



Differentiating the Self: How Do Middle-Aged Gay Men in Manchester Respond to Ageing and (Gay*) Ageism?

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2. Running order

1. Context – questions and methods
2. Argument
3. Narratives – different responses to categories of age and to ageing, ageism.



3. Context: aim/research questions

How do middle-aged gay men (late 30s – early 60s) living in Manchester respond to growing older and ageism?

1. Everyday stories/practices re dress and grooming – responses to categories of age, ageing processes and ageism in various ‘homo’ and ‘heterospaces.’
2. How dominant/institutionalised ways of thinking (discourses) about ageing influence men’s understandings of age/ageing and how they relate to others and express their midlife selves (in various spaces)
3. Interaction or social distance between men of different ages in spaces of the ‘gay scene’ – workings of ageism.



4. Context: methods

1. In-depth interviews with 27 men (aged 39 – 61) living in Manchester. Interviewees differ by age, class, ethnicity (3) and relationship type/status.
2. **Twenty ‘covert’ participant observation sessions** in 12 (age-coded) Village bars (and streets) – **bodily** stories (dress, grooming and interaction). The dynamic character of ‘village life’ obliged theoretically-informed **time, place** (age and class) **and people sampling** (singles, dyads, small groups) as well as a focus for each session (in line with research questions).



5. Argument/driving narrative

1. Differentiation (mainly) from younger gay men through an ‘authentic’ (age-appropriate) middle-aged self/form of sexual citizenship. Works in three ways: reproduces; negotiates with; and challenges/resists (gay) ageism.
2. Ageism in Manchester’s gay male culture is multidirectional – ‘downwards’*, ‘sideways’* and ‘upwards.’
3. The gay village is not overwhelmingly a site of exclusion on the grounds of age – conviviality in age-friendly, sexualised space that involves friendship, affection, being there for others.



6. Differentiating the middle-aged self: an authentic, age-appropriate sexual citizenship

I see the bright coloured, patterned underwear that they sell in gay and designer shops... I think, ‘just does *not* apply.’ It’s largely comfort for me now... from *Primark* and *Tesco*... I just refuse to do the whole **superficial** *Calvin Klein* thing... I know I shouldn’t say it... but, well, quite frankly, I think I’m better than them ...more self-aware... I see all that in an older guy as a sign of immaturity, a lack of awareness... being a sheep... trying to dress in a young way, which **looks ridiculous** on them. (**Daniel 46**).

I just don’t find it attractive. I like people to be **natural**... to be themselves. I find it a bit feminine when men are too fussy and dress too young... I don’t fancy men like that at all (**Jamie 54**).

If they’re obsessed with desperately hanging on to youth, then it’s probably somebody **not worth knowing** (**Vince 49**).



7. Negotiations with age/ageism

*Late forties, gym-toned biceps and the outline of pectoral muscles were visible but his potbelly appeared to be toned down by a slightly baggy, long sleeved t-shirt. His slightly reddened, blotchy skin especially around the nose, indicating breakage of fine blood vessels just beneath the skin, suggested that he might be a frequent drinker and long-term smoker. (Field notes, outside **Canale Uno** midweek, mid evening 7/5/09).*

Ok, I'm at the time of life when I think about clothes I'm going to look good in rather than the latest fashion with skinny jeans halfway down yer arse that we're now being told to buy.... I like to look nice... a bit more modern but I wouldn't wear things that would look **too young**... But, the middle classes can get away with looking younger, trendier because they've got the means to look stylish. (**Ben 50**).



8. Blurring age, transcending ageism

*Man of 'bearish' proportions, shaved head, late fifties/early 60s, quite striking appearance. He was wearing a bright blue t-shirt that hugged the contours of his fat, solid body and sported a long, shaped grey (ZZ Top-style) goatee. His style of 'cruising' was direct, utterly confident, and unapologetic. He communicated the right to look and to be looked at. (Field note, **Diva's Bar** (mixed age) 12/6/09).*

The lines on the face tell a story... Nobody's perfect... and I'd rather see that up-front... People who look a bit lived-in are usually more interesting... (Laughs)... And part of that *phwoar* factor is that rugged, **unpolished** look. (**Davie 44**).



9. The village: moment of alienation

*On the various podia and dance floor were many men in their twenties and early thirties, stripped to the waist, some with shaved, muscled torsos. But, the dry ice, dizzying lighting, loud, fast, thumping music and the energy of those dancing were beginning for me to feel like sensory overload. I noticed a man, (mid-forties?), carefully picking his way along the periphery of the dance floor as if battling against a storm. He appeared almost fixed to the spot under the onslaught of the 'high energy' sound and light show. His facial expression and body posture communicated that his whole being felt embattled by the club experience. [Field notes, **Disco Inferno** 12/6/09, early hours of Saturday morning].*



10. Moment of ambivalence

South East Asian man, late forties well defined arms and torso, tight-fitting, light blue, rugby style, short-sleeved t-shirt that accentuated his physique. For the duration of his stay, (about half an hour), he sat alone with his back to the wall behind a group of seven men. Variousy, he occupied himself by leafing through a magazine, leaflets, then switched between a mobile phone and pocket diary. He snatched occasional glances at the group and around the bar and would make subtle adjustments to the nap of his t-shirt and trousers. Later, he was practically hugging himself; right hand holding his left shoulder with one leg crossed over his knee and left hand on right ankle, foot twitching. [The Frontier Bar (older men) mid-evening].



11. The moment of agency

Two men early sixties and mid twenties (?) leapt onto the dance floor, determined facial expressions to, Are You Strong Enough? Their Cher impersonations involved energetic waving of arms and suitably contorted facial expressions as they lip-synched the words to each other. During Pink's, 'Cause I'm a Fighter,' they attracted an audience as they punched their fists in the air/towards each other mock aggressively. Other dancers cleared the floor to watch, as they began spontaneously to mirror each other's movements/gestures and at one point shook their imaginary though ample showgirl breasts at each other. Their routine covered the whole dance floor and segued into dancing side-by-side, moving backwards and forwards in-step, waving an index finger in front of them to the histrionic refrain of, 'One Night Only!' The audience was transfixed; enthusiastic applause followed. [Changes Bar (mixed space) 20/3/09].



12. Conclusions

1. Differentiation (mainly) from younger gay men through an ‘authentic’ (age-appropriate), middle-aged self/form of sexual citizenship. Works in three ways: reproduces; negotiates with; and challenges/resists (gay) ageism.
2. Gay ageism in Manchester’s gay culture is multidirectional.
3. The gay village is not overwhelmingly a site of exclusion on the grounds of age – negotiation with ageism **and** a transcendent conviviality in age-friendly, sexualised space that involves friendship, affection and being there for others. Challenges the idea that sexualised spaces of the ‘gay scene’ offer only degraded relations.



In Heterospace Everyone Can Hear You Scream (1)

We went to X store in town. Anyway, there was this slip of a bloody schoolgirl trying to sell jeans and he [partner] put these jeans on and she said, 'Oh, they look really lovely.' And I just looked at him and said, '*No way! No way!*' They were hangin' off his arse. So, I called her over and I said, 'Excuse me, love, I'm gonna give you one more chance, right?' I said, 'I don't like shopping at the best of times, right? Now, I'm looking for a pair of jeans that I can see his arse in. And that's what he's lookin' for too... a pair o' jeans where people will see his arse and think, 'that's a nice arse.' So, she went away, came back, he tried on these jeans and I said, 'Perfect' ...Anyway, the manager thanked us afterwards (Warren 52).



Screaming in heterospace (2)

Sometimes I wear mini-skirts, tights and high heels... In the winter I like to wear a fur coat... and a lot of pancake type or really caked on make-up as well. I kind of look like a drag queen sort of thing... But, I'm making a statement about the gender divide... I sort of identify myself as a trans guy, if you like... a trans queer... I'm sort of gay but I don't know whether dressing kinda makes me a heterosexual female when I go out or whether I'm a gay man dressed as a woman, y'know.... But, Marigold (drag alter ego) is really feisty, in yer face... bit of a vamp... And I do put on the act at times.... But, it's all very kind of blurred and confused... I have been to the village on the bus a few times...