participants, suggest to me a certain angst for being in meaningful relationships, where meaningful relationship does not equate long-term or romantic but it means that is worthwhile and constructive. Occasionally, this meaningfulness was reached through ephemeral encounters that would prove to be sincere in spite of their briefness. Sometimes, this meaningfulness was reached through the permanence and safety of their partners. Although participants' longings were specific and varied, they may indicate a common and more basic existential need: a need for these connections to transcend and impact on their sense of self. Because when these meaningful connections would satisfy their dire need to be seen, heard or touched, those connections would satisfy their wish to be remembered.

As I write this, I realise that it is impossible to know for sure how these relationships have affected participants' sense of selves. I also realise that participants would not know if those experiences had affected their lovers and partners as much as they had affected them. Then I can only assume that these meaningful relationships have affected participants' narrative selves because they have touched, changed, and build their autobiographies as they narrated their stories to me. And perhaps in the same way participants narrated their stories of friends, lovers, and partners, alleviating their angst for becoming a faceless body that transforms into a forgettable sexual encounter, it is possible that somewhere in the world Nick, Maurice, Manoel, Malone, Luca, Karpathos, Gustav, Giovanni, Cameron, and Arthur have become part of someone else's life stories.

8 | Discussion of the research findings

8.1 *Introduction*

My aim here is to discuss the findings in the light of the gaps in knowledge about gay men's identities and their erotic and romantic relationships, having presented an analysis of the participants' narratives in the previous chapters. As described in my review of the literature, gay identities have been constructed around some implicit assumptions that underpin research in this field. First, gay identities have been constructed within the tight constraints of heteronormative discourses that relegate gayness to a dependent relationship from its – arguably – opposite concept of heterosexuality. Second, they have been understood as identities based on sexual desires and practices. Third, there have been attempts to identify a normal path that describes a typical gay identity development/trajectory. Fourth, these attempts to describe a typical gay identity development/trajectory have led to the creation of public representations of gayness, constituting some of the few elements upon which gay men rely in order to understand 'how to be gay'. In between these four implicit assumptions that I observed in the literature, my research on erotic and romantic relationships emerges as an amalgam of these somewhat established discourses on gayness and some unfamiliar personal narratives that confirm, expand, or challenge them.

The way I presented my findings gave different qualities to this study, on the one hand, the study is specific and focused on the relational aspects of these gay men's identities – chapter 7 – and on the other hand, each one of the five life stories I introduced in chapter 6 engaged with particular themes on gay men's identities that only make sense in the context of the participants' life

stories. Throughout both findings chapters, I identified key messages that helped me to move the discussion further and observe how participants' narratives might be embedded in broader cultural narratives. This discussion is therefore an interplay between macro-narratives – the social, the cultural, and the global – and micro-narratives – the personal, the intrapersonal, and the subjective – in light of the relevant literature that I have used throughout the thesis. In line with the onto-epistemological assumptions described in chapter 3 – gayness as a subjective concept that is constructed nonetheless in interconnection with the historical, cultural, linguistic particularities in which the individual lives – I begin this chapter by discussing the key messages I identified as emergent themes in my research findings.

8.2 *Discussion of research findings*

8.2.1 *Gayness pervades the Self and yet, it is first experienced – and constructed – as unspeakable and secret*

To explain what being gay means, all participants relied on family recollections; stories of their school years; workplace anecdotes; their relation to the spaces where they lived, live, and would like to live; and accounts of how society in the form of law, media, and religion has created a narrow – often negative – version of what being gay means. Extensive research has been conducted on the sexual aspects of being gay. Extensive research has also been conducted on the stigmatisation oppression and other forms of violence against gay men and LGBTQ people in general. There is, however, little research on being gay beyond these overarching perspectives. Furthermore, underlying these common research angles, I often found an ontological assumption that linked the concept 'gay' to the concept 'heterosexual' in a way that gayness is presented as a subordinate category in an imbalanced

relationship. Foucault (1979) explained how the concept 'homosexual' does not simply exist, but it is constituted in discourse, where discourse means a series of repeated statements established by institutions and authorities and then acquired by the larger population. Discourse shapes not only the ways in which people perceive homosexuality, but also the ways in which homosexual people perceive themselves. Whilst the concept homosexual has lost some power amongst gay people, in research it is still a discourse that colours the ways in which gay people are conceptualised and represented. For example, by referring to gay people as 'non-heterosexual' or defining them within the 'homosexual-heterosexual' binary, numerous research studies consolidate what Butler (2006) called the hegemonic 'heterosexual norm'. From this, I understood that historical and current discourses on homosexuality were/are constraining gayness as a concept and therefore, as explained in chapter 3, I aimed to explore gay identity from a perspective that would loosen the boundaries that have positioned gayness as a subordinate category and, instead, see it as a more autonomous, self-contained identity. Throughout the analysis, I observed that this approach provided participants with the space and conditions to elicit a freer talk about being gay from their own perspectives. I was thus able to explore areas that had not been addressed in research and, although struggling to construct their personal narratives and albeit momentarily, participants talked about themselves in a way that transcended the 'non-heterosexual' subordination, the 'homosexual-heterosexual' dichotomy, and the discursive customs that describe gayness as a purely sexual concept. Participants actually provided life stories that portrayed gayness as an extensive dimension of experience that proved to be difficult to separate, even analytically, from the Self and instead appeared entangled with their entire life stories. As Maurice said during his interview:

'[Being gay] affects the way I live and the things I do, and the people I socialise with, and the places I go. It's caused me to have the relationships I have and all the people I love and care for. I have this sort of community. And I like it.' (Maurice – interview)

The pervasiveness of being gay expressed in Maurice's life resonates with what Haldeman (2010) writes, *'My gayness is central to the way I live in all areas of my life: from my profession to my social relationships to my marriage, being gay infuses my interpersonal interactions, my thoughts, my dreams, my feelings.'* (p. 185). Maurice's and Haldeman's narratives do not seem to describe an isolated form of seeing gayness; in fact they seem to summarise what all participants shared in terms of the impact that being gay has in their lives. Take, for instance, Manoel's narrative of not being able to leave London and move to Cork, as he would like, because there is not an overt gay scene there. He feels gay people are limited in the places they can live because they need support networks, gay-friendly spaces, and an openly gay population in order to establish friendships and relationships, and in some cities that does not seem to exist. On another note, Luca shared how he has been told from a very early age how he should act and behave so his gayness remains private. From school teachers telling him that nobody needs to know 'his business' to his mother telling him that he should not wear colour red because it brings 'too much attention' to himself and it reveals his gayness. Choices, decisions, interactions, and a number of aspects of life – from the paramount to the mundane – in the narratives of participants, being gay appeared to affect their sense of Self. Sometimes it did so in unexpected ways and seemed, as Haldeman (2010) describes, to infuse their social interactions as much as their most intimate intra-personal experiences and life stories.

As life stories are personal and cultural objects (Plummer, 1995), most of the narratives that participants shared were constructed on the basis that gayness was not straightforwardly accepted in their immediate circles. All participants dealt with negative responses from others due to their gayness and they integrated them to their life stories in different ways. As Dan McAdams wrote:

‘When it comes to life storytelling, there are many ways to narrate negative events. Perhaps the most common response is to *discount* the event in some way. The most extreme examples of discounting fall under the rubrics of repression, denial, and dissociation. Some stories are so bad that they simply cannot be told—cannot be told to others and, in many cases, cannot really be told to the self.’ (McAdams, 2008, p. 253)

Participants’ narratives showed many variants of ‘discounting’ gayness from their lives. Keeping their desires, their sexual activities, and their self-identification as gay men in secret was one of the most radical ways in which participants dealt with the predicament of feeling they were part of a group which is perceived negatively in society. Karpathos, for example, kept in secret his sexual encounters with men for more than thirty years. Unable to tell any of his close friends, family members, colleagues – unable to tell anybody – he did not call himself ‘gay’ because in his understanding, it was less condemnable to engage in sex with men, as long as he were not gay. It seemed that he had borrowed the story of gayness as a story that cannot be told. It seemed he could not tell that story to himself. However, discounting gayness from someone’s life takes other more nuanced forms. As read in chapter 6, Giovanni applied his sociological knowledge to his life story in a ‘theory of roles’ style. For him, being gay was not an identity that was influential in his entire life – for example, he argued that being gay would not be relevant to

facets such as his political views or his professional life – and conceived his gayness as an identity that is only relevant in his life in partnership or his sexual life. I consider the aforementioned views to be an illustration of what McAdams calls ‘discounting’ because, as the life narratives of all participants show, gayness touches upon many – if not all – areas of their lives. This raises an important question, how would it be for an individual to *discount* an aspect of the Self that has such a pervading presence? To what extent can a person be ‘fully’ themselves if there are multiple gaps in the way they present themselves in their relationships with others?

One of the most striking aspect of the research findings has to do with the difficulty that most participants found in describing what being gay meant to them. This difficulty is crucial because for some participants it was distressing to realise that it was impossible to describe it at all. It was the distress of being unable to say who they are or being unable to describe an important part of who they are. This shows, to me, one of the most oppressive ways in which negative macro-narratives of gayness have affected gay men, to the point in which being gay becomes not only a story that cannot be told, not even to the Self (McAdams, 2008) but a story that cannot even be articulated outside the constraints of cultural discourses. What are the effects of being unable to describe one’s identity, what we are? One of the recurrent narratives in the findings seemed to condemn gayness to secrecy, invisibility, and the anguish of trying to understand how to construct an identity that does not exist beyond fragmented and poor descriptions of homosexuality. Edmund White (1994) writes: ‘As a young teenager I looked desperately for things to read that might excite me or assure me I wasn’t the only one, that might confirm an identity I was unhappily piecing together’ (p. 275). This strenuous search for an identity that White described was echoed in all

participants' past and current narratives, which confirms the invisibility or inaccessibility of favourable, accurate narratives of gayness. Furthermore, narratives in this study showed that in spite of research pieces that talk about a post-gay youth (R. Savin-Williams, 2005) for whom gayness no longer represents a prominent identity in their lives, arguably because it is no longer a social label that elicits oppression and other forms of violence, participants' lives were still coloured by oppression and different levels of violence. As discussed throughout the analysis, being defined as a gay man caused participants mixed emotions. Some participants would not desire to use this label as a prominent way of defining themselves; they felt there were more significant qualities that describe them than being gay. Butler (2006) writes, 'homosexuality emerges as a desire which must be produced in order to remain repressed... heterosexuality produces intelligible homosexuality and then renders it unintelligible by prohibiting it' (p. 77). Drawing on Butler, the reluctance participants expressed to be defined by their gayness seems to obey the heteronormative discourses that produced an identity that was meant to be prohibited. The reluctance participants expressed to be defined by their gayness comes not from the social circumstances in which being gay is no longer an issue but quite the contrary; it came from the discomfort of being defined by a label that has been poorly described and manipulated by others but themselves. Ghaziani (2011) writes, 'Post-gay isn't 'un-gay'. It's about taking a critical look at gay life and no longer thinking solely in terms of struggle.' (p. 100) Certainly, participants did not think of their gayness solely in terms of struggle, they showed resilience not only by overcoming the rejection of their families, the limitations of the work opportunities, and the verbal, physical, and psychological violence to which they were subject, but also by enjoying the lives they have made, with the relationships they have

fought for. Participants' rejection of being defined by their gayness can be seen as an attempt to claim back the right to define their identities in their own terms. In his work on narrative identities in lesbian and gay youth, Coleman-Fountain (2014c) writes:

'Whilst saying that being lesbian or gay was 'what' they were, there was a tendency, notably amongst the young gay men, to frame that as 'just' sexual. Sexuality was seen through a language of attraction, but denied significance beyond that.' (Coleman-Fountain, 2014c, p. 813)

Narratives in Coleman-Fountain's study showed certain resistance by people to be identified by labels, and he clearly spotted, as I did with my own data, those discursive acts of resistance. As in Malone's narrative, *'I'm a man who happens to be gay, rather than a gay man'*, detailed in chapter 6, there is a resistance to be labelled, to be reduced to being gay and nothing else. This narrative that denies the significance of gayness beyond desire, attraction, and sexuality seems to be in alignment with what Coleman Fountain describes. However, the research findings in this study show something more. Participants did not seem to challenge the label 'gay' or the act of being identified as 'gay' for the label itself. Their reluctance seemed to implicitly challenge the ontological position that sees gayness as a 'sexual' identity. In other words, participants did not seem to reject the label gayness but the meanings that are predominantly attached to it. As seen in the literature review, there is a paradigmatic way in which LGBTQ people are conceptualised in research, this being centred on the sexual dimensions of their identities. It is customary to call these labels, 'sexual labels' (Coleman-Fountain, 2014b; Russell, Clarke, & Clary, 2009), 'sexual identities' (Phillip L. Hammack & Cohler, 2009; Rosario et al., 2011), 'sexual minorities' (Cooper, 2008; RitchC Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000), 'sexual orientation identities'

(Galupo, Davis, Gryniewicz, & Mitchell, 2014), and ‘non-heterosexual population’ (Chakraborty et al., 2011; Downing, 2013). For example, in his research, one of Coleman-Fountain’s interview questions reads: ‘How central is your sexuality to how you see yourself?’ (Coleman-Fountain, 2014c, p. 812). After conducting this study, I have become convinced that participants’ gayness was central to who they are but they appeared to have an unspoken claim about their gayness being founded upon a different ontological position, one that challenges the description of being gay as ‘a sexuality’, one that states that there is more to gayness than the sexually-centred concept. Could it be that people deny the significance of being gay beyond their sexuality because of the centrality that sex plays in the definition of those labels? This study suggests that this apparent denial of significance might rely on the paradox that gayness is an identity that is not only, not always, and not predominantly about sex. Take, for instance, Nick’s narrative:

‘[Being gay is] such an inherent part of who I am. I don’t spend a great deal of time thinking about that. Even if I’m doing something very gay like cruising... That’s just me... The time I spend thinking about it is... when I start getting upset by things that happen around the world... where some state decides to make a law that says that is perfectly fine for employers or businesses to discriminate against people... then I start putting on my gay badge and my gay hat. And you know, my gay clothes. And become a gay person who then... has a rage about it.’ (Nick – interview)

The ‘inherent’ quality that Nick attributes to his gayness aligns with the description that Haldeman (2010) gave of his gayness as infused throughout the Self but Nick also gives the sense of gayness as non-salient. The sense of becoming ‘a gay person’ comes across through the feeling of the broader gay population being discriminated against and being at risk. This view of

becoming gay when in trouble was shared by other participants and, as Lawler (2014) writes, ‘there is a problem with casting identity as something to be considered only when it is in trouble, and that is that ‘normal’, everyday processes of identity-making can too easily become obscured.’ (p. 1) Whilst the literature review shows the limited aspects of gayness that have been investigated, the findings of this study show that even participants who did not consider gayness to have relevance in defining who they are, when it came to describe their lives in the light of gayness, they produced rich, meaningful narratives that altogether constituted gayness as a pervasive identity. It becomes apparent that, as Lawler explained, the everyday processes that construct gayness for these men became obscured.

These findings that show gayness as an identity that pervades the sense of Self, rather than a sexual identity or sexual orientation; these findings that show gayness as a standalone concept, one that can be analysed without describing it as non-heterosexual identity; these findings suggest to me the need for an ontological shift that describes gay people in the depth of the meanings that being gay has, rather than conceptualising them as a sexual minority. These nuances brought to the fore by the narratives of the participants suggest to me that these terms that are used in research in an unproblematic, seemingly apolitical way, need to be questioned and challenged. These works on sexuality have informed the field of gay men’s identities in a number of undeniable ways and, whilst the empirical and conceptual work that has been done on sexual identities, sexual orientations, sexual minorities, sexually diverse populations, and non-heterosexual people describes important aspects of gay life, their emphasis on the sexual is not only limited but it also reinforces the heterosexual norm. In his work in education settings Greenfield (2005) proposes a shift from ‘sexual orientation’ to

'relational orientation' that resonated with my analysis of these findings.

Greenfield writes:

'When beginning the lecture on the relational orientation model, I ask self-identified heterosexual students what they ultimately desire—a permanent "sex buddy" or a life partner—with the overwhelming majority reporting seeking a life partner. While sex may certainly play a significant role in a partnership, it does not supercede the overall relationship... The emphasis on relationships in the broadest context means that the diversity found within LGB communities is appropriately respected and examined, with careful consideration of the structural and cultural factors that differentially impact various identity groups.' (p. 312).

What would research findings show if researchers asked the same questions, using perhaps the same methods, and engaging in the same inquiries that research with gay people has engaged in already, but this time doing it by allowing that theoretical shift, from the sexual to the relational?

In his essay 'ideology and ideological apparatus', Althusser (2007) uses the term 'repression' to refer to the physical and ideological forms of violence that institutions – primarily the state – use to control and rule citizens. Gay people have suffered physical and ideological violence that has been institutionalised and deinstitutionalised at various points in history. Whilst the state currently protects gay people from discrimination and other forms of violence (at least in contemporary Britain, where participants live), ideologically and discursively, gay people are still subjugated by constructs such as heteronormative families and relationships. This is reflected in the ways participants use language to narratively construct their identities. As seen in Gustav's life narrative in chapter 6, he did not think of living 'a gay life' because he chose to have a family. His narrative suggested that gayness is incompatible with the concept 'family'. His narrative went on and implicitly

associated gayness with 'individualism' and 'self-centredness'. Similarly, Manoel's arguments for having a boyfriend – chapter 7 – implicitly portrayed happiness as a heterosexual privilege when he says that having a boyfriend is good because *'it makes life easier and better. Even, despite being gay.'* Such examples show what Althusser (2007) describes as 'interpellation'; a concept he used in order to explain how authority figures 'hail' people into an ideological position by calling them out in a particular way, by describing them in a particular way. The act of calling them out brings them into existence – interpellates – them and they become subjects. By describing gay people in terms of their 'sexual orientation' they have been interpellated as exclusively sexual subjects, with ideological constraints that restrict them to even imagine their lives in loving relationships, families, in happiness. However, in this act of interpellation there is another element, which Butler (1997) describes as an individual who responds to the 'hailing' by recognising and positioning themselves in the symbolic place that has been given to them. Butler sees potential for subversive power in the individual who can resist the calling and therefore exceed the discursive power that attempts to define them. These dynamics of power and power-resistance were evident in the research findings, as participants showed awareness of the multiple ways in which society has manipulated public representations of gayness and gay people. Participants seemed to live 'between narratives' because (1) they wanted to fight back against the discourses that define gayness in deplorable ways, at the same time that (2) they wanted to explore some of the avenues that those scenarios provided, whilst simultaneously (3) they wanted to be part of the very group that condemned their identities. These attempts to live between narratives, for example being gay whilst embracing heteronormative

practices, represented a challenge for participants who engaged in the exploration and stretching of category boundaries.

Adams, Braun, and McCreanor (2014) wrote that gayness is not a simple nor well-delimited category but an identity that is negotiated and renegotiated, an identity that presents an inherent complexity with it. What the present study shows in advancement of their argument is that the inherent complexity is due to the ways in which gayness is pervasive of the Self in a similar way that whiteness, for example, pervades the lives of those who are white. I question whether those participants who claimed that gayness was just one part of them could talk about a situation in which their gayness is uninfluential of their acts, thoughts, or feelings. Could we claim, for example, that being white is uninfluential of people's acts, thoughts, of feelings? I question, as it is all I can do, whether the downplaying of their gayness is not yet another way of '*discounting*' (McAdams, 2008) from their life stories an identity that is perceived as negative. Discounting gayness as yet another way in which powerful heteronormative discourses keep oppressing gay people in a subtle, unnoticeable way. While writing this, I need to remain aware of the tensions this interpretation creates. Tensions between the voices of participants who say 'it's not an important part of who I am' and this interpretation that puts that idea into question. I remain aware of this tension and offer this interpretation for discussion at the same time that I acknowledge the agency of the individual to interpret their own reality and construct their own sense of identity.

Through this first key message – gayness as an identity that pervades the Self – I have explained that, because being gay was surrounded by negative connotations, participants often felt pressured to conceal their identities and 'discount' them in some way. However, being gay did not concern only their

sexuality but their family, work, and social lives. It is an identity that is embedded in a number of factors, as in dialogue with Haldeman's (2010) reflective work, which observes how his gay identity seems to be the cornerstone for all his interpersonal interactions. Participants expressed contrasting views on the relevance that gayness had in their lives; some of them aligned with Haldeman's vision of gayness as an identity that is infused in the Self, others lived in between narratives, and some others aligned with the idea of the post-gay (R. Savin-Williams, 2005). It became apparent that the study of gay identities is still necessary as contrasting views position it as a core identity or as a near to meaningless aspects of the Self. In analysing these opposite views, it is important to interpret the data critically, as those narratives that describe gayness as only an aspect of the Self, showed that gayness was constructed around secrecy, concealment, and unspeakable abuse. Thus, these apparently personal narratives that seem to draw on the discourse of the post-gay era should be explored with caution and questioned in light of discourses of power and control.

8.2.2 The 'gay Other' influences the 'gay Self' in powerful and unique ways

As I wrote in chapter 7.3 – The impact of *you* on the *I* – the ways in which the – gay Other influences the gay Self were multiple, powerful, but most importantly, unique. Because conversations about gay people were not regularly nor positively addressed in the family or at school, men in the study described difficulties encountered when growing up whilst trying to understand what those feelings and desires meant, putting together pieces of information scarcely available in the social milieu they lived in. When coming across the label 'gay', it seemed to be taken as the closest possible option that explained their feelings and attractions and consequently put into words who

they were. As Rogers Brubaker (2009) explains, this would be a process of 'grouping' and 'identification', a way of ascribing to a socially established reference that is comforting because it is shared by many and provides some meanings for them to draw on. However, as narrated by participants, this identification process was just part of the exploration of their newly discovered label. The most important identity construction work that took place in the lives of these gay men seemed to happen in the intimacy of their relationships and encounters with other gay men. When I say 'the most important', I ask you to take into consideration that, amongst all the stories participants narrated as elements that helped them to understand who they are, it was only their relationships and encounters with other gay men that provided them with the opportunity to construct the implicit significance of the label 'gay' and articulate their very own personal narratives. In other words, their erotic and romantic relationships with other gay men would contribute to their personal identity, whilst the macro-narratives they absorb in their social milieu would help them with a process of collective identification.

As described by Luca in his interview, when he encountered another gay man, there would be a feeling of elation emerging from the encounter with someone gay: *'I'd see a guy and I was: "Oh my God! He's gay!" And I felt like I was the last man on Earth who had found another species.'* The excitement would answer to a sense of scarcity that felt present, not only in Luca but all participants' lives, a sense of being alone with their gayness and needing to meet someone else who shared the same feelings. The intimate encounters and relationships with other gay men proved to be key in the construction of their identities. They were essential because participants identified with gayness as

a social label that, although they had discovered and knew it existed, needed corroboration. It needed to be experienced rather than just assimilated.

'Sameness' is a concept that drawing on Ricœur's (1992) ideas on narrative identity, I use here to describe how a man's attraction to men is socially constructed as a non-normative desire that positioned participants as an alien Other. That is why the role of the encounters and relationships with other gay men were crucial for participants as these made them realise, not only that there were other men who felt attracted to other men, but also that some men actually acted upon those attractions. Those acts of being together contributed to the construction of a sense of Self through a process of identification with an Other that felt similar to them. In Ricœur's terms, the Other, represented by those gay men who engaged with participants in various forms of erotic and romantic intimacy, showed them that they were not alone with their gayness and this realisation helped them to answer the questions 'who is the Other?' and 'who is the 'I'?'. Take for instance the passage in 'moments of romantic and erotic intimacy' in chapter 7, where Karpathos describes his astonishment, confusion, and consternation accompanied by simultaneous enjoyment and sense of being 'fully alive' when his lover kissed him shamelessly while they were on the beach. Karpathos worried about people's gaze and disapproval of what he considered to be seen as an immoral act. An act of non-normative desire that the 'Other' acted upon him. Because Karpathos did not identify himself as gay at that point, only as a man who had sex with men, that passage was paramount in his identity construction process. The lover's naturally spontaneous public display of affection served two purposes: to ask 'who is that Other that shamelessly kisses his lover on the beach? Why did I enjoy it? Why does he not feel concerned?'; and to do identity work, to work on the Self by a process of

identification: 'that Other has desires like me'. Other participants' stories were similar to this one, as acts of modelling, as acts of affirmatory identity work, such as Malone's recollection of a friend who, in contrast to him, was overtly gay: *'he's just a friend, and he was so comfortable in his sexuality, and I kind of thought: "Maybe, maybe it's not so bad".'* This is an example of the gay Other influencing the gay Self to achieve 'Sameness', showing that something in the Other resonated within him. It became apparent that through those encounters participants defined the Other and by doing that, they engaged in a process of understanding and re-constructing the Self. In their study about the stages of gay men's relationships, Brown, Ramirez, and Schniering (2013) wrote that as sexual awareness increases, men who are discovering and exploring their attractions face the challenge of creating a new narrative that is concordant with their emerging feelings. Brown and colleagues' study also suggests that in the construction of a gay Self, individuals require – amongst other elements – interaction with similar others and engagement in actual gay experiences. These interactions with other men who have experienced the same feelings and desires allow them to do identity work that resonates with what participants in this study narrated. In his narration of his decision to wait to come out to his parents, and especially to his mother, until he was in a relationship, Manoel said:

'Sometimes I think they need to know I'm gay. But at the moment I don't find it necessary... What's the point? I'm still single... I only need to tell her when I'm actually seeing someone... But at the moment... I'm single and that's it.' (Manoel – interview)

The presence of a gay Other that establishes a relationship with him seems to serve in Manoel's narrative as a motivation to 'come out' to his parents. As Adams (2010) writes, the act of coming out exists in a

heteronormative culture and only in that context it becomes relevant for the individual to 'explicitly validate her or his nonheterosexuality by way of discourse or action' (p. 236). Manoel's narrative highlights the significance of a gay Other that, through the establishment of a relationship, advances the identity work and helps the construction of a gay Self through relational aspects and through discourse.

The narrative of the gay Self that is formed relationally with gay partners, lovers, boyfriends, friends, or significant others was common to all participants. The comments of Arthur, for example, compared the significance of his partner to the significance of one's parents, *'our parents are very important people in everyone's history, especially when you're a child, later, when adults, my partner is the most important person in my life'*. Karpathos centred his attention on the transformational power that a partner can have, *'I wasn't gay, before him. I didn't have any desire to be that, this. This fucking gay guy.'* These narratives suggested a process of formation/validation of a gay Self that seems difficult to happen if not in relation to a gay Other. Brown, Ramirez, and Schniering (2013) suggest that the process of accepting their sexual attraction requires gay men to question their identities, and this questioning process prepares them for intimate connections. As findings in this study show, when participants engaged in a questioning process of their identity and relationships, they seemed to articulate a clearer sense of Self. As suggested in Brown and colleagues' study, intimacy was an element that was key in this identity work, which I use here to introduce the third message, as observed in the emerging themes in the research findings.

8.2.3 The role of intimacy in the construction of the 'gay Self'

In my interpretation of the encounters and relationships with other gay men, I propose that participants' sense of being gay became clearer, stronger,

and more vivid when they were in a relationship. Seemingly, the stability of a relationship would favour the opportunity for intimacy to happen between the lovers. It was as if the act of being in a relationship would liberate the capacity to create and choose their own meanings about a collective identity that was either alien or inaccessible. However, it is not the relationship or the encounter itself that promotes the identity work. In this meaning-making process, other gay men became the agents of personal transformation and identity construction but it was romantic and erotic intimacy that proved to be the motor for the change. It was romantic and erotic intimacy that proved to have the capacity to touch and shape the Self. Lynn Jamieson writes, 'What is meant by intimacy is often a very specific sort of knowing, loving and 'being close to' another person.' (Jamieson, 1998, p. 1) However, it is precisely those conditions of knowing, loving, and being close to another gay man that have been difficult for men in the study to access. Therefore, when those opportunities arose, they created unique conditions in which participants could understand themselves in the light of a newly acquired sense of being. Because of the secrecy and concealment that surround gayness, participants' narrations showed – from subtle to overt – ways in which the expressions of their desires and attractions were oppressed. Thus, looking for men, contacting or being contacted by, meeting men, and following up the initial contact often happened in circumstances where they would not feel free. These circumstances made it difficult – but not impossible – for them to develop intimacy; that sense of being close to another gay person. In participants' narratives, men who were available for sexual encounters seemed easier to find than men who were willing to establish long-term relationships. In their narratives, there was a sense of a divide between the idea of finding men for love and finding men for sex. However, I want to emphasise that whilst my

analysis showed that participants who were in long-term stable relationships seemed to experience more favourable conditions in which intimacy could happen, intimacy was not restricted to those relationships. Some participants seemed to discover that they could find intimacy in encounters centred on sex.

Take, for example, Luca:

'I used to have a lot of fuck buddies... and it was cool, because... It wasn't just so cold... you meet for a little: "I'm home alone, why don't you come and stay for a movie?" He'd come along and we'd watch a movie... It wasn't serious... we'd have nice sex... and stay for a while and then he'd go. It still has something else... we were hugging on the sofa, and we'd have a little connection.' (Luca – interview)

The sense of 'connection' that comes from the act of hugging adds 'something else' to the encounter. What is that 'something else'? Is that 'little connection' intimacy? A critical view of the narratives of the participants who explained that they had encounters that were purely sexual makes me question the extent to which they are drawing on a portrayal of the hypersexualised gay man – coloured by traditional views on masculinity – a portrayal that limits access to a narrative of love. As Jamieson writes, 'Sex, love and intimacy are analytically separate but in social practice they are often linked' (p. 106), I listened to and analysed various narratives in which a superficial reading would say plain sex was at the core of participants' activities, and yet a deeper analysis showed that there was something more, that their social practices would point to a clear linkage between sex, love, and intimacy. In some cases, participants' social and sexual practices would suggest that underneath there was a search for love, for community, for home, for the Self. Take for instance, Nick's story of cruising in Hampstead Heath (described in chapter 6), in which he never talked about sex, but he instead

evoked the space, the weather, the temperature, the atmosphere, the calmness, the joy, the people, the sense of community, the intense sense of belonging – should I venture to write that there was a sense of intimacy and love? – in his experience of cruising there. The highly sexualised portrayal of gay men in popular culture makes the idea of gay men cruising accessible. However, the idea of gay men looking for the Self while cruising might require more effort.

In her study of how policy-makers in Sweden have regulated co-habitation laws for same-sex couples, Andersson (2016) found that:

‘In order to deal thoroughly with discrimination against gays and lesbians, the policymakers stressed, first and foremost, the importance of acknowledging that a social taboo concerning same-sex sexualities existed in contemporary society. This taboo is strengthened by the fact that homosexuality is perceived as pure sexuality, and that love is perceived as something that can only occur between a man and a woman.’ (p. 609)

This work on law-making becomes relevant here because the way in which gay identities are conceptualised in broader social spheres affects how individuals create their own sense of what is to be gay. Andersson’s detailed analysis of government documents shows that, even in countries that protect the rights of LGBTQ people, such as the Swedish context, which introduced its same-sex co-habitation legislation in 1987 and same-sex marriage in 1995 (Andersson, 2016), there is a powerful narrative that conceptualises homosexuality as purely sexual whilst heterosexuality is seen as a more complete identity. The recommendations that the committees made contained repeated formulations on how homosexuality: ‘is more than an erotic attraction. Instead, the entire personality including emotions such as friendship, care, loyalty, tenderness and love, come into play in same-sex relationships – the same emotions as in heterosexual relationships.’

(Andersson, 2016, p. 610). The acknowledgment of emotions, friendships, and love in such recommendations is a remarkable achievement for a population that has not been conceptualised through relationships other than sexual ones. However, this achievement brought to the fore other complexities. As Andersson described, the attempts that policymakers made in order to change the idea that gay men and lesbian women were unable to form loving, committed relationships, validated certain types of relationship – stable, long-lasting ones – whilst building on a discursive dichotomy that positioned love and sex on opposite ends of the spectrum and, implicitly, invalidated other forms of relationships: those that could be considered to be based on sexual aspects.

In his work on gay males' identities, Cooper (2013) writes about the complex social-historic dynamics that influence the ways in which gay men construct their sense of Self. One of these ways is through their long-term relationships. He suggests that identities and relationships hold similar qualities because they inform each other through the identity construction process the person engages in. My study suggests this mutual feedback between relationships and identities shows, as Cooper's does, that gay men can construct a sense of Self in a very special way through relationships with other men. These relationships provide the space that broader social spheres do not. However, one way in which this study expands Cooper's analysis, relates to the way in which relationships are conceptualised. Whilst his study highlights the importance of partners in processes of identity exploration, affirmation, and construction, and offers sophisticated analysis of gay men's narratives and the influences of partners, friends, and families in their identity work, the relational aspects of identity Cooper deals with in his work refer primarily to long-lasting relationships. Findings in this study show that

ephemeral sexual encounters can be as important as other types of relationships. One-night stands, men on Grindr, nameless people whose identities remain obscure. 'Not giving names because names would add a history' (McMillan, 2015, p. 2). A sense of anonymity comes when we do not name people but, as I have explained in the sections 'the euphoria of meeting someone gay' and 'sexual encounters' in chapter 7, even though some of the connections gay men have are short-lived, anonymous, or some of them happen only in the person's imagination, these connections real or imagined have the potential to impact profoundly on their sense of Self. Furthermore, some gay men meet through sex (Balthasar et al., 2009) as sex is the only way in which they know gay men relate to each other. White (1994) writes:

'If it all goes well, two gay men will meet through sex, become lovers, weather the storms of jealousy and the diminution of lust, develop shared interests... and end up with a long-term, probably sexless camaraderie that is not as disinterested as friendship or as seismic as passion or as charged with contradiction as fraternity.'
(p. 164)

That relationship that White writes about – something at the crossroads of camaraderie, friendship, fraternity, and passion – is a particular type of relationship that participants in this study spoke about. I want to draw attention here to the significance that intimacy in the sexual encounters has as the starter of many – but not all – relationships between gay men. As Manoel shared in his interview, *'there were a few [sexual encounters], the minority which... even though they were just one night, they were very, caring, if you know what I mean. Which for me, makes them more meaningful.'* It might be just a moment, it might be just a one-off sexual encounter – or not even that – but the connection might still be meaningful enough to affect the individual's sense of Self. We can see those foundational qualities in how those ephemeral

connections are still incorporated in meaningful ways into their autobiographies. Each one of the chapters I dedicated to these men demonstrates that even the shortest of encounters can greatly affect the individual in a way that they use those recollections to explain aspects of their current lives.

As Nick's, Luca's, Manoel's, and other participants' narratives showed, they looked for ways to explore an identity that they had worked hard to construct. They explored their identities through those sexual relationships and prepared for intimate connections, as Brown, Ramirez, and Schniering (2013) explained in their study of relationships between gay men. Participants engaged in explorations of the Self via intimate relationships and it seemed that through them looked for validation – from themselves and from others – of their gay identity. Although family, friends, the state, and the media were also important external sources of validation, finding a man who reciprocated their feelings and desires – if only temporarily – was a fundamental element in the forming of an affirmative gay identity. Throughout this process, the role that intimacy and those acts of togetherness played in the construction of identity was crucial. Intimacy was present in many forms: it could be long-lasting or short-lived, it could be with people they knew well but it could also be with strangers, it could happen with lovers but also with friends. As White's essay on sexual culture, quoted above, offered, camaraderie between gay men proved to be important and it often touched upon sexual areas. Sexual involvement with friends was common practice, and some friendships stemmed from sexual encounters but it often transcended them. Those acts of intimacy had identity building qualities. As seen in the section 'existential questions' in chapter 7, the participants engaged in relationships that left them looking for meanings. Either in their one-off sex encounters, casual affairs with

friends, or stable relationships, participants expressed a longing for something beyond those relationships. Could that be the Self?

I have written extensively about these key themes, so in this chapter I aim to move my analysis forward by discussing what these particular findings mean beyond the particular stories of these participants and looking at their socio-historical context, namely Britain in 2017.

8.3 Concluding discussion

After analysing the narratives of all participants, there is a question that jumps out first from the others. Who is to determine what being gay means? It has been a question of medical, legal, religious, and social concern and it has been in the hands of institutions. Is it the responsibility of social institutions and experts to define gayness? Is it the right of gay people themselves to define what being gay means to them? At the end of this data analysis, it has become apparent to me that being gay can be defined – and indeed is being defined – by gay people themselves but this right is often limited to the framework that medical authorities, religious bodies, legal, and other social institutions have already defined as ‘sexual orientation’. Because the idea of sexual desire and sexual practices are a core idea of being gay, it is often reduced to that aspect. Understanding what being gay means has been for these men an act of self-identification, rather than an act of creating their own idea of being gay. In other words, participants found themselves in between narratives: whilst their own life experiences gave them the will to create solid, stable, yet flexible identities, the publicly available definitions of gayness has meant in many cases that they have choices within an existing set of conventions and have not been free to explore their personal identities. This position in between narratives is the place that some participants seemed to evoke in their

narratives, as a place of a 'queer' statement, a political statement that defies binaries and challenges the heteronormative matrix (Butler, 2006).

This political statement with its complexities – clearly seen in Malone's narrative in chapter 6 – originates partly as a response to the definitions of gayness in negative terms and as an equivalent to homosexuality. That term, as I have explained, was mostly centred on sexual practices and coined during a period in which medical models dominated the field of gay studies. Then it seems that the AIDS crisis constituted the main argument tying discussion about the sexual practices between men to concepts of medical conditions and sexuality. This historical context cannot be ignored when interpreting its purposes. Under these circumstances, it has been difficult to talk about gayness beyond the perspective of sexuality, even when the narratives are not concerned with sexuality.

'Power' is a complex factor playing part in the conceptualisation of gayness as a sexual orientation (as compared to a 'full' identity). For gay people to be seen in their full humanity and not limited to be sexually-based beings, another already existing hegemonic identity – heterosexuality – needs to change or re-adjust its dominant position thereby losing some of its stability. The social recognition of gay people as fully developed human beings in their full humanity seems to transgress heteronormativity as one of the most unquestioned norms underpinning institutions such as relationships, marriage, family, or masculinity as we know them (Butler, 2006). Recognition of gayness as an identity means that gay men would have all the elements associated with a broadly known, fully formed group represented in a culture. The 'ideological state apparatus' (Althusser, 2007), namely educational, health, or religious institutions – but more importantly gay people themselves – would need to acknowledge the existence of that 'full' identity.

Despite the fact that homosexual acts have been decriminalised and de-pathologised and that many groups have stated the negative connotations of the term, even to this day, there are people who describe themselves as homosexual. This is largely because there are structures of power still claiming supreme control over definitions, representations, practices, and rights of gay people, although other factors are certainly playing a part. One of these is the very fact that gay men are a very diverse group and individuals claim their autonomy in defining in their own terms what being gay means or their right to not call themselves gay at all. Malone, for example, is an outspoken questioner of the representations and uses of gayness. Gustav does not agree with a singular idea of being gay, straight, or whatever notion that anchors his life to his desires and his desires to labels that do not describe his experience. Other factors have to do with the loss involved in assuming a gay identity. Cameron, Karpathos, Giovanni, Manoel, and Giovanni expressed in one way or another that in order to be openly gay they had to be prepared to lose some of the elements that the invisibility of their gayness afforded and that an openly gay identity does not.

There are obvious competing and contradicting social elements in the construction of a gay identity. In various instances these contradictions appear together within the same identity-construction process, which makes its construction complex and difficult to understand, analyse, and explain, to participants themselves and to others. I found, however, that those acts of physical, sexual, and emotional togetherness between these gay men and their partners or lovers or strangers with whom they became intimate have the power to influence the idea of the Self and entangle in their life stories in a way that no other instance can. As Brown, Ramirez, and Schniering (2013) write in regards to some of the elements of a gay Self, 'creating a narrative of the new

emerging sexual identity through interaction with similar others, and through seeking further information about what being gay means' and 'seeking physical sensations through actual gay experiences'. (p. 35)

The meanings of these encounters with their lovers, partners, and intimate strangers get combined with the meanings that these gay men draw from larger narratives and representation of gayness. This illustrates the power of discourse in shaping people's realities. The coining of the terms 'homosexual' and its preceding 'sexual orientation' colonised the feelings and practices of people whose desires were for people of their own gender and marked a landmark in the way people would understand, not only their desires but all the elements associated to those desires. As expressed in the narratives of all these participants, being gay has impacted on areas of their lives that would seem impossibly related to their 'sexual orientation', such as not being able to pursue a career in the diplomatic service, deciding the size of the city/town/village in which want to live, or avoiding wearing red in spite of it being their favourite colour. The unproblematic way in which the term 'sexual orientation' is applied to gay people shows how easily scrambled the term is with the idea that gayness is exclusively based on sexual premises, with the result of gay identity being constrained to the confines of sexual acts quintessentially based on the complementarity of the penis and the male anus. What matters, as these research findings show, is that what research papers define as gayness often fails to capture the experiences of gay people and how they make sense of those experiences of being gay, of being 'it'.

There are some legally established mechanisms that promote certain ideas of what being gay means, and some participants are embracing them already. Nick entered into a civil partnership ten years ago; Malone is going to get married. The idea of gayness as purely sexual is slowly changing; there

is a new concept in the public ideology 'gay people get married'. Identity understood narratively deals with personal narratives and social narratives. Social narratives are not essential for personal narratives to exist; some participants in this study had very particular relationships that created very particular life stories that do not necessarily fit in traditional relationship moulds. Think of Nick, who has been in a relationship for twenty years, with a man he loves and with whom he does not have sexual relations, and with whom he enjoys talking about their respective sexual conquests. His relationship may transgress some of the ideas of what being in a conventional relationship means, of what love means, of what intimacy means. Because gay relationships used to have little social or legal reality, White writes:

'As a result, we must invent love all over again. Gay lovers must work out contracts or agreements that suit them. Household chores, money matters, social obligations... Sex roles in bed, gender-linked behaviour out of bed... And fidelity, the thorniest question of all, must be arranged. Is tricking outside the relationship to be permitted? If so, under what terms? Shall the lovers describe the outside adventures to one another or stay discreetly silent? One couple might decide that each partner can trick but only during separate vacations or when apart. Or they might say there's one night a week for tricking out. Or they might say only three-ways are permissible. The variations are endless.' (White, 1994, p. 34)

Nick's agreement with his partner was not the only one. Other participants had different conceptions of love, fidelity, and sexual practices. Whilst White describes the need to 'invent love all over again' as an advantage because it allows gay men to create their own conventions, I acknowledge the flexibility of creating bespoke couple arrangements but I would be cautious in saying that that is an advantage. I observed that when trying to define what

being gay is, participants were not reliant upon comparisons with heterosexuality. Participants talked largely about being gay as a self-contained concept and only on occasion did they use the term heterosexuality as a reference or in order to emphasise their comments. However, for some heterosexuality was a massive ever-present notion that was difficult to escape. Take, for instance, Malone's narrative in chapter 6. His life story illustrates the difficulties of trying to shape a gay identity within the constraints of heteronormativity. Thus, defining love, intimacy, and their relationships *can* be an advantage but is not necessarily a straightforward endeavour. Like Nick, other participants engaged in a pragmatic sense with the available cultural and technological tools – for example, meeting men for hook-ups and having one night stands – that allowed them to socialise with other gay men but they did not necessarily analyse the effects that those tools or even the ways in which these practices are part of a heteronormative version of how gay men are and should be. Whereas sex has been the axis around which gay identities have been defined, love and intimacy have not been part of the master narratives that define what being gay is. Thus, whilst enjoying the advantages of an identity that is under construction, it is important to be aware of the practices that align gayness with the ready-made category that has been defined by others. Autonomy in defining their own identities seemed to be exercised amongst participants without the 'official' – namely academic, legal, or social – recognition of gayness as an identity beyond the sexual, but lacking an 'official' statement that describes gayness as an identity that infuses all areas of the Self has major impacts on how these gay men can and cannot interact, not only with other gay men but also with the society in general. Larger narratives are not essential for the personal identities to exist. However, larger narratives often influence personal identities in imperceptible ways.

Furthermore, larger narratives are needed in order to obtain the visibility and social representation that guarantee the existence of collective gay identities as such. So far, many personal narratives describe complex gay lives concerned with existential questions, with the awe that provokes a realisation that a lover can save them from the constraints of an existence decided by others, but those complexities need to be represented in larger narratives in order to benefit from having fuller, rounder, more complex, and more sophisticated social identities. Brown and colleagues' study on gay men's relationships (J. Brown et al., 2013) is a significant point of reference as it offers parallels for the study of gay men's identities. As they write, 'gay relationships can be explored without a preconceived model of how they should be negotiated, and without reference to the nature of the final relationship, which only has to work for the individual couple involved' (p. 50). This study suggests that gay men's identities, in intertwinement with their relationships, can be studied bracketing the larger narratives that have shaped our understanding of gayness and focusing on the subjective meanings that gay men construct around their lives. This is where research on gay identities becomes vital. If gay identities are not recognised beyond the confines of sexual practices and sexual desires, it is much more difficult to access many of the benefits of personhood such as the freedom to talk about one's partner or one's relationship without having to use neutral pronouns to hide the gender of their partners, to apply for jobs without the concerns about an employer's reaction to one's gay identity, to hold hands with one's partner on the street without fearing to be attacked, to talk about one's relationship without the immediate association with the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Many of these freedoms have significant consequences for how people construct an idea of who they are, the careers they might choose, the ways they interact with people, the

practices they engage in in order to establish their relationships, amongst other core aspects of their lives.

9 | Conclusion – two narratives

9.1 *An oppressive narrative – sex*

If I had to summarise in one sentence what I observed, realised, and understood after conducting this study, my statement would be that gay men have been trapped in oppressive social dynamics, environments, and discourses that have facilitated sexual encounters but have clipped their wings to love. The trap, however, is sometimes very attractive. The trap is namely a narrative that says that sex is all we – gay men – have; a narrative that says that even in its unspoken and hardly visible qualities – because gay identity is invisible (T. E. Adams, 2010, p. 236) – gay identity is, to the exclusion of everything else, known through the doing of sex. The doing of sex is an easily available narrative that is sometimes repeated, sometimes embraced, and often unquestioned by gay men. We can be lured to it. We might enjoy the process and the outcome. The before, during, and after of sexual encounters might be pleasurable, enjoyable, and fulfilling but it is also possible that the pleasure, joy, and fulfilment will be just a mirage: *‘And I told him: “Fuck me, fuck me, fuck me! Fuck, fuck!” But I don’t know why! Because he actually was hurting me.’* I remember well the passage where Gustav asked an unnamed man he had just met to fuck him. But he did not know why. Gustav asked him to fuck him even though he was being hurt. The pleasure that never came proved a mirage. Just as Gustav did not know why, three years before writing these closing remarks, I did not know exactly why men who had entered into my life as lovers, boyfriends, or casual sexual partners populated all my writing. I did not know why, but I felt that these men had done and were still doing something to me. Just as Gustav did, I had put myself in situations where I had been hurt, not physically but in my sense of self.

It took me time, tears, and theory to realise that, without knowing how, I had voluntarily walked into the environments and relationships that facilitated and normalised casual sex, anonymous sex, passionate sex, beautiful sex, harmful sex, relentless sex: many forms of sex. I had walked into the trap; a narrative trap that invigorates a discourse about gay men as if sexual relationships were all we had. *'Sometimes you find yourself in a gay orgy. Why am I doing this? Because I want to? Or because I saw this in a movie?'* Luca had the reflexive capacity to realise that whilst something in him wanted to be in that gay orgy, his decision was partly informed by the scenes shown in pornographic movies. Even though I never dared take part in an orgy, I many times fantasised about it; I thought that was 'what gay men do'. That thought partly came from the extremely limited sources and spaces where I could learn about how to be gay. Benjamin Scuglia (2015) writes that 'outside of a handful of independently produced films, and the occasional theatre piece, the only place to see gay men exploring their passion, their lust, is in gay porn.' Gay porn becomes the archives of our erotic history, Scuglia says. Gay porn becomes one of the main epistemological sources through which gay men produce a view of our relationships and about how it is to be gay. The sexual encounters portrayed in porn become a sign that orients us in the questions of *what* it is and *how* one is gay. Just as Luca did, I also learned from porn I watched, books I read, and speeches I heard. The problem was that the books were scarce, the speeches oppressive, and the porn incomplete in portraying the complexity of our experience. Just as Luca did, I asked myself many times 'why am I doing this?'. One answer – and of course there could be many – as to why Luca, myself, and other gay men were engaging in sexual encounters is an ontological one. This being together, this sharing a moment seems to be a construction process in which gayness gains meaning via clumsy encounters

that make us ask so many 'why' questions. It seems we like, love, look for, provoke, and accept sexual encounters, but why?

We – gay men – have come to existence in dialogue, discourse, and representation mainly as sexual beings and then we have been judged punished and stigmatised for *being* so. Sometimes it is society and sometimes it is ourselves who make the judgements and the punishment. As Michel Foucault observed well in his *History of Sexuality* (1979), homosexuality was born as a concept that ties the individual to their object of desire and to their sexual practices. The existence of the homosexual as a concept is linguistically grounded on the *homo* and the *sexual*. It is through the sameness of the gender of their object of desire and through the practice of sexual acts that a homosexual person exists. The *sexual* in *homosexual*, with its centeredness on the acts, has overpowered the person to privilege the performance to a point that all that seems to matter is the act and not the person. The person is disposed of their personhood when the act becomes central (Kershaw, 2005). If the authority and legitimacy of scientific, religious, and legal discourses have supported the definition of homosexuality through the gender of the partners and the sexual acts people engage in, it is not surprising that people who have those types of encounters fall in the chasm of equating gayness to a sexual practice. The chasm of describing in sexual terms something that is not only, not always, and not predominantly, sexual. As narrated by the participants, gayness pervades different and unexpected areas of the Self as can be seen in how being gay has deeply affected, shaped, and changed the way they have lived and talked about their lives. From the intra-personal to the inter-personal in the micro and macro levels, gayness has imprinted distinctive qualities on our lives. See for instance, Maurice's concluding remarks about the meanings that being gay has for him: *'If I wasn't gay, I would*

still be involved in something but something different. I guess I'm thankful now because of all the people I've met thanks to my sexuality and all the people I love and care for... It just affects the way I live and the things I do, and the people I socialise with, and the places I go. It's caused me to have the relationships I have. I have this sort of community.' The number of aspects of his life that have been affected by being gay are many and yet, by referring to being gay as 'my sexuality' even though the aspects he speaks about are not predominantly sexual, he shows me that the overpowering discourses that construct gay men in people's ideologies are only, always, or predominantly sexual.

This is where I echo Dereck Greenfield (2005), who proposed the term 'relational orientation' instead of 'sexual orientation' because the latter fails to holistically describe individuals by stripping them of their humanity, oversimplifying their subjectivities, and reducing them to a sexual aspect. A relational orientation is, for Greenfield, a theoretical shift that allows us to focus on how connections between people are experienced rather than focusing on a sexual, behavioural component. Based on the ways that participants' accounts of their erotic and romantic relationships interweave with many other areas of their life, I take this concept of relational orientation further and suggest that the emphasis on relational aspects is not only more appropriate, honouring, and comprehensive of the ways in which these men experience their relationships, it is also necessary to understand gay identities with care and respect. As you might have noticed, in the last sentence I used the term 'identities' rather than the term 'orientation' that Greenfield contemplates as part of his theoretical shift. I used the term 'identities' there and in the thesis as a whole because, whilst orientation suggest certain positionality, direction, and sense of mobility in space, identity in this context is closer in meaning to autobiography. For this, I draw on Paul Ricœur's (1984)

ideas of narrative identity – as I did extensively in chapters 3 and 6 – where ‘identity’ refers to the person who, in order to answer the question ‘who are you?’, tells a story that provides them with a sense of existence, with agency to act, and with the receptivity to be affected by the acts of others. I used the term narrative identity, narrative gay identity, because it asks us to look at gayness from an ontological perspective. Conceiving gayness as an identity requires us to look at the person in their wholeness; it requires us to question ‘why does being gay become an identity? Why does our desire for men become something so central, so important to the point of being an identity?’. Conceiving gayness as an identity and not an orientation requires us to see that, in many cases, being gay means to the individual much more than the gender of the person to whom they feel attracted, much more than their desire.

When using the term ‘gay identity’ I am well aware of two of the emergent issues of this approach: an ethical one and an epistemological one. Ethically speaking, whilst all men who took part in the study identified themselves as gay, they showed different attitudes and described different understandings of the term ‘gay’. Even if most of them had an affirmative attitude to being gay, some participants expressed that it does not establish an essential part of them. There was a strong reaction from some who wanted other areas of their lives to be seen too; it was slightly uncomfortable for them to think of being gay as an identity that predominates in their sense of self. One participant strongly disliked the term ‘gay’ as an identity and, although I understand his request for his personhood to be acknowledged and privileged over his gayness, I also noticed that behind his distaste for thinking of being gay as an identity, there seemed to be a narrative that connects it with the sex-centred definitions of homosexuality. *‘A straight person wouldn’t have their sexuality as part of their identity. And, but I’ve known people who, if you ask them to*

describe themselves in a couple of words, 'gay' would be one of the words they would use, and I don't see why your sexuality is given such a prominent place.' Malone – to whose narrative I dedicated extended analysis in chapter 6 – asks a fair question there but his critique to use gayness as an identity seems to highlight a disheartenment for being defined by a term that highlight his sexual life but fails to capture his wholeness as human being. His reluctance seemed to refer to a conceptualisation of gayness that is very close in meaning to homosexuality rather than being gay in its interweavement with the self. Similarly to Malone, a couple of participants used the term 'my sexuality' as an equivalent to 'being gay'. Their use of the term 'gay' puts me in a compromising ethical position because my principle of fidelity to participants' tells me to work with the meanings they attribute to their gayness in the way they understand them, but on the other hand, my analytic work makes me question to what extent participants are constructing their own meanings of gayness and to what extent they are relying on existent broader, larger, mightier narratives that equate gayness with sexuality. At the crossroads of the analytic work I have done with their narratives and the ethical principles of respecting their self-understanding, I can only question that powerful narrative that says sex is all that gay men have.

In the exploration of what is to be gay and how to be gay, men seemed to be full of questions, wishes, and longings to bond with others like them; to talk to others like them, to get to know others like them. We can, however, see that overpowering narrative in operation when many men in the study could only approach others like them through sex. How do we connect with other gay men if not through sex? That seemed to be the unspoken question behind many of those sexual connections. It seems to me that that limitedness of the narrative of gayness as sexual was what participants rejected when they

rejected assumption of their gay identity. A rejection of their identity results in the rejection of a foundational aspect of the Self that, as I observed in this study, would be problematic as gayness colours our experiences and our views of those experiences. Participants' narratives suggest to me that, when attempting to understand gay men's identities, we first need to understand that being gay can mean, for example, having had to leave home when your mum turned her back on you because you love someone you were not supposed to love. It can mean a history of loving in secret and years of oppression. Being gay can also mean strengthening relationships with your mum and dad. It can also mean intimacy and togetherness. It can also mean delight in the eye candy, looking at guys who never looked back. Most importantly, their narratives suggest to me that through erotic and romantic relationships these gay men make sense of their lives in a way they cannot do otherwise; as if when searching for lovers, they were looking for meanings. These men, the ones who actually look back and reciprocate our desire, serve as an element to validate our sense of Self and corroborate our very own existence.

9.2 *A narrative of resistance – love*

To complicate what I have said before, I will emphasise that when I propose a conversation about gay identity that is not exclusively centred on the sexual, I am not denying, disregarding, or undermining the sexual aspects of gayness. *'It's great to enjoy sex. You can enjoy sex with a stranger and it can be great, you know?'* Luca said, in a similar fashion to what Manoel expressed: *'I'm not saying that I don't have sexual encounters or that I don't do, like one night stands but I do want to reach a point where I have my own boyfriend. And, you know, sex becomes something very intimate and personal. And where you actually have a*

romantic relationship where sex is more intimate and is much better than when you have a one night stand with someone.' Participants in this study do have active sexual lives and for the most part, they enjoy the thinking, the doing, the feeling, and the talking about their sexual encounters. Cooper (2013) acknowledges that sex is 'a focus of pleasure and an aspect of life that enables gay men to create successful identities' but he suggests that over the past decades, sex appears to have become less central to gay male identity projects. With pernickety deliberation, I would say that whilst I agree with Cooper on the need to see the complexity of identities through other elements such as relationships and friendships, my study suggests that sex is still and might continue being central to gay identities. It is not, however, the only aspect that is at the centre of the concept. I suggest sex might continue being central to discussions of gayness but I argue that the reasons for its centrality need to be explored, queried, and challenged from perspectives beyond the sexual aspect itself. These sexual aspects need explored in the realm of meanings, and those meanings should integrate wider, broader, and more complex understandings of gay people's identities. A preponderant understanding of these identities as sexual acts has given incomplete and fragmented views of gay people and perpetuates the constraints they have experienced throughout their lives.

Following this argument I continue with my, namely, original contribution to knowledge with a narrative of love that is at the same time a narrative of resistance. If I could complement my concluding remark in which I expressed that gay men have been trapped in oppressive social dynamics, environments, and discourses that facilitate sexual encounters but have clipped their wings to love, I would say that even with partial narratives, with the invisibility of gay identities, and with clipped wings, we – gay men – have dared to love. Without strong models, positive discourses, or sufficient sources

upon which we could rely; with the oppression, stigmatisation, violence, and shame; we gay men have dared to love.

My use of the verb 'to dare' is deliberate in order to make a point about how loving involves risks and requires the individuals to embody and show the bravery and courage to assume the consequences of those risks. For a number of social, family-related, legal, religious, and cultural reasons that I have explained extensively throughout this thesis, love has not been easy for gay men in this study. Yet they have loved nevertheless. From the more evident consequences such as the verbal attacks and derision that Maurice faced for bringing his boyfriend to the college party: *'I've lost my mum for being gay. So I thought: "it can't get much worse than that, so just bring him along and see what happens."'*; to the physical attack Malone suffered for holding his boyfriend's hand *'I was attacked for holding my boyfriend's hand. Walking on the street in Edinburgh'*, loving represents a risk. Less evident consequences also show that loving has been difficult to access for gay men. *'I never thought, when I was young, that love could happen for me'* Karpathos said, when to his surprise, he found himself with a man who made him feel something he never imagined that could happen to him. Cameron, in spite of the eloquence that characterised his narrative, found it difficult to talk about love: *'I don't know how one... I don't know how easy is to identify romance, or love as a component. I think you have desires.'* For a couple of participants it even seemed difficult to address the idea of love. As the interviews developed, I identified acts of what I would call 'love' quite frequently throughout their narratives. However, they rarely mentioned the word 'love' itself.

Was I just assuming it was love that they were thinking of? In trying to answer that question, I observed narratives of wishful belonging, belonging to someone who reciprocates those feelings. It was this sharing of the very self

that Sternberg (1986) described as one of the feelings that strengthen this connectedness, that makes relationships something intimate and something personal. *'And suddenly you have someone to belong to. And he belongs to you too.'* Manoel's words showed me how Sternberg's concepts operate. In Manoel's narrative I saw that being there for each other, that reciprocity, that togetherness. I not only saw those warm feelings and the intimacy they provoked in the narratives of these men, I also saw their willingness to make a commitment to being in a relationship and to maintaining it. *'I have been with my partner for 19 years now'*, Nick said, and through his comment I saw his commitment. In Nick's and Arthur's and Malone's and Luca's and Karpathos' and in everyone's narratives I can point to specific passages where that intimacy, passion, and commitment are in narrative action. But for each narrative display of love, I saw an obstacle to it. To illustrate this, I use Maurice's comment in reference to his long-term partner: *'I do love him... I'd do anything for him... but just there's no sexual desire... he's the person I'm closest to and we'd talk about everything and we share a lot of things but it just lacks this sexual aspect.'* One of the main obstacles was the tension I have written about in chapter 7: the tension between the erotic and the romantic aspects of relationships. The erotic thought of as a euphemism for the sexual. Octavio Paz's (1997) essay 'la llama doble' – the double flame – on the relatedness of sex, eroticism, and love reminds me that I am speaking about a relatedness that, although makes them close, does not make them the same. For Paz, sex is the primal fire, the least human of these three forces because sex is experienced by all non-human species; it does not depart from culture but from nature. Eroticism, although emerging from the sexual, emancipates itself from the purely sexual and becomes a finer fire that feeds on delight, seduction, and desire that is not satisfied. The pursuit of love for life or the

search for their *'soulmates'*, as Arthur labelled them, hints at a connection that transcends time. Understood as a culturally embedded emotional and intellectual construct that defies comprehension, love is, according to Bauman (1999), a venture into immortality because 'a mortal person is loved as if he or she were immortal, and is loved by a mortal person in a way accessible only to eternal beings' (p. 26). From 'the three relatives' Octavio Paz described in his essay, sex seems to be the most prominent element in gay men's narrative and the most accessible one. Although his broadly biologically grounded argument about the reproductive function of sex – a function from which sexual relationships between men are excluded – Paz's essay is applicable here as it highlights some of the implications of movements such as capitalism, which has made of the body and sex a product. A product that has been stripped of its ethereal qualities. The available, sometimes plain sex, '*You can have sex every day. If you're not too picky*' as Giovanni said, funnelled the apparently more sophisticated eroticism that other participants spoke about. If the erotic was less accessible, the seemingly ethereal love became highly inaccessible. This closeness of love, eroticism, and love makes me question to what extent we should be faithful to that narrative that locates these entities close to one another, yet separately. If we can be sexual, erotic, and loving beings, what stops us from being all of them simultaneously? In trying to solve the dilemma of *love and sex* versus *love or sex*, I find an answer in Audre Lorde's (1984) uses of the erotic. In her feminist take on how the erotic has been misnamed, misrepresented, and misconstrued, the erotic for Lorde, 'is not a question only of what we do; it is a question of how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing' (p. 54). Her work also conceptualises the erotic as a powerful, constructive, harmonic 'lifeforce' that can be expressed. She invites us to reclaim in 'our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our

lives' (p. 55) because when the erotic integrates to our being, it allows us to live fulfilling lives. I read Lorde's work and wonder what would happen if, instead of fragmented narratives of love and sex, we talked about one unified, harmonic *lifeforce*.

Against the social discourses that facilitate sexual encounters but hinder love connections, love stories were abundant in the narrative. It was through loving relationships or sometimes through the sole idea of love that gay men resisted those forms of oppression. Through partnerships we experience what it is to be gay – still affected by broader discourses – but from our own exploratory way. *'I'm a very home person, I love being at home. I'm... a very 'cat person'... I get fulfilled with little things. Like, I remember Bastian asked me once: "If you could be now anywhere in the world, where would you be?" And I said: "You know what? I'd like to be here right now, with you watching a movie."'* Through the cosiness and intimacy of his description of that quotidian scene, Luca revealed an aspect of his relationship with his partner that integrated with the way he speaks about the Self. Through the unrequited kisses with a stranger, Gustav was trying to resist the idea that casual sexual encounters cannot or do not need to involve intimacy. *'I tried to kiss him. He didn't kiss me. I didn't go through [the] experience of the passionate kiss.'* It is through the embodiment of the erotic and the love he feels for his partner that Arthur offered me a view of the reparative and healing possibilities of constructing narratives that make room for love. *'It's something I have with him, a very special sexual connection that soothes me, not only with orgasms and cum, when I'm making love with him is like feeling that all what could be wrong is completely fixed.'* Love was the prime form of resistance participants used to emancipate themselves from the narrative 'sex is all we have'. Through dreams of kissing the guy or finding the boyfriend; through a journey from Australia to the UK to live with his

soulmate; through the mundane yet meaningful act of being on the couch with his partner; through the creation of their own agreements for love and relationships; through those dreams and acts, these men showed that even if some were unable to even talk about love, they loved nonetheless.

9.3 Limitations of the research

The conceptual understanding of narrative identity I relied upon for the development of my analytic framework, namely narrative identity explained as autobiography (Ricoeur, 1984), implied I worked with large volumes of text that constituted participants' life stories. Those texts made the analytic work laborious and time-consuming, and yet I found myself thinking that even though I analysed the structure, essential content, and special narrative features of the interview transcripts, I left aside a number of aspects that would have been worthwhile of analysis. For example, my observations of the gestures, cues, intonations, pauses, laughter, tears, and other non-verbal content occurring during the interviews; the conversations I had with participants before and after the actual interview; the emotional content that I and (I believe) participants experienced during the interview but cannot be transcribed or even described. All these are examples of the elements that could have contributed to the analysis but, because of my epistemological stance in alignment with narrative identity theories (J. S. Bruner, 1986; Ricoeur, 1984) and narrative analysis (Georgakopoulou, 2007; Labov & Waletzky, 2006; McAdams, 1997), the evidence to support my claims relied heavily on what was said, how it was said, when it was said, and in which context was said. In short, my research inquiry was primarily based on narrative, on processes of storytelling and, as such, it can only offer a view from that perspective.

Conducting unstructured interviews was a decision that allowed participants to talk about their relationships and about being gay from the perspectives they considered important. However, with this unstructured nature of the interviews also came an organic quality that meant I was able to contribute to the dialogue sharing my own experiences when I considered it relevant. Sharing my own experiences in the form of self-disclosure was, for the most part, useful. Participants seemed to respond well to those disclosures as those seemed to facilitate the interview. The main limitations of this methodological decision emerged, however, at the point of data analysis, where I found a plethora of anecdotes, episodes, and stories that, although captivating and relevant to understand the context of these men's lives, sometimes took me away from my original research question and I had to leave them out of the analysis of findings.

Additionally, the reader needs to remain aware that the findings of this research rely on one-off interviews with each participant. I did not engage with them in an ongoing process of expanding on their narratives. When I concluded the first stage of my data analysis, I sent via e-mail a summary of preliminary findings to my research participants. That summary had the purpose of informing participants about the generalities of the research findings. Although I specified that if they wanted, they could offer me their thoughts on the report I sent them, only six out of ten participants responded to that e-mail thanking me for the report and some of them told me they found it insightful. Whilst they did not ask me to change anything about the report, neither did they offer the feedback that some researchers have received after going back to their participants to ask them to confirm that what they wrote about them remains faithful to how participants see themselves. I relied, however, on reflexivity as one of the core principles of my research practice,

on sharing parts of the interview transcripts with my supervisors for constructive and critical feedback, and always put my analytic work under critical examination as embedded in theoretical revisions of the literature.

The experiences of the participants I had in my study do not represent the experiences of all gay men. Furthermore, because of the interpretive qualities of this work and my theoretical position that acknowledges the individual as the expert in their own life (Anderson, 1990), I cannot even claim that I am accurately understanding the experiences of these gay men and all the meanings that they give to those experiences. Hence, these findings are interpretive, contextual, and informed by my research skills and limitations, and by my 'insider perspective' as a gay man. Since this study may trigger some questions about generalisability, I need to emphasise that generalisability was not my goal when I conducted this research. However, some discussions about 'resonance' (Mason, 2002) and wider theoretical generalisability can be held, as the accounts presented in this research evoked similarities across participants. Thus, although the findings must be contextualised in terms of the historical, geographical, cultural, linguistic, economic, and other aspects that conform the personal circumstances of each participant, their stories resonate with those of other participants in other studies, and my interpretations seem to resonate with other research findings in the field of gay men's identities.

With regards to erotic and romantic relationships, this study was unintentionally restricted to an aspect that, halfway throughout the data collection process, I realised was a 'taken for granted' element of the inquiry. The element I refer to is the body and how I believe that the body is inevitably and inextricably linked to the narratives. The young body, the attractive body, the disabled body, the eroticised body, the ageing body, the muscular body,

the white body, the dark-skinned body, the tall, short, thin, and all the qualities of those bodies impact on the people's experiences and on how those people narrate their experiences. Perhaps they have an even greater impact when those narrations have to do with their erotic and romantic relationships. Given that my epistemological position privileged narratives, participants' bodies became what Chris Shilling (2012) calls 'the absent presence' in research; I imagined how participants' experiences as mindful and embodied beings would be completely different if they had a different body, and yet only on occasion their accounts incorporated their bodies as part of the important elements that shaped their experiences. When I designed it, my method for data collection and analysis did not contemplate this crucial aspect. Therefore, when aspects of their bodies were captured in the narratives I worked with those in my interpretations, as it can be seen in chapters 6 and 7. However, when they did not explicitly involve the body in their narrative acts, I often found myself in the ethical tension of not addressing the politics of those bodies, and consequentially missing some important information, in order to respect the ways they told their stories and, importantly, in order to avoid the potential pitfall of objectifying participants.

9.4 Suggestions for future research

Research with gay people in their teenage years, such as Savin-Williams' (2005) and Coleman-Fountain's (2014a) work, address extensively aspects of identity construction, identity formation, identity negotiation, and overall, how gay people make sense of their LGBT identities. Both studies suggest that these identities are becoming less salient in the overall identity of LGBT youth. Whilst in my study I did not have any participants in their teenage years, I came across similar findings of a non-salient gay identity for

participants from their mid-20's up to their late 40's. Based on my observations and my comparisons with other works, my suggestion in this regard is twofold. It is necessary to explore this non-salience of gay identities, not only in the teenage years but also in different age groups. Secondly, it is necessary to explore in depth the underlying reasons for this non-salience and analyse them critically, as my findings showed that one of the reasons for this might be rooted in the desire to avoid the oppression that LGBTQ people have experienced for being identified as such.

I would strongly suggest researchers on gay issues allow some space to explore aspects of identity that are not centred on sexual aspects. If the sexual component of their research is crucial to their inquiry, I would suggest they question, challenge, and deepen the focus on the latent or potentially unexpressed reasons why gay men engage in sexual encounters beyond the sexual encounter itself.

An area of opportunity for future research, perhaps particularly relevant in the field of counselling and psychotherapy, is the one denominated 'existential questions' in chapter 6, which refers to those episodes in which participants desperately look for answers to questions that prove to be undecipherable. *'I envy people who are together and I ask "why I can't have that?" I always feel I have lots on store for my partner, lots. I want to give it all. Why it hasn't worked for me so far?'* This question from Karpathos' interview, which allowed him to understand aspects of the dynamics of his relationships, echoes many others such as Nick who wondered about his need to look for connections on his Grindr app: *'Sometimes I turn my app on when I actually got no interest. I don't know why.'*, or Gustav, who, in trying to come to terms with his desires, wondered who he really is: *'This true self is a person, who as a boy was hurt by a father wound. And by the overprotection and been told: "Like your father" ... You have*

a hurt boy there. You have a young man who had... a lot of question marks. And today where am I? Today I'm still the person with the same question marks and the same hurts.' I consider these questions to be a fertile soil for research with people from LGBTQ population as they may spark the curiosity of researchers who – like these men – search for answers to their whys. Whys that attempt to understand those Selves that act and feel; Selves that look for sex; Selves that want to love and be loved; those Selves that after being misplaced, misled, misconstrued, just want to experience the feeling of truly being.

9.5 *A sense of an ending*

This thesis is an interpretive work of the narratives of Luca, Arthur, Karpathos, Maurice, Manoel, Giovanni, Malone, Gustav, Nick, and Cameron with regards to how they think their sense of Self was affected by their erotic and romantic relationships. Their views emerged from their past and present experiences but took place in the context of an interview with me, which must be taken into consideration as our conversations were contextual and were shaped by our very own personal backgrounds. As such, this study is concerned with what these ten men said and does not attempt to generalise gay men's relationships and identities. However, it evokes the voices of other gay men who have felt, experienced, described, and written similar narratives about their relationships. This study might also resonate with other men's experiences of feeling, exploring, and struggling to construct an identity that centred on their desire. It does so by engaging in in-depth analysis of rich accounts in which gay men described their relationships, life stories, and understandings of what being gay means to them.

As described at the beginning of the thesis, my inquiry about the sexual, erotic, and romantic relationships and their intertwinement with the sense of

Self emerged from my personal experience of being a young man who desired men and had found some words that apparently described what that desire meant. Having experienced an adverse reaction to the word 'homosexuality' and investigated its history, I realised that experts in medicine coined the term to describe a psychiatric disorder. Having embraced almost unproblematically the word 'gay' and many of the notions attached to it, such as some of its stereotypes, I wanted to know what exactly 'gay' means. In my review of the literature I observed how being gay and being homosexual have been considered equivalent terms. I also described in that chapter how sexual relationships between gay men are frequently researched but they are rarely linked to an identity construction process. This state of literature drove me to set my research question and, alongside, my onto-epistemological foundations through which I explained the need for research that contemplates first-person, experiential, meaningful stories. I knew if I wanted to explore this intertwining of self and relationships, I needed to ask gay men directly and invite them to speak freely and in their own terms. In these conversations with them, amongst other things, I came across a narrative that seemed so similar to what specialist literature has described as the concept 'post-gay', which seems to portray gayness as an unnecessary and not-so-significant identity. However, looking at participants' narratives in-depth, I observed that some of the gay men in this thesis considered the label 'gay' unnecessary, not because they thought it is unnecessary in itself but because they felt it has been colonised and appropriated by mainstream institutions which have spread inaccurate, incomplete, and misleading representations of what being gay means. Similarly, throughout my engagement with participants' narratives, with their use of labels and terms, I never questioned the term 'sexual orientation'. As I explained in chapter 3, it was through a young boy's story

that featured in the project 'Humans of New York' that I thought that when he was saying 'I'm homosexual' he might have not been thinking about sex. That episode made me re-approach my dialogues with my participants and it was through re-listening and re-reading, and through my structural narrative analysis of the interview transcripts that I started to feel the inadequacy of referring to being gay as a sexual orientation. I noticed that our conversations about their gayness addressed many aspects of their lives; it seemed that being gay was infused in their life stories and some of those stories were completely unrelated to sexual aspects. Implicitly, participants seemed to speak about an identity that is not only, not always, and not predominantly sexual. Thus this thesis dealt with themes of intimacy, belonging, the euphoria of meeting someone gay for the very first time, moments of feeling desired, love, and the deep effect that a partner, lover, or even a stranger can have on the sense of Self. This led me to conclude that for these men, sex has become an easily available narrative that facilitated sexual encounters but put many obstacles between them and love. This makes me more understanding and more sympathetic of people who engage in many forms of relationships, as for some a relationship might mean a search for the Self. Having interpreted the data in this way, I echo Derek Greenfield in his proposal to shift the focus from being gay as an identity that is conceptualised around desire and sexuality to an identity that is conceptualised around relationships. Furthermore, I humbly ask you, the reader, to consider that a whole world of meanings might be contained in the voice of someone who shyly, proudly, firmly, utters: 'I'm gay'.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Summary of studies included in the literature review

Studies on gay men’s narrative identities and relationships (n = 141)⁷

<i>Authors</i>	<i>Title of the study</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Setting – Researchers’ location</i>	<i>Research approach –Study design</i>	<i>Study population⁸</i>	<i>Sample size</i>
Ross, Michael W.	Gay Youth in Four Cultures	1989	Stockholm, Sweden; Helsinki, Finland; Dublin, Ireland; and Brisbane and Melbourne, Australia.	Self-administered paper questionnaire.	Self-identified homosexual men.	604

⁷ Search words included ‘gay’, ‘homosexual’, ‘identity’, ‘relationships’, and ‘narrative’. Subsequently, I conducted a boolean search by combining key words with the words ‘AND’ and ‘NOT’ to widen and refine the search as follows: ‘gay identity’ AND ‘narrative’ AND ‘relationships’ NOT ‘homosexuality’.

⁸ As specified by the authors

<i>Authors</i>	<i>Title of the study</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Setting – Researchers' location</i>	<i>Research approach –Study design</i>	<i>Study population^s</i>	<i>Sample size</i>
Friend, Richard A.	Older lesbian and gay people responding to homophobia. (Homosexuality and Family Relations)	1989	USA	Theoretical review of relevant studies on lesbian and gay identity in order to develop a lesbian and gay identity model for older gay and lesbian adults.	N/A	N/A
Troiden, Richard R.	The Formation of Homosexual Identities	1989	USA	Theoretical review of relevant studies on homosexual identity in order to develop an ideal-typical homosexual identity development model.	N/A	N/A
Roy, Cain.	Stigma Management and Gay Identity Development	1991	Montreal, Canada.	Interview based. Thematic analysis of the data.	Self-identified gay men.	38

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Ortiz, Daniel R.	Creating Controversy: Essentialism and Constructivism and the Politics of Gay Identity	1993	USA	Theoretical review, critique, and synthesis of essentialist and constructivist approaches to gay identity.	N/A	N/A
Paradis, Bruce.	A self psychological approach to the treatment of gay men with AIDS	1993	Massachusetts, USA	Case study. Vignettes of psychotherapeutic notes from work with clients.	Self-identified gay men.	4
DeCecco, John P. & Elia, John P.	A Critique and Synthesis of Biological Essentialism and Social Constructionist Views of Sexuality and Gender	1993	USA	Theoretical review, critique, and synthesis of essentialist and constructionist views to sexuality and gender.	N/A	N/A
D'Augelli, A. R. & S. L. Hershberger.	Lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth in community settings: Personal challenges and mental health problems	1993	Atlanta, Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Cleveland,	Self-administered paper survey.	Lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth.	194

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			Dallas, Denver, Detroit, Indianapolis, Los Angeles, Pittsburgh, San Diego, San Francisco, and Washington D.C., USA.			
Calhoun, Cheshire.	Denaturalizing and Desexualizing Lesbian and Gay Identity	1993	USA	Theoretical review, critique, and synthesis of essentialist and constructivist approaches to gay identity.	N/A	N/A
Long, Ronald E.	An Affair of Men: Masculinity and the Dynamics of Gay Sex	1994	USA	Theoretical review, critique, and synthesis of literature	N/A	N/A

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				on gay men's masculinity and sexual relationships.		
Boulton, M.; McLean, J.; Fitzpatrick, R. & Hart, G.	Gay men’s accounts of unsafe sex	1995	England, UK.	Questionnaires and individual interviews.	Self-identified gay men.	78
Bem, Daryl J.	Exotic becomes erotic: a developmental theory of sexual orientation	1996	USA	Theoretical review, critique, and synthesis of literature on erotic/romantic attraction.	N/A	N/A
Fassinger, Ruth E. ; Miller, Brett A.	Validation of an inclusive model of sexual minority identity formation on a sample of gay men	1996	Maryland, USA.	Modified Q-sort methodology and questionnaire.	Self-identified gay men.	34

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Binnie, Jon.	Coming out of Geography: towards a queer epistemology?	1997	UK	Theoretical review, critique, and synthesis of literature on positivist and post- structuralist approaches to sexual dissidence.	N/A	N/A
Knapp Whittier, David.	Social Conflict Among “Gay” Men in a Small(er) Southern Town	1998	Small(er) town in the south-eastern USA.	Ethnography, including observations and in-depth interviews.	Homosexually interested men.	170
McNeil, Peter.	“That Doubtful Gender”: Macaroni Dress and Male Sexualities	1999	UK	Theoretical review, critique, and synthesis of literature on fashion, masculinity, culture, and gender performativity.	N/A	N/A
Skelton, Alan.	An inclusive higher education? Gay and bisexual male teachers	1999	UK	In-depth interviews.	Self-identified gay and bisexual male	14

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	and the cultural politics of sexuality				higher education teachers.	
Yarbro-Bejarano, Yvonne.	Sexuality and Chicana/o studies: Toward a theoretical paradigm for the twenty-first century	1999	USA	Theoretical review, critique, and synthesis of literature on ethnic studies, women’s studies, and gay and lesbian studies.	N/A	N/A
Savin-Williams, R. & L. Diamond	Sexual Identity Trajectories Among Sexual-Minority Youths: Gender Comparisons	2000	New York and Salt Lake City, USA.	In-person or telephone interviews.	Sexual-minority young adults.	164
Levina, Marina; Waldo, Craig R. & Fitzgerald, Louise F.	We're Here, We're Queer, We're on TV: The Effects of Visual Media on Heterosexuals' Attitudes Toward Gay Men and Lesbians	2000	Illinois, USA.	Video-based experiment.	Heterosexual undergraduate students (men and women).	125

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Flowers, P. & K. Buston	I was terrified of being different”: exploring gay men's accounts of growing-up in a heterosexist society	2001	South Yorkshire, England.	Semi-structured, in-depth, qualitative interviews.	Self-identified gay men.	20
Brown, Lester B.; Alley, Glen, R.; Sarosy, Steven; Quarto, Gerramy; Cook, Terry.	Gay Men: Aging Well!	2002	USA	Ethnography.	Self-identified older gay men.	69
Floyd, Frank J. & Stein, Terry S.	Sexual Orientation Identity Formation among Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Youths: Multiple Patterns of Milestone Experiences	2002	Upper midwest and south-eastern USA.	Individual interviews and set of questionnaire measures.	Self-identified lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth.	72

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Corey, Frederick, C.	Alexander	2002	USA	Performative writing, psychoanalytic essay on gender, identity, and sexuality.	Self-identified gay men.	N/A
Bowen, Frances & Blackmon, Kate.	Spirals of Silence: The Dynamic Effects of Diversity on Organizational Voice	2003	Canada	Theoretical model that analyses the effects of disclosure and concealment of sexual orientation at the workplace.	Lesbian and gay adults.	NA
Heaphy, Brian & Andrew K. T. Yip.	Uneven Possibilities: Understanding Non-Heterosexual Ageing and the Implications of Social Change'	2003	UK	Focus groups, interviews, and postal questionnaires.	Lesbian, gay, and bisexual adults aged 50 and above.	266 (postal questionnaire) 20 (interviews)
Ragins, Belle Rose; Cornwell,	Heterosexism in the Workplace: Do Race And Gender Matter?	2003	USA	Self-administered survey.	Self-identified lesbian, gay, and bisexual employees.	534

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John M. & Miller, Janice S.						
Mohr, Jonathan J. & Fassinger, Ruth E.	"Self-Acceptance and Self- Disclosure of Sexual Orientation in Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Adults: An Attachment Perspective."	2003	USA	Self-administered paper survey.	Lesbian, gay, and bisexual adults.	489
Meyer, Michaela D. E.	"It's me. I'm it.": Defining adolescent sexual identity through relational dialectics in Dawson's creek	2003	USA	Narrative analysis of media representations of gay identity in a TV show.	N/A	N/A
Kendall, Christopher N.	Gay Male Pornography and Sexual Violence: A Sex Equality Perspective on Gay Male Rape and Partner Abuse	2004	Canada	Case study on pornographic material targeted to gay men.	N/A	N/A

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Haubrich, Dennis J.; Myers, Ted; Calzavara, Liviana; Ryder, Karen & Medved, Wendy.	Gay and bisexual men's experiences of bathhouse culture and sex: 'looking for love in all the wrong places'	2004	Ontario, Canada.	Face-to-face, semi-structured, qualitative interviews.	Self-identified gay and bisexual men.	23
Mazor, Aviva.	Same-Gender Couple Therapy: Creating New Objects in Intimacy and Parenthood Transition	2004	Israel	Case study.	Self-identified gay men.	2
Heaphy, Brian & Thompson, Debbie.	Ageing in a non-heterosexual context	2004	Mainland Britain, UK.	Postal questionnaire survey, focus groups, and semi-structured interviews.	Self-identified lesbian, gay, and bisexual adults aged 50-80.	266 (questionnaire), 30 (focus groups), and 20 (interviews).

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Aoki, Eric.	An Interpersonal and International Embrace: A Letter of Reflection on My Gay Male Relational Connections	2004	USA	Letter/essay grounded on personal experience.	Self-identified gay men.	1
Kassoff, Betsy.	The Queering of Relational Psychoanalysis	2004	USA	Theoretical review, critique, and synthesis of literature on gender, sexual identity, queer theory and relational psychoanalysis.	N/A	N/A
Satterly, Brent A.	The Intention and Reflection Model: Gay Male Therapist Self-Disclosure and Identity Management	2004	USA	Theoretical model that proposes an alternative for gay male therapists to examine and manage their identities within their clinical work.	N/A	N/A

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Bowers, Randolph; Plummer, David & Minichiello, Victor.	Homophobia in Counselling Practice	2005	Australia	Face-to-face, semi- structured interviews.	Self-identified lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender counselling clients and counsellors.	34
Cameron, Jan & Hargreaves, Katrina	Managing Family Secrets: Same- Sex Relationships	2005	Australia and New Zealand	Focus groups and semi- structured interviews.	Self-identified lesbian, gay, and transgender adults.	10
Mitchell, Danielle.	Producing Containment: The Rhetorical Construction of Difference in Will & Grace	2005	USA	Analysis and critique of media representations of gay identity in a TV show.	N/A	N/A
Aoki, Eric.	Coming Out as “We 3”: Using Personal Ethnography and the Case Study to Assess Relational Identity and Parental Support of	2005	USA	Letter/essay grounded on personal experience. Email and face-to-face interviews.	Self-identified gay men and their parents.	3

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	Gay Male, Three-Partner Relationships					
Greenfield, Derek.	Shifting from Sexual Orientation to Relational Orientation: A Discursive Move with Theoretical and Pedagogical Benefits	2005	USA	Theoretical critique to literature on the use of the term sexual orientation.	N/A	N/A
Cross, Malcolm & Epting, Franz.	Self-obliteration, self-definition, self-integration: Claiming a homosexual identity	2005	USA, UK	Theoretical review, critique, and synthesis of literature on the use of labels in the development of a homosexual identity.	N/A	N/A
Schnoor, Randal F.	Being Gay and Jewish: Negotiating Intersecting Identities	2006	Toronto, Canada.	In-depth qualitative interviews.	Self-identified gay Jewish men.	30

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Rosario, Margaret ; Schrimshaw, Eric W. ; Hunter, Joyce & Braun, Lisa.	Sexual Identity Development Among Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Youths: Consistency and Change Over Time	2006	New York City, USA.	Interviewer-assisted questionnaire.	Self-identified lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth.	156
Jacobs, Jill & Freundlich, Madelyn.	Achieving permanency for LGBTQ youth	2006	USA	Theoretical review, critique, and synthesis of literature on child welfare and LGBTQ youth.	N/A	N/A
Burlew, Larry D. & Serface, Holly C.	The Tricultural Experience of Older, African American, Gay Men: Counseling Implications	2006	USA	Theoretical review, critique, and synthesis of literature on African-American older gay men.	N/A	N/A

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Andersen, Judith, P. & Blossnich, John.	Disparities in Adverse Childhood Experiences among Sexual Minority and Heterosexual Adults: Results from a Multi-State Probability-Based Sample	2006	Maine, Wisconsin, and Washington, USA.	Interviewer-assisted survey.	Self-identified lesbian, gay, bisexual, and heterosexual non-institutionalised adults.	22071
Payne, Robert	"Str8acting"	2007	Australia	Critical reflexivity. Discourse and content analysis of online data.	N/A	N/A
Flowers, Paul ; Langdridge, Darren.	Offending the other: Deconstructing narratives of deviance and pathology	2007	UK	Deconstructive analysis of a research paper.	N/A	N/A
Heaphy, Brian.	Sexualities, Gender and Ageing: Resources and Social Change	2007	UK	Focus groups and survey questionnaires.	Self-identified lesbian, gay, and bisexual older adults.	296

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Wade, Jay C. & Eric Donis, Eric.	Masculinity Ideology, Male Identity, and Romantic Relationship Quality Among Heterosexual and Gay Men	2007	USA	Self-administered survey.	Self-identified heterosexual/straight and homosexual/gay men.	100
Berry, Keith.	Embracing the catastrophe : Gay body seeks acceptance	2007	Chicago, USA.	Performative narrative.	Self-identified gay men	1
Levon, Erez.	Sexuality in Context: Variation and the Sociolinguistic Perception of Identity	2007	New York City, USA.	Experiment in linguistics.	Undergraduate students.	123
Satterly, Brent A.	The intention and reflection model of self-disclosure: Social work education for student identity management in gay men	2007	USA	Focus groups. Thematic analysis.	Self-identified gay men.	26
Loftin, Craig M.	Unacceptable mannerisms: Gender anxieties, homosexual	2007	California, USA.	Documentary and historical analysis of national gay and	N/A	N/A

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	activism, and swish in the United States, 1945-1965			lesbian archives and records.		
Gray, Mary L.	From websites to Wal-Mart: youth, identity work, and the queering of boundary publics in small town, USA	2007	USA	Ethnography, including observations, interviews, and analysis of online documents.	Self-identified lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer youth.	Unspecified
Rich, B. Ruby.	Brokering Broke back: Jokes, Backlashes, and Other Anxieties	2007	USA	Analysis and critique of media representations of gay identity in a gay-themed film.	N/A	N/A
Swim, Janet K. ; Pearson, Nicholas B. & Johnston, Kristen E.	Daily Encounters with Heterosexism: A Week in the Life of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Individuals	2007	USA	Researcher-assisted questionnaires and forms. Self-administered daily diary entries.	Self-identified lesbian, gay, and bisexual adults.	69

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Gust, Scott William.	"Look Out for the Football Players and the Frat Boys": Autoethnographic Reflections of a Gay Teacher in a Gay Curricular Experience	2007	USA	Autoethnography	Self-identified gay men.	1
Malcolm, James P.	Heterosexually Married Men Who Have Sex With Men: Marital Separation and Psychological Adjustment	2008	Australia	Self-administered online or paper based questionnaire.	Heterosexually married men who have sex with men.	201
Hunt, Mia & Zacharias, John.	Marketing the Imaginary of Montréal's (Gay) Village	2008	Canada	Imagery analysis.	N/A	N/A
Cooper, Lindsay.	On the other side: supporting sexual minority students	2008	UK	Theoretical review, critique, and synthesis of literature on models of sexual orientation development. Qualitative interviews.	Self-identified gay men.	Unspecified

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Stone, Nancy.	Developmental Perspectives in Brief Treatment of Gay Youth	2008	USA	Case study.	Self-identified gay men.	1
Johnston, Lon B. & Jenkins, David.	Coming Out in Mid-Adulthood: Building a New Identity	2008	USA	Semi-structured, face-to-face interviews.	Self-identified lesbian and gay adults.	30
Jones, Mike.	"The First Very Bourgeoise Gay Love Story": An Interview with Robert Leleux	2008	USA	Interview, memoir.	Self-identified gay men.	1
Kelly, Brian C.; Carpiano, Richard M.; Easterbrook, Adam & Parsons, Jeffrey T.	Sex and the community: the implications of neighbourhoods and social networks for sexual risk behaviours among urban gay men	2008	New York City and New Jersey, USA.	Self-administered survey.	Self-identified gay men.	710

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Hughes, Mark.	Lesbian and Gay People's Concerns about Ageing and Accessing Services	2009	Queensland, Australia.	Self-administered online and paper survey.	Self-identified lesbian and gay adults.	371
Bogaert, Anthony F. & Hafer, Carolyn L.	Predicting the Timing of Coming Out in Gay and Bisexual Men From World Beliefs, Physical Attractiveness, and Childhood Gender Identity/Role	2009	Toronto and Niagara region, Canada.	Questionnaires and psychometric scales.	Self-identified gay and bisexual men.	622
Heaphy, Brian.	Choice and Its Limits in Older Lesbian and Gay Narratives of Relational Life	2009	UK	Survey, in-depth interviews, and focus groups.	Self-identified lesbian and gay adults.	316
Frontain, Raymond - Jean.	Peter McGehee and the Erotics of Gay Self-Representation	2009	USA	Case study.	Self-identified gay men.	1
Fergus, Stevenson;	Social Support Moderates the Relationship Between Gay	2009	USA	Self-administered paper questionnaire.	Self-identified gay men.	108

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Lewis, Megan A. ; Darbes, Lynae A. & Kral, Alex H.	Community Integration and Sexual Risk Behavior Among Gay Male Couples					
Lewis, Aron.	The internalized primal scene	2009	USA	Theoretical review, critique, and synthesis of psychoanalytical, relational, and feminist literature on gender, sexuality, and identity.	N/A	N/A
Tillmann, Lisa M.	Don't Ask, Don't Tell: Coming Out in an Alcoholic Family	2009	USA	Longitudinal narrative ethnography.	Self-identified gay man and his siblings.	4
Duncan, Duane & Dowsett, Gary W.	There's no teleology to it; it's just about the spirit of the play":	2010	Melbourne, Australia.	One-to-one focused interviews.	Self-identified heterosexual and gay adults.	10

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	Men, intimacy, and late modernity					
Duncan, Duane	Embodying the gay self: Body image, reflexivity and embodied identity	2010	Melbourne, Australia.	In-depth interviews.	Self-identified gay men.	16
Ryder, Steve.	I Didn't Have to Play Football to Be Hurt: An Inquiry Concerning the Disjunction Between Public and Private Self.	2010	Canada	Autoethnography	Self-identified gay men.	1
Subero, Gustavo.	Gay male pornography and the re/de/construction of postcolonial queer identity in Mexico	2010	Mexico	Narrative, discourse, and visual analysis and critique of films.	N/A	N/A
Sapp, Jeff.	A review of gay and lesbian themed early childhood children's literature	2010	USA	Review and analysis of lesbian and gay themed children's literature.	N/A	N/A

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Drescher, Jack.	Queer diagnoses: parallels and contrasts in the history of homosexuality, gender variance, and the diagnostic and statistical manual	2010	USA	Historical review of literature on homosexuality and its relation with psychiatry and mental disorder diagnosis.	N/A	N/A
Haldeman, D. C.	Reflections of a gay male psychotherapist	2010	USA	Critical reflexivity.	Self-identified gay men.	1
Boone, Melissa, R.; Cook, Stephanie H. & Wilson, Patrick A.	Sexual identity and HIV status influence the relationship between internalized stigma and psychological distress in black gay and bisexual men	2010	USA	Computer-assisted self-interviewing questionnaire.	Self-identified gay and bisexual Black men.	228

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Cover, Rob.	Recognition and re-cognition: Lesbian/Gay identity and the discourse of childhood memory	2011	Australia	Theoretical review, critique, and synthesis of literature on the role of narrative in the construction of gay and lesbian identities.	N/A	N/A
Guerra, Alberto.	Sexual Diversity in Revolutionary Times, 1959-2009	2011	Cuba	Historical review and critique of literature on the construction of dissident sexualities in Cuba.	N/A	N/A
Carrillo, Héctor & Fontdevila, Jorge.	Rethinking sexual initiation: pathways to identity formation among gay and bisexual Mexican male youth	2011	Mexico	Semi-structured in-depth interviews.	Self-identified gay and bisexual men.	76

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Caudwell, Jayne.	'Does your boyfriend know you're here?' The spatiality of homophobia in men's football culture in the UK	2011	UK	Multi-methods, including secondary research in relation to existing 'data' such as official reports, journalistic accounts, individual anecdotes, and semi-structured interviews.	N/A	N/A
Chakraborty, Apu; Mcmanus, Sally; Brugha, Terry S.; Bebbington, Paul & King, Michael	Mental health of the non-heterosexual population of England	2011	UK	Interviewer-administered structured interview schedule.	Self-reported non-heterosexual individuals.	7403
Hoppe, Trevor.	Circuits of power, circuits of pleasure: Sexual scripting in gay men's bottom narratives	2011	San Francisco, California, USA.	Focus groups and one-to-one interviews.	Self-identified gay men.	18

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Stein, Edward.	Sexual Orientations, Rights, and the Body: Immutability, Essentialism, and Nativism	2011	USA	Theoretical review, critique, and synthesis of literature on legal, ethical, and political aspects of the discourse of essentialist and socially constructed perspectives on sexual attractions.	N/A	N/A
Kazyak, Emily.	Disrupting Cultural Selves: Constructing Gay and Lesbian Identities in Rural Locales	2011	Midwest of the USA.	Semi-structured in-depth interviews.	Self-identified lesbian and gay individuals.	30
Rosario, Margaret; Schrimshaw, Eric W. & Hunter, Joyce	Different Patterns of Sexual Identity Development over Time: Implications for the Psychological Adjustment of	2011	New York City, USA.	Structured interview and follow-up interviews occurring 6 and 12 months later.	Self-identified lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth.	156

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	Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Youths					
Shinsuke, Eguchi.	Negotiating Sissyphobia: A Critical/Interpretive Analysis of One "Femme" Gay Asian Body in the Heteronormative World	2011	USA	Autoethnography	Self-identified gay men.	1
Gomillion, Sarah C. ; Giuliano, Traci A.	The Influence of Media Role Models on Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Identity	2011	USA	Survey, in-depth interviews.	Self-identified lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals.	141
Shippee, Nathan D.	Gay, Straight, and Who I Am: Interpreting Passing Within the Frames for Everyday Life	2011	Midwest of the USA.	Semi-structured, face-to- face interviews.	Self-identified gay and lesbian adults.	18
Podesva, Robert J.	The California vowel shift and gay identity	2011	USA	Acoustic analysis of intraspeaker vowel	Self-identified gay men.	1

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				variation in recorded speech.		
Podesva, Robert J.	Saliency and the Social Meaning of Declarative Contours: Three Case Studies of Gay Professionals	2011	USA	Acoustic analysis of pitch accent variation in recorded speech.	Self-identified gay men.	3
Gallegos, Anne; Roller White, Catherine; Ryan, Caitlin; O'Brien, Kirk; Pecora, Peter J. & Preneka, Thomas.	Exploring the Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Questioning Adolescents in Foster Care.	2011	Michigan, USA.	Structured interviews.	Self-identified lesbian, gay, bisexual, and questioning adolescents.	10

<i>Authors</i>	<i>Title of the study</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Setting – Researchers' location</i>	<i>Research approach –Study design</i>	<i>Study population^s</i>	<i>Sample size</i>
Henderson, Neil.	Narratives of power and abuse in gay relationships in the Cape Metropole	2012	Cape Metropole, South Africa.	Semi-structured in-depth interviews.	Self-identified gay men.	15
Carless, David.	Negotiating sexuality and masculinity in school sport: an autoethnography	2012	UK	Autoethnography	Self-identified gay men.	1
Fenge, Lee - Ann & Jones, Kip	Gay and Pleasant Land? Exploring Sexuality, Ageing and Rurality in a Multi-Method, Performative Project	2012	Southwest of England and Wales, UK.	Multi-methods, including visual ethnography, focus groups, and interviews using the Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method.	Self-identified lesbian and gay older adults.	22
Sadowski, Michael.	From adolescent boys to queer young men: Support for and silencing of queer voices in	2012	USA	In-depth interviews.	Self-identified lesbian, gay, bisexual,	Unspecified

<i>Authors</i>	<i>Title of the study</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Setting – Researchers' location</i>	<i>Research approach –Study design</i>	<i>Study population^s</i>	<i>Sample size</i>
	schools, families, and communities				transgender, and queer youth.	
Bowleg, Lisa.	Once You've Blended the Cake, You Can't Take the Parts Back to the Main Ingredients': Black Gay and Bisexual Men's Descriptions and Experiences of Intersectionality	2012	USA	In-depth interviews.	Self-identified gay and bisexual men.	12
Santoro, Patrick.	Relationally Bare/Bear: Bodies of Loss and Love	2012	USA	Autoethnography	Self-identified gay men.	1
Berry, William F.	Transforming experience: Negotiations of sexual identity in the composing process of gay men	2012	USA	Semi-structured interviews.	Self-identified gay men.	7

<i>Authors</i>	<i>Title of the study</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Setting – Researchers' location</i>	<i>Research approach –Study design</i>	<i>Study population^s</i>	<i>Sample size</i>
Dempsey, Deborah.	Surrogacy, gay male couples and the significance of biogenetic paternity	2013	Melbourne, Sidney, Victoria, Australia.	Face-to-face, semi-structured, in-depth interviews.	Self-identified gay men.	12
Downing, Gary.	Virtual youth: non-heterosexual young people's use of the internet to negotiate their identities and socio-sexual relations	2013	London and south west of England, UK.	Focus groups and interviews.	Non-heterosexual youths and LGBT youth workers.	34
Gray, Emily M.	Coming out as a lesbian, gay or bisexual teacher: negotiating private and professional worlds	2013	England, UK.	Semi-structured life-story interviews.	Self-identified lesbian, gay, and bisexual teachers.	4
Clyman, Jeremy A. & Pachankis, John E.	The Relationship Between Objectively Coded Explanatory Style and Mental Health in the	2013	USA	Online freestyle written narratives and self-	Self-identified gay men.	49

<i>Authors</i>	<i>Title of the study</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Setting – Researchers’ location</i>	<i>Research approach –Study design</i>	<i>Study population^s</i>	<i>Sample size</i>
	Stigma-Related Narratives of Young Gay Men			administered online questionnaires.		
Oakleaf, Linda.	“Having to think about it all the time”: factors affecting the identity management strategies of residential summer camp staff who self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender	2013	USA	Face-to-face in-depth interviews.	Self-identified lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer adults.	28
Sedlovskaya, Alexandra; Purdie-Vaughns, Valerie; Eibach, Richard P.; Lafrance, Marianne; Romero-Canyas,	Internalizing the Closet: Concealment Heightens the Cognitive Distinction Between Public and Private Selves	2013	USA	Five different studies to distinguish between public and private aspects of the self. Development and test of a measure of the cognitive accessibility of the	Self-identified heterosexual and gay adults.	263

<i>Authors</i>	<i>Title of the study</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Setting – Researchers' location</i>	<i>Research approach –Study design</i>	<i>Study population^s</i>	<i>Sample size</i>
Rainer & Camp, Nicholas P.				distinction between public and private self-schemas.		
Crooks, Roderic N.	The Rainbow Flag and the Green Carnation: Grindr in The Gay Village	2013	USA	Autoethnography	Self-identified gay men.	1
Goltz, Dustin Bradley	"Sensible" Suicide, Brutal Selfishness, and John Hughes's Queer Bonds	2013	USA	Theoretical review, critique, and synthesis of an activist campaign, a TV show, and a film on gay and heterosexual suicide.	N/A	N/A
Bregman, Hallie R. ; Malik, Neena M. ; Page,	Identity profiles in lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth: the role of family influences	2013	USA	Self-administered psychometric scales.	Self-identified lesbian, gay, and	169

<i>Authors</i>	<i>Title of the study</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Setting – Researchers’ location</i>	<i>Research approach –Study design</i>	<i>Study population^s</i>	<i>Sample size</i>
Matthew J. L. ; Makynen, Emily ; Lindahl, Kristin M.					bisexual adolescents and young adults.	
Vider, Stephen.	Oh Hell, May, Why Don’t You People Have a Cookbook?: Camp Humor and Gay Domesticity	2013	USA	Historical review of literature on spatiality, invisibility, domesticity, and liberation of gay identities.	N/A	N/A
Gray, Amy ; Desmarais, Serge	Not all one and the same: Sexual identity, activism, and collective self-esteem	2014	33 major Canadian universities.	Online self-administered survey.	Heterosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and queer people.	265
Korycki, Katarzyna; Nasirzadeh, Abouzar	Desire recast: the production of gay identity in Iran	2014	Iran	Theoretical review of social, cultural, and historical literature relevant to homoerotic practices,	N/A	N/A

<i>Authors</i>	<i>Title of the study</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Setting – Researchers’ location</i>	<i>Research approach –Study design</i>	<i>Study population^s</i>	<i>Sample size</i>
				homosexuality, and gay identity in Iran.		
Coleman- Fountain, Edmund.	Lesbian and gay youth and the question of labels	2014	Northeast of England, UK.	In-depth qualitative interviews.	Lesbian and gay youths.	19
Spieldenner, Andrew R	Statement of Ownership: An Autoethnography of Living With HIV	2014	USA	Autoethnography	Self-identified gay men living with HIV	1
Gamarel, Kristi E.; Walker, Ja’Nina J.; Rivera, Lillian & Golub, Sarit A.	Identity Safety and Relational Health in Youth Spaces: A Needs Assessment with LGBTQ Youth of Color	2014	USA	Focus groups.	Self-identified LGBTQ youth.	29

<i>Authors</i>	<i>Title of the study</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Setting – Researchers' location</i>	<i>Research approach –Study design</i>	<i>Study population^s</i>	<i>Sample size</i>
Goltz, Dustin Bradley	“We’re Not in Oz Anymore”: Shifting Generational Perspectives and Tensions of Gay Community, Identity, and Future	2014	USA	Generative focus groups (including photographs, written narratives, poetry, and use of journals).	Self-identified gay men.	10
Mizock, Lauren ; Harrison, Kathleen ; Rusinova, Zlatka	Lesbian, Gay, and Transgender Individuals with Mental Illness: Narratives of the Acceptance Process	2014	USA	Semi-structured, qualitative interviews.	Self-identified lesbian, gay, transgender, and heterosexual individuals.	32
Nagoshi, Julie, L.; Terrell, Heather K.; Nagoshi, Craig T. &	THE COMPLEX NEGOTIATIONS OF GENDER ROLES, GENDER IDENTITY, AND SEXUAL ORIENTATION AMONG HETEROSEXUAL, GAY/LESBIAN, AND	2014	USA	Semi-structured, qualitative interviews.	Self-identified lesbian, gay, transgender, and heterosexual individuals.	35

<i>Authors</i>	<i>Title of the study</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Setting – Researchers’ location</i>	<i>Research approach –Study design</i>	<i>Study population^s</i>	<i>Sample size</i>
Brzuzy, Stephanie.	TRANSGENDER INDIVIDUALS					
Kuper, Laura E. & Mustanski, Brian S.	Using Narrative Analysis to Identify Patterns of Internet Influence on the Identity Development of Same-Sex Attracted Youth	2014	USA	Semi-structured interviews. Narrative analysis.	Same-sex attracted youth.	4
Adams, Jeffery; Braun, Virginia & McCreanor, Tim.	“Aren’t Labels for Pickle Jars, Not People?” Negotiating Identity and Community in Talk About ‘Being Gay’	2014	Auckland and Christchurch, New Zealand.	Focus groups. Thematic analysis.	Gay men and men who have sex with men.	54
Bond, B. J. and J. N. Loewenstern	Employing Memory Narratives to Dissect the Wellbeing of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Adolescents	2014	USA	Self-administered online survey.	Self-identified lesbian, gay, and bisexual adolescents.	390

<i>Authors</i>	<i>Title of the study</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Setting – Researchers' location</i>	<i>Research approach –Study design</i>	<i>Study population^s</i>	<i>Sample size</i>
Coulombe, Simon & De la Sablonnière, Roxane.	The Role of Identity Integration in Hedonic Adaptation to a Beneficial Life Change: The Example of “Coming Out” for Lesbians and Gay Men	2015	Canada	Self-administered paper-based and online questionnaires.	Self-identified gay men and lesbians	80
Eric Fassin, Eric & Salcedo, Manuela.	Becoming Gay? Immigration Policies and the Truth of Sexual Identity	2015	France	Dyadic interviews.	Self-identified gay men	4
Collier, Kate; Sandfort, Theo; Reddy, Vasu & Lane, Tim.	This Will Not Enter Me': Painful Anal Intercourse Among Black Men Who Have Sex with Men in South African Townships	2015	Atteridgeville, Hammanskraal, Mamelodi, and Soshanguve, South Africa.	Ethnography, including observations and in-depth interviews.	Black Men who have Sex with Men	81

<i>Authors</i>	<i>Title of the study</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Setting – Researchers’ location</i>	<i>Research approach –Study design</i>	<i>Study population^s</i>	<i>Sample size</i>
Bartle, Chris.	Gay/Queer Dynamics and the Question of Sexual History and Identity	2015	UK	Theoretical review of essentialist/constructivist and gay/queer notions.	N/A	N/A
Critchfield, Adam R. & Pula, Jack.	On Psychotherapy, LGBT Identity, and Cultural Visibility: In Conversation with Alison Bechdel	2015	USA	Case study. It analyses the artistic work of Alison Bechdel from the perspective of cultural representations of psychotherapy, development of gender identity and expression, and considers the implications of her work for the mental health practitioner caring for LGBT individuals.	N/A	N/A

<i>Authors</i>	<i>Title of the study</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Setting – Researchers' location</i>	<i>Research approach –Study design</i>	<i>Study population^s</i>	<i>Sample size</i>
Davis, Brian R.	Harmony, Dissonance, and the Gay Community: A Dialogical Approach to Same-Sex Desiring Men's Sexual Identity Development	2015	New York, USA.	Questionnaires and individual interviews.	Same-sex desiring men	10
Martos, Alexander J.; Nezhad, Sheila & Meyer, Ilan H.	Variations in Sexual Identity Milestones Among Lesbians, Gay Men, and Bisexuals	2015	New York, USA.	Computer assisted personal interviews.	Lesbian, gay, and bisexual people.	369
Tee R., Tyler.	Our Story: The Parent and LGBTQ Child Relational Process	2015	Southern states in the USA.	Unstructured, open-ended interviews with parent-LGBTQ child dyads.	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer self-identified 'children' and their parents.	11

<i>Authors</i>	<i>Title of the study</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Setting – Researchers' location</i>	<i>Research approach –Study design</i>	<i>Study population^s</i>	<i>Sample size</i>
Harper, Gary W; Serrano, Pedro A; Bruce, Douglas & Bauermeister, Jose A.	The Internet's Multiple Roles in Facilitating the Sexual Orientation Identity Development of Gay and Bisexual Male Adolescents	2015	Chicago and Miami/Dade Metropolitan areas, USA.	Semi-structured, in-depth, qualitative interview.	Gay, bisexual, and questioning male adolescents.	63
Lozano-Verduzco, Ignacio & Rosales Mendoza, Adriana Lorena.	In/formal sex education: learning gay identity in cultural and educational contexts in Mexico	2016	Mexico City.	Individual semi-structured interviews.	Self-identified gay men	15
Oluwafemi, Atanda.	Selected Theories in Gay and Lesbian Studies: A Sociological Inquiry into Homosexual Identity and Same-Sex Intimacy	2016	South Africa.	Theoretical review of relevant global and continental scholarship on family sociology and	N/A	N/A

<i>Authors</i>	<i>Title of the study</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Setting – Researchers’ location</i>	<i>Research approach –Study design</i>	<i>Study population^s</i>	<i>Sample size</i>
				sexuality studies through sociological lens.		
Villicana, Adrian J.; Delucio, Kevin & Biernata, Monica.	“Coming out” among gay Latino and gay White men: implications of verbal disclosure for wellbeing	2016	USA	Self-administered questionnaires, inventories, and measures.	Self-identified gay men	199
Ocampo, Anthony C. & Soodjinda, Daniel.	Invisible Asian Americans: The Intersection of Sexuality, Race, and Education among Gay Asian Americans	2016	San Francisco, USA.	In-depth interviews.	Self-identified gay and queer men	35
Boone, Melissa R.; Cook, Stephanie H.;	Sexual identity and HIV status influence the relationship between internalized stigma and	2016	New York, USA.	Questionnaires, which used a computer-assisted self-interviewing modality.	Young Black gay and bisexual men	227

<i>Authors</i>	<i>Title of the study</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Setting – Researchers’ location</i>	<i>Research approach –Study design</i>	<i>Study population^s</i>	<i>Sample size</i>
Wilson, Patrick A.	psychological distress in black gay and bisexual men					
Collins, Joshua.	Retaliatory Strike or Fired with Cause: A Case Study of Gay Identity Disclosure and Law Enforcement	2016	USA	Case study. Analysis of news pieces, including: 11 articles from mainstream news outlets, five articles from LGBT news outlets, two posts from gossip sites or blogs, one video from a press conference, one audio recording of a radio interview, and nine Facebook posts.	Self-identified gay men	1
Jaspal, Rusi.	Gay Men’s Construction and Management of Identity on Grindr	2017	London and East Midlands, England.	Semi-structured interviews. Data were analysed using IPA.	Self-identified gay men	18

<i>Authors</i>	<i>Title of the study</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Setting – Researchers' location</i>	<i>Research approach –Study design</i>	<i>Study population^s</i>	<i>Sample size</i>
Hughes, Bryce.	"Managing by Not Managing": How Gay Engineering Students Manage Sexual Orientation Identity	2017	Southwest of the USA.	Individual semi-structured interviews and focus- groups. Data were analysed using thematic narrative analysis.	Self-identified gay men	7

Appendix 2 – Invitation to participate in research

**Understanding gay men’s identities
through their narratives of romantic and erotic relationships
Invitation to participate in research**

I am Edgar Rodríguez, I have identified myself as a gay man for several years. During this time I have been interested in understanding what ‘being gay’ actually means to gay men.

Erotic and romantic relationships have particularly attracted my attention because they seem to be central to the understanding of gay identity. This observation made me want to explore how gay men talk about their experiences of sexual and romantic intimacy, and try to understand how through them they (we) make sense of their (our) identity.

Perhaps you are interested in these topics too, perhaps you would like to talk about them too. If that is the case I want to invite you to take part in my research. But I need to ask you to take a few minutes to read this information sheet before making up your mind about whether or not you would like to help me with my study.



The kiss of life, by Rocco Morabito.

What is the purpose of the study?

This is a research project which will help me to complete my PhD in Counselling and Psychotherapy at the University of Edinburgh.

The main goal of my research is to get an understanding of how gay men get a sense of their identity through listening to their stories of romantic and erotic relationships.

I want to interview men who identify themselves as gay and discuss with them their experiences of sex and love and the meanings, thoughts, and feelings derived from those experiences.

Who can participate?

If you identify yourself as a gay man, are at least 16 years old, are able to communicate in English, have experienced sexual desire towards men, and have participated in or longed for a romantic relationship, I invite you to participate in this study.

What will I do if I take part?

If you are happy to contribute to my research I will ask you to meet for a one to one interview session which I will audio-record.

Although in this interview there are no pre-established questions and I expect the conversation to develop naturally with your input on topics of your erotic and romantic relationships, some examples of the themes we may talk about are (but not limited or compelled to):

- People you have been in love with.
- Circumstances in which you feel sexual desire.
- Relationships you have been involved in.
- Your thoughts when you start to have a crush on someone.
- The meanings that being single or partnered has for you.
- Thoughts about your identity coming from sexual experiences you have had or fantasized.
- Experiences of sex or relationships that have gone well or not so well.
- Important episodes of your love and/or sex life.
- The meanings that being gay has for you.
- The role sex and relationships play in your sense of yourself as a gay man.

The interview is expected to last approximately 90 minutes but of course this will depend on you, on the time available, and on the conversation itself. Some interviews can be shorter whereas others can extend a bit.

We will make arrangements to meet in a venue of your preference as long as it is private to facilitate communication. When we meet I will ask you to read and sign a consent form and return it to me. In that form I will expand on your rights as a participant and the details of the research.

If you do not wish to participate you do not have to do anything in response to this request.

What are the possible risks of taking part?

Whilst there are not significant risks attached to this research, sometimes a research interview about intimate subjects like these can bring up unexpected feelings, or the interview can leave you realizing that you need to talk more about something. If this happens to you, or if you need emotional support, I will share some details of available sources which offer telephone and face to face consultation, and other relevant services.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Whilst there may be no personal benefits to your participation in this study, by helping me with this interview, the information you provide can contribute to develop knowledge about gay men's identities and their (our) relationships.

Although your participation will not be remunerated, some participants find the opportunity of conversing about their experiences rewarding.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

Firstly, what you have to say about your erotic and romantic relationships could make an important contribution to my research!

I expect to publish the results of this study on my PhD thesis, I also expect to publish them in articles in academic journals, and presentations at academic conferences. If you decide to take part and want to know about the findings, I will make a summary of the preliminary findings available to you. We will talk about the time to get that preliminary analysis when we meet.

Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?

As I will ask you to talk about intimate topics of romance and sex, you may be concerned about the confidentiality of your personal details.

I will keep confidential all potentially identifying information provided by you by anonymizing those aspects, e.g. no personal details relating to who you are, where you live or work will be disclosed to anyone.

I will keep all the information you provide on a password-protected computer and secure cloud storage. I will be the only person having access to the audio recordings. My supervisors will have access to the transcriptions of our interview but under no circumstances I will disclose responses that make you identifiable.

When I finish my thesis and publish articles, I will only make public information emanating from the interview in such a way that no participant will be identified.

Who is organising the research?

I am conducting this research as my PhD project and I am supervised by Seamus Prior and Jonathan Wyatt. I am undertaking my research at the School of

Health in Social Science at the University of Edinburgh with funding from the CONACYT (Mexican Council for Science and Technology).

How can I take part in this research?

If you feel you would like to be part of this research or you would like to know more, please call me or email me and I will get back to you shortly (contacting me to ask questions does not obligate you to participate in the study).

Edgar Rodríguez Sánchez | PhD student

Counselling and Psychotherapy, University of Edinburgh

Email: e.rodriguez-3@sms.ed.ac.uk

Mobile phone: 077 3670 4584

If you have any questions about the validity of this study, you might want to contact my supervisors:

Seamus Prior

seamus.prior@ed.ac.uk

Tel: +44 (0) 131 651 6599

Jonathan Wyatt

jonathan.wyatt@ed.ac.uk

Tel: +44 (0) 131 651 3974

**Understanding gay men’s identities
through their narratives of romantic and erotic relationships**

Interview Consent Form

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my research study. Before we proceed I need to explain why this study is being done and what it requires from you. Please take your time to read the following information carefully and let me know if something is not clear or would like to know more.

1. Nature of the process

- 1.1 My name is Edgar Rodríguez, a PhD student in Counselling and Psychotherapy at the University of Edinburgh. My study aims to understand how self-identified gay men give meanings to their romantic and erotic relationships and how these meanings become entangled with their sense of identity. I identify myself as gay and I am interested in this topic because I have observed how frequently men mention relationships, love, and sex when talking about being gay and I want to know more about it.
- 1.2 In order to participate in this study you must be over the age of 16.
- 1.3 You have been invited to participate because you identify yourself as a gay man.
- 1.4 Participation in this research study is completely voluntary, so (a) you will not be pressured to participate and (b) you will not be paid for your participation.
- 1.5 Through participating in this research you are helping me to learn more about gay men’s identity and their relationships. I expect this research will inform the profession of counselling and psychotherapy on how to improve work with gay men.

2. Procedure, confidentiality, and data management

- 2.1 By signing this form you agree to partake in a one to one interview in which we will talk about your experiences, thoughts, and feelings regarding romantic and erotic relationships, and the meanings they have for you.
- 2.2 Although I would expect it to last between 45 minutes and 2 hours, the interview length will depend on you.
- 2.3 The interview can take place in a venue of your preference; it could be a room at the University of Edinburgh, an office at your workplace, a community centre, your home, or somewhere else as long as the place is quiet and private to facilitate the conversation and avoid distractions.
- 2.4 I will audio-record the interview in an electronic file and will make notes in my journal once we have finished. If you do not want to be audio-recorded, it will not be possible to include you in this study.
- 2.5 I will store the information in digital format in a password-protected computer and secure cloud storage. The notes in my research journal will be stored in a locked cabinet.

- 2.6 Although my supervisors will have access to the transcribed material, your name and other potentially identifying information will not be revealed.
- 2.7 Ultimately, the information discussed during the interview will be part of my PhD thesis, it might also appear in academic journals or conference papers. I will include your comments and answers but your name and other data which might make you identifiable will be kept strictly confidential.
- 2.8 This consent form, the audio recording of the interview, and its original transcript will be deleted at the successful completion of the PhD.
- 2.9 The anonymized transcripts will be held up to 5 years after completion of the PhD for purposes of further scholarly publications.

3. Rights of the participant

- 3.1 As all the objectives and aims of this research will be transparent at all times, you have the right to ask anything about the study if you feel something is not clear.
- 3.2 If any response you give during the interview makes you feel uneasy, you have the right to ask for part of the recording to be erased.
- 3.3 If during the course of the interview you feel you do not want to continue, you are free to end the interview and renegotiate your overall participation in the study.
- 3.4 If you withdraw from the study once the interview has finished, the entire recording will be deleted.

The findings from this research will be shared with you upon request.

Although the completion of my PhD thesis can take me a couple of years, I can share with you a preliminary summary of the results once the phase of data collection is finished in a few months' time. If you wish to be informed about these initial findings, please tick this box and write your email address in the following space.

For any questions or enquiries regarding this study, you may contact me via email or post:

E.Rodriguez-3@sms.ed.ac.uk

Edgar Rodríguez Sánchez

PhD Student, Counselling and Psychotherapy

School of Health in Social Science, University of Edinburgh

Medical School, Teviot Place, Edinburgh, EH8 9AG

This research project is supervised by Seamus Prior and Jonathan Wyatt, academics from The University of Edinburgh. In you want more information you can contact them:

Seamus Prior

seamus.prior@ed.ac.uk

Tel: +44 (0) 131 651 6599

Jonathan Wyatt

jonathan.wyatt@ed.ac.uk

Tel: +44 (0) 131 651 3974

Please read the next statement and if you understand it, please proceed to fill in the spaces below.

- **I hereby agree to be a participant in the described interview.**
- **I was given an opportunity to ask questions about the process.**
- **My questions were answered satisfactorily.**
- **I also understand that I am free to stop participating in the project, the deadline for withdrawal is 30th September 2016.**
- **I have read and understood the above consent form and want to participate in this study.**

Name:

Signature:

Date:

Appendix 4 – Post-interview form

Understanding gay men's identities through their narratives of romantic and erotic relationships

[Post-Interview Form]

Thank you for your generous participation in this study. I expect that your collaboration in this interview will help me to develop knowledge about gay men's identity and their relationships.

*

Do you want to change something or withdraw?

If you wish to remove or change any comments, responses, or details from the interview, let me know, I can do that so you feel comfortable with what you shared.

If for any reason you want to withdraw from the study, please feel free to contact me before 30th September 2016 when I am expecting to start the writing process of my PhD thesis.

For these purposes, my details are as follows:

e.rodriquez-3@sms.ed.ac.uk

Edgar Rodríguez Sánchez
PhD Student in Counselling and Psychotherapy
School of Health in Social Science, University of Edinburgh
Medical School, Teviot Place, Edinburgh, EH8 9AG
Tel: 077 3670 4584

*

Doubts?

If you have further doubts associated with this study, you can contact Seamus Prior or Jonathan Wyatt, academics from The University of Edinburgh who are supervising my research project.

Seamus Prior
seamus.prior@ed.ac.uk
Tel: +44 (0) 131 651 6599
Jonathan Wyatt
jonathan.wyatt@ed.ac.uk
Tel: +44 (0) 131 651 3974

*

Complaints

If you are dissatisfied about how this study has been conducted and me and my supervisors have been unable to resolve the matter, you may then contact the Head of School of Health in Social Science. Please write or call with the details of your complaint to:

Professor Charlotte Clarke
Head of School of Health in Social Science
charlotte.clarke@ed.ac.uk
Tel: +44 (0) 0131 650 4327

*

Other Resources

Perhaps you do not have complaints, but sometimes participating in a research interview about intimate subjects like these can bring up unexpected feelings, or the interview can leave you realizing that you need to tell more about something. If this happens to you, or if you need emotional support, there are available sources which offer telephone and face to face consultation, and other relevant services. These list below presents some of these sources:

LGBT Health & Wellbeing

9 Howe Street, Edinburgh, EH3 6TE

Tel: 0131 523 1100

LGBT helpline: 0300 123 2523

admin@lgbthealth.org.uk

<http://www.lgbthealth.org.uk/>

Gay Men's Health Counselling Service

10 Union Street, Edinburgh, EH1 3LU

Tel: 0131 558 9444

fiona.macaulay@gmh.org.uk

<http://gmh.org.uk/about/home.html>

Couple Counselling Lothian

9a Dundas Street, Edinburgh, EH3 6QG

Tel: 0131 556 1527

info@cclothian.org.uk

<http://www.cclothian.org.uk/>

Edinburgh Institute for Counselling & Psychotherapy

86 Causewayside, Edinburgh, EH9 1PY

Tel: 0131 6675251

enquiries@eicp.org.uk

<http://www.eicp.org.uk/>

LGBT Youth Scotland

Need to chat?

Chat anytime for friendly advice: <https://www.lgbtyouth.org.uk/>

Leave a text message: 07786 202 370

Hope Park Counselling Centre

8 Hope Park Square, Meadow Lane, Edinburgh, EH8 9NW

Tel: +44 (0)131 650 6696

counselling@hopepark.org.uk

<http://www.ed.ac.uk/schools-departments/health/hopepark/home>

Appendix 5 – Interview schedule

Understanding gay men’s identities through their narratives of romantic and erotic relationships

[Interview Schedule]

(1) Revision of the consent

- The expected length of the interview, procedure, confidentiality, and data management.
- Rights of the participant.
- Participant signs the consent.
- Turn on the audio recorder.

(2) Rapport

- Who am I and how this research started.
- Do you want to ask something about me?
- Explanation for how your stories will be valuable to my study.
- Thank you for your collaboration.
- *‘There are no prepared questions because I want to know what is important for you’*

(3) Narrations of Erotic and Romantic Relationships

‘In general, what I am trying to understand in this research is how gay men make sense of the interaction between their romantic and erotic relationships and their sense of identity. Particularly in this interview I want to talk about your romantic and erotic relationships and what these relationships mean in your life as a gay man’.

- You can tell me about people you have been in love with.
- We could talk about circumstances in which you feel sexual desire.
- You can tell me about relationships you have been involved in.
- Your thoughts when you start to have a crush on someone.
- The meanings that being single or partnered has for you.
- Thoughts about sexual experiences you have had or fantasized.
- You can tell me about experiences of sex or relationships that have gone well or not so well.
- Important episodes of your love and/or sex life.
- The meanings that being gay has for you.
- You can tell me about the role sex and relationships play in your sense of yourself as a gay man.

(4) Reflexion of the process

- How have you found the interview today?
- Do you have any feedback for me?
- Anything else you would like to say?

- Anything you would like to know about the study and what happens next?

(5) Closure

- Turn off the audio-recorder and give them the post-interview form.
- Ask them if they wish to remove or change anything from the interview.
- Inform them their right to be updated about the research in the form of a summary of the preliminary findings. How would you like to be updated? Email? Post?
- Emphasize their right to withdraw from the study if that is their wish and the deadline to do that. Explain them that the report can take up to six months.
- Provide contact details of relevant institutions which might be helpful for them.
- Give them the contact details in case they want to complain about this study.
- Thank them for their generosity in giving their time and insights.