Differentiating the Self: How Midlife Gay Men in Manchester Respond to Ageing and Ageism

A thesis submitted to the University of Manchester for the degree of PhD Sociology in the Faculty of Humanities, School of Social Sciences, Department of Sociology.

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Paul Simpson
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Abstract.

Differentiating the Self: How Midlife Gay Men in Manchester Respond to Ageing and Ageism

The study seeks to answer how midlife gay men in Manchester manage growing older. It analyses accounts generated through in-depth interviews with 27 middle-aged gay men living in Greater Manchester (aged 39 – 61) and 20 participant observation sessions conducted in Manchester’s ‘gay village.’ It deploys an interpretivist methodology and a ‘pick and mix’ analytical framework developed by Thomson (2009) that uses of Foucault’s ‘technologies of the self’ (1987) (that concern capacities for agency) but located within ‘fields of existence’ (with their own norms) adopted from Bourdieu (1984). Through analysis of participants’ accounts of bodily practices (dress, grooming, diet, exercise) and their relationships in various fields, the study examines the constraints on and choices around expression of midlife identity and ways of relating. The study’s structuring theme concerns the mechanisms through which midlife gay men in Manchester differentiate themselves from others. Differentiation is achieved largely through moral and epistemic claims-making around an ‘authentic’ gay male midlife self that is central to the notion of a legitimate, (age-appropriate) form of socio-sexual citizenship. As extant scholarship has identified, there are normative restrictions on expression of a midlife self and the possibilities for interaction (especially with younger gay men) but men can use self-worth and political knowledges gained from life experience (‘ageing capital’ and age-related technologies of the self) to do other than comply with such restrictions. But, this study also illuminates men’s ambivalent responses to age, ageing, gay ageism and homophobia that involve negotiation with discourses that inform understandings of ageing and sexuality. The study also maps a cultural “politics of the minor” (Rose 1999) operating at the micro-level, which is concerned to affect the context of interaction. The power relations of gay male ageism that are crucial to this expression of politics are multidirectional. Midlife gay men are not just the targets of ageism from younger gay men. They distinguish themselves in ways that can express ageism towards younger, (some) peer aged and old gay men. The study also complicates assumptions about midlife gay men and their lives: 1) Dressing for ‘comfort’ (part of an ‘authentic’ midlife self) contradicts the idea that midlife gay men obsess about the body, prolonging youth and maintaining sexual marketability. 2) Manchester’s gay village is not overwhelmingly a site of exclusion for midlife gay men. They negotiate with the rules of the game and use emotional and cultural political knowledges gained through life experience to resist ageism and carve out a conviviality that involves friendship, affection and care for others in sexualised space. 3) Gay men continue to experience unequal access to public space but gains in self-worth with age and the recent tolerance dividend indicate that this is now more often experienced as safer. Gayness is now being claimed as integral to broader sexual citizenship. 4) Midlife gay men do not live outside of kinship. Subjects creatively reconfigured their kinship circles/friendship families over time. This form of kinship has special political significance for this present generation of middle-aged gay men in Manchester.

Paul Simpson, Manchester University, PhD. Sociology. 11 September 2011.
Declaration of Authenticity

No portion of the work referred to in the thesis has been submitted in support of any application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.

Signed………………………………………………...

Date…………………………………………………
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Chapter One. Orientation, Themes and Issues

I’ve had younger men tell me on the dance floor, ‘What the hell are you doing here? This place isn’t for old men.’ Most of these young people when they see people like us, or me rather, they see their own fathers… (Laughs). They don’t expect to find their parents or even their grandparents at the same disco, do they? (Tony 59).

1.1 Introduction

The above excerpt might tempt anyone to believe that midlife gay men (late thirties to early sixties) are considered ‘past it’ by their younger peers. Can midlife gay men expect nothing but rejection and isolation as they slide towards the ultimate misery of rejection as a ‘lonely old queen?’ This awful label haunted me for a while when my parents warned me (not long after I ‘came out’ to them in 1980 aged 22) about my inevitable fate if I continued along this path. It suggested that not only would I eventually find myself washed up and alienated from my own kind but also that I was making a decision that would alienate me from proper human kinship – the family. At that time, the few, small ‘gay scenes’ that existed outside of London appeared to be ‘underground’ often quite literally when pubs and clubs were housed in basements or were constructed in such a way that prevented the ability to see inside a venue (Binnie and Skeggs 2004: 49). With this historical backdrop in mind, this study attempts to examine midlife gay men’s experiences of growing older in a city that since about the mid-1990s has witnessed the exponential growth of a very visible gay bar scene or ‘gay village,’ which is now popular with heterosexuals (Binnie and Skeggs 2004). The village is the centrepiece of a highly developed gay culture (second only in size to London) that provides all manner of social opportunities (LGF July 2011).

This study is about the power relations of ageism between gay men as discernible in accounts generated in interviews with 27 gay men aged between 39 and 61 living in Manchester who have some connection with instutionalised forms gay culture (bars, the ‘virtual’ scene, saunas and social and/or kinship groups) and 20 observation sessions in parts of the village. The study illuminates how local midlife gay men differentiate themselves through various forms of claims-making mainly from gay others. Midlife gay men’s accounts of ageing and ageism serve as major tropes through which claims for differentiation mainly from younger gay men but also from (some) peer aged gay men and old gay men are achieved. Whilst middle-aged
gay men are differentiated or 'othered' by the ageism of younger gay men, study participants’ claims to superiority over younger gay men (by virtue of a more developed subjectivity) indicate a reverse ageism that reinforces divisions in gay male culture. Of necessity then, this study engages with midlife gay men’s involvement in a cultural politics or more specifically what Rose has called a “politics of the minor,” which operates at the micro-level of interaction and is concerned with “small reworkings of the spaces of action” (Rose 1999: 279 – 80). The study demonstrates how this multiform politics of the everyday involves capitulation to, negotiation with and resistance to gay ageism. It also addresses power relations with heterosexuals, which can involve conflict around homophobia. Stories relating to ageism and homophobia raise questions about how middle-aged gay men living in a metropolitan context negotiate gay and straight defined cultural spheres – ‘homospaces’ (chapter 6) and ‘heterospaces' (chapter 7) - and whether they experience inclusion in or exclusion from these fields of existence. Study participants’ experiences of ageing may be different in important ways from midlife gay men who have opted not to be or are prevented from being involved in any of the more obvious expressions of Manchester’s gay culture or ‘gay scene.’ The study then does not address the accounts of ageing of men who are separate from Manchester’s gay scene for various moral, cultural and political reasons.

The chapter begins with explanation of what motivated the study and a statement of the research questions that have structured it. I then orient the reader to the fields of existence – the village or commercial scene, the ‘virtual’ scene (of websites), gay social groups and the domestic scene of kinship and friendships – which make up the bulk of experience of gay culture for middle-aged men in Manchester. These cultural ‘scenes’ were crucial in shaping the stories that emerged through research encounters. The second half of this chapter outlines the key arguments and themes that form the backbone of chapters 2 to 9.

1.2 What motivated the research?

Middle-aged gay men are affected by and concerned with a range of moral, social and political issues other than ageing and ageism (Kristiansen 2004: 258). However, the latter are difficult to ignore when a whole body of literature (Pugh 2002: 164, 175) and popular discourse recognise that ageing and ageism take on a particular acuity and forms within gay male culture to the extent that one might be judged middle-aged or old well before one’s time (Bennett and Thompson 1991: 65 - 7). This consideration was key in motivating my interest
but my motives were a complex mix of the personal/biographical, sociological and political. The research was partly inspired by a sense (soon confirmed) that the topic of midlife gay men had been neglected, especially in the United Kingdom. This presented an opportunity to contribute and develop new knowledge. The ‘real’ motivation, however, had a much longer gestation that is bound up with personal and political concerns of the kind that are reflected in the quotation at the beginning of the chapter. Although, there was no epiphanal moment that crystallised that I was no longer young-ish, about six years before the study, I started to register changes in how younger gay men in particular were reacting to me on the bar scene. I was beginning to sense something like the harsher scrutiny or the sense of erasure intimated in the above quotation from an interview with Tony. My sense that I was losing status as a socio-sexual being prompted me to ask myself some prickly and judgemental questions. Was my time on the ‘gay scene’ over? Was it payback for my own ageism and shallowness? Was I that vulnerable or so lacking in emotional resources that, in my early forties, what self-esteem I had built up actually rested on the unstable foundations of how my appearance and character were being read and dis/approved of by men I did not know?

This shift in my social positioning prompted me to engage with a world that was changing for me and for others. Being simultaneously an insider and now feeling like a relative outsider but with access to sociological tools, I began to connect these anxieties to deeper, wider social, cultural and political issues and to recast my questions. Is appearance of heightened importance in gay male culture and if so why? What power relations inform this culture and why is it that midlife gay men figure lower down in its hierarchy of bodies or, indeed, do they? Why do older and younger gay men seem so divided? What quality of life or hopes for social and cultural inclusion can midlife gay men expect now and later in life in various social spheres ‘gay,’ ‘straight’ or mixed?

1.3 Research questions

This study has been shaped by my own personal, cultural, political and sociological concerns but any study requires an overarching intellectual puzzle (Mason 1996: 18 - 21). The puzzle here reflects concerns ‘internal’ to gay male culture about diminution of status following loss of youth and ‘looks’ (physical capital). Three questions that logically emerge from this broader conundrum are:
1. What can midlife gay men’s work on the body (e.g. dress, grooming etc) tell us about understandings of ageing and the workings of ageism in Manchester’s gay male culture?

2. How do dominant ways of thinking about age and ageing influence how midlife gay men make sense of and express their selves as they grow older?

3. How do midlife gay men narrate changes associated with growing older in their relational practices and what can their narratives/practices tell us about their responses to ageing and ageism in local gay culture?

Reprising themes and issues that appear in the literature (chapter 2), the research questions aimed to address whether midlife for gay men is narrated/experienced as a time of: oppression, constraint and exclusion; or of continuity in terms of agency and participation in gay male (and other) ‘scenes,’ kinship arrangements; or something in-between these two poles? But, the three questions above are just as much a response to ‘external’ assumptions operating in wider society (and often internalised by gay men themselves) concerning gay men’s susceptibility to ‘promiscuity’ (Berger 1992: 227; Hewitt and Moore 2002: 61; Klesse 2007: 6; Pugh 2002: 164). Midlife gay men might be imagined as in thrall to pressures to cling onto the vestiges of their youth. By this reckoning, men’s involvement in a youth and body-obsessed culture would render them prone to pressures to continue partying long after heterosexuals have settled down and formed ‘proper’ families. Whilst there is some truth in the last point concerning a gay male temporality that can involve a prolonged period on ‘the (bar) scene,’ the reality of gay men’s lives, trajectories and kinship amounts to much more than a prolonged adolescence (chapter 8).

1.4 Situating the field of research: a rough guide to ‘the scene’ for gay men in Manchester

Manchester’s ‘gay scene’ was chosen not simply for convenience but because it would provide a situated case study that would allow depth mining of the research questions. Although the ‘findings’ are particular to Manchester, the narratives expressed by study participants might be told in cities with quite developed gay scenes. But, what geographical and symbolic circumstances shape local middle-aged gay men’s stories of ageing? Where are
the lives of midlife gay men largely played out? Given my knowledge of Manchester and its LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer) cultural landscape, it was hypothesised that midlife gay men’s lives were likely *inter alia* to comprise various patterns of involvement in the gay bar/commercial scene (chapter 5), gay social groups (chapter 6) and the domestic spaces of friendship and kinship (chapter 8). The subject of saunas and the ever-expanding ‘virtual’ scene of gay websites emerged as significant in interview accounts. Formally, the field of research involved interviewing 15 men (see interviewee pen portraits in appendix 2) in the gay spaces of their homes. The other 12 interviews were conducted either at: gay or gay-friendly voluntary organisations (9); the University (2) where I was the key link to this temporary gay space; and a city centre workplace (1) where the informant was the key link. The field of research also involved carrying out 20 in-depth participant observation sessions in spaces of the gay village associated with middle-aged gay men, younger men and in spaces that involved a clientele mixed by age, sexuality and gender.

1.4.1 Village life: the symbolic spaces of Manchester’s gay bar scene

As one study participant put it, gay life in Manchester “did not rise out of the desert from nowhere.” Its dynamic, historically shaped character was evident in informant accounts that charted its growth largely from the 1980s from modest beginnings (four bars in a rundown area) through its spectacular growth from the mid-1990s to its present regenerated cornucopia of bars and other services. An e-mail communication from one informant, Leo (61), (26 June 2011), supplied a vivid, potted history of Manchester’s gay scene:

The gay scene did not rise out of the desert from nowhere. From the mid-60s onwards, there was a thriving gay bar scene in the city, most of it at street level without the necessity for doormen or any great fear of police 'raids,' though *agents provocateurs* were operating in public toilets ['pretty policeman’ used to encourage men to make sexual overtures]. *Changes* bar had been an 'alternative' venue from the late nineteenth Century onwards and *The Classic* was alive and well in the 1950s and ‘60s. The Trafford Bar underneath the Gaumont Cinema on Oxford St (now a Chinese restaurant and multi-storey car park) was a busy, 'gentlemen only' bar throughout the 60s and 70s. Many pubs just shy of the immediate city centre - Oldham Street, Ancoats, and Salford - usually ones with live entertainment and/or drag shows, welcomed a sizeable gay clientele and there was rarely any trouble between the gays
and the heterosexuals apart from good natured banter. Many of these [places] have disappeared as a result of regeneration and redevelopment etc. The club scene was perhaps a little more 'underground' but perhaps that had more to do with the archaic licensing laws of the time... There was a running joke at the time, horribly sexist now, that in the event of a police raid, it was 'grab a dyke and dance.'

Parts of Manchester may have been quite liberal and tolerant for the time in question. Nonetheless, ‘progress’ is seldom linear and the same taken for granted pride in visibility of the bars today would have been very difficult at the time Leo describes and in the 1980s when Greater Manchester Police was headed by fundamentalist Christian, James Anderton (Binnie and Skeggs 2004: 49). Anderton allegedly encouraged his officers to indulge in the policing of morals by harassing people they perceived to be sexual deviants, particularly gay men (Campbell 2004). In 1994, the village contained 15 gay premises (no more than 150 metres from each other) of which eight were bars and three were nightclubs (Hindle 1994: 17 – 19). The number of bars practically doubled between 1994 and 2000. Consequently, the area has become differentiated over the past two decades from a few spaces where very different gay men were thrown together to a situation where certain bars have become associated with different ‘types’ such as ‘bears’ (older, fatter, hairier men), middle-aged men, younger men, lesbians and male to female cross-dressers and some have become mixed by age, sexuality, gender and social class.

The historicity of the scene has involved painful reckoning with memories of the resurgence of anti-gay prejudice expressed via the notorious ‘Section 28’ of the Local Government Act 1988 and through hysterical media responses, public hostility and government cautiousness in relation to HIV/AIDS in the 1980s (Watney 1987). This generation of gay men would have felt the full force of the backlash against their sexual difference in the 1980s (Weeks 2007: 17-18) when gay men became the representatives of the failed, if not deadly experiment with permissivism (Watney 1987: chapters five and six). Two informants recalled the poignant legacy left by HIV/AIDS, which they believed had decimated the number of gay men in their fifties and sixties still alive and visible on the scene today (Martin 52, Warren 52). The HIV/AIDS monument in Sackville Park just across the canal, the safer sex literature from gay voluntary organisations and a free condom distribution service available in most gay-identified bars act as reminders of the continuing but (since the success of combination drug therapies in prolonging life) somewhat more muted impact of HIV/AIDS on the physical and
symbolic landscape. The historicity of the village is also visible in its appeal to many heterosexually identified people whose interest it is commonly thought was sparked by the internationally popular television series, *Queer as Folk* in 1999 (Homfray 2007: 14). The ‘heterosexual invasion’ of this queer space is discussed in chapter 5.

Geographically, the ‘gay village’ is close to the main shopping districts, rail, bus and coach termini. It accommodates 35 bars (LGF July 2011), many taking advantage of liberalised opening hours, which are concentrated in two main streets (see appendix 8). There are three nightclubs (with sizeable dance floor space) and club *Mystery*, (see appendix 3) is popular with middle-aged gay men. Further, there are six restaurants (two of which are located in sizeable bars) and various fast-food outlets. There are various businesses mostly targeted at gay men e.g. four gay or gay run hotels (two of which are attached to bigger bars on Canal Street), a clothes/sex toys shop called *Clone Zone* which has a small sauna above it, a barber’s shop and an off-licence complete with tanning booth! The centrepiece of the gay village is Canal Street (see the photograph on the page below and appendix 8) - a pedestrianised thoroughfare that overlooks the Rochdale Canal. During the summer months most of the canalside bars put out tables and chairs on the street creating a ‘continental’ feel. The trees that line the main street are tastefully decorated with small, pretty, pale blue lights, illuminated most evenings, which create a celebratory, permanently ‘Christmassy’ ambience.

Most of the canalside bars are widely understood as ‘trendy’ or ‘smart’ spaces that tend to attract a younger or sometimes mixed clientele and several of the ‘off-Broadway’ pubs are understood as more “rough and ready” (e.g. *The Old Cock* and *The Frontier*), attracting a middle-aged and older gay male clientele that is read as “less pretentious” if not “more working class” (Bill 55).
The perceptions described immediately above indicate that the village figures as symbolic space. It was a structuring presence in interview narratives even when men reported socialising in the village only rarely. All informants described the village and gay life as part of their wider cultural experience. They defined themselves in relation to or, most commonly, differentiated themselves from the superficial forms of relating thought typical of the youth-coded village where middle-aged gay men could experience a partial sense of belonging contingent on acceptance or otherwise by younger men. Four informants (all cohabiting with partners) described socialising in the village on rare occasions. For Will (48), who shared a
home with a long-term female partner, his visits to the village were limited to visits to the sauna. Thirteen men (a mix of single and partnered) described socialising in the village occasionally, often fitted around another cultural occasion – before or following a concert, film, theatre outing or a gay social/support group meeting. Despite its reported problems (degraded forms of relating, exploitation of the pink pound, sexualisation etc), several informants took the pragmatic view that going to the village was preferable to total isolation from one’s kind and offered opportunities to look at men and for ‘people watching.’ For “mixed race” informant, Alec (46), who was also reliant on social security benefits, the village registered as a site of risk and/or exclusion on both racial and economic grounds. Nine men reported socialising on the bar scene fairly frequently and six of these men would sometimes go to a nightclub or late bar. Significantly, six of these nine men were single and five of the six lived alone, though two of the nine ‘regulars’ were part of a couple but living apart for much of the week/time.

During the last decade at least, the gay village has been marketed by Manchester City Council as a cosmopolitan tourist attraction in its own right (Binnie and Skeggs 2004: 48-50; Hughes 2005: 250). Tolerance of diversity has been integral to the city’s reinvention as a modern European metropolis. The village has become a metaphor for the success of the City Council’s facilitation of economic and cultural regeneration since the mid 1990s, which have helped transform a rundown backwater into a vibrant, smarter and putatively ‘cosmopolitan’ cultural space (Binnie and Skeggs 2004: 49). At weekends especially, the village attracts people from around the northwest region and it is not uncommon to meet visitors of any sexuality from elsewhere in the UK or from abroad. The area itself and the annual ‘Pride’ parade (late August bank holiday weekend) of local gay groups, involving participation in and financial and/or symbolic support from various local authorities and business (global and local, gay and ‘mainstream’) have become totems for the city’s tolerance towards sexual difference (Hughes 2005: 250). The Pride weekend in August 2011, popular with heterosexuals, demanded entry fees of between £15 and £21 (for access to a cordoned-off public space). A modest portion of any profits are donated by the organising pubs/breweries to LGBTQ/HIV charities (Hughes 2005: 245 -7).

Just across the canal is Sackville Park, a small green space that is used mostly during the summer months and functions as a concert area at Pride weekend. It symbolises LGBTQ-friendly space not simply because of its propinquity to Canal Street. The park contains the
“Beacon of Hope” monument that mourns and encourages remembrance of people who have died of AIDS-related conditions and celebrates those living with HIV. It also contains a statue of Second World War ‘enigma’ code breaker, mathematician/logician and father of computing, Alan Turing. This figure, sculpted in bronze, with apple in hand is seated in the middle of a park bench and invites people to interact with it. The statue is there courtesy of privately raised funds but required government permission for its right to be there. Turing taught at the old University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology, which is situated to his left as the gay space of Canal Street is situated to his right. In 1954, and following libido reducing hormone treatment (‘chemical castration’) as punishment for his sexuality (Gay Police Association www.gpasscotland.com/files%GPA%20Gay%20Events%20Timeline.pdf) i.e. following prosecution for ‘gross indecency’ in a public toilet, Turing committed suicide aged 41 by eating a cyanide-laced apple. The apple also symbolises Newtonian physics, itself the symbol of modern scientific knowledge. Following an internet-based campaign in 2009, the British Government offered a posthumous apology to Turing, which was meant to make amends to and communicate support for those viewed as sexually different. A plaque at the sculpture’s feet recognises that Turing was “a victim of prejudice.” The two above-described monuments in their different ways say something about the historicity of sexual difference. They serve as concrete reminders on the physical landscape of lesbian and gay political struggles against demonisation and for recognition, respect and equality. They are material testimony to the gains in tolerance made in more recent years. It is also worth noting that the village area is served mainly by gay police officers. This is a far cry from the socially conservative, repressive 1980s that research participants would be able to recall when Greater Manchester Police was headed by James Anderton. In 1987, and reflecting the zeitgeist around the time of the notorious “Clause 28” of the Local Government Bill and at the height of hysteria around HIV/AIDS, he announced to the media that “homosexuals” were “swirling about in human a cesspit of their own making” in full knowledge of the “dangers” involved in their sexuality. (GaydarNation 2004 www.rainbownetwork.com/UserPortal/Article?Detail.aspx?ID).

However, items on the Lesbian and Gay Foundation website indicate that the moral and de facto policing of some expressions of gay male culture continues. Since 2008, there has been increased police surveillance of the toilets on Manchester Victoria railway station (lgf.org.uk April 2008). Not far beyond Canal Street along a towpath beyond the locks, there has been for many years, a largely nocturnal cruising ground - the scene of sexual encounters between
men. The installation of lighting and a warning sign provided by the City Council together with increased police patrols (ostensibly to protect men from being ‘mugged’ or ‘queer bashed’) have imposed considerable restrictions on this sexual space (see lgf.org.uk November 2009). Nonetheless, any man seeking anonymous, ‘casual’ sex, so long as he possesses the requisite cultural knowledge, predilection and economic means, might consider as an alternative the ‘dark room’ available at monthly BDSM (bondage, domination and sadomasochism oriented) club night Alive, the village sauna or any of two slightly bigger saunas situated outside the village. One of these is close to the village in the fashionable, post-industrial, regenerated ‘Northern quarter’ and another is situated in an affluent residential suburb popular with lesbian and gay people about four miles south of the city centre.

1.4.2 The virtual gay scene

The historicity of the gay scene is also visible when we consider the appearance of a highly differentiated ‘virtual’ gay scene of websites, chat rooms and the like that go beyond the local and national (chapter 6). Over the last 15 years or so, the ‘virtual’ or ‘cyber scene’ has become an important part of gay culture. Mowlabocus describes the cyber scene as integral to the wider gay scene: the relationship between the virtual and actual scenes is a “symbiotic” one where websites might function as “virtual gay bars” or even “virtual cottages” (sites of anonymous cyber sex) which can lead to face-to-face meetings (Mowlabocus 2010: 8, 9, 16). Gay dating and/or ‘social networking’ websites are many and varied. At first blush, they represent the quintessential technologically mediated examples of “time-space compressing” reflexive modernity and forms of communication that provide consumers with opportunities to innovate and reconstruct identity (Giddens 1991). There are generic websites, i.e. the trailblazing, iconic Gaydar whilst others are organised explicitly along the lines of age. For example, the Caffmoss Community website, which recognises older gay men as socio-sexual citizens, enables/encourages younger and older men to contact each other. Yet others are organised along fetish lines. The Recon website caters for a dizzying array of innovative sexual tastes/practices (mostly BDSM-related) and tends to attract mainly middle-aged men. Most gay websites are national and many are ‘international,’ though largely Anglophone. Most men in this study used them in a very local way – occasionally to meet up with men, though Marcus (47) had visited men encountered on the internet who were living in Europe and North Africa.
1.4.3 Group life

The gay scene is not all about commodification, sexualisation or technologically mediated interaction. All but five of the 27 men who were interviewed in this study reported some involvement in a voluntary gay social, support or leisure-oriented group. The most common view, regardless of whether men attended them, was that groups offered an antidote to the ageist scrutiny and degraded ways of relating thought to characterise the more sexualised aspects of the gay scene (chapters 5 and 6). Manchester is teeming with LGBTQ groups. There are 20 organisations based in eight Greater Manchester local authorities that offer various social/support groups or services, many of which are located either within or close to the village district. The July 2011 edition of the free, bi-monthly, tabloid-style news and events magazine, *OutNorthwest*, (provided by the Lesbian and Gay Foundation (LGF)), lists nine voluntary or governmental organisations in central Manchester alone that between them run/house 37 LGBTQ social/support groups. Voluntary groups cover a wide range of concerns including: gender and ethnically specific health and welfare issues; refugee action; black gay/bisexual men; deaf people; and ecumenical religious commitment. The LGF is the lynchpin of non-profit making, community oriented activity in the North West region of England. This information/service providing and campaigning voluntary organisation has a full-time staff of 35 and is backed by 150 volunteers. It occupies a large, well-appointed suite of offices with generously proportioned meeting spaces on three floors just behind Canal Street. In addition to the free bi-monthly magazine, it organises a range of sexual health promotion projects, the centrepiece of which is a long running condom distribution service. It also provides funding for a range of groups such as the ‘Gay Men’s Forty Plus’ group and meeting space for independent gay social/support groups like ‘Icebreakers’ for men new to Manchester, ‘coming out’ or seeking connections with other gay/bisexual men away from the bar scene. A third of interview informants in this study (n = 9) came via project publicity displayed at LGF and/or through the ‘Forty Plus’ and ‘Icebreakers’ groups (see chapter 3). There are several other sizeable, fairly well known voluntary organisations situated in the city or nearby suburbs. The Albert Kennedy Trust supports vulnerable young LGBTQ people and George House Trust and Body Positive Northwest (the latter situated about two to three miles from the city centre) provide support services to people affected by HIV. Some other social/support organisations are smaller and less well funded e.g. the Lesbian and Gay Centre, which tends to attract LGBTQ individuals seeking a more ‘political’ alternative to the
commodified scene, is situated less than ten minutes on foot from the village closer to the University district. Each of the three main Universities in Manchester has a LGBTQ Society. The local *Age Concern* also runs an informal social meeting one afternoon a week in a village bar (*Posh!*) for LGBT individuals over 50.

Greater Manchester also boasts a cornucopia of smaller groups covering almost every conceivable interest, hobby or fetish. These smaller concerns are usually completely self-funding, being reliant on subscriptions from members/attendees. Two line dancing groups are run by a handful of volunteers. There are various sexual interest groups (including ‘rubbermen,’ ‘leathermen’ and ‘skinheads’). More prosaically, the Manchester ‘scene’ accommodates a gay camping and caravanning society! Looking through the listings in *OutNorthwest* August 2011, one is struck by how sporty gay men are. There are 29 sports groups based/held in central Manchester mostly aimed at gay men some of which socialise in the village *post eventum*. They range from football, rugby, badminton, tennis, swimming, athletics, climbing and walking through to Scottish country dancing. A gay men’s naturist swimming group meets weekly in a local authority swimming pool in a working class district about two miles from the city centre. The regional LGBTQ cultural experience in Manchester and the northwest region of England is also enhanced by a community radio station, *Gaydio*, which offers a mix of pop/disco music, news and discussion. BBC Manchester Citizen Radio broadcasts a weekly *Lesbian and Gay Hour* which attracts an audience mostly aged 35 plus (personal communication from one of its hosts April 2009) and discusses various community issues interspersed with ‘retro’ sounds from the 1960s onwards.

1.4.4 Domestic spaces of friendship/kinship

All interview informants lived within no more than seven miles from the city centre and most lived within a four mile radius of it. Most men owned or were purchasing a house with a partner (12) or, in one case with an ex-partner now friend, though three lived alone and were buying their houses. Eight men lived alone in a privately rented house or social housing (usually a flat) and three men shared privately rented accommodation with friends (see also chapter 3). For all respondents except bisexually identified Will (48), the ‘gay scene’ extended to some degree of socialising with gay significant others either in the home and/or the homes of gay friends.
The home signified in men’s accounts as gay space not just in terms of who was invited there to socialise (Gorman-Murray 2006) and/or to have sex. It also registered as gay space in terms of the kind of material cultural artefacts that adorn and constitute such a ‘private’ space. The home was also the space of much practical self-care, surveillance and regulation that involved decisions about how to present an ‘authentic’ middle-aged gay male self to the outside world and mostly with other gay men/the gay scene in mind (chapter 4). Most interviewees spoke of the domestic spaces of their own and friends’ homes as safer and more valuing because they felt freed from the ageism of ‘the gay scene.’ Here it was possible to ‘be myself’ (perform/realise one’s authenticity) within friendship family largely involving gay men of a similar age (chapter 8). The home/domestic spaces of friends were spoken of in ways that differentiated men’s ways of relating there from the ‘superficial’ forms of relating they commonly associated with the youth-oriented village. The home was narrated as a space where control could be exercised over one’s own entertainment and intellectual stimulation; something thought lacking on the standardised bar scene. But, the emotional safety of the home could be compromised. Homophobic intimidation had forced three men to move home and most informants who used the gay cyber scene spoke of how the home as emotionally safer space could be breached by the animosity - ageist, ‘looksist,’ racist and otherwise - they encountered there (chapter 6).

1.5 Themes and issues: the story in order

1.5.1 Chapter 2: the state of play on gay male midlife and ageing

Having situated the gay cultural scene in Manchester, chapter two situates the study in relation to extant scholarship germane to ageing and midlife gay men. It reviews three bodies of literature with reference to how the present study addresses or avoids the deficiencies within existing scholarship. I examine the ‘mainstream’ scholarship from within the field of social gerontology; the specific work on gay male ageing and mid/later life; and scholarship relating to gay identity.

Much of the literature fails to reckon with the complexity of the processes through which midlife gay men differentiate their selves and their ways of relating. The failure of extant scholarship is predominantly a definitional one. I discuss some basic omissions from and problems within much of the literature concerning definitions of ageing, midlife and ageism.
I propose working definitions of these that recognise the multiform, differentiated character of midlife gay men’s experiences of growing older. I also address how existing work on gay male ageing is based on an impoverished view of midlife gay male subjectivity. The specific work on gay male ageing has tended to take the body for granted; overlooking gay male midlife subjectivity and relationality as embodied experience. This work has also neglected the various meanings and functions of men’s body management practices (as explained in chapters 4 – 6). Attempts at more critical treatment of the ageing body from within social gerontology, (involving recognition of its socially constructed character), have tended to overlook structural limitations on expression of subjectivity (and relating) and have actually reinforced ageism. Further, much of the literature overlooks the complexities of midlife gay men’s sexual citizenship. The specific literature’s focus on ageing as “accelerated” in gay male culture (Bennett and Thompson 1991: 66 - 7), where men are adjudged middle-aged well before heterosexuals might be considered as such, is insufficient to explain the variety of midlife gay men’s responses to ageism. The limited view of sexual citizenship that this concept and much of the literature invoke has led to a failure to recognise how legitimate midlife gay male sexual citizenship is constructed through a multiform ‘authentic self’ (where outward appearance should reflect a more ‘real’ inner self). None of the existing scholarship recognises how this ‘authentic’ midlife sexual citizenship serves as a mechanism to distinguish selves from other gay men. In turn, this results in failure to grasp the complex power geometry within gay male culture where ageism is multidirectional. Midlife gay men might themselves express ageism ‘downwards’ towards young gay men, laterally towards (some) peer aged gay men (dressing ‘too young’) and ‘upwards’ towards old gay men (chapters 4, 5, 6 and 8).

Further, this chapter examines three theoretical perspectives that could account for midlife gay men’s different experiences of ageing identity as expressed through their relationships - relations of power. Structuralist accounts, which focus largely on how socio-economic arrangements shape/constrain identity and social relations (Vincent 1999), risk homogenising midlife gay men’s experiences of ageing and overlook the hugely significant symbolic, cultural dimensions of gay ageism. Poststructuralist accounts (which would contend that ageing sexuality is a product of dominant ways of thinking about these categories) would emphasise the constraints on expression of midlife identity (Butler 1990) and modes of interaction. They risk downplaying or even denying midlife gay men’s capacities for critical thought and practice; something which is not borne out in this present study. ‘Late modernist’
accounts (Gilleard and Higgs 2000) would argue that social structures/rules serve as resources for the expression and reconstruction of highly differentiated ageing identities and ways of relating in midlife. Such thinking risks overstating the choices available to midlife gay men in relation to these, paying insufficient attention to the structural and discursive constraints that respectively the previous two theories tend to overstate. Indeed, much of the literature fails to reckon adequately with the context-dependent tensions between constraint and choice as they bear on ageing as a middle-aged gay man. All three bodies of work occlude the possibility that, in addition to reproducing and contesting gay ageism, subjects might negotiate or have more ambivalent relationships with its various expressions in different fields/social contexts (chapters 4 and 5). There is also a failure within the specific work on gay male ageing to recognise the salience of friendship families (kinship based on friendship rather than biological/biolegal factors) for the current generation of midlife gay men. The above definitional and theoretical deficiencies mean that much existing scholarship neglects important aspects of what is distinctive about ageing as a middle-aged gay man.

1.5.2 Chapter 3: generating and analysing men’s stories

This chapter explains and justifies the research design that has underpinned this small-scale, mixed qualitative methods study based on 27 semi-structured interviews and 20 participant observation sessions. The research design was formulated to reflect the distinctiveness of gay male midlife as well as study participants’ different social locations and experiences. The research puzzle/questions were designed to generate different stories that illuminate how midlife gay men with some connection with Manchester’s ‘gay scenes’ respond to ageing and ageism and how these impact upon expression of midlife identity and middle-aged gay men’s ways of relating. The sampling strategy defines who counts as a midlife gay man. The observation sampling strategy took into account behavioural differences at different times in different age-coded spaces and consisted of different thematic foci (Brewer 2000: 81). Using observation and interviews in parallel enabled a reflexive loop (Mason 1996: 138) whereby interim ‘findings’ generated by one method were used to refine or ask new questions when applying the other method. It is also argued that each method can both support and compensate for the limitations of the other and that each has yielded different orders of data concerning ageing experience. Participant observation enabled understanding of bodily ageing as situated within dynamic social relations as analysed in chapters 4 and 5. Interviews, which involved use of photo-elicitation techniques, enabled exploration of
unexpected leads, socio-historical contextualisation and comparisons between past and present experiences.

The methodological approach that informs the study recognises actors’ interpretive capacities but is linked to an analytical framework developed by Thomson (2009), which uses “technologies of the self” (Foucault 1979: 10 – 11, 27 - 8) but situates these opportunities for agency from constraining (ageist) discourse within different fields of existence with their own rules of the game (Bourdieu 1984: chapter 4). This approach allows a view of experience of ageing as multi-dimensional, resulting from the tensions between constraint and choice in relation to the expression of midlife identity and the possibilities for interaction/relating. I also describe the practical analysis of narratives and specifically the strategic use of “data reduction” and how “situation ethics” were used to safeguard participant dignity and emotional safety. The management of inevitable power relations between myself and participants has involved dialogue between our different ways of knowing.

1.5.3 Chapter 4. Keeping up appearances: midlife gay men’s work on/within the body

This chapter examines the meanings and functions of men’s stories relating to practices on/from within the body largely concerning dress, grooming, diet and exercise. These are used to explain how midlife gay men in Manchester respond to ideas about ageing and ageism prevalent within gay male culture and the impact these have upon expression of midlife identity. The chapter illuminates how midlife gay men’s claims to bodily authenticity, (a more natural self where the surface self faithfully reflects a more ‘real’ or essential, inner self), constitute age- and emotionally-inflected forms of cultural capital, (knowledge of the workings of society, gay culture, relationships etc) that work in various ways. I refer to this as “ageing capital.” In one mode, this refers to the gains of ageing in terms of ‘maturity,’ emotional strength and acceptance of self and others. These qualities of authenticity (that refer to a more holistic subjectivity or self) were thought to help informants to maintain affirmative identity as they grow older. Dressing ‘for comfort’ rather than for socio-sexual display was considered a quintessentially authentic form of self-presentation for middle-aged gay men. This thinking contests stereotypes of midlife gay men as obsessed with appearance in order to prolong their sexual marketability in a promiscuous culture (Berger 1992: 219). But, informants also used authenticity to differentiate themselves in ways that involve expression of ageism towards: younger gay men whose forms of self-presentation are thought
to embody superficiality and self-obsession; peer aged gay men thought to be denying their age in dressing ‘too young’; and old gay men who are associated with fears of morbidity, mortality and social death. Power relations then between gay men of different ages are much more complex than often assumed. Recognising that midlife gay men can mobilise ageism towards others challenges the twin assumptions that younger gay men occupy a largely hegemonic position within gay male culture and that ageism runs overwhelmingly in the direction from younger to older men (see Berger 1982; Bennett and Thompson 1991; Cruz 2003; Kimmel and Sang 1995; Hostetler 2004: 159; and Whittle 1994).

Further, I show how the idea of authenticity of self-presentation constrains or enables expression of midlife identity. Men’s stories of body management and self-presentation involve capitulation to (feeling oppressed by), negotiation with (only going so far to look appropriately youthful) and resistance to homonormative ageism. The more resistant instances involve resignification of age and ageing, which helps recuperate the gay male midlife body as sexually desirable and socially valuable. I indicate how, in some instances, men’s more resistant practices suggest use of ageing capital or age-related ‘technologies of the self’ that enable men to contest and do other than comply with gay ageism or other forms of constraint such as homophobia. Taken together, I argue that the three expressions of authenticity constitute a broader, multifaceted, sometimes contradictory cultural politics of ageing that can involve assertion of the right to pleasure, recognition and esteem. Again, this politics is focused on how men are defined and treated at the level of everyday interaction rather than transformation of gay ageism through collective political activity (Rose 1999: 279 - 80).

1.5.4 Chapter 5. Life on the bar scene

Whilst the previous chapter addresses practices often conducted in the ‘private’ spaces of the home but with an eye on the scene, this chapter situates midlife gay men in relation to the bar scene of the gay village. It describes how the bar scene itself is differentiated or roughly zoned along lines of age and, to an extent, class. This spatialisation is suggestive of a historically shaped ‘politics of place’ that is discernible in midlife gay men’s appearance (habitus) and associated tastes for certain venues (field), which differentiate them from more youth-associated spaces and the forms of décor, self-display and relating thought to occur therein.
The main thrust of this chapter is that age-related, socio-sexual norms encourage the production of forms of display, approach and touch which can be subject to spatio-temporal change. Following the pattern identified in chapter four, midlife gay men’s responses to and performances on the bar/club scene involve capitulation to, negotiation with or resistance to norms prevalent in the village. The first kind of story, generated mainly in interviews, offers a version of the scene as divided, conflicted and disenchanted. Informants understood the bar scene as the major site of exclusion. Middle-aged gay men can either be subjected to the ageist critical gaze of younger gay men (Bennett and Thompson 1991; Jones 2000) or be overlooked altogether. The village is a space where middle-aged men are negatively differentiated by younger men and where they experience restrictions on expression of what subjects would consider an authentic midlife identity and ways of relating. Being reduced to the bodily signs of ageing was thought inimical to men’s sense of authenticity as a whole person and to their status as sexual citizens. Second, and the account most commonly produced within observations in middle-aged gay men’s spaces, relates to the more convivial dimensions of gay male culture. The age-friendlier spaces of the village scene figure as a sensorium where ‘the gaze’ (the act of looking or being looked at from a particular socio-cultural location) can be mobilised or experienced in a various ways, some of which can register or be appreciated as more affirmative. The gaze can be actively deployed, invited or else deflected in ways that deprive it of its power to judge, constrain or wound. Midlife gay men can deploy ageing capital (gains in self-worth) and ‘technologies of the self’ (thinking about the self that enables agency) in certain spaces in ways that question/challenge ageism. Study participants recuperated sexual citizenship through display of an ‘authentic self’ that involved erotic and/or playful practices (sometimes with younger gay men) that help humanise, decommodify and thus make parts of the village scene more habitable. Such accounts mark limits to the idea that the bar scene overwhelmingly represents a site of exclusion for midlife gay men due to their perceived loss of looks (‘physical capital’) (Pugh 2002: 163). They also challenge the caricature of the gay bar scene as overwhelmingly youth-oriented, competitive and a site of calculating, impersonal sexual strategy (Flowers et al 2000: 70 -1) and thus no place to find love, affection or friendship. There are social connections available on the bar scene that enable men to escape, question and resist gay ageism. Such opportunities can help men not just to revalue midlife identity but also help secure some measure of belonging within this social sphere. Third, interviews and observations yielded more ambivalent accounts of the intermixed pleasures and dangers that
the scene has to offer, which involve negotiation with ageing and gay ageism. Such accounts indicate that partaking in the scene’s sensory delights often requires sacrifice or suppression of the more serious, ‘authentic’ aspects of subjectivity that lie below surface appearance (i.e. values and personal qualities). Also, in this type of narrative, the gaze can be experienced in contradictory fashion. It might be sought as a sign of continuing desirability, sexual citizenship yet can simultaneously be felt as discomfort and constraint. Such responses suggest men’s awareness of the risk of hostility, their heightened self-surveillance and a suspicion of others that is more keenly felt in sexualised space. Although intergenerational sociation is possible in the village, age-inflected socio-sexual norms can restrict proximity, approach and touch between midlife and younger gay men and in ways that mark the line between the legitimate sharing of social experience and the forbidden sexual.

1.5.5 Chapter 6. Negotiating particular ‘homospaces’

This chapter moves the story from the bar scene to other homospaces that emerged as significant in informants’ accounts. It reviews the risks, constraints, ambiguities and pleasures of the relations available within the cyber scene of dating websites and Manchester’s gay saunas (sites of/for ‘recreational’ sex) and the less sexualised gay social/support groups. Informants’ responses to age-related and sexual norms are divisible into three modes: constraint on expression of identity and modes of interaction resulting from gay ageism; negotiation with gay ageism, involving moments of ambivalence; and challenge and/or resistance to gay ageism. The virtual scene was thought to replicate the bar scene’s obsession with youth and its tendency to exclude the older and racial other. I demonstrate that although most informants made use of it, they differentiated themselves from the ‘cyber scene’ of gay dating and ‘social networking’ websites, which was thought to typify intrusive, impersonal or ‘superficial’ ways of relating that were associated with younger gay men. Further, informants’ differentiation from the cyber scene, criticised for its tyranny of the visual and tendency to fragment, objectify (parts of) the body, can reinforce conservative discourse that restricts display and uses of the body for sexual purposes. I also propose that the norms prevalent within the more sexualised homospaces provide much less scope for reclaiming the desirability, authenticity and broader socio-cultural value of the middle-aged gay male body. The sauna was narrated as a particular site of constraint on expression of authenticity and of threat to the sexual health and self-esteem of the midlife gay male body-self. Here the midlife body was negatively differentiated - felt as out of sync with dominant
aesthetics where a subject’s appeal might be reduced to (or objectified in) penis size. Informants tended to distance themselves from degraded, instrumentalised forms of relating. But, this differentiation could involve depiction of younger gay men, especially if read as belonging to an underclass, as a socio-sexual threat to the more respectable, middle class, middle-aged gay man. These considerations trouble informants’ account of ageing as linear progression towards a more assured, liberated self: gay men might be more susceptible to constraint on sexual interaction as they grow older. Although they were a minority report, the critical responses of some culturally middle class informants, (courtesy of the emotional and political resources developed with age), could be used to express authenticity and make the virtual scene and saunas more humane, convivial spaces.

In contrast to sexualised homospaces, informants commonly differentiated gay social/support groups as more valuing, communally-oriented alternatives to the bar scene. Gay groups were thought to offer respite from the bar scene’s ageist, sexualised gaze. Social groups were thought more likely to facilitate expression of a more confident, ‘authentic’ self and ways of relating that were not focused around sexual opportunity. Whether informants were providers or users, groups were often spoken of as enabling opportunities for re-skilling (in terms of employability and gains in cultural and social capital e.g. ‘life skills,’ knowledge of self and others). But, gay groups were not uniformly supportive, healthier relational spaces. Several informants compared their experiences of working in straight and gay workspaces and spoke of the latter as considerably more age-divided. Gay social/support groups were not immune from the hierarchy of bodies thought to characterise the bar scene and subtler forms of exclusion could be experienced in situ on the grounds of age, race and class. Such considerations mark limits to the binary view common among informants that ‘casual sex’ scenes offer only degraded forms of relating whilst gay social/support groups provide a more united, inclusive and empowering alternative.

1.5.6 Chapter 7. Negotiating ‘heterospaces’

In this chapter, the focus switches to midlife gay men’s ways of relating with heterosexually identified others in the ‘heterospaces’ of city streets, neighbourhoods, workplaces and the local gym. I examine what these relationships say about midlife gay men’s understandings of and practical responses to homophobia and ageism. I demonstrate that midlife gay men in Manchester negotiate heterospaces in ways that involve constraints on expression of identity
and interaction as well as negotiation with and resistance to the socio-sexual norms that constitute these distinct spaces. The chapter complicates the argument advanced in a fairly recent study involving individuals who frequent Manchester’s gay village, which concluded that the threat of homophobic violence (symbolic and physical) structures the experiences of public space of those seen as sexually different (Moran et al 2004; Browne, Lim and Brown 2007). Gay men continue to experience unequal access to certain kinds of public space. In ‘family’ coded spaces especially, (middle-aged) gay men might be negatively differentiated and thus face considerable restrictions on their ability to ‘be’ their ‘authentic,’ habitual, relational selves. The heterosexual gaze sets limits on self-expression, interaction, mobilisation of ageing capital (self-worth) and obliges surveillance and modification of everyday behaviour (gestures of affection, ‘camping it up’ and talking freely about daily life) (Valentine 1996: 160). There were also more ambivalent experiences of heterospace. Claiming the right to ‘be’ or a belonging in heterospace could involve men differentiating themselves from the rest of the ‘gay community’ but in ways that can reinforce homophobia. The unspoken conditions of ‘acceptance’ by heterosexual male friends could require discretion about one’s sexuality or even denial of grounds for discontent. Despite the above mentioned restrictions, I contend that Moran et al’s argument is overstated given the tolerance dividend of the last decade or so and fails to reckon adequately with midlife gay men’s capacities for agency that owe much to the emotional and political resources built up through life experience. Indeed, I provide evidence which indicates that midlife gay men can express their identity difference and relate ‘authentically’ with others in heterospaces which are nowadays experienced not just as safer but also largely free from the ageist gay gaze. Participants’ stories and practices indicate a quiet but effective claim for the ordinariness of being gay and for the inclusion of their sexuality within the panoply of everyday sexual citizenship (Weeks 1998: 37).

1.5.7 Chapter 8. The scene at home with significant others: organising intimacy, securing inclusion

This chapter returns to the domain of the home but in contrast to chapter 4 addresses informants’ more communal experiences of domestic spaces that were gay or gay-friendly. The main argument of this chapter is that conditions prevailing within local middle-aged gay men’s kinship groups, (which rely on the idea of family as friends (Nardi 1992: Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan 2001; Weston 1991)), help sustain midlife identity. Increasing
emotional distance from the family of origin paralleled by prioritisation of connections in friendship families over involvement in the commercial gay scene leads to various claims for differentiation. Friendship family was not simply consolation for the loss of value on the gay scene or the lack of understanding by the biological/biolegal family. The spaces of coupled relationships and friendship family were narrated as freer from ageism and as furnishing the emotional and political resources to withstand and at times contest ageism (Weston 1991: 161) and homophobia (Weeks et al 2001: 87). The spaces of kinship were spoken of as enabling informants to mobilise ageing capital to express ‘authentic’ aspects of the relational self. Through the use of age-related technologies of the self or ageing capital, some informants differentiated themselves (from gay and straight others) through critical questioning of heteronormative notions of family and the practice of sexual relations beyond monogamy. Some informants, however, experienced disadvantaged access to certain forms of friendship family/gay kinship or were practically excluded from this for socio-economic reasons (Carrington 1999; Weston 1991: 104) or by the homophobia of heterosexual associates (Lewin 1998: 93). Further, claims to differentiation from relational practices associated with younger gay men could operate in benign and ageist registers. On the one hand, men spoke of friendship/partnership with peer aged gay men as sustaining and in ways that did not imply derogation of others. This was evident in stories underlining the importance of being able to relate to others who understood what it was like to have survived more hostile times (Nardi 1999: 17). On the other hand, claims to differentiation from younger gay men could involve reverse ageism. Younger gay men could be considered a threat - if perceived as being financially ‘on the make’ (Stacey 2004: 186). Alternatively, informants differentiated themselves from the “empty vessels” (Chris 48) younger gay men were thought to represent. Here younger gay men figured less as a threat than lacking in substance (developed cultural tastes and personality). They could also be constructed as vulnerable thus requiring the older man to exercise a moral duty of care to avoid exploiting them sexually. The discursive force of ageism was also visible in the strong desire to differentiate themselves from the awful label of the “predatory” older man (Jones and Pugh 2005). It appears that cross-generational relations can rarely if ever be considered authentic. When cross-generational intimacies were not imagined as quasi-prostitution (Steinman 1990: 180) (where the physical capital of youthful bodies is traded for economic reward), anxiety was expressed about their time-limited character. Such relations were considered inherently unstable when, as sexual activity diminishes and the younger party, on reaching middle age, begins the inevitable search for a younger replacement. This kind of thinking indicates
considerable restrictions on informants’ capacities to deploy their ageing capital (emotional strength and self worth) and technologies of the self (capacities to free the self from ageist constraint) to express an ‘authentic’ relational self. Finally, I argue against Bech’s view that gay male kinship/friendship family is now barely distinct from the kinship practices of younger urban heterosexuals (Bech 1997: 198). The practices referred to in informants’ accounts remain distinctive. Middle-aged gay men have greater scope for participation in new relational experiments (Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan 2001: 19 - 21) and friendship family has particular political and emotional significances for the current generation of middle-aged gay men in Manchester.

1.5.8 Chapter 9. Looking forward: re-imagining politics and power relations

The concluding chapter provides an executive summary of the central themes of the study concerning how midlife gay men differentiate themselves mainly from younger gay men and how their responses to ageing and gay ageism enable or constrain expression of midlife identity and the possibilities for relating. It also draws out the broader political and theoretical ramifications of these issues. In this respect, I elaborate how the study provides a detailed mapping and analysis of: stories/practices that make up midlife gay men’s situated cultural politics of ageing; and the multilayered, multidirectional power geometry of age discourse and gay ageism at work in Manchester, which might be applicable to cities with developed gay cultures. I also reflect on gaps in thematic content and problems with use of methods, which involves considering what might be done differently if the work were to be developed and offering ideas for further research.

1.6. Summary

This study focuses on midlife gay men’s experiences of growing older in metropolitan Manchester. In broad terms, it concerns the power relations of gay ageism at work in various fields of existence that constrain and enable expression of midlife gay male identity and forms of relating. More specifically, the central theme of the research concerns the processes through which middle-aged gay men *differentiate* themselves mainly from younger but also from (some) peer aged and old gay men. As a corollary, the study examines the ways in which midlife gay men enact a complex cultural politics operating at the micro-level of interaction that involves constraints flowing mainly from gay ageism but also from
homophobia on the expression of midlife identity and interactional/relational possibilities as well as negotiation with and transcendence of gay ageism and homophobia. Inevitably, this concerns the power relations between middle-aged and younger gay men around ageism, where middle-aged gay men themselves reinforce ageism and divisions between themselves, younger and old gay men. The study offers analysis of the relevant literature (chapter 2) and explains how men’s stories were generated and the analytical framework that was used to make sense of them (chapter 3). The empirical chapters explain and analyse the various claims to differentiation midlife gay men in Manchester make through: work on/within the body and what this might say about their thought/practice concerning age, ageing and relations of ageism (chapter 4); interaction in the ‘gay village’ bar/club scene (chapter 5); participation in other homospaces – the cyber scene, saunas and gay social/support (chapter 6); experiences in ‘heterospaces’ (chapter 7); and stories of closer kinship (chapter 8). The empirical chapters 4 – 8 complicate a range of hetero- and homonormative imaginings about life as a middle-aged gay man. They present evidence that: midlife gay men are not obsessed with appearance in order to maintain sexual marketability; the bar/club scene and other sexualised ‘homospaces’ are not overwhelmingly sites of exclusion for midlife gay men; midlife gay men in Manchester are claiming the right to occupy public space on equal terms with heterosexuals; and midlife gay men do not lead lives outside of kinship but are involved in creative forms of friendship family. These family formations have a particular political significance for this present generation of middle-aged gay men living in Manchester.

Having set the scene of the study, I now turn to examination of the literature that has helped to provide a theoretical framework to think with and against.
Chapter Two. Literature Review: the State of Play

2.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews the literature germane to gay male midlife and ageing in line with the study’s research questions, which concern the issues of midlife identity, the power relations of ageism operating within gay male culture and the functions of kinship for middle-aged gay men. The first two factors are inevitably intertwined but I treat them separately as a heuristic device in order to bring out and address key themes that emerge from the literature. This review draws on three bodies of work: ‘mainstream’ work from within social gerontology on ageing and later life; specific work on gay male ageing; and work that addresses gay identity. These bodies of scholarship offer useful concepts and have helped frame my analysis but I focus more on the deficiencies of the literature as a way of indicating how the present study addresses problems within it and improves upon previous work.

The problem of much of the literature is in various ways a definitional one. My main argument is that much theorising in the literature fails to reckon with the processes through which midlife gay men differentiate their selves and their ways of relating. First, I discuss some basic omissions from and problems within much of the literature concerning definitions of ageing, midlife and ageism. Second, and building on some of the more thoughtful attempts within the literature, I propose working definitions of each of these that recognise the multiform and internally differentiated character of midlife gay men’s experiences of growing older. Third, I address how in two respects, existing work on gay male ageing is based on an impoverished definition/conceptualisation of midlife gay male subjectivity. In the first instance, the specific work on gay male ageing has tended to take the body for granted, which overlooks gay male midlife subjectivity and relationality as embodied experience. Specifically, this work has neglected the varied meanings and functions of men’s body management practices (as explained in chapters 4 – 6 of the present study). Even some of the more critical treatments of the ageing body from within social gerontology, (involving recognition of its socially constructed character), have tended to overlook the structural limitations (of social class and institutions) on expression of subjectivity and relating and have actually reinforced ageism. In the second instance, much of the literature overlooks the complexities of midlife gay men’s sexual citizenship. The specific literature is largely concerned with the idea of ageing as “accelerated” in gay male culture (Bennett and
Thompson 1991: 66 - 7). There is evidence to support this and Bennett and Thompson (1991) and Heaphy et al (2004) have complicated this concept. But, it is insufficient to explain the variety of midlife gay men’s responses to ageism. The limited view of sexual citizenship on which this concept and the body of work relies has resulted in a failure to recognise how a legitimate midlife gay male sexual citizenship is constructed through the multifaceted notion of an ‘authentic’ self. Authenticity requires that outward appearance should reflect a more ‘real’ inner self of personality and values. None of the existing scholarship recognises how this ‘authentic’ midlife sexual citizenship is used to distinguish selves from other gay men. In turn, this results in failure to grasp the complex power geometry within gay male culture where ageism works in a multidirectional way. The cultural politics of ageing and ageism in gay male culture can involve middle-aged men expressing ageism ‘downwards’ towards young gay men, laterally towards (some) peer aged gay men and ‘upwards’ towards old gay men.

Further, I examine three general theoretical perspectives that have been used in social gerontology that might account for midlife gay men’s different experiences of ageing identity in the context of relating (power relations). Structuralist accounts, which focus largely on how socio-economic arrangements shape identity and social relations (Vincent 1999), would homogenise midlife gay men’s experiences of ageing or reduce these to socio-economic disadvantage and are thus ill-equipped to explain important symbolic, cultural dimensions of gay ageism. Poststructuralist accounts (which would argue that ageing sexuality is a product of dominant ways of thinking about these categories (Butler 1990) risk downplaying even denying midlife gay men’s capacities for critical thought and practice; something which is not borne out in this present study. ‘Late modernist’ accounts (Gillear and Higgs 2000) would argue that social structures/rules serve as resources for the expression and reconstruction of highly differentiated ageing identities and ways of relating in midlife. Such thinking risks overstating the choices available to many midlife gay men in relation to these, paying insufficient attention to the structural and discursive constraints that the previous two theories tend to overstate. None of these perspectives can deal adequately with the tension between constraint and choice that shapes expression of identity and ways of relating. This problem is replicated in the more specific literature on gay ageing which describes midlife gay men’s experiences of ageing as either blighted by loneliness and conceives of men as oppressed by (gay) ageism (Hostetler 2004) or views men as well-connected and defiant in the face of gay ageism (Berger 1982). This thinking occludes the possibility that, in addition
to reproducing and contesting gay ageism, subjects might negotiate or have more ambivalent relationships with its various expressions in different contexts (chapters 4, 5, 6 and 8). Further, the specific work on gay male ageing misses the salience of friendship families for this current generation of midlife gay men. In sum, the above identified deficiencies mean that much existing scholarship neglects the complexities and important aspects of what is distinctive about ageing as a midlife gay man; concerns which are central to the present study.

2.2 Defining gay ageing, midlife and ageism

2.2.1 Some basic omissions and problems

Gay ageing has been overlooked (Pugh 2002: 161). A classic anthology exploring sexuality (Abelove et al 1994) contains several articles relating to racialised sexuality but not a single one that deals with or mentions ageing. If scholarship on sexual identity overlooks ageing (Heaphy et al 2004: 882), the gerontological literature on ageing often ignores sexuality (Arber and Ginn 1995: 3) and homosexuality in particular (Pugh 2002: 208). There is a growing body of social policy oriented writing in America limited to old LGBT people (usually beyond statutory retirement age) that explores socio-economic exclusion (Boxer 1997 and Quam 1997) and psychological adjustment to ageing and opportunities for social participation (Quam and Whitford 1992). But, there is very little work devoted to gay midlife. Within the specific literature on gay ageing, age is narrated as the major form of social difference and division within gay male culture. For examples of this, see Bennett and Thompson (1991); Berger (1982); Cruz (2003); Friend (1991); Hostetler (2004); Jones (2000); Lee (2006); and Pugh (2002). Extant work on gay ageing is also methodologically limited largely based on ‘conscience constituents’ (Friend 1991) or white men who are generally ‘out,’ possessing sufficient disposable income and often based substantially on surveys with north American men (Pugh 2002: 207). Much of it lacks engagement with social or sociological theory (Rosenfeld 2003: 13). For examples of this, see Berger (1982) and Brown et al (1997). As a corrective to the above omissions, using mixed qualititative methods, this study examines the experiences of ageing of middle-aged gay men living in a major British city with a developed LGBTQ culture who differ along the lines of age, class, relationship status/practices, ethnicity and degree of disclosure (‘outness’) about their sexual difference.
2.2.2 What is meant by ageing?

The literature yields few specific attempts to define/theorise ageing or midlife. Much of the specific work tends to take both of these as self-evident. For examples of this, see Berger (1982); Bennett and Thompson (1991); Brown et al (1997); Kimmel and Sang (1995); and Steinman (1990). The social gerontological literature has supplied a thoughtful definition of ageing. Following Arber and Ginn (1995: 5 – 8), I regard ageing as a product of the relationships between the symbolic/discursive and structural/material dimensions of existence. Specifically, I define ageing as resulting from the interplay between chronology, physiology and social relationships. Whilst chronology refers to (dominant) ideas about the passage of time, for example, the symbolism of being 18, 40, 65 or 100, physiology refers to the material body that bears the signs of ageing. Both of these happen within dynamic socio-cultural relations between people who differ by age, sexuality, class and race. Thinking in this way allows appreciation of midlife gay men’s experiences of ageing as embodied (chapters 4 – 6) and occurring within particular relations of power that are co-produced by social structures and discourse (prevailing ideas). Such a definition avoids reducing ageing and midlife to individual, physiological or psychological states that happen in an asocial vacuum. Because the lives of midlife gay men rarely follow the same temporal milestones or trajectory as many heterosexuals, gay male ageing and midlife are also better regarded as consistent with the idea of more open “life courses” rather than fixed ‘life stages’ (see Arber and Attias-Donfut 2000: 3-5). The latter assume heteronormative forms of kinship where child rearing is central. Defining gay male midlife and ageing in this more open way not only affords analysis of what is distinctive about midlife gay men’s experiences of ageing compared to their heterosexual peers. It also allows that gay men themselves experience these categories in very different ways e.g. for (conjoined) reasons of class and ethnicity (see Cronin and King 2010: 877; and Rosenfeld 2003: 10 - 11).

Further, there is definitional neglect of ageing in the social gerontological work, which has tended to regard it as if it operates in isolation from other kinds of social relations (Arber and Ginn 1995: 2). Arber and Ginn have noted attempts to compensate for this by ‘adding and stirring in’ the effects of one influence with those of another (for example, by adding social class, gender or sexuality to age). It has been argued that such approaches have often overlooked how social influences actually intersect to fashion multiform, experiences of
identity and dis/advantage later in life (Arber and Ginn 1995: 3; Cronin and King 2010: 879). However, in envisioning social influences as separate lines of force, such ‘intersectional’ approaches would occlude how these social influences enmesh with each other to enable or constrain midlife gay men’s expression of ageing identity, interaction and the conduct of closer relationships. The analytical framework used in the present study (chapter 3) recognises how social influences intertwine to shape how men think of and express themselves and their ways of relating. For example, I show how gendered sexuality and ethnicity are co-implicated in the construction of an ‘authentic’ gay midlife identity/form of sexual citizenship (chapter 4) and how race and sexuality can work together to encourage some men to lead ‘double lives’ where gay and straight associates and experiences are kept rigidly apart (chapter 8).

2.2.3 What is midlife?

In much of the specific literature on gay ageing, midlife is often not defined. For examples of this, see Friend (1991) and Ellis (2001). Otherwise, it is collapsed into ‘later life,’ or ‘fifty plus’ (Cronin and King 2010; Heaphy et al 2004), which might obscure what is distinctive about middle-age for gay men. The few definitions of midlife available within gerontological writing tend to conceptualise it in rather predictable ways that reflect commonsense perceptions but dressed up in the language of developmental psychology. They also obscure the diversity and distinctiveness of the bodily and relationship practices central to midlife gay men’s experiences of ageing. On the one hand, “prime of life” accounts, according to O’Rand (1990: 140), stress midlife as a time of social prestige, relative affluence and freedom from the demands of welfare institutions usually connected with childrearing. This heteronormative conceptualisation does not serve gay men well. On the other hand, as Biggs points out (1993; 1999), “midlife as crisis” accounts, portray it as a period of reckoning with losses, gains and the prospect of mortality. Such a confrontation might result in reclamation of an inner “authentic Self” that has been distorted by the demands of socialisation hitherto (Biggs 1993: 28-32; 1999: chapter 5). But, the self that is being presumed in this account is an originary, rational self, which rules out that the ageing self might continue to be at odds with itself (and others) (Lash and Urry 1994: 41 – 6) and that it might actually evolve by virtue of being so (Deutsch 1969). Such accounts would then tend to obscure the messier, more ambivalent experiences of midlife gay men’s experiences of ageing that involve continuing conflict. Indeed, ‘maturity’ can be distinctly problematic. Men’s self-contradictory claims to personal
growth call into question ideas of maturity (gains in emotional strength, understanding of social relations/phenomena, acceptance of the self and others) as an unfolding, linear process (chapters 6 – 8).

As a corrective to the above, I distinguish gay male midlife as: a period with somewhat blurred boundaries between when men start to confront the ‘loss’ of youth but before statutory retirement age (circa the mid-sixties). Such a definition allows that there may be individual differences about when the category ‘midlife’ is applied to the self though, generally, the interviewees in the present study reported beginning to think of themselves as middle-aged in the ‘run-up’ to forty. A range of generic studies and mainly empirically based emanating from America have identified midlife as occurring around this age (Staudinger and Bluck 2001: 4). The men in this present study used this first order construct to explain slowing down, loss of physical/sexual capital (‘pulling power’) as well as gains in maturity. Midlife is also distinct from life after statutory retirement age for both structural and discursive reasons. Leaving paid work might mean more flexibility over one’s time but a significant reduction in income calling for lifestyle adjustments. Moreover, being considered ‘old’ or ‘a pensioner’ commonly involves assumptions of increasing dependence (physical and economic) and association with or getting closer to death - actual or social (Gilleard and Higgs 2000: 135). Whilst old people might challenge such stereotypes (Bytheway 1995: 40 – 1), they cannot completely escape their influence, especially in a culture where age consciousness and ageism are thought to operate more acutely (Bennett and Thompson 1991, Bergling 2004; Heaphy et al 2004; Kaufman and Chin Phua 2003).

2.2.4 What is ageism?

In terms of defining ageism, the gerontological literature has been fairly helpful. Jones’ definition regards ageism in a LGBT context as, “the internalisation” of ideas that older individuals are “less desirable, capable and important” (Jones 2000: 14). This is useful insofar as it recognises the wider components of ageism that presume reduced capability and the aesthetic dimensions of ageism in a sexualised culture where loss of youth can result in diminished status. But, Jones’ overwhelming focus from within social psychology concerned with internalisation of ideas reinforces the idea of ageing as an individual matter or a problem of the individual, which risks losing sight of the wider structural, institutional dimensions of (gay) ageism (chapter 6). It also assumes that ageism runs in the direction from younger to
older men. As a corrective, I define ageism as: a set of social relations that result from the combined influences of social structure and dominant ideas of age and ageing that draw on and produce prejudiced assumptions and stereotypes about chronological and physiological age. In fact, my definition closely follows that of Bytheway (1995), which registers the structural and discursive constituents of ageism. Here ageism is seen as operating both at the individual and the institutional/macro-social levels. It is thought to be expressed through stereotypes which reflect widespread anxieties in an age-negative culture about the physical differences associated with ageing and which can result in denigration or ‘othering’ of midlife gay men. This resonates with the view that stereotypes do not just generalise unfairly and homogenise those to whom they are applied but also mark the boundary between the deviant and the normal/acceptable (Hall 1997: 257 - 8). Bytheway’s definition is also useful insofar as it recognises ageism as capable of flowing in various directions, though running mainly from younger towards older people (Bytheway 1995: 6 - 14). Following this logic, I regard ageism not just as socially embedded but also occurring in multidirectional ways within gay male culture where midlife gay men themselves might denigrate younger, peer aged and old gay men (chapters 4, 5, 6 and 8).

2.2.5 Defining subjectivity: what does it mean to be a middle-aged gay man?

The problem of definition extends to treatment of subjectivity. Most extant work is lacking in rich descriptive detail of men’s lived experience and focused engagement using social theory. In particular, the gay specific work neglects gay male midlife/ageing subjectivity as embodied experience. For instance, see work by Ellis (2001); Jones (2000); and Lee (1991). This omission is ironic in view of assumptions about midlife gay men’s heightened concern with the body and self-presentation (see Berger (1982); Brown et al (1997); Cruz (2003); Lee (2006); Pugh (2002); Steinman (1990); and Whittle (1994)). Typical within much writing on gay male ageing, accounts proceed as if the body is mere instrument for the intentions or whims of the mind. For examples of this, see work by Bennett and Thompson (1991); Berger (1982); Bergling (2004); Brown et al (1997); Cruz (2003); Ellis (2001); Friend (1991); Jones (2000); Lee (1991); Lee (2006); Nardi (1992); Robinson (2008); Rosenfeld (2003); and Steinman (1990). This writing neglects that mind is housed within a body, which is both locus and medium of interaction. As Shilling (1993: 84) has argued, the body is both acted upon by social influences and (by its mere presence) acts back on social relations. Following Bourdieu (1990: 66) and McNay (2000: 24 – 6), my treatment of midlife gay male
subjectivity throughout recognises the inherency of body and mind. This is reflected in the decision to use participant observation to access the stories about ageing that midlife gay men express through their (mindful) bodies (see chapters 4 and 5) and is implicit in the study’s analytical framework elaborated in chapter 3.

Specifically, the gay focused literature misses: the role of the body and outward appearance in the construction of ageing, midlife gay identity; and how appearance tacitly undergirds midlife gay men’s interaction with or social distance from different others (chapters 4 and 5). By social distance, I refer to the process by which gay men separate themselves from each other spatially (and emotionally) within a hierarchy by means of different cultural practices (Bourdieu 1984: 32). On the rare occasions when the body and appearance are referred to, they are addressed as parenthetical to other concerns. In an article on gay friendship families, Nardi (1992: 157) refers to the semiotics of gay men’s sartorial knowledge/skill. He mentions in passing how styles of dress and grooming are used to communicate difference from heterosexual men, belonging to a social group and sexual availability to other gay men. But, much of this type of work ignores the particularities of how midlife gay men use dress and grooming to distinguish themselves from other gay men. Also, the rational actor that figures in Nardi’s account, again operating in the realm of mind, risks reducing the multiple, ambivalent meanings and functions of midlife gay men’s dressing and grooming practices (chapters 4 and 5) to body management techniques that are intended largely for sexual purposes. As this study shows, dress and grooming also indicate ongoing acculturation, reinforce a sense of belonging and help in the management of (ageing) identity and signal resistance to heteronormativity (Kates 1998: 3–5).

There are, however, contributions from within gerontology both from ‘late modernist’ (Gilheald and Higgs 2000) and poststructuralist directions (Featherstone and Hepworth 1993) that challenge assumptions of the body and ageing as given - as natural phenomena. In the first instance, the body, in, highly differentiated, contemporary societies might now be a canvass for the construction of a plurality of ageing identities which blur and challenge more ‘traditional meanings of age, ageing and later life (Gilheald and Higgs 2000: 3, 25, 59–60). Gay men who choose to carry on ‘clubbing’ beyond 40 or 50 (chapter 5) would present an example of this. In the second instance, the ageing body also figures as a social construct, though is constructed less through the voluntarism of individual actors than through discourse - the ideas and symbols that animate how we might think of and perform ageing identity.
(Featherstone and Hepworth’ 1993). Within this particular account, moreover, the older gay male body would be thought of as a “mask” that covers a more youthful, interior self, ‘Inside I still feel 25.’ But, the selves that are imagined in both the above contributions reinforce thinking of the ageing body as inferior to nubility. It appears that if older people are to achieve validation, they must imitate youth or recapture forms of embodiment or qualities associated with it. By this reckoning, growing older is not to be welcomed but still feared. Viewing ageing and midlife as pathological only reinforces thinking prevalent in gay male and consumer cultures where denial, deferral or avoidance of ageing assume the force of a “moral imperative” (Pugh: 2002: 170).

There are some more credible accounts of midlife gay male subjectivity. In an Australian context, a study by Robinson (2008) shows how gay men’s experiences of ageing and sexuality, (looked at through the lens of ‘coming out’ stories), are structured by their age cohort and can be contrasted with experiences of other generations of gay men. For instance, men in the middle-aged cohort, who were pioneers in promoting visibility and building gay culture, were more able than old gay men to draw on affirming discourses to construct their ageing sexuality. This is similar to research conducted with midlife and older lesbian and gay people in Los Angeles by Rosenfeld (2003) where informants drew on discourses to produce either a “discreditable” (stigmatised) or a more “accrediting” account of their (ageing) sexuality as a political identity whose stigma was the result of oppression by a dominant social group. In this formulation, age itself was less an influential factor in shaping ageing identity than how subjects reacted to the more accrediting discourse that began to emerge in the 1960s and 1970s (Rosenfeld 2003: 10 – 12). Although neither of these two contributions explicitly engages with midlife gay male subjectivity as embodied experience, nonetheless, and like the present study, they both specify the mechanisms or social processes (structural and discursive) that mediate midlife gay men’s experiences of growing older.

2.2.5 a) A different kind of sexual citizenship?

Midlife gay male ageing subjectivity is inevitably relational. This becomes particularly clear when we consider the issue of sexual citizenship, which involves not just recognition of sexual diversity but also: “control (or not) over use of our bodies... relationships... [My emphasis] [and] erotic experiences” (Plummer 2003: 38 - 39). Indeed, the gay specific literature draws attention to how experience of socio-sexual citizenship might be different for
gay men as they grow older. It has been argued that midlife gay men’s experiences of selfhood and sexual citizenship directly contrast with the experiences of middle-aged heterosexual men and middle-aged/older lesbians. In the first instance, attraction between young women and (powerful) middle-aged men is normalised in popular culture and in film and television especially (Gill 2007: 2). One only need think of Dynasty but there are real life occasions where being a middle-aged heterosexual man can be an advantage in terms of income/wealth, status and access to formal political structures and being older and female a disadvantage in these respects (Winkler and Stone 1985). In the second instance, it appears that the signs of ageing and midlife might be considered little barrier to being valued in lesbian cultures that tend to regard attractiveness more holistically (Kehoe 1986; Barker 2004). Whilst we can accept that lesbian cultures yield many opportunities for support, we might question the romanticised, assumptions that underpin the idea of a community largely untainted by ageism in a society where ageism is endemic (Bytheway 1995). Ageism may operate differently and less acutely within lesbian culture (perhaps bearing on them more as women than as lesbians) but it is not completely immune from ageism (Cruikshank 1990: 83 - 4). Indeed, there are signs that, like young gay men, younger lesbians are beginning to reject chances for intimacy and friendship with their ageing peers on ‘aesthetic’ grounds of age and whether women have the appropriate ‘look’ (Slevin and Mowery forthcoming 2012).

Moreover, the idea that sexual citizenship is distinct for midlife gay men and that ageism is more acute in gay male culture is materialised in the notion of “accelerated ageing” (Bennett and Thompson 1991: 66), which is central to the specific literature on gay male ageing. This means that within gay culture men might be considered and may come to consider themselves as middle-aged (or old) well before the point at which heterosexual men (and perhaps lesbians) might do so. A study in America in 1980 by Kelly (cited in Bennett and Thompson 1991: 67) concluded that gay men identified middle-age as beginning at 30 and old age at 50. A survey involving 478 Australian gay men concluded that their perceptions of ageing were similar to heterosexuals but were “accelerated” when they referred to experiences within gay male culture. (Bennett and Thompson 1991: 65-7, 73). This conclusion is supported in more recent British research based on a survey of 164 men, eight focus groups involving 14 men and in-depth interviews with ten men (Heaphy et al 2004: 884-5). If midlife gay men’s embodied difference, actual presence and need to form relationships within gay culture are denied or overlooked, they might then no longer count as proper sexual citizens within gay male culture (Friend 1991: 111; Pugh 2002: 163).
Although, these studies indicate the persistence and acuteness of ageism within white gay male cultures across economically developed societies, we should be sceptical of overstating the importance of accelerated ageing in shaping midlife gay men’s experiences of sexual citizenship. Unfavourable comparisons between midlife gay men and their lesbian and heterosexual male counterparts risk ignoring how the former use age-inflected cultural and political knowledge, emotional resources and relational skills to express a more unapologetic ageing identity and secure inclusion (chapter 8). Indeed, ‘accelerated ageing’ is queried in Lee’s (2006) study (based on in-depth interviews with 15 men aged between 35 and 72), which concludes that the more interior considerations of the age that midlife gay men feel themselves to be (‘Inside I am still really 25, 30 etc.,’) are more influential than chronological or physiological age on how midlife gay men might think of and express their ageing sexual identity (Lee 2006: 26). Whilst theorising gay male ageing subjectivity in this way troubles the reduction of age and ageing to mere chronology or biological decline, this emotional resource offers only limited, ambivalent challenge to ageism. Like, the ‘mask of ageing’ thesis referred to above, it suggests an apologetic account of ageing. The idea that midlife gay men fall back on a more interior, younger self for validation actually reinforces stereotypes that they are old before their time and risks shoring up their exclusion from sexual citizenship.

Accelerated ageing may have some validity in explaining men’s experiences of (non)sexual citizenship on the gay commercial scene (Heaphy et al 2004: 884 – 5). But, it is too limited a concept to do justice to the complexity and range of experiences of sexual selfhood available to midlife gay men. The concept obscures that midlife gay men might have ambivalent responses to ageism or make claims for sexual citizenship which are suggestive of a more questioning stance towards age, ageing and forms of relating or (as discussed in chapters 4 – 6 of this study). More importantly, not a single piece of work recognises how a legitimate midlife gay male sexual citizenship is constructed through an ‘authentic’ self, which can be used to differentiate middle-aged selves from younger, peer aged and old gay men. For interviewees in the present study, being ‘authentic’ demands that the age-appropriate outward self (appearance) is managed/produced to reflect a more ‘real’ interior that is more than just sexualised display and consists of feelings, values, qualities of personality etc. This ‘authentic self’ or midlife gay male sexual citizen is crucial to how midlife gay men differentiate themselves from and express ageism towards other gay men as explored in chapter 4.
Specifically, the more elaborate, sexualised forms of embodiment that subjects associate with younger gay men are considered symptomatic of the shallow, superficial, self-obsessed forms of identity and relating thought to typify the gay commercial scene. The embodiment of peer aged men considered trying ‘too hard’ to cling onto their youth is read as denial of the midlife/ageing self rather than blurring/questioning of the meanings of age, ageing and age-appropriate authenticity. Further, none of the extant works on gay male ageing deal with how midlife gay men differentiate themselves from the desexualised embodiment or non-sexual citizenship of old gay men who they associate with morbidity, social death and mortality itself (chapter 4).

2.3 Identity and power relations: differentiation

The forms of differentiation just mentioned remind us of the imbrication of identity and power relations. Debates on expression of gay (and other sexual) identity and the conduct of social relations have been dominated since about the late 1970s by structuralist and poststructuralist theories. These theories would offer competing explanations of the different opportunities that midlife gay men experience in respect of self-expression and relating. This debate has been complicated by more recent theorising since about the 1990s of a more complex, ‘detraditionalised,’ individualised ‘late modernity.’ These conditions are thought to provide actors with the material and conceptual resources to reconstruct identities and relationships (Giddens 1991) within highly differentiated “cultures of ageing” (Gilleard and Higgs 2000).

2.3.1 Social conditions as constraints on midlife gay male identity and relations

Theories of ‘structured dependency’ (Estes et al 2003) have dominated much British work within gerontology since about the 1970s. They combine Marxian and social democratic concerns with how later life/old age are constructed as a distinct form of disadvantage by socio-economic arrangements. Exclusion from economic production or reduced power to labour results in loss of income and status post-retirement (Vincent 1999: 171). Such an approach offers several related theoretical and political advantages. First, it opens up consideration of how midlife gay men’s social status, expression of identity and opportunities for relating are linked to socio-economic factors (social class). Some midlife gay men experience exclusion from or disadvantaged access to/participation in various forms of gay
(and other) culture (chapters 5, 6 and 8). Second, the focus on how socio-economic organisation produces disadvantage offers an alternative to and critique of “ontogenetic” thinking that views ageing as an individual affair (Streib and Binstock 1990: 9) happening in a vacuum untouched by social structures or ideology. As such, it offers a critique of thinking that holds individuals accountable for ageing ‘badly’ - failing to look after their health or to secure financial autonomy in later life.

However, this school of thought risks reducing understanding of and practices in relation to ageing and later life to socio-economic arrangements. This reductionism has several consequences. First, it risks reproducing the kind of overly bleak stereotypes of ageing/later life as largely constrained by experiences of exclusion, social withdrawal and non-identity that theorists might otherwise want to contest (Bury 1995: 19; Phillipson and Biggs 1998: 16). Such accounts are empirically dubious in the light of many European studies challenging the idea that socio-economic disadvantage in later life automatically leads to social isolation (Arber and Evandrou 1997: 19). This present study acknowledges structural limitations imposed upon enactment of identity and the conduct of interaction and kinship (chapter 8). But, at the same time, it attempts to illuminate the forms of mutual support that are created within midlife gay men’s kinship networks that do much more than merely compensate for or alleviate loneliness but offer challenges to heteronormative models of kinship, intimacy (Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan 2001; Weston 1991) and masculinity (Nardi 1992: 108). As implied in the work of Gillear and Higgs (2000: 193), structured dependency theories would risk obliterating the distinctiveness of midlife gay men’s experiences of ageing compared with their heterosexual equivalents as well as the differences between them. In depicting the ageing process as culminating in an impoverished, empty, excluded later life, such theorising fails to recognise midlife gay men’s creativity. This ignores the emotional, cultural and political knowledges that middle-aged gay men have built up through life experience, which can help to reconfigure identity, interaction and kinship (chapter 8). Second, structuralist paradigms would also struggle to account for midlife gay men’s specific experiences of ageing and ageism, addressed in this present study, which more often pivot around symbolic considerations of aesthetics (Kimmel and Sang 1995: 207; Heaphy and Yip 2003: 897; Hosteteler 2004: 160 – 1; Lang 2001: 95, 101) and authenticity (Lang 2001: 94 – 5) (chapter 4). Structural dependency theories then cannot account for those aspects of ageing experience where middle-aged (or older) gay men are rejected not so much on account of their role in
socio-economic production or positioning within the class system than because they are defined as the antithesis of proper, youthful sexual citizenship (Friend 1991).

2.3.2 Prevailing ideas as constraints on midlife gay male identity and relating

In contrast, poststructuralist theorising inspired by Michel Foucault (1979) operates with a very different conception of subjectivity and relations of power. This would recognise the centrality of the symbolic in producing different expressions of ageing sexual citizenship and ways of relating among men who might identify as gay and middle-aged. Such approaches would theorise midlife gay men’s ageing, gendered, sexual identities and varied relationship practices as less the products of regulation by social structures than by discourses (Butler 1990). On this account, none of the categories ‘ageing,’ ‘midlife,’ ‘gay’ and ‘man’ would constitute a unitary identity or something that subjects ‘are.’ Instead, these categories are humanly invented ones that are made (to appear) real by dominant ways of thinking about age, sexuality, maleness etc, which subjects internalise and act out or ‘do.’ As Butler would have, ageing midlife gay male identity is “performative.” It is constituted through the repetition of everyday practices animated by discourses that work behind our backs to prevent critical appreciation of their regulatory effects (Butler 1993: 227). The constant iteration of midlife gay male identity would create the illusion that gay, male and midlife are natural properties – whether biologically, psychologically or as eternally fixed, natural social categories. For poststructuralist theory, (sexual) identity is not so much a product of anything natural but the result of social processes whereby it becomes naturalised - experienced as ‘second nature’ – resulting in governance of thought and practice. Accepting then that (ageing) sexual identity is socially constructed (through discursive practices) means that all forms of sexual identity are radically unstable and thus open to change. But, change in how we experience identity does not occur because we are agents able to amend our identities by an act of will. Any such change is attributed to the idea that because identity enactments are never perfectly replicated in each doing, they are open to “distortion” (Butler 1990: 179; 1993: 227) and can thus result in subversion of the heterosexual/homosexual binary (Butler 1990: 43-4), which privileges the former category and obscures/denies the plurality of gender and sexuality.

In addition to recognising ageing gendered sexual identity and citizenship as much more diverse, such thinking suggests certain theoretical and political advantages. First, and unlike
structuralist accounts, it might be more attuned to how midlife gay men’s different experiences of sexual subjectivity are constructed through the kind of aesthetic judgements already alluded to about the midlife/ageing gay male body, which operate independently of structural relations of social class. Second, the recognition that we never fully become our partial, conflicted identities (Butler 1990: 23-4) and that identity practice might cross/subvert the “heterosexual matrix” (the binary opposition of heterosexual as dominant and homosexual as subordinate) could open up “new political articulations” or forms of sexual citizenship beyond these narrow categories (Butler and Scott 1992: xv). This allows us to theorise that some middle-aged gay men might question and indeed practice their sexual and gender difference as less fixed or definitive. For example, see Jed’s account of his gendered sexuality in chapter 7.

However, performativity has been questioned on the grounds that it tends to rely on an overly socialised, disciplined account of subjectivity (Martin 1997: 132). In effect, this would homogenise midlife gay men’s experiences of ageing and close down analysis of differences between them. Taken to its logical conclusion, performativity would deny midlife gay men any significant capacity to develop critical appreciation of let alone practices that would consciously challenge the effects of the dominant discourses which construct them as pathological. The over-privileging of the discursive level (Weeks 1981b: 90) would lead us to disregard how gay male midlife/ageing and ageism overlap with other forms of social conflict (Jackson 1999: 21, 134) where ageing is enmeshed with the effects of relations of class and race. The presumption that any change in how midlife gay men experience their midlife/ageing sexual identity is only ever accidental misses that identity, as Seidman would argue, can be both a “site of regulation and contestation” (1993: 133-5). Therefore, Butler’s formulation of performativity would fail to illuminate the kind of body management (dressing and grooming) and relational practices described in chapters 4 and 5 that involve negotiation with and conscious challenge to gay ageism.

By privileging the disciplinary effects of discourse, performativity might also occlude any appreciation of how differences in midlife gay men’s expression of identity and relating are shaped by context or rather the rules operating within different fields of existence. Indeed, none of the theories or texts explored addressed this particular issue. As Crossley might argue (2006: 50-1), there are “carcereal” domains of experience where midlife gay men might feel constrained by self-governance and domains where they could deploy “embodied
reflexivity.” The former was certainly the case in relation to the more disciplinary norms operating in gay saunas (chapter 6), which set considerable limits on expression of identity, interaction and opportunities for defiance of its unspoken rules. In contrast, norms prevailing in less sexualised gay social/support groups (chapter 7) and kinship groups (chapter 8) might allow men greater scope to mobilise authenticity - ‘to be myself.’ Further, I contend that accepting subjectivity as performative need not involve giving up the idea that midlife gay men are capable of conscious forms of agency. Indeed, the analytical framework that supports this present study (chapter 3) conceives of agency as more than merely iterative or accidental whilst avoiding a view of human actors as gifted with unproblematic self-knowledge (Nelson (1999: 346-51), Lovell (2003: 9-13), McNay (2000: 24); and Thomson (2009)). Such an approach enables consideration of differently positioned gay male midlife subjectivities as arising from the uneasy dynamic between conscious and unconscious moments of existence, between the forces of constraint (structural and discursive) and the choices that midlife gay men create to do otherwise. This kind of dialogue is apparent in subjects’ mediation of habitual body management regimes (related to diet and exercise) to stave off weight gain as a sign of growing older and the more questioning shadow narratives that permit giving into sensual pleasures related to food, alcohol and relaxation (chapter 4).

2.3.3 Social conditions/ideas as resources for recreating midlife identity and relating

In contrast, ‘late modernist’ inspired theories offer challenge to structured dependency and poststructuralist theories that underplay opportunities for agency. On this account, the (structural) socio-economic and cultural (discursive) conditions prevalent in post-industrial, ‘post-scarcity’ societies are thought to function less as constraints on than resources for the expression and reconfiguration of a plethora of (ageing) sexual identities and ways of relating. Here, expressions of identity and forms of relating are considered more fluid than ever leading to new ‘experiments’ in intimacy where lesbian and gay people have taken a lead (Giddens 1991; Giddens 1992: 135, 142, 147 - 7; Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan 2001). Indeed, steady increases in affluence and longevity across all social classes are thought to have resulted in highly differentiated “cultures of ageing” (Gilleard and Higgs 2000) that trouble the cliché of later life as decline and midlife as marking the downward slide towards withdrawal from social participation (Gilleard and Higgs 2000: 4). In consequence, the process of ageing as a midlife gay man might now be experienced as much more self-referential, individualised – what you make of it. The meanings of midlife may then have
become more blurred when we consider the opportunities that middle-aged gay men create on the commercial scene (chapter 5) and beyond. This might lend support to the view that younger people’s power to determine and police what counts as youthful or age-appropriate has weakened significantly (Gilleard and Higgs 2000: 9, 29, 129), though this is questioned by my own experience in a youthful gay space in chapter 5. The idea of different cultures of ageing resonates with midlife gay men’s experiences of ageing that are distinct from the temporal milestones associated with heterosexuality. They also allow consideration that midlife gay men’s experiences of ageing differ from each other.

Such theorising would move us beyond accounts that would reduce gay male midlife and ageing to socio-economic and/or cultural exclusion. Focussing on how age, ageing and midlife are socially invented categories that can be made and remade by human actors invites consideration of the conscious moments that help midlife gay men reconstruct their identity and reconfigure their ways of relating. Thinking in this way also opens up analysis of how midlife gay men might mobilise cultural knowledge gained through life experience (age-inflected cultural and emotional capital). But, this perspective risks overstating choice, which neglects well-established forms of inequality and constraint. The ‘cultures of ageing’ thesis then tends to overlook or downplay the persistence of more ‘traditional’ structural and discursive/ageist relations that impact on midlife gay men who lack the interrelated economic means and enculturated sense of entitlement in various fields of existence. Such factors would set limits on who has the capacities to engage in agency, choices about ‘life plans, ‘life politics’ and ‘bodily projects’ (Skeggs 2004: 53: Smart and Neale 1999: 12). The ‘pink pound’ is mythological, if not exclusionary for those who have to rely on lower incomes (Bell and Binnie 2000: 99). Midlife gay men might well find themselves excluded from participation in the more visible aspects of gay male culture, the gay ‘cyber scene’ of websites, chat rooms etc and certain forms of friendship network for reasons of class, sexuality and race (chapters 5 and 8). The ‘cultures of ageing’ thesis risks homogenising midlife gay men’s experiences of ageing but in a different way from structured dependency theories. In sum, late modern, cultures of ageing reflect middle class hegemony in the struggle to define later life where affluence and a sense of entitlement have been erroneously universalised (Estes et al 2003: 147).
2.3.4 The distinctiveness of midlife gay men’s ways of relating?

There has been some useful exploration of the distinctiveness of lesbian and gay kinship per se, which has in more recent years involved reclamation of the notion of family. It has been argued that gay men’s friendship families, largely consisting of other gay men, have grown out of social, cultural and political necessity given hostility from state, civil society and biological family (Pugh 2002: 173-5; Weston 1991; Nardi 1992). At worst, gay men might face rejection and condemnation and even tolerant, biolegal family members and straight friends can unwittingly express homophobia or misunderstand gay men’s social experiences and practices. More recently, lesbian and gay people have begun to broaden even ‘gay’ the concept of ‘family’ (Nardi: 1992; Weeks et al 1999: 86; Weston 1991). Relative freedom from regulation by the state and biolegal family has meant greater autonomy for midlife gay men to engage in contemporary “experiments” in intimacy, kinship and relating (Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan 2001). The distinctiveness of these forms of lesbian and gay kinship are expressed in a language of ‘customised,’ ‘constructed,’ ‘patchwork’ friendship-families,’ which is suggestive of the choices and creative labour involved in how midlife gay men ‘do’ familial relationships. The distinctiveness of gay kinship has been challenged by Bech (1997: 277 - 83) who has remarked on how young, urban, (middle class) heterosexual Danes are now developing their own friendship families of choice. But, involvement in these kinship formations is temporary (Duncan and Phillips 2008: 15). But, what all these previous efforts to describe gay kinship miss is the distinctiveness of friendship families for the present generation of midlife gay men. Indeed, younger lesbian and gay people might feel more able nowadays to invest more in or even attempt to imitate biological family (Nordqvist 2010). Further discussion of the salience of friendship family for middle-aged gay men appears in chapter 8.

Like the more general literature on (sexual) identity and social gerontology, the specific literature on gay male ageing neglects the subtleties of how midlife gay male subjectivity, men’s modes of interaction and their investments in kinship are differentiated. What is striking here is how midlife gay men’s responses to discourses of ageing and ageism are considered either as compliant (Cruz 2003; Hostetler 2004: Whittle 1994) or defiant (Berger 1982; Brown et al 1997). On the one hand, midlife gay men might be conceived as having given into the oppressive force of gay ageism (Hostetler 2004). Rejection by younger men can result in withdrawal from the gay commercial scene (Pugh 2002: 163). On the other
hand, a study by Berger (1982: 14), whilst acknowledging the force of ageism, gives emphasis to the view that midlife gay men do not experience gay culture as uniformly exclusionary and that in carrying on cruising for sex, they defy the injunctions of gay ageism. But, both these caricatures of relatedness fix middle-aged gay men into loneliness or connectedness and obscure how differences in identity and forms of interaction might change over time. They tend to gloss over midlife gay men’s more ambivalent, contradictory experiences of relating as they grow older, which concern negotiating with age, ageing and ageism (chapters 4 – 7). Indeed, I have encountered only one text, written in a more journalistic, self-help style, that recognises gay male ageism as a two-way street (Bergling 2004). But, like the rest of the literature, this contribution fails to do justice to the more complex power geometry that is addressed in this present study where, again, in differentiating themselves through accounts of how they conduct their relationships, midlife gay men can mobilise ageism towards younger, peer aged and old gay men (chapter 8).

The specific literature paints a similar binary picture with regard to midlife gay men’s experiences of kinship where subjects are viewed either as socially skilled and well connected (Berger (1992: 219); Brown et al (1997: 5)) or else their claims to healthy levels of social capital (friendship circles and social networks) are thought to function as cover stories for de facto isolation (Hostetler 2004: 163). This account troubles the idea of friends as family for its overplaying of the relational choices available to midlife gay men and for obscuring the structural and discursive constraints that shape their different experiences of identity and relating. Heaphy (2007b) has argued that inequalities in socio-economic and cultural resources influence whether midlife gay men will experience a more or less connected gay midlife. Choice may be overstated anyway when relationships are imperceptibly shaped by divisions of class (Bottero 2005: 167-9) and differentiated by age, gender and ethnicity in gay contexts (Weston 1991: 110-1). In fact, Lewin notes a range of American studies which indicate that working class and black gay/lesbian people are more likely to rely on biological family and to define family in such terms (1998: 93). Whilst such accounts are credible, they should not be overplayed to the extent that they obscure or deny the relational skills and resources deployed by middle-aged working class gay men (see chapter 8). For Hostetler, social class dis/advantage exacerbates the ageism that midlife gay men can face. Indeed, he argues that the gay community’s political rhetoric concerning the value of friendship family obliges midlife gay men to own a family of choice or circle of friends. This community ideology is thought to fly in the face of reality where midlife and
older gay men more often find themselves restricted to scattered acquaintances (Hostetler 2004: 163). For Hostetler, owning (or perhaps inventing) a family of choice is a “strategy of interpretive control” that rationalises loss, maintains the illusion of being in charge of one’s midlife and salvages (the pretence of) self-esteem. It is, in short, a cover story for personal failure in midlife. (2004: 167).

Such thinking troubles accounts that overplay the egalitarianism of and voluntarism within gay affiliation (for an example see Nardi 1992) and rely on unexamined notions of ‘gay community’ (see Friend 1991). Hostetler’s view invites consideration of the unequal power relations within a gay male culture that is crosscut by differences and inequalities relating to age, class and ethnicity. There are undoubtedly socio-economic and cultural limits on participation in gay friendship families (chapter 8) but, this analysis is empirically, theoretically and politically dubious. The present study concurs with Robinson’s empirical study (based on data from 58 midlife and older gay men in urban and rural areas of Australia) which found little evidence of isolation (Robinson 2008: 178). Hostetler’s view denies the diversity of experience and the possibilities for agency that men in the present study reported being able to mobilise (dependent on context) in relation to identity and relating with closer kin (chapter 8). Such a view also comes perilously close to reproducing the heteronormative spectre of the lonely, midlife/ageing gay man (or ‘old queen’) reaping the rewards for failure to commit in a lifetime that has been dedicated to ‘promiscuity’ (Robinson 2008: 156). But, crucially, it also overlooks midlife gay men’s capacities to reconfigure their kinship networks and to develop counter-narratives that revalue being alone or minimally connected as autonomy (chapter 8).

2.4 Conclusion

Whilst it provides some useful concepts and an overall framework through which midlife gay men’s experiences of ageing can be approached, much of the literature suffers from key definitional and theoretical deficiencies. These relate to impoverished definition/conceptualisations of midlife gay male subjectivity and the power relations of ageism in gay male culture which shape how men think of themselves and relate (or not) to other gay men of similar and different ages. I have contended that the literature lacks specific, credible definitions of ageing, midlife and ageism as they might apply to gay men. To counteract this lack, I have provided definitions of each of these. My definition of ageing
acknowledges its multifaceted character that involves connections between the passage of time, the material body and the social relations in which midlife gay men are embedded. Using the concept of the “life course” (rather than fixed “life stage”), this definition allows for the contingencies, similarities with and distinctiveness from heterosexual experiences of midlife and growing older and that midlife gay men themselves experience midlife and ageing in different ways. I have proposed a definition of midlife which allows, within reason, a blurring of the boundaries with earlier adulthood and ‘old age.’ I have also provided a definition of ageism that acknowledges its multidirectional character within gay male culture.

The chapter has also illuminated deficiencies in the literature concerning how midlife gay male subjectivity and the relations of power between gay men of different age groups have been defined and theorised. First, the embodied character of gay male midlife subjectivity has been ignored or insufficiently theorised. When there have been attempts at more critical treatment of the ageing body from within social gerontology, this work has overlooked the structural limitations on expression of subjectivity (and relating) (Gilleard and Higgs 2000) or has actually reinforced views of ageing as pathological and thus to be avoided (Featherstone and Hepworth 1993). Second, much of the literature overlooks the complexities of midlife gay men’s sexual citizenship. The specific literature’s focus on ageing as “accelerated” in gay male culture is insufficient to explain the variety of midlife gay men’s responses to ageing and ageism. Much existing scholarship then has also failed to recognise men’s thinking about what constitutes legitimate forms of midlife, gay male sexual citizenship, which pivots around the notion of authenticity, (where age-appropriate appearance must reflect a more ‘real,’ interior self). Extant scholarship then misses how this self/sexual citizen is used by midlife gay men to distinguish themselves from other gay men from different age groups and the complex power geometry of gay male culture where ageism operates in multidirectional ways. In this cultural politics of the body, midlife gay men might themselves express ageism ‘downwards’ towards young gay men, laterally towards (some) peer aged gay men and ‘upwards’ towards old gay men. Third, I have drawn attention to the deficiencies of three theoretical perspectives on ageing. Structuralist accounts (Vincent 1999) risk homogenising midlife gay men’s experiences of identity and relating and overlook important symbolic dimensions of gay ageism. Poststructuralist accounts (Butler 1990; 1993) would downplay or even deny midlife gay men’s scope for critical thought and practice. ‘Late modernist’ accounts (Gilleard and Higgs 2000) risk overstating midlife gay men’s choices concerning expression of identity and relating, paying insufficient attention to structural and discursive
constraints. Practically all previous theoretical endeavours have failed to address the complexities of how men reproduce, contest and negotiate with gay ageism. Much of the literature (general and specific) gives insufficient attention to the context-dependent character of expression of identity and forms of relating, neglecting that different fields of existence enable more or less scope for constraint or the exercise of choice. Similarly, the more specific literature on gay male ageing misses the complexities of midlife gay men’s forms of interaction and kinship, including the salience of friendship families for this current generation of midlife gay men. Much of this work relies on a simple binary where midlife gay men are thought of either as well-connected and defiant of gay ageism (Berger 1982) or isolated and oppressed by it (Hostetler 2004). Whilst the former overstates midlife gay men’s capacities to challenge ageism, the latter ignores midlife gay men’s capacities to develop counter narratives. As a consequence of the above-identified deficiencies, existing scholarship neglects ambivalences where men might negotiate with age and ageism and also overlooks key elements of what is distinctive about ageing as a midlife gay man.

Having analysed problems with the literature, I now turn to consideration of the research methods that have been used to generate informants’ stories of ageing and the analytical framework that has been used to understand them. Given the shortcomings identified in this chapter, this task requires an analytical framework that opens up understanding of midlife gay men’s varying experiences of ageing subjectivity and the relations of power operating in the fields of existence that make up their lives.
Chapter Three. Research Design: Methods and Methodology

3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter examined theories that could explain different experiences of ageing as a middle-aged gay man. But, what research methods have been used to generate accounts of ageing in this study? This chapter explains and justifies the research design that has informed the investigation. This small-scale study is based on narratives generated through two qualitative methods from 20 covert participant observation sessions in Manchester’s ‘gay village’ and semi-structured interviews with 27 men aged between 39 and 61. The order of the chapter is as follows: what the study aims to know via the research questions; a sketch of the field of research within Manchester; why each of the two main methods was used; strategies for sampling men for interview and in observations - times, places and what to observe; the analytical framework of the study, including practical data analysis strategy; and examination of ethical and political issues arising from the study. I demonstrate how the study benefits from the use of two qualitative methods and contend that relations between investigator and participants in the field are resources for rather than impediments to the production of plausible knowledge (Maxwell 1998: 74; Stewart 1998). If we recognise that social actors construct their worlds, then the study calls for qualitative methods and an ‘interpretivist’ methodology. But, I contend that the study benefits from an analytical framework of the kind developed by Thomson (2009) which enables appreciation of the constraints on and choices available to social actors concerning how they understand ageing, express their midlife/ageing selves and relate to others. Further, I demonstrate how “situation ethics” (Goode 1986) have allowed case-by-case assessment to safeguard participant dignity and emotional safety and how dialogue has been staged between the different knowledges of participants and the researcher.

3.2 Research questions

The aim of the study is to illuminate how midlife gay men who participate in Manchester’s developed gay scene (mainly its bars and/or social groups) respond to growing older. The overall research puzzle and related research questions were formulated in the earlier stages of research to provide focus and structure for the investigation (Mason 1996: 18 – 21, 32). In the light of themes identified within the literature, it was hypothesised that ageism within gay
male culture would set limits on how midlife gay men think of themselves, conduct relations (Hostetler 2004; Pugh 2002) and manage appearance. It was also surmised that ageism would generate conflict and/or social distance between middle-aged and younger gay men (Bennett and Thompson 1991, Berger 1982; Bergling 2004; Brown et al 1997; Cruz 2003; Heaphy 2007b; Jones 2000; Lee 2006; Pugh 2002). The specific questions that fall out of the central puzzle are:

1. What can changes in midlife gay men’s work on the body (e.g. dress, grooming, diet, exercise etc.) tell us about understandings of ageing and the workings of ageism in Manchester’s gay male culture?

2. How do dominant ways of thinking about age and ageing influence how midlife gay men make sense of ageing and express their selves within this culture as they grow older?

3. How do midlife gay men narrate any changes associated with growing older in their relational practices and what can these narratives/practices tell us about their responses to ageing and ageism in local gay culture?

These questions reflect concerns ‘internal’ to gay male culture where loss of physical/sexual capital (youthful looks) can entail loss of status (Bennett and Thompson 1991; Berger 1982; Bergling 2004; Brown et al 1997; Heaphy et al 2004; Jones 2000; Lee 2006; Pugh 2002), resulting in partial inclusion within or exclusion from gay culture. But, they were also framed just as much in response to ‘external’ heterosexist assumptions where (midlife) gay men might be imagined as ‘promiscuous’ (Berger 1992: 227; Hewitt and Moore 2002: 61; Klesse 2007: 6; Pugh 2002: 164). On this account, involvement in a youth and body-obsessed culture would make midlife gay men more susceptible than their heterosexual male peers to pressures to maintain sexual marketability (Bennett and Thompson 1991: 68). The study contests the first hypothesis concerning middle-age as a time of loss and rejection but the second hypothesis concerning divisions between gay men of different ages is largely confirmed.
3.3 Manchester: the broader scene of the research

A detailed picture of Manchester’s gay male culture has been provided in chapter 1 - the commercial scene of bars and saunas, the virtual scene of websites and ‘scenes’ that involve social groups and domestic/personal networks. But, the research took place in a broader metropolitan context. After Greater London and the West Midlands, Greater Manchester is the third largest conurbation in the United Kingdom, covering 493 square miles with a population of more than 2.5 million. It is reputed to have an economy that is larger than that of Wales and that of the North East of England (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greater_Manchester). It is bordered by affluent north Cheshire about eight miles south of the city centre, the Merseyside conurbation about 15 miles west (Liverpool is only 30 miles away), south Lancashire about eight miles north, (a mix of old industrial mill towns and more affluent rural areas) and Leeds and Sheffield lie about an hour away over the Pennines.

At the 2011 Census, the city of Manchester administrative area had a population of nearly half a million (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greater_Manchester). The city centre itself is relatively small, covering two square miles and containing nearly 12,000 residents. It was significantly ‘regenerated’ from the mid-1990s and first half of the ‘noughties.’ Manchester now counts as a major European city that attracts tourists from abroad for its many cultural opportunities, including its bars, restaurants, cinemas, theatres, concert halls, museums, art galleries, sport venues, surrounding countryside and accessibility to the Peak and Lake Districts. The fieldwork was concentrated in the eight month period between October 2008 and June 2009. The spaces of ‘the field’ involved interviewing in respondents’ homes in and around Greater Manchester (15) but no more than about seven miles outside the city centre. Nine men were interviewed at LGBT (related) voluntary organisations in or close to central Manchester, two men were interviewed at the university and another man was interviewed at his city centre workplace. The 20 observations were conducted in 12 venues (ten bars and two nightclubs) within the village. Five venues were reputed to attract midlife/older gay men, six were thought to attract a more mixed clientele (by age, gender and sexuality) and one nightclub was known as a younger gay man’s space. In the warmer months, observation extended to the village’s thoroughfares and a nearby small park. The map in appendix 8, shows that most of the 35 bars are concentrated in two streets. As Manchester’s largest night-time leisure zone, the village is reputed to attract about 20,000 visitors per weekend (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greater_Manchester). Most of these are gay men but the district
attracts significant numbers of lesbian, trans and heterosexually identified people and men who cross-dress.

3.4 Choice of two methods and how they were implemented

In-depth interviews and participant observation are central to the study’s design. But why were these methods chosen and how were they put into practice? It is a methodological commonplace that qualitative methods are better suited to eliciting the detail, dynamism and ambiguities of personal narratives and social practices (Brewer 2000: 162; Bryman 2004: 273 - 83). They are suited to generating ‘data’ for examination of social processes rather than (factual) outcomes (Maxwell 1996: 20). One advantage of this mixed qualitative study was that the methods share a view of (inter-)subjectivity, how actors interpret the world and how it is constituted (ontology) or rather constructed through human thought and interaction (Williams and May 1996: 78). Yet each method might yield different kinds of data suggestive of different experiences of ageing. It was also considered that each method could compensate theoretically and practically for limitations of the other. On the one hand, in-depth interviews would elicit detailed, spoken narratives (Bryman 2004: 219-20: Patton 2002: 341) that could be probed and would be difficult to tell or hear in village bars with their many sensory ‘distractions.’ On the other hand, it was considered that participant observation would generate detailed, nuanced accounts of embodied display and interaction in situ of a kind not available in interview. It allowed appreciation of the processes that shape actors’ situated social reality (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995: 7-8). Indeed, observations not only helped yield accounts of bodily practices and interaction in chapters 4 and 5 but provided a backdrop for key themes of social distance from or closeness with similar and different others explored through interview narratives in chapters 6 – 8.

This approach has also allowed comparison and contrast between different kinds of story and orders of data. The plausibility or salience of cultural events might be enhanced if data from both methods point in a similar direction or support each other. (Brewer 2000: 75; Mason 1996: 150; O’Donaghue and Punch 2003: 78). This was evidenced in the stories that research participants articulated through talk or embodied interaction that indicate pressures towards self-surveillance (see chapters 4 and 5). This approach from more than one ‘standpoint’ could yield more detailed, nuanced accounts of thought and interaction (Cohen and Mannion 1986: 254). In effect, using both methods in parallel created a reflexive loop (Mason 1996: 138;
LeCompte and Shensul 1999: 18). Observation sessions prompted exploration of the details of the contextual character of self-presentation in interviews whilst interviewees’ accounts of social distance from younger gay men encouraged focus on the mechanisms by which this was achieved in social space. Accounts produced by each method could also illuminate different dimensions of experience. For instance, whilst stories of the bar scene as oppressive were dominant within interview stories (chapters 4 and 5), participant observation sessions yielded stories that indicated the creation of more convivial forms of interaction in parts of the village (chapter 5).

3.4.1 Participant observation: the observation schedule

The use of covert observation drew on ethnographic techniques but the study was not an actual ethnography where I was immersed in village life. The observation role adopted was covert – being overt in the village was unfeasible. Inevitably, this involved close contact with people but in contexts where prolonged conversation is difficult. The overwhelming amount of sensory, sensuous and sensual events encountered during two pilot observation episodes made it clear that accounts of interaction would best be generated by an observation schedule with some minimal structure (appendix 6) (Spradley 1980: 54). Such an instrument provided both a conceptual/thematic structure i.e. a focus for each observation and allowed scope to record extempore (Robson 2002: 328; Marshall and Rossman 1995: 111). This instrument was used to record seemingly commonplace or discrepant events that might suggest new lines of enquiry or ‘hidden’ experiences (Glaser and Strauss 1967) and the “multivocality” (Brewer 2000: 49, 124) or multiple realities of lived experience (Fetterman 1998: 470).

Broadly in line with the research questions, the foci in observation were: dress and grooming; peer aged interaction; intergenerational interaction; behaviour when alone; behaviour in pairs; and interaction among smaller groups. Because, early observations tended to be drawn to more ‘spectacular’ events, several sessions were conducted that focused on more muted performances. The observation instrument consists of columns to record thoughts, inter/action and theoretical applications. The schedule enabled recording of what subjects do (Ellen and Hicks 1983: 215) and my evolving ideas in situ using my own shorthand/memory joggers (written during periodic visits to the toilet cubicle). These were elaborated into detailed description of events, feelings and insights away from the field. The centrepiece of this three-part instrument is the larger “action” column for brief, simple description of events
what men were wearing, what they did etc. The field notes were later written up in descriptive detail, which included facial expressions, hairstyles, uses of the body, dance moves, description of logos, the quality of stitching in clothes and footwear. The “thoughts” column to the right helped me to think about ethical and political issues relating to my relations with subjects, the language used to describe age and appearance and my thoughts about the conditions that inform the researcher’s and subjects’ knowledges and behaviour (Pink 2007: 23). The “theoretical ideas” column was used sparingly at first to prevent premature theoretical or analytical closure - resorting to a concept/theory without due examination of its applicability given the constantly emerging stories and unfolding ‘bigger picture’ (Bouma and Atkinson 2002: 216). It was referred to later during the more formal stage of analysis to discern theoretical regularities or discrepancies.

Participant observation was used to identify the salience of events (use of humour, sexualised display) and distinctiveness of cultural practices (Spradley 1980: 31; Brewer 2000: 41; Fetterman 1998: 477, 483) such as ‘cruising’ styles and modes of approach that were dependent on time of day etc and could differ within and between the various age-coded bars. The method can also point to what people do across different contexts within the village rather than what they report doing (Ellen and Hicks 1983: 215), including ‘off guard’ forms of situated interaction (Kellehear 1993: 130). The observation schedule helped generate accounts of bodily expression and interaction that contest theories of gay male midlife and ageing as overly structurally determined accounts of interaction. Again, the more convivial forms of interaction described in chapter 5 seriously contest views like those of Whittle (1994) of the village scene as unrelentingly commodified space where younger men are hidebound by capitalist ideology that prioritises youth and where middle-aged gay men’s lack of physical capital disqualifies them from sexual citizenship.

3.4.1 a) Criticisms of the method

Less structured participant observation has been criticised because it yields accounts that are invalid because they do not reflect social reality as it is actually experienced. It might provide interesting vignettes but these do not constitute accurate or reliable (replicable/generalisable) social scientific knowledge. In terms of accuracy, it was at times difficult to ascertain who was ‘really’ middle-aged, gay, male etc. Because it relied on my intuition about who fits or
not within these designations, the method could have included ‘false positives’ or ‘category errors’ (Poland 1995) – younger and old gay men as well as heterosexual men. This methodological limitation might then lead to theoretical error, which risks misunderstanding gay male midlife as a distinct social location or set of experiences. But, this thinking overlooks that subjects are never perfect exemplars of the categories used to define them. Indeed, participant observation is much better suited than the survey method to deal with the ambiguity of categories (Robson 2002: 168; Brewer 2000: 162). The survey method tends to rely much more on the assumption that categories are fixed properties of the person and thus can miss the dynamism, complexities and slippages of categories and social experience (Circourel 1964: 108). But, even if we were to accept the premise of this criticism, the majority of men observed showed awareness of the age-appropriate rules in relation to self-presentation and this was confirmed in interview accounts.

Further, criticism of participant observation alleges that closer contact with the people whose actions are being studied distorts behaviour in actors’ ‘natural’ habitats (Bryman 2004: 284). This is thought to risk contaminating or biasing the results of any study if the researcher becomes too familiar or begins to ‘over-identify’ with its subjects (Knox 2001: 206). But, contact between researcher and participants is inevitable and its impact needs to be qualified. The covert role, I adopted was designed to allow balance between involvement and emotional distance rather than impossible ‘detachment.’ It involved “participation but not immersion and observation but not marginality” (Burawoy 1991: 5) a balance between involvement and distance for reflection (Brewer 2000: 62; Robson 2002: 165). Withdrawal from the field (and the analytical framework adopted in the study) enabled me to examine men’s experiences of ageing from a temporal and emotional distance (Spradley 1980: 71; Stewart 1998: 29-31). I was also struck by how easy it was to go unnoticed, especially among younger men who disregarded my older body and among the ‘bear community’ (fat, hairy and older men) where my thinner body often discounted me as a socio-sexual being. Even if we accept that ‘objectivity’ is valuable within social research, it can be understood in a different way in relation to qualitative methods. Rather than biasing the research, participant observation and interviewing brought me closer to the ‘object’ of study - midlife gay male ageing - resulting in accounts that are more detailed, differentiated and plausible (Maxwell 1996: 87; Stewart 1998). The test of ‘plausibility’ here is not whether stories are accurate, faithful or erroneous representations of gay male midlife/ageing but whether they are substantively recognisable by or credible to subjects (Stewart 1998: 12-14) and the academic community. Following
Plummer (1995: 20 – 1), the study seeks to escape the limitations of establishing the ‘facts’ of stories and is more concerned to examine the meanings of midlife gay men’s socially located accounts. Like Rosenfeld’s (2003) study of the identity work performed by older lesbians and gay men, I am more concerned with illuminating the processes by which subjects produce accounts of lived experience.

Criticism has also been made that any data or accounts resulting from participant observation and other less structured methods cannot qualify as (social) scientific knowledge because they are unreliable, i.e. they reflect subjective impressions of a few local contexts. It is alleged that no claims can be made for knowledge that cannot be generalised to other contexts (Bryman 2004: 268). But, the method has enabled the generation of accounts (of differentiation) that are likely to transcend the immediate environments in which they were generated (Brewer 2000: 176; Marshall and Rossman 1995: 87; Maxwell 1996: 98; Spradley 1980: 163; and Stewart 1998: 16-17). Accounts of ‘letting oneself go’ through disco dancing or signs of discomfort and shame in relation to the older body might be available (chapter 5) in gay village/scenes in Birmingham, Brighton, Glasgow, Leeds or Liverpool. Essentially, the above criticisms misapply the criteria of positivism appropriate to the survey method onto an approach that operates with a very different notion of social worlds and how actors make sense of them (Kvale 1996: 133 – 5). From the outset, I have regarded researcher subjectivity and interaction with the subjects of research not as an impediment to but as a resource for the production of more finely tuned knowledges (Holstein and Gubrium 1997: 118 – 9; Maxwell 1996: 28). Both participant observation and interviews have provided opportunities for exploration of common issues of rejection, subtle negotiation with age and resistance to gay ageism.

3.4.2 Interviews

3.4.2 a) Negotiating interviews and use of the interview schedule

When contacted by prospective interviewees, I explained the purpose of the study, offered a brief description of myself, gave a sketch of my motives, the kind of questions to be asked, approximate length of interview and ethical approach. Because I was concerned that enquirers should make an informed decision about whether to take part, project details were
sent to them (appendix 4) and followed up with an e-mail or telephone call to check willingness and, if appropriate, to negotiate a suitable time, date and venue.

The interviews lasted between two and four hours, (averaging about two and a half hours) and were audio-recorded, with consent, for transcription. Time was spent building rapport and checking that consent was informed (explaining possible emotional risks). Informal ‘chat’ after interview questions and de-briefing about what the informant thought of the questions also yielded important ideas and data. I aimed for a conversational style of interview using a semi-structured interview schedule (appendix 4) consisting of practical questions. The emphasis on practicality reflects that we experience the abstract in concrete ways (Mason 2002: 226). For instance, simple questions about where men shop for clothes elicited responses indicating habitual self-presentational practices and norms relating to intergenerational conflict. The interview schedule was designed to explore: responses to the signs of bodily ageing and body management with age (dress, grooming, exercise, diet); current patterns of close kinship and ways of relating compared to their twenties and thirties. It also asked for key biographical details: age; the respondent’s definition of his sexuality; occupation; qualifications; cultural, political and/or community pursuits; relationship status; and residence (whether renting, owner-occupier, living alone, sharing accommodation). The interview schedule combines order with flexibility: its structure lends a sense of coherence to the interview process whilst allowing for exploration of unexpected thematic, theoretical leads or significant ‘minority reports’ (Maxwell 1998: 84; Arksey and Knight 1999: 169). The more open-ended nature of the interview yielded accounts of experience that had not been anticipated (Gilham 2000: 10), for example, concerning the detail of how men negotiate and even ‘gay’ the spaces they understand as ‘heterosexual.’

3.4.2 b) Use of photo-elicitation

My discussion of participant observation has already dealt with some of the criticisms that might be made of the more open-ended interview in terms of putative lack of validity and reliability. It has though been noted that, as contrived encounters, (in-depth) interviews risk taking behaviour out of the everyday context in which it is produced (Gubrium and Holstein (2009: 15); Lawler (2002)). But, it is not as though interviews are alien to everyday social life (Holstein and Gubrium 1997: 127). Indeed, interviews can be “recontextualised” (Thomson
To this end, photo-elicitation techniques were used to encourage informants to relocate their experiences of change with age in personal, historical and social context and to draw comparisons between past and present, they were asked before interview to bring photographs of themselves when in their twenties or thirties. If interviewees did not supply photographs, images of gay men of different ages on and off the scene from LGF’s *OutNorthwest* magazine were used to fulfil a similar function. The magazine images were particularly useful in generating accounts of how and why midlife gay men differentiate themselves from younger and older gay men through appearance and ways of relating. The photographs and images were not themselves the subject of analysis (though participants did this in their engagement with the images) but were used to elicit narratives. But, photo-elicitation is of necessity collaborative (Jenkings et al 2008) and the accounts co-produced with informants showed how personal photographs and images refer to events and relationships beyond interviewees’ present selves and experiences (Kuhn 2002: 13 – 14). For example, Rob’s photographs encouraged vivid (re)contextualisation of the period from his late teens until his late twenties/early thirties, which had been overshadowed by a strict Catholic upbringing. This involved describing the difficult journey that he had made in order to ‘come out’ and his subsequent struggles to develop the emotional resources and cultural political knowledge in middle-age to allow himself to have anonymous, ‘recreational’ and BDSM sexual encounters.

### 3.5 Sampling

#### 3.5.1 Broad strategy

Given the number of men who have sex with men in Greater Manchester and the scale of its gay culture, men, spaces and events would need to be sampled. For reasons of time and resources, it was decided that interviews with somewhere between 20 and 30 interviewees would be sufficient to yield detailed accounts accommodating differences between men and their experiences of growing older. Indeed, the last few interviews largely rehearsed familiar themes, suggesting that a thematic ‘saturation’ point, involving key cultural narratives, was being reached (Foster 1996: 79). It was estimated that at least 12 observations would be necessary given the different types of venue and the kind of themes to be explored. In effect, a similar ‘saturation point’ was encountered by about the sixteenth session but further sessions were conducted, including two sessions during the ‘Manchester Pride’ weekend in
late August 2009. The latter was designed to illuminate differences in expression of embodied subjectivity and ways of relating at a more carnivalesque event, which helped illuminate overt examples of intergenerational conflict (chapter 5). The sampling strategy with regard to both methods was of necessity ‘purposive’ (Maxwell 1996: 56). Because sampling is intimately linked to matters of definition, or specifically whose or what kind of experience counts, the strategy needed to be theoretically informed. Sampling for interviews needed to be alive to the differences in men’s social locations that were likely to shape their responses to ageing. Because behaviour in the field is dynamic and participant observation involves the researcher being immersed in a welter of sensory experiences (or ‘data’) that make up the field of enquiry, managing this required strategic sampling of times, days, spaces, actors in situ and thematic foci (Brewer 2000: 81).

3.5.2 Who counts as a midlife gay man?

Although identity categories relating to age, gender and sexuality have been troubled (Butler 1990), some clarity is needed about who counts as a middle-aged gay man. The lines of definition within this study, however, recognise the relative porosity and different meanings attached to these social categories. My insider experience of the gay scene and the literature sensitised me to the notion that the age of about forty might serve as the dominant cultural marker of entry into middle-age. As Bennett and Thompson (1991) and Heaphy et al (2004) have noted, notwithstanding ‘accelerated ageing,’ middle-aged gay men are influenced by wider cultural perceptions of age and ageing. It was also hypothesised that post-statutory retirement age (mid sixties) would represent a qualitatively different experience of age in terms of how one is regarded - as a ‘pensioner’ or ‘retired’ (Estes et al 2003: 3 - 11). Questioning of age markers and what it means to grow older (Gilleard and Higgs 2000), cautioned against setting precise age parameters. Whilst 40 and 65 are significant milestones in (white) British culture, I did not want to discourage prospective respondents from any cultural background who were approaching official retirement age or anyone in their late thirties who might be concerned (or not) about being middle-aged. The indeterminacy of sexuality also required that sampling strategy be sensitive to differences in how it is defined and experienced. Some men who desire or have with men may not see themselves reflected in the category ‘gay.’
3.5.3 Strategy for sampling and recruiting interviewees

Although it is an important factor in informants’ lives, gay men are not just differentiated by age. The strategy for sampling of interviewees surmised that experiences of ageing would be significantly influenced by how men describe their sexuality (gay, bisexual, queer or indeterminate), their social class, ethnicity and relationship status/practices (single, coupled, non-monogamous). A multi-pronged strategy tailored to the diverse social opportunities open to gay men in Manchester was devised to accommodate the above differences. Central to the sampling strategy was project publicity - a leaflet and a poster (appendix 1) – which was designed to attract interest from within personal networks (of my own, friends, contacts and interviewees), gay social/support groups, bars and other gay businesses (e.g. the sauna, clothes shop and village barber’s). Leaflets were left and posters displayed in the *The Classic*, and *The Frontier*, bars associated with older gay men, and the mixed age spaces of *Changes, Diva’s, The Empire, Gemini and Posh!* (See pen portraits of the bars in appendix 3). Personal networks were trawled and gay social groups contacted because they might yield respondents more involved with social and friendship groups than the bar scene (Harry 1986: 26). Groups might enable contact with non-white men (relatively absent from the village scene), men in the later part of midlife who might feel particularly unwelcome on the bar scene and men who might define their sexuality in less rigid terms. Leaflets and a poster were displayed in the village sauna and clothes/sex toys shop because they might attract interest from non-white men or men who do not identify as gay and who might choose not to socialise on the bar scene or feel obliged to avoid being seen there. The bars might yield men whose cultural capital (deeply embodied habits) might suggest a taste for socialising around the consumption of alcohol (Harry 1986: 23) rather than self-exploration through social/support groups. Leaflets were distributed and posters displayed in a variety of bars including the class-coded ‘smart’ and ‘trendy’ and more ‘rough and ready’ ones.

Recruitment of interviewees concerns not just where but also how appeal is made to prospective informants given their differences and diverse social locations. The publicity framed midlife as somewhat open – “forty-ish to sixty-ish.” Although the publicity did not refer specifically to race or social class, measures were taken to avoid a mono-sample of white, middle class ‘conscience constituents’ (Friend 1991: 109). To this end, the publicity invited enquiries from men regardless of “background.” In terms of ethnic difference, I targeted a regional social/support group for black gay men, which did not yield a single
informant, as most of its members were considerably below the age of 40. The emphasis on “background” might also avoid excluding men who regard their sexuality as more fluid, rejecting fixed labels. Gender – maleness - was not, however, treated as problematic in the sampling strategy/publicity. Suggestion of gender ambiguity may have invited enquiries from across the spectrum and diluted the focus of enquiry. In fact, taking maleness for granted did not deter one interviewee who recognised the indeterminacy of his gender (Jed 39).

Because the research aims to illuminate the different stories that midlife gay men tell about growing older, project publicity avoided the implication that ageing would be experienced uniformly as negative. If anything, it suggested a positive take on ageing given the breezy reference (designed to gain attention) to a well-known 1980s film; a farce centred around mistaken identity and mis/adventures around personal ads, Desperately Seeking Susan, starring gay icon, Madonna. The two men whose images feature on the leaflet/poster (probably in early midlife) are almost stereotypical – well-groomed, ostensibly happy, very much together (possibly a couple) given their embrace where the head of the reclining younger man is resting on the shoulder of the seated older man. (When organising the design of the publicity with a graphic designer, we were soon struck by the lack of available images and that what little existed was mainly of this ilk). The poster/leaflet also invites men to think of the interview as part of an intellectual journey, as the study is the first of its kind in the United Kingdom and it is intimated that men might learn more about ageing or at least explore this complex ‘personal’ issue. This suggests that the interview could be an ‘empowering’ experience; offering opportunities to help men manage gay ageism. In retrospect, this could have been misleading, though a common refrain from interviewees was that the experience had caused them to examine taken for granted attitudes and practices concerning ageing prior to, at and following interview. Further, emphasising my own sexuality in the publicity might have offered reassurance that men’s sexuality would not be treated as problematic. The quality of the leaflet and poster, their tone and the imprimatur of Manchester University convey that the topic would be treated seriously but that any interview would not be overly formal.

3.5.4 How interviewees were recruited

The table below indicates the recruitment strategy’s partial success in contacting men through different routes. It shows that the majority of interviewees contacted me in response to a
leaflet or poster displayed within gay voluntary groups. The figures also demonstrate that interviewees are connected to some kind of gay social scene.

Table 1. How interview informants were recruited

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Number (Percentage)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leaflets/poster in voluntary organisation/gay social group</td>
<td>16 (60%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaflets/poster in bars</td>
<td>5 (18%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal networks (‘snowballing’)</td>
<td>5 (18%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaflet/poster in village sauna</td>
<td>1 (4%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most interviewees were recruited from three voluntary organisations that provide social and/or support opportunities for gay men. The 16 men contacted through voluntary groups came from: two groups housed within the LGF (one being for gay men over 40 and the other a group for men seeking an alternative to the bar scene); a voluntary organisation concerned with sexual health; and a gay social group that meets weekly based around self-entertainment (line dancing). A significant minority (six men or just over one-fifth of the sample) emerged in response to publicity materials displayed in mixed age bars. This suggests that for various contextual reasons (publicity ‘overload,’ resistance to age labels in an ageist culture or perhaps the wish to escape from serious issues in ‘informal’ space) men might be less open when on the bar scene to being persuaded to be interviewed. Not a single interviewee approached me in response to publicity in the bars frequented by middle-aged men. This could reflect the fact that I did not invest time in becoming an identifiable presence within the village handing out leaflets, answering questions in situ and building up relations of trust. In terms of the respondents recruited through personal networks, one was well known to me, another was met at a conference, three were referred by acquaintances and one respondent referred the researcher on to another contact at his line dancing group.

3.5.5 The interview sample characteristics

Judging by the men who actually came forward for interview (see appendix 2 for pen portraits) the sampling strategy has been relatively successful in recruiting men from different social locations (taken as indicative and not representative of subjectivity). There is a reasonable spread of socio-cultural difference with the exception of ethnicity. Fourteen men
(52%) were aged between 50 and 61 and thirteen (48%) were aged between 39 and 48. All but one respondent identified as predominantly if not totally gay and one man identified as bisexual, being equally sexually attracted to men and women. In terms of relationship status, 17 respondents (63%) were single and the remainder were partnered (mostly long-term), though two respondents described a ‘together apart’ relationship; one in a state of abeyance (where the partner was working abroad) and another in a moribund state because the two men lived in different cities. Twenty four respondents (89%) described themselves without prompting as ‘white and British.’ One respondent self-defined as “mixed race,” another as “oriental” and another as “Irish and European.” The number of non-white men is perhaps not surprising given that the publicity was focused mainly on the village. The goal, however, was not representativeness but to include key dimensions of variation.

3.5.5 a) Social class

The interviewee pen portraits (appendix 2) supply details as to how men were allocated to a social class. Adapting a definition from Bourdieu (1984), class was defined in terms of inter-related socio-economic and cultural dimensions. This was chosen because it is attuned to the multifaceted dimensions of social class, which recognises differences within as well as between class categories. My implementation of it has tried to accommodate both the more enduring and the dynamic elements of social class experience, which are at times discrepant. For instance, three informants were long-term unemployed but educated to degree level.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Socio-economic dimensions</th>
<th>Cultural dimensions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>Working class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 (48%)</td>
<td>14 (52%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>Working class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22 (81%)</td>
<td>5 (19%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interviewees were allocated to a socio-economic class category on the basis of employment and income-related data. The crucial divide here concerns whether men were employed full-time or whether they were working part-time on modest levels of pay (in some cases supplemented by benefits related to a physical condition). Even if in full-time paid work, men could be allocated to the “working class” category if I estimated, by the nature of their work,
informants were likely to be on a lower income and have few opportunities for career development. Six of the eight men not in paid work had been unemployed on a long-term basis (between three and 11 years on the grounds of various physical and/or mental health conditions) and one man, who had worked in a ‘professional’ occupation for almost 30 years, had left this position to become a full-time paid carer for his elderly father three years prior to interview.

In terms of allocation to social class in cultural terms, I was guided by Bourdieu’s notion of ‘cultural capital’ (Bourdieu 1984) - the forms of embodied knowledge men were able to mobilise to access and carry out certain cultural pursuits. Such considerations involved my own personal and academically formed judgments about the degree and kind of intellectual ability required to be involved in these. However, my questions about taste for/involvement in such pursuits involved clarifying how men actually engaged with the various symbolic and/or cultural artefacts of which they spoke. For instance, a liking for pop music, pulp novels were explored to see whether men were able to read these at a meta-level (in terms of plot, character, symbolism) or whether an interest in the facts of royal dynasties, military projects, self-help books/projects etc involved appreciation of social and political history and human behaviour. In this respect, I also considered information that men volunteered in response to standardised questions at the end of the interview about employment - levels of knowledge, skill and qualification needed to fulfil their usual or last occupation – as indicative of the cultural dimensions of social class.

The sample is evenly spread across the two socio-economic classes but less so in terms of the cultural dimensions of class, though nine of the culturally middle class men spoke of originating from working class backgrounds. The sampling strategy yielded a group of men on lower to modest levels of income, which, for those receiving state support especially, set practical limits on participation in various gay (and other) cultural ‘scenes.’ The sample though appears rather better resourced in terms of cultural capital. Twenty two respondents described the kind of eclectic interests associated with the more culturally ‘omniverous’ suggesting ability to decode and access pursuits from across the cultural spectrum. We might also consider how these two categories interrelate. For instance, a background of relative economic disadvantage might indicate fewer opportunities for the acquisition of more highly valued forms of cultural capital, which in turn gives entry to certain more privileged or esteemed social networks (Bourdieu 1984). Keir (42) reported not being able to afford to go
to the gay dining group but, on an occasion when he was treated by a friend, found himself alienated by the assumptions that its regulars made about their lives and the “arty farty” subjects some of them talked about. However, the cultural class category was not a useful indicator of capacities to be critical. The five men who recounted a taste for and involvement in less intellectually demanding pursuits may have had fewer qualifications and may have appeared a little less confident in their use of language but showed themselves to be fairly adept as cultural critics in relation to the interpersonal politics of age and sexuality.

3.5.6 Sampling in participant observation: times, places, men in focus

The sampling strategy concerning participant observation focussed on spaces within the gay village. (For a sense of how the bars are concentrated in this district, see the map in appendix 8). Observing across a range of milieux such as gay social/support groups was discounted because experience of groups could be probed in interviews. Also, my ‘insider knowledge’ sensitised me to the need for a strategy about where and when (Brewer 2000: 81) as well as how to observe. I surmised that interaction would vary according to the time of day/night, day of the week and time of the year. For instance, weekday early evenings in the winter might facilitate more ‘mundane’ forms of display and interaction whereas weekend night-times and the August bank holiday ‘Pride’ event usually sanction less inhibited forms.

The sampling strategy was also theoretically informed (Glaser and Strauss 1967) insofar as it was designed to recognise the “multi-sited” nature of participant observation (Pink 2007: 28) and different participants spread across different age- and class-coded spaces. Of the twelve venues (See appendix 3), five (including one club) were selected for their association with midlife/older gay men. One of these venues has a reputation as a rough-and-ready bar that attracts middle-aged/older gay men (and working class, often hetero- or bisexual-identified ‘rent boys’ or male prostitutes) who might not be welcomed in the more youth-coded, smart, fashionable venues. Six venues were selected because they tend to attract a more mixed clientele – by age, gender (apparent) sexuality and social class. This enabled observation of interaction/social distance between midlife gay men and younger, different others. Two of the mixed venues, it was discovered in pilot interviews, were understood as more ‘middle class’ (Canale Uno and Posh!) given their decor and ability to attract people who appear to possess or represent certain forms of economic and cultural capital. The sole venue sampled that was associated with younger gay men, Disco Inferno, was selected because it operates as a
nightclub that has a 1980s retro night that is reputed to attract midlife gay men. The above strategies recognise the different temporalities constitutive of the shifting ‘gay scene’ where, in some of the more mixed venues, the clientele changes and where different forms of expression, for example, dancing, being drunk or full-on cruising were more legitimate at different times on different days.

3.6 Methodology, analytical framework and analysis of interpersonal narratives

What choices have been made in relation to both methodology and strategy for analysis? By methodology, I refer to the philosophical underpinnings of research techniques, the latter themselves being theoretically saturated (Mason 2002: 225). More broadly, it concerns how research methods, techniques and theory are co-implicated and embedded in different ways of knowing, interacting in the social world, how it can be known (epistemology) and what it consists of/how it functions (ontology). Methodology is important because it reflects the study’s view of the workings of intersubjectivity or more specifically what midlife gay men are able or not to think and do in relation to ageing in the contexts they negotiate.

3.6.1 Methodological sensibilities

Because the research aims at in-depth understanding of how midlife gay men understand and enact their ageing identities, it was considered that methods were required that lend themselves to an “interpretivist” paradigm (Giddens 1977: 168). Many of the stories challenging gay ageism (chapters 4 – 8) support the view from interpretivism that capacities for interpretation are no special privilege (of reflexive academics) but are mundane accomplishments arising from everyday social engagement (Lynch 2000). In various ways, the empirical chapters show how men are involved in the construction of meanings and their social worlds. Following Plummer, participants’ experiences of ageing are animated by “flows of power” where men interpret and act upon discourses from different, unequal, though never fixed social locations (Plummer 1995: 26 - 31). This formulation would help us understand the particular gendered and ethnic discourses Tony (59) drew on when constructing his own highly complex notion of an authentic middle-aged gay self, which he also reflexively recognised as a socio-historical construction – the product of growing up in rigidly gendered rural Ireland in the 1950s (see chapter 4).
However, the study supplements this broadly interpretivist approach with a particular analytical framework. If we take participant interpretations as read, it would be accepted that younger gay men are shallow dupes of gay male and wider consumer culture (chapter 4). This would risk uncritical reproduction rather than critical examination of such institutionalised stories. Whilst midlife gay men can use their reflexive capacities quite consciously, their thought and practice can reinforce ageism (chapters 4 and 5). The study regards participant narratives as largely credible or, “authentic but [at times] fallible” (Bryant 1991: 188-190). A framework for analysis developed by Rachel Thomson (2009) is used to address the above-identified problem. This involves selecting conceptual tools from two broad methodological approaches; drawing on the creative moment within Foucault’s “technologies of the self” and Bourdieu’s concept of “field.” These technologies are described as, “discursive resources used to construct an identity” (Thomson 2009: 163). They indicate capacities for self-direction, resources for “individuals to trace... and personalise... the form of their existence” (Bernasconi 2010: 861). More specifically, they consist of “intentional “arts of existence” by which subjects can set their own rules/goals, free themselves from (negative) forms of self-governance and transform their lives into an “oeuvre” (Foucault 1987: 10-11). This sensibility is visible in certain body management practices (see chapter 4) and humanising forms of behaviour/interaction that men might deploy in the hyper-sexual sauna (chapter 6). It involves using aesthetics in the service of ethical and political ends, as expressed in the term “ethics of the self” (Foucault 1987: 10-11; 24-28). But, Thomson grounds these technologies within “fields of existence” (2009: 23) - various spheres of life with their own norms that are inherently relational. In gay male culture, different actors deploy practices or strategise for dominance over age- and class-inflected symbolic resources (C.f. Bourdieu 1984: 32). The rules of the game within domains of existence become deeply entrenched within the body that they animate ‘habitus’ or a ‘second nature.’ This invokes consideration of how imperceptible social structures and discourse shape interaction/social distance between younger and older men.

This particular ‘pick and mix’ approach enables one conceptual tool to compensate for problems with the other. Midlife gay men’s technologies of the self” would avoid use of habitus conceived as largely fated to repeat itself (Bottero 2005: 153). This would allow analysis of more resistant responses to constraints of ageist discourse, social class relations etc. At the same time, the concept helps to ground midlife gay men’s subjectivity and ways of relating and avoids reducing them to the effects of nebulous, free-floating discourse.
(Thomson 2009: 163). This conceptualisation of reflexivity would allow us to consider how (midlife gay men’s) subjectivity and modes of relating emerge from the uneasy dialogue between constraint and choice (Thomson 2009: 2, 14, 23, 40, 163). Such thinking takes us beyond analysis of midlife gay men’s responses to ageing as either conformist or voluntarist, as the result of constraint or the exercise of free will. It opens up examination of the ambivalences of how midlife gay men express their ageing identities, conduct their relationships and differentiate themselves from others.

3.6.2 Types of data yielded and how they were analysed

Different qualitative methods can produce different kinds of data (Silverman 2006: 57 - 8). Portraits co-produced in interviews often represent moral claims to differentiate the self (mainly from younger gay men) whereas observations have focused on the detail of forms of embodied mobility practiced by middle-aged gay men in the village. At the same time, observation opened up understanding of gay culture beyond the dominant narrative of exclusion on the bar scene to convey something about the availability of supportive friendships and valued connections to middle-aged gay men on ‘the scene’ and away from it (chapters 6, 7 and 8). In practice, the differences in the kind of data yielded presented little impediment to practical analysis. At times, these data pointed in similar directions and at other times they usefully pointed up different dimensions or discrepant examples of midlife gay men’s experiences of ageing.

The sheer amount of narrative detail required that the design include a strategy for data management prior to more formal analysis (Lewins and Silver 2007: 165; Spradley 1980: 89). ‘Data’ comprising 27 interview transcripts and 20 observation schedules were uploaded into the computer assisted qualitative data analysis software package, NVivo8. This mass of data was divided into five tranches, consisting of four to six interviews and two to three observations per tranche. This also involved comparisons and contrasts between the five tranches. However, the software was used in a ‘light touch’ way rather than for more directive ‘theory building’ that could risk sacrificing insights from intuition or ‘feel’ for the data (Brewer 2000: 109). I wanted analysis to be driven by theory rather than technique (Silverman 2000b: 828). The software was used to organise stories into meaningful categories and identify themes. The coding frame was developed inductively through
engagement with narratives (involving several ‘passes’ through the ‘data’) and made use of “free nodes” - codes designated by the researcher.

Emphasis was placed mostly on the content of stories in terms of what kind of theory might explain them. At times, attention was paid to how the story was constructed, for example through use of age and class discourses to claim difference from the cultural tastes (chapter 4) or relational practices of others (chapters 5 and 6). “Open coding” (Lewins and Silver 2007: 84) of narrative segments, consisting of simple descriptive codes, was used to compare and contrast the different ways in which stories constructed age/ageing. These accounts were also examined in terms of how they related to differences of age, race, class, relationship status etc. Nodes (codes) referred to practical instances, events and concepts and were applied to narrative segments produced by both methods e.g. ‘clothing,’ ‘health,’ ‘connections.’ Some nodes applied only to interview stories to ‘shopping,’ ‘sauna,’ ‘gay group involvement’ and others, applied mostly to observation accounts, e.g. ‘use of space,’ ‘dancing,’ ‘cruising styles,’ approaches etc. Nodes were re-coded when the crux of narrative episodes suggested similar thematic content and were collapsed together or later elaborated into concepts e.g. ‘ageing capital.’ But, this still allowed scope to consider any distinctions within a particular genus of concept, behaviour or interaction (or discrepant instances that might require a new node). For instance, ‘ageing capital’ could be subdivided into contextual instances, including productive and problematic ones where the latter might contradict men’s ideas of maturity as a linear process. Much of the above describes what Tesch has referred to as strategic “data “fragmentation” and “reduction” (Miles and Huberman 1994: 86; Tesch 1990: 122 - 4, 138).

Rather than doing violence to narratives, reducing them to manageable proportions can facilitate identification of key messages within text that can actually extend and sharpen analysis through deeper, more focused engagement. However, given the overlapping nature of storytelling (one narrative was often embedded within another), narrative episodes were often multiply coded e.g. referring to ‘ageing capital,’ ‘the gym,’ ‘exercise,’ ‘health,’ ‘cruising’ and the ‘heterosexual gaze.’ This allowed interrogation of stories from various thematic angles and these re-readings were used to identify recurring, idiographic and contradictory stories (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2000: 87 - 95).
3.7 Ethics and politics

The ethical and political dimensions of research concern relations of power between researcher and researched, (though they also transcend this immediate ‘social contract’ to include wider ‘stakeholders’ - gay men and the research community). The ethics and politics of research are not simply a discrete set of bureaucratic requirements but are integral to the research design (Pink 2007: 49), from conception to beyond completion. Put simply, ethics and politics concern the values of the study/researcher across particular contexts: how human beings are viewed and treated within dynamic power relations throughout the research process, including how they are written about. This bears on issues of reflexivity within the research process itself that concern the status of different ways of knowing, what claims can be made for and about participants’ knowledges and the researcher’s transformation of these into a different way of knowing.

3.7.1 How ethical and political issues were addressed?

Debates on ethics have pivoted around four issues. These are: 1) avoidance of harm (physical and emotional); 2) rights of prospective participants’ to sufficient knowledge to make an informed decision about whether or not to participate in a study – the principle of informed consent; 3) participants’ legal right to privacy, which bears on confidentiality, anonymity and avoidance of intrusion into ‘sensitive’ issues; 4) avoidance of deception, which concerns misrepresentation or disguise of the purpose of the study or one’s role as a researcher (Diener and Crandall cited in Bryman 2004: 509-14).

The ethical approach in this study has been concerned with minimising harm to participants (Diener and Crandall cited in Bryman 2004: 509). This has been achieved by implementing a “situation ethics” (Goode 1996) involving negotiation with informants in situ largely on a case-by-case basis. This approach represents a halfway position between a “universalist” approach where all harm should be avoided (and questions about sexual practices would not be asked) and stances that privilege the attainment of knowledge over considerations of harm or participant sensitivities (Bryman 2004: 508). In terms of the more cautious approach, the issue of what might cause harm is not clear-cut and there are limits to which the researcher can plan to avoid or actually prevent emotional harm (Bryman 2004: 510-1). Assuming that subjects are overly sensitive ignores the emotional resources that middle-aged gay men have
developed over time. Situation ethics also provided a necessary flexibility. I sensed on several occasions during interview that an informant was drifting into a story that involved reconnecting with a painful episode. Judgements were made in situ when: one respondent recounted experience of imprisonment and recent bereavement; another recounted experience of bereavement and consequent mental health difficulties; and two other respondents described experience of abuse as children, which they considered had shaped their experiences of sex, sexuality, self-worth, relating and growing older. On several occasions, I offered to stop the interview (and acknowledge the informant’s concerns) or else move to another question but it soon became clear that it was important to each participant that that they continued to tell their story as a form of self-validation.

Covert observation might be thought to transgress all four precepts concerning harm, consent, privacy and avoidance of deception. But, British Sociological Association ethical guidelines (2002) approve covert research when overt approaches are unfeasible (www.britsoc.co.uk/equality/63.htm). Use of covert observation is justifiable for other practical and theoretical reasons. First, the overt/covert distinction is blurred. There were times when I was engaged by men in the field to whom I subsequently revealed my purpose for being there. Conversely, there are times when overt observation can transform into being covert (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995: 72) such as when a researcher is ‘off duty’ but chances to note something of interest for which consent was not sought. Complete openness and honesty of the kind required by the universalist approach is impossible to achieve. Second, the covert role was the most effective way of safeguarding participant anonymity (Pienaar 2010: 321). Third, the issue of ‘privacy’ is equally moot; what is understood as private or public is blurred, if not overlapping (Plummer 2003: 68 - 70). More importantly, I have disguised men’s identities and made efforts to write about participants in a way that recognises their dignity (Sieber 1998: 135) as a knower and human being. Any criticism of participants’ views or practices has largely avoided imputing blame to individuals and instead acknowledges the structural and discursive influences that inform these practices.

In addition, the ethical approach of the study has been implemented within the context of a research design that built in certain safeguards, including password protected data. The University Ethics Committee approved the research and its personal safety guidelines were followed as appropriate (appendix 7). Prospective interviewees were informed before any interview (appendix five), as part of informed consent, that questions, in context, concerning
sexual practices would be asked or may lead to discussion of sexual content in terms of changes in any practices with age but without asking for intimate details. Transcripts were provided to each respondent to check for over-disclosure and any other comment. The right to withdraw participation at any point was recognised in the interviewee consent details (appendix five) and reinforced just before interview, which acknowledges that consent is not ‘once and for all’ but renegotiable (Burawoy 1991: 285; Sieber 1998: 133; Stewart 1998: 24).

3.7.2 The politics of research: reflexivity

The politics of research involves power relations, which largely concern how the researcher’s and participants’ ways of knowing social experience are framed. As will be seen in the empirical chapters, interviewees discursively draw on well established narratives – such as a holistic self that is not reducible to the ageing body - but the meanings and functions of such narratives have been unpacked. Whilst participants narratives have been analysed for content, I have also looked at how they are constructed for example combining discourses relating to class and gendered sexuality. Not only have participant stories been analysed for what they say about tacit cultural rules but the approach to participant knowledge has also recognised their reflexive capacities. Participants can challenge researcher perceptions (Rosenfeld 2003: 194 - 5) and it is mistaken to imagine subjects as in the grip of ‘commonsense’ understandings (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 213-4). It is also the case that academics are not immune to the first order constructs and the discursive and structural conditions that affect the people they study (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 69 - 70). But, learning is a two-way street and research participants can influence the direction of the research. I learnt from listening to informants and from watching men’s embodied stories that the spaces of the bar scene are far from uniformly hostile to midlife gay men (chapters 5 and 6). If academic theory has been used to interrogate off-the-shelf cultural narratives about ageing, then informant narratives have been used in ways that have involved examination of the analytical fitness for purpose of concepts and theory. This is what Coffey and Atkinson (1996: 156) refer to as “abduction,” involving dialogue between data and theory. This dialogue between my academically derived knowledge and participants’ everyday knowledges is also visible in a strategy that involved using summary/progress reports provided to participants and published online by LGF. This offered interviewees and anyone interested the opportunity to comment on how men’s stories were being interpreted and transformed; a strategy designed to minimise power asymmetries relating to “representation, authority and voice” (Sherman
Heyl 2001: 378). There were few responses. In itself, this does not signal assent or dissent in relation to my interpretation of men’s stories. But, those who were critical suggested new foci such as exploration of the cyber scene as the space for middle-aged gay men feeling alienated by the village scene (LGF website) and the need to give more attention to the differences between middle-aged gay men and heterosexuals in the organisation of kinship (see chapter 8).

In practice, my experience of power relations with those interviewed or observed were contextual and variable (Lee 1993: 110; Nairn and Munro 2005: 232). They were achieved interactionally between researcher and participant(s) in particular discursive conditions shaped by past experience and experience in other domains of life (Gubrium and Holstein 2009: 95). I set the research agenda with which interviewees largely complied and about which those observed were ignorant. But, power relations within an interview could fluctuate. I was at times productively challenged when my paraphrase of an interviewee’s point did not do justice to the informant’s meaning or if the interviewee did not agree with the premise of a question. Indeed, such encounters required me to examine and reframe the kind of questions asked. I have regarded the differences in knowledge and practice of the research and participants less as a threat than as an opportunity for dialogue. Even though I have had the final word in how men’s stories have been interpreted, interviewees were informed that disagreement over interpretation would be signalled in the dissertation in a way that would respect the logic of their different understandings. This acknowledges that informants’ stories cannot be detached from the context of their telling and reading; they are capable of being read from different social locations that shape multiple ways of knowing (Pink 2007: 16). But, the idea of ownership of a story is highly contentious anyway. The narratives produced are neither the participants’ ‘own stories’ nor entirely mine. Again, they were produced through institutionalised patterns of interaction, shaped by mutable power relations operating within the research context. These accounts were also produced intertextually in that they have been shaped by events beyond the immediate context; by the historical experiences and other circumstances in which they were enmeshed (Gubrium and Holstein 2009: 2, 10, 112). Such influences inevitably shaped my decisions about what stories were salient; what was included in the study and what was left out of it.
3.8 Conclusion

This chapter has explained the research design that has informed this small-scale, mixed qualitative methods study based on semi-structured interviews and participant observation. The overall research puzzle and questions were designed to generate stories relating to everyday practices that illuminate how different midlife gay men with connections with ‘gay scenes’ in Manchester respond to ageing. The theoretically informed sampling strategy defines who counts as a midlife gay man, registering the relative porosity and differences around this category. The sampling strategy took into account differences in interviewees’ social locations and times, spaces and foci for observation. Interviews, involving photo-elicitation enabled unexpected leads, socio-historical contextualisation and comparisons of past and present experiences of the self and ways of relating to others. Participant observation enabled appreciation of experiences of bodily ageing as situated within actual social relations. The broad methodological approach that informs the study recognises actors’ interpretive capacities but is linked to an analytical framework developed by Thomson (2009), which allows a view of experience of ageing as multi-dimensional, resulting from the tension between constraint and choice. Practical analysis of narratives has involved a simple coding frame developed using computer software that was designed to develop themes for further interrogation. A “data reduction” strategy has enabled more focused analytical engagement with participants’ stories. “Situation ethics” have been used to allow case-by-case assessment in order to safeguard participant dignity and emotional safety. The management of power relations between researcher and participants has involved dialogue between different ways of knowing.

Having explained how study participants’ stories of ageing were generated and analysed, I turn to examination of midlife gay men’s subjectivity and ways of relating as expressed through their body management practices.
Chapter Four. Work on the Body: Differentiating Appearances

4.1 Introduction

Clothing and appearance express a relational self that is central to identity construction (Woodward 2007). They are also implicated in how people are differentiated from each other in terms of gender, class, sexuality and ethnicity. The chapter addresses the research questions which are concerned with: what midlife gay men’s work on the body (dress, grooming, diet, exercise) says about how ageing is understood and the operation of ageism in Manchester’s gay male culture; and how discourses of ageing influence these understandings, the expression of middle-aged selves and informants’ ways of relating.

The thrust of this chapter concerns midlife gay men’s moral claims to bodily authenticity, which differentiate them from younger and old gay men and how these are implicated in ageism that operates in multidirectional fashion in local gay male culture. Adapting the notion of ‘cultural capital’ (Bourdieu 1984), I demonstrate how informants’ differentiate themselves in different contexts from other gay men through claims-making organised around a notion of authenticity - a holistic self where surface appearance faithfully reflects the more ‘real’ interior self. Typically, an ‘authentic’ or more ‘natural,’ midlife gay male appearance or masculinity was materialised through a mundane politics of “dressing for comfort” (Holliday 1999). This politics of comfort marks limits to the idea that appearance is of heightened importance in a sexualised culture (Feroais 1998: 415) where gay men become fixated on their looks to remain sexually marketable as they age (Hewitt and Moore 2002: 61; Berger 1992: 227; Robinson 2008: 76). Authenticity is integral to an age-inflected form of cultural capital or what I call “ageing capital.” This term is used throughout the study in various ways - though suggesting variations on a theme relating to cognitive resources and ones that are central in enabling men to narrate and perform an ‘authentic’ gay midlife self.

At times, ageing capital indicates a sense of self-acceptance as men grow older but is also discernible in informants’ accounts of growing awareness of self, the workings of society, gay culture, relationships and the critical capacities and skills that men have garnered through life experience. Ageing capital is also implicated in forms of distinction relating to the body, emotions, style, classed and moral claims in relation to others. As well as referring to the gains of ageing (in terms of emotional strength, social and relational skills), ageing capital could operate in ambivalent, problematic ways, involving negotiation with age/ageing and
ageist discourse, which could at times reinforce the idea of ageing as pathological. Ageing capital could also be used to differentiate the midlife self in ways that involved derogation of others. The authenticity of dressing for comfort to please an autonomous self was contrasted with the more decorative, crowd-pleasing styles of self-presentation associated with younger gay men who were considered in thrall to pressures of consumer and gay culture. This does, however, indicate limits to the view that younger men occupy a dominant position within gay male culture and that ageism runs overwhelmingly from younger towards older men, as implied in work by Berger (1982); Bennett and Thompson (1991); Cruz (2003); Kimmel and Sang (1995); Hostetler (2004: 159); and Whittle (1994). Interview informants also differentiated themselves from the appearance/embodiment of old gay men who could be considered beyond sex, identity and relating. Authenticity is implicated in the expression of ageism towards: younger gay men whose forms of self-presentation are thought to embody superficiality, self-obsession (qualities thought consonant with their immaturity); peer aged gay men thought to be undermining their authenticity in dressing ‘too young’; and old gay men who are associated with threats of morbidity, closeness to mortality that deny their status as social and sexual citizens.

In the second part of the chapter, I elaborate on how authenticity operates in three modalities (sometimes intermixed, contradictory), which indicate different responses to the categories of age and the workings of ageism in gay culture. Midlife gay men’s efforts to distinguish themselves through work on/within the body indicate that they can: experience constraints on self-expression and ways of relating and capitulate to/reproduce ageism; negotiate with the ambivalences of ageing and ageism (e.g. only going so far in looking credibly youthful); and use ‘ageing capital’ and age-related ‘technologies of the self’ to critique conventional meanings of age, ageing, challenge ageism. These ‘technologies’ refer to strenuous thinking on the relationship of the self to the self (and relations with others) to forge autonomy free from the discipline of negative self-governance. The more critical responses to gay ageism help reclaim the continuing value, desirability of the midlife, ageing gay male body-self and represent a claim for inclusion within broader socio-sexual citizenship. Taken together the above three responses to ageing and ageism (and the forms of distinction central to them) constitute a multiform cultural politics. Such a politics is concerned with the right to pleasure (Bell and Binnie 2000: 69) and how middle-aged gay men are defined and treated when on the Manchester gay scene. This politics resonates with Rose’s description of a “politics of the minor” that are “pragmatic, experimental... tentative... concerned with the here and now...
the everyday not transcendental” and which seek to bring about “a small reworking of their own spaces of action” (Rose 1999: 279 – 80).

4.2 Gay male midlife distinction through authenticity

Self-presentation is an immediately visible way in which people distinguish themselves from others. But, through what mechanisms are selves or social groups distinguished from others? Bourdieu’s concept of ‘distinction,’ (1984), central to his theory of social class relations, can be used to explain how midlife gay men become differentiated from heterosexuals and from each other. Central to Bourdieu’s thinking on how we inhabit, manage and present the body, is the concept of ‘habitus.’ This represents deeply ingrained practices, themselves the results of long, imperceptible processes of socialisation through engagement with social structures and/or institutions e.g. the class system, forms of kinship, the workplace and the ‘gay scene.’ Habitus is constituted or shaped by varying combinations of ‘capital’: economic - income and wealth; cultural – knowledge of society; social - connections and/or networks; and symbolic - reputation/status. It is largely experienced unconsciously i.e. as ‘second nature’ or actions that involve “spontaneity without consciousness” (Bourdieu 1990: 53, 62). Habitus functions in a way that leads to patterned forms of thought and interaction. Combinations of the above capitals are thought to predispose actors towards certain tastes, ways of knowing and competencies that become embodied and involve varying degrees of consonance or dissonance with the ‘rules of the game’ in different fields of existence. Consequently, social actors differentiate themselves through cultural tastes and practices that both constitute and reflect social hierarchies and their locations within them (Bourdieu 1984: 467-8). This process then results in advantaged and disadvantaged social positions where inequalities of wealth, knowledge, network and status are mutually constitutive or least reinforcing (Skeggs 2004: 16). Skeggs makes use of these categories but usefully reminds us that although disadvantaged groups such as working class women might generally be less valued across these four categories, they can generate a measure of self-worth and moral value at least at the micro-level (2004: 14 – 16). This resonates with midlife gay men’s capacities (as featured in chapters 4 – 8) to recuperate self-worth in a culture where their ageing bodies are often devalued, though I emphasise how this process can involve derogation of others - younger and old gay men. I also differ from Skeggs’ application of these concepts in that I pay more attention to the non-economic constituents of status that here concern the workings of ageist discourse related to bodily aesthetics that are only tenuously if at all related to the workings
of social class and occurring within a particular culture/set of fields. Within this culture, habitus is discernible in gay men’s reputed facility for bodily display via dress and grooming (Frith and Gleason 2004: 40). In terms of taste for/type of participation in gay male culture, some men might be predisposed towards a taste for and competencies in forms of controlled abandon visible on the bar/club scene, as witnessed in accounts of spectacular dancing and sexualised play in chapter 5. Other men might be predisposed to seek stimulation, connections and value away from the bar scene in domestic settings, gay social/support groups (chapters 6 and 8). As a conceptual framework, habitus is a start-point for understanding the processes through which gay men are differentiated from each other and from heterosexuals but of itself, it does not specify the detail of the body management practices through which differentiation is actually achieved.

Central to all interviewees’ stories of midlife distinction through self-presentation was the idea of authenticity – a more ‘natural’ less adorned body. This story of authenticity functions in self-supporting, ambivalent and critical ways. In the first instance, it provides an overarching, practical framework through which midlife and ageing are understood. This framework drew on and combined ideas of a holistic self linked to a more permanent, inner subjectivity. Such thinking frequently registered in many upbeat (essentialist) tropes such as “liking the whole package,” (Bill 55), “being myself” (Les 53) and “happy in me own skin” (Warren 52). These throwaway statements are suggestive of growing self-worth and the idea that desirability exceeds mere bodily surface/display. They suggest something valuable about the ageing process. Being ‘authentic’ also involves a more holistic, relational self where human connections are prioritised over individualised projects of the body:

At the end of the day, your body is only one aspect of you. Y’know, there’s your mind, your emotions, relationships and all the rest of it, which are much more important. (Pete 52).

But, the idea of the authentic “more natural looking” midlife gay male body was put to work in ways that contrasted it with the artificiality of, “...being a ‘muscle Mary’ who spends hours in the gym” (Keir 42). In this kind of story, forms of appearance suggestive of ‘excessive’ work on the body were not critiqued as valuable cultural political projects because they point up the socially constructed nature of masculinity. Rather they were derogated by most men regardless of social class who differentiated themselves morally from others considered self-
obsessed and representative of unthinking conformity to gay and wider consumer culture. This was thought to signify failure to develop the ageing capital needed to withstand such pressures in order to ‘be your own person.’ Statements like Keir’s which refer to lapses in (or the over-production of) appearance, are indicative of social norms that require certain expressions of care of the self as evidence of moral character (Rose 1999: 73). Invocation of symbols like ‘the Muscle Mary’ and the young gay cultural dupe also represent appropriation of the ability to speak about what constitutes a legitimate form of subjectivity (Rose 1999: 29 – 30) and, in this case, an age-appropriate one.

For all interview informants, an ‘authentic self’ was one where the body’s surface is a faithful reflection of the more ‘real’ interior. This inner self could involve age, gender and ethnicity working in concert. For example, Tony (59) drew on his upbringing in rural Ireland to distance himself from feminising worries about ageing and the knowledges, competencies (predispositions) required to cover over the signs of growing older i.e. dyeing over grey hair (Tony 59). Tony was, in fact, critical of this discourse and his understanding of authenticity as the product of a historically and culturally shaped experience of socialisation recognises the socially constructed nature of identity. But, authenticity could be expressed in more sharply essentialist terms that viewed both age and race as innate qualities:

I don’t want to colour it because that would be pretending to be somebody I’m not. There’s no point darkening my hair and saying I’m 50 because the next step would be to say I’m 35 or something like that. And where do you stop? I’m fifty and I’ve got grey in my hair… I get really annoyed especially with oriental people who colour their hair brown or bleach it blond… To me, it’s like a rejection of… what you are, your ethnicity… pretending to be Caucasian… I like people… from the onset to see who I am… and not have to fight through layers to get to know… the real me. I value honesty very highly and that translates into my appearance too. (Vince 49).

In Vince’s narrative it appears that the interior qualities of age and race (as a South East Asian man) should remain inviolate if men are to preserve the integrity of a more natural, honest, self-accepting, midlife masculinity. The body’s surface might be used as an attempt to deceive but no amount of artifice can succeed in denying the deeper, ‘natural’ realities of age and race that should be reflected on the exterior. But, this account is also suggestive of how a moral claim for distinction is related to anxiety about being considered inauthentic; covering
over one’s age or ethnicity can be read as denial or betrayal of the ‘real’ self. This moral stance shapes and set limits on the informant’s choices for self-expression. Vince also supplied insight into what is at stake here when he intimated that midlife gay men trying ‘too hard’ to look (too) young risk exclusion from social and sexual citizenship (see also below).

4.3 Addressing ageing: capitulating; negotiating; challenging

The above narrative excerpt indicates one particular effect of discourse. But, stories of authenticity figured in three kinds of response to ageing and ageism. First, authenticity could operate as a form of self-governance. Second, it figured in accounts that involved negotiation with ageist discourse where subjects would only go so far in their efforts to look appropriately younger. Third, it could be mobilised in more critical ways that involved use of ageing capital and/or ‘technologies of the self’ that challenged ageism. In the latter case, an ‘authentic’ body-self constitutes a position from which critique is possible. This resonates with Shilling’s understanding of the body as not simply ordered and disciplined but as a material locus from which selves act back on social relations (Shilling 1993: 103). At times, responses to ageing and ageism were contradictory as men were aware of shadow narratives. For instance, age could be dismissed as “just a number” but this was contradicted in the same narrative episode by capitulation to ageism in an aside about visits to the hairdresser “just to tone down the grey a bit” (Sam 45).

4.3.1 Self-governance

4.3.1a) The hidden injuries of ageism

Most self-labour on the body to produce appearance is conducted in what is commonly understood as the ‘private’ space of the home. But, habits of dress and grooming are shaped by public discourse. Participants carried out everyday forms of body management with regard to how they might be read mainly by other gay men and often with ‘the gay scene’ in mind.

Stories of bodily ageing as involving loss of youthful looks (physical capital) and discomfiting constraint if not shame about the ageing body featured in every interview. Reflecting little difference in terms of age, social class, race or relationship status, 19 informants narrated stories that indicated how the idea of in/authenticity in midlife can set
limits on their own self-presentation and how they think of themselves in relation to younger gay men:

I see the bright coloured, patterned underwear… the kind of stuff that that they sell in designer shops, *Clone Zone* (gay village shop selling clothes and sex toys) ...like *Aussie Bum* (merchandiser of ‘designer’ swimwear and underwear popular with younger gay men). I think ‘just does not apply.’ It’s largely comfort for me now... from *Primark* and *Tesco*. Not designer-label clothes or underwear because 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 (younger gay men on the scene) ...I think I’m more self-aware. (Daniel 46).

Daniel’s account represents the most common form of distinction through clothing style that informants made. It suggests how men might adopt speaking positions to make (moral and epistemic) claims (Rose 1999: 29 – 30) and in this case tinged with resonances of social class given Daniel’s claim to the kind of cultural knowledge that enables him to avoid being duped by consumer and gay culture. Showy styles of self-presentation and even choice of underwear were contrasted with an age-appropriate midlife taste for dressing for ‘comfort’ and economy. They are suggestive of both age and class differences that reject a taste for the garish though expensive – signifying that youth and money might not guarantee appropriate taste. Daniel’s statement does not just indicate limits on self-expression but also indicates how the reversal of discourse can result in the expression of ageism towards *younger* gay men. Reading off the character of younger men – their ‘superficiality’ - from appearance alone contradicts the more holistic notion of authenticity that informants applied to themselves. The logical corollary of this is that younger gay men are little more than their surface selves and thus are incapable of being authentic. This might explain why younger gay men are discounted as fully-fledged socio-sexual citizens in the imaginary of midlife gay men. (See also chapter 8). Although this claim to authenticity stereotypes younger gay men, Daniel’s statement troubles the idea that midlife gay men over-invest in appearance and represents a claim for men of his generation to have a say in how Manchester’s gay culture is represented. His implicit claim for the heterogeneity of this culture reminds us that the hegemony of younger men therein is far from guaranteed. Nonetheless, informants expressed empathy in terms of the kind of pressures younger gay men face to produce a particular kind of appearance. Jeff (48) spoke of his lifestyle extravagancies in his twenties but contrasted
these with his financial prudence in midlife, which he understood as a marker of personal growth as a result of age and experience of humanistic therapies.

Although there was some understanding of the sartorial follies of youth, greater criticism was reserved for peer aged gay men thought to be dressing ‘too young’:

I see it in an older person as a sign of immaturity, a lack of awareness… going along with the crowd and being a sheep… trying to dress in a young way, which looks ridiculous on them. (Daniel 46).

Crossing the lines of age through self-presentation might be considered almost as consequential as crossing the lines of gender. Daniel’s comments indicate differentiation from peer aged gay men thought of as being less than true to themselves. The moral character of midlife gay men considered culpable of this kind of ‘cross-dressing’ could be seriously questioned. Excessive effort to maintain the semblance of youth was thought to render men ‘inauthentic.’ They might be deemed to be trying desperately to hang on to a quality they no longer have any right to claim. In allowing themselves to be duped by image-makers in the media, fashion industry and pressures from within gay culture, these ‘age-inappropriate’ forms of self-presentation were thought to represent a lack of individuality as well as moral fibre. Such age-denying actions are thought to reflect a lack of ethics from men who had failed or even refused to develop the requisite ageing capital.

Further, dressing age-inappropriately might render middle-aged gay men fraudulent and beyond the pale sexually:

There is a category, isn’t there? I suppose that’s when I would use the category ‘old queen.’ I wouldn’t use it as such… but, that’s what probably would come into my head… You know, if I saw somebody who was really trying to dress very young. Though, generally I tend to think that people should dress how they want to. (Jonathan 42).

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 young… I don’t fancy men like that at all (Jamie 54).
In the first excerpt, Jonathan recognises the liberal individualist right to self-expression (through appearance). But, his words draw attention to how ‘age-inappropriate’ forms of self-presentation might have the reverse effect of accentuating even ‘outing’ one’s chronology to risk exposure as a risible, self-denying “old queen.” In the second segment, distinction from more elaborate, youthful styles of dress, grooming and display is significant for its indication of how midlife gay men are susceptible to normative masculinity. For Jamie, midlife gay men who invest in a ‘fussy,’ overly youthful appearance risk feminising themselves and being held responsible for excluding themselves from sexual citizenship.

Middle-aged gay men also differentiated themselves from men thought of as old (usually 65 plus). In observations of the village scene, there were very few men who appeared to be in their mid-sixties or older and only two informants (Keir 42 and Alec 46) were able to speak of sexual experience or friendship with men over 65. This was also reflected in throwaway comments about tastes for clothes that rejected “older men’s shops” (Martin 52). Certain “gentleman’s outfitters’ (for example Dunn & Co.) were named as exemplars of ‘dressing for comfort,’ which symbolised the social withdrawal and lack of sexual citizenship associated with a state where one no longer need bother much with appearance (Leo 61). But, more fundamentally, old gay men could embody threats to the vitality and well-being of middle-aged men and fears about mortality:

It’s not that I don’t like old people but they can have many health complications… And that’s something that scares me… What if they have problems, if he collapses, has a heart attack and you have you do mouth-to-mouth resuscitation? I’m scared of picking up germs (Alec 46).

The kind of anxieties Alec invokes through bodily distinction from old (gay) men are an understandable response to the precariousness of life (Heaphy 2007a: 155-6) from a position where mortality now seems increasingly possible. Such worries also recall arguments from Elias (1985) and Shilling (1993) that fear of ageing results in social and psychological distanciation from age-related morbidity and those adjudged closer to death (Elias 1985: 75; Shilling 1993: 190). But, in collapsing old age and morbidity, Alec could also be distancing himself from norms that construct (gay) old age as desexualised. Simultaneously, such thinking reminds midlife gay men of their relative vitality, bodily viability and continuing
sexual citizenship. Further, given the empathy informants showed towards older people, it is not necessarily old age that is being rejected but the ideology that suffuses it. Rather, any distanciation from old gay men could represent informants’ unconscious rejection of discourse that constructs or stereotypes old people as “superfluous, poor, needy and close to death” (Gilleard and Higgs 2000: 135).

4.3.1 b) The signs of age: self-surveillance

As suggested in some of the narrative excerpts above, ageist discourse can become internalised to influence how we regard others against our kinder judgement. But, midlife gay men’s ideas of (in)authenticity are not restricted to the aesthetic and ethical lapses of others with regard to everyday body management and presentation. Despite their rejection of styles considered overly youthful, ageist discourse could inform micro-level grooming practices, which were designed to disguise or conceal the finer, giveaway signs of ageing (monitoring and trimming of ear and nose hair). Transcending differences of class and race, such practices were motivated by the age-inflected sexual economy of the village scene, which supports the idea (described in chapter 2) that age/ageing are felt contextually and more acutely in relation to sexuality (Heaphe et al 2004: 884 - 5). Anxieties about ageing signified particularly in concerns about the appearance of greying body/pubic hair:

I notice it more in my pubes and beard. It embarrasses me… It makes you feel more aged… especially the pubes… You may be used to seeing the hair on your head turning grey… but your pubes? Your private parts? Your beard? It reminds me I’m ageing quicker than I feel. (Alec 46).

Grey body hair can accelerate the perception of ageing, which represents a further step towards mortality. Whilst greying hair (on the head) could be stoically accepted as “part of life’s pattern,” Chris (48) contrasted this with the appearance of greying chest hair, which he actually described as “mortifying.” The men who reported trimming nose and ear hair contradicted the notion of authenticity as represented by a more ‘natural,’ untreated body that ‘lets it all hang out.’

Self-governance also figured in men’s bodily practices indicating pressures to desire, attain or maintain the gay male ideal of the youthful-looking, ‘well-toned body.’ Putting on weight
was commonly understood as a sign of ageing and as de-aestheticising and, in tandem with other signs, could exacerbate ageing and result in feelings of exclusion from sexual opportunity and citizenship (Mann 1996: 348; Giles 1996: 355 - 7; Blotcher 1996: 359; Guideigas 1996: 369). Gay male culture and parts of the bar scene can register as no place to be middle-aged and fat:

I’ve put loads of weight on compared to those days (twenties). I don’t like it… having a big belly and all that …I’m actually in the process of trying to lose it now… Since I’ve lost some weight, (through diet and regular exercise) I feel a lot better… a lot more confident. You do, don’t you? …If yer fatter, you feel as though yer unattractive… a bit less fresh… Don’t get looked at so much. (Jamie 54).

The disciplinary power of aesthetics circulating within wider consumer society and thought to be operating more harshly within Manchester’s gay male culture were expressed in men’s many “battles with the body” (Phillipson 1998: 19) and subsequent denials of pleasure. These registered in reported changes in dietary practices (restriction and/or modification of the amount and kind of food consumed) and exercise regimes that were often pragmatic:

I’m one of those guys who puts weight on, loses it, puts it on again and so on… I put on about two and half stone since Christmas. And I’m now trying to lose that because I really don’t like it. I don’t lose it to please other people. I lose it because sometimes when I look at myself in the mirror with my clothes off, I think I look fat… But, I don’t go out there thinking, ‘Oh I must be thinner to pick somebody up or to fancy me.’ (Martin 52).

The informant’s confrontation with his unclothed body in the mirror registers the desire to lose weight specifically to please the self. This self might qualify as ‘authentic’ for its ability to exercise volition. But, the kind of authenticity Martin describes suggests an asocial self untouched by discourse, social structures, institutions or relations. Indeed, his story invokes a kind of privatised, liberal individualist self that assumes control over the body. Such notional control might supply a sense of ontological security that helps sustain self-worth in midlife but the narrative is decidedly contradictory. What might motivate anyone to engage in ‘yo-yo’ dieting’ was not questioned. Indeed, none of the interview informants questioned sizeism (as part of a ‘looksist’ agenda) and why there should be anxiety around body fat, putting on
weight or why the bigger, older body was adjudged less desirable. There was little questioning of the judgemental, disciplinary notion of being “overweight.” In effect, Martin’s account is suggestive of Hollway and Jefferson’s notion of the “defended subject” (2000: 19). In these terms, Martin’s account serves as a defence mechanism that helps him rationalise any moral lapse in regulating his weight that could signify giving into ageist pressure from within gay and consumer culture.

Further, perceiving oneself or being perceived as fat, overweight etc could constrain men to a taste for wearing black, baggy, dowdy clothes. In such terms, a politics of ‘dressing for comfort’ itself registers as a form of authenticity but with constraining effects:

I have to try and hide it and not wear tight clothes these days… I’m not confident enough in my physical appearance to do that. So, the colours in my wardrobe tend to be darker colours like blacks, greys and navy blues… I like clothes that I feel … relaxed and comfortable in. I don’t like wearing anything expensive… It just makes me self-conscious… Very bright colours… tend to accentuate the fact that I’m overweight… I think I’m not worth spending a lot of money on with clothes… There is the element of… do I deserve it? So, I buy clothes in places like Primark… and think, ‘Well, at least I’ve not splashed out too much money on me…’ And why when I’m planning to lose weight? (Daniel 46).

Reference to ‘feeling self-conscious’ when wearing brighter colours suggests discomfort if not shame about the fatter, middle-aged body, which needs to be hidden or disguised by the slimming properties of darker colours. For Daniel, his older, thickening body is less worthy of being esteemed or desired (Blotcher 1996). Rather than expressing an empowering indifference or challenge to pressures to present the self in certain homonormative ways, comfort dressing could involve disowning the bigger, older body that does not “deserve” to be adorned or celebrated but rather requires denial and self-disciplinary modification.

4.3.1 c) Getting ready for ‘the scene’: how do I look?

Given the risks of exclusion attached to failure to live up to bodily norms in gay male culture, it is not surprising that midlife gay men succumb to intense self-surveillance. The practices
described above imply forms of self-governance that involve critical scrutiny of the self but also imply consideration of scrutiny by (and of) others. This was typified in the many statements that reflected the habitual self-surveillance considered increasingly necessary prior to entry into the public domain of the gay village:

Oh, it can take me hours now (to get ready to go out). (Laughs). I can change me mind several times... and if I’m in a re-al-ly fussy mood, I can go right through me whole wardrobe... and I won’t be happy with anything I’ve got... I do try and co-ordinate though... You have to put things together well. (Davie 44).

The majority of informants spoke of the bar scene as discursive in terms of the additional care and attention to appearance beyond dressing for comfort that was thought to be required when going out on the village scene. Davie’s statement about producing an appearance fit for the bar scene was reflected in observation accounts:

*Man about late 50s, expensive and detailed denim shirt with fancy epaulette type detail, wavy salt and pepper hair, short and nicely styled wearing close fitting designer style (?) jeans and training shoes – sleek and close fitting to the foot - a hybrid between a training shoe and a slipper. The brand, 'Merrells,' is de rigueur among younger, fashion-conscious gay men. (Field note, Canale Uno 30/12/08 11.30pm).*

In observation accounts of more than 180 instances of dress/grooming, only 28 instances (just under 16% of all observed instances) suggested less effortful self-presentation. In interview accounts, self-surveillance was generally considered essential to avoid the censure, ridicule that could follow from bodily displays readable as incriminatingly age-denying, though men also commonly reported intense discomfort if they felt insufficiently well presented for inspection (Paul 53). Over-elaborate forms of self-presentation can lead to subjects being held responsible for desperate measures that amount to clinging onto the vestiges of youth:

Some refuse to accept the fact they are growing older... Hanging on to the last semblance of their youth... If they have an issue with their ageing, then it’s somebody not worth knowing. (Vince 49).
For Vince, choosing to distance the self from one’s actual age and thus from similar aged peers suggested serious moral consequences. It was thought to risk (even deserve) ostracism or a kind of social death because it is read effectively as a choice to render oneself inauthentic. But, this moral differentiation suggests some awareness of the rules of the game where men need to present an age-appropriate self to continue to be recognised as a sexual citizen by the peer aged and older men to whom the informant was more attracted. But, again, this kind of story illuminates the risks attached to forms of self-presentation that cross the boundaries of what is considered age-appropriate.

Pressures towards self-surveillance and the dissatisfaction with the self this implies could apply regardless of embodiment:

*Early fifties, tall, slim, dressed in black/grey clothing – smart casual and subtly co-ordinated silver grey tie with black shirt and blouson style jacket that suggested care and pride in his appearance. He might be considered quite handsome though his posture was scrunched up: as if trying to make his height look less conspicuous. His whole being seemed to seep discomfort, gaucheness. Most of the time, he stood in a corner slowly but anxiously stroking his beret-style hat with the fingers of both hands, as if getting comfort from its felt-like texture. He left after about 15 minutes.* (Field notes, *The Frontier Bar*, weekday, mid-evening 13/5/09).

This scenario is suggestive of a body-subject in the grip of an immobilising form of governance where the gaze of others in a sexualised milieu is internalised as disciplinary self-scrutiny. Indeed, this kind of experience was not uncommon, indicating contextual restrictions on the ability to mobilise ageing capital where it is difficult to be ‘happy in my own skin.’

Moreover, additional labour on the body with age had become imperative and integrated into habitual grooming regimes:

“I’ve got to an age where if I’m going to be taking my clothes off in front of anyone… some might look and think ‘uhhm, oh dear... But, I’m probably firmer now than when I was in my thirties” Fred (55).
I use exofiliatior (sic) now… I don’t use toner any more… not for a while. Now I moisturise… and use a bit of fade-out cream for those pigmentation marks… They come with age don’t they? Uhm… I’ve got it all to come, eh? (Jed 39).

For Fred, engagement in a physical exercise regime had been motivated by anxieties about scrutiny of the body during sexual encounters. Midlife gay men need to try harder and, in Jed’s case, go deeper to gain recognition as sexual citizens. Jed’s self-labour indicates the kind of extra knowledge and care of the body and its presentation that midlife gay men can feel obliged to acquire and use. The informant’s story was typical of accounts of close monitoring of the quality of facial skin for the signs of ageing – perhaps the most significant barometer of how men’s chronology and experience of ageing (well or badly) are read. For Jed, stringent skin toner (that reduces oleageneity) has been replaced in midlife by a practice thought to maintain a more youthful appearance. Anxiety is also visible in the informant’s efforts to disguise de-aestheticising ‘age’ or ‘liver spots’; corporeal signs that presage the misery, decline and perhaps ultimate loneliness associated with gay ageing/later life. Jed’s practices and anxieties lend support to and partly explain Pugh’s argument that avoidance of ageing within gay male culture has taken on the force of a “moral imperative” (2002: 170).

The need for socio-sexual recognition on the scene and thus the requirement to distance oneself from ‘looking old’ (Kiley 1996: 328) was so powerful for one informant who resorted to more invasive, expensive measures to look younger that were generally regarded as quintessentially inauthentic:

I do have botox from time to time so… I’m trying to keep youngish looking. …I don’t want to look young, it’s just that I like not to look old… just look… okay-ish for my age, to look sort of my age but don’t look haggard, look healthier… younger…. It keeps things at bay… It’s not gonna… turn the clock back but… delay… the look of the ageing process…. On the gay scene, people want you to look younger… If I delay it a little bit… not too much, it means that I could go in Essentials (younger men’s night club) and they wouldn’t scream, ‘old man.’ I wouldn’t exactly be one of them but I’d be able to merge in a bit more… But, equally, I could go in the Classic Bar and they’d go, ‘Oh, here’s a bit of totty…’ It’s ensuring that I can expand the net a bit more… Botox keeps things so people don’t notice too much. (Sam 45).
Sam’s prevarication and the caveats that punctuate his statement are illuminating. His tone also suggested a note of confession and apology, as if he would be judged self-obsessed and thus inauthentic as a middle-aged gay man. But, although admitting to botox might be difficult, this story is interesting because botox injections are justified as a response to the pressures facing middle-aged gay men on the Manchester gay scene to look as credibly young for as long as possible. Implicit within Sam’s story is the idea that ageist pressure is a problem generated by a generalised, younger gay male, scene-oriented other (Jones 2000). But, in its own terms, Sam’s account suggests the use of botox as a form of negotiation with ageing and gay male ageism. It serves as a strategy to maintain the appearance of freshness, healthy vigour and desirability. Sam also justified botox as stopping short of outright fraudulence (i.e. a facelift). His story represents a claim for continuing inclusion within socio-sexual citizenship, especially among the middle-aged gay men who frequent The Classic bar where he might still be considered, “a bit of totty.” Submitting the self to such treatment indexes the normative force of gay ageism where the appearance of youth is thought to be prized by middle-aged gay men themselves. But, Sam’s account is ambivalent because it implies critique of the village bar scene as a sexual marketplace that places excessive importance on the youthful appearance considered necessary for validation.

4.3.2 Ambivalences: negotiating ageing and gay ageism

However, not all informants’ reactions were quite so compliant with pressures to produce the body-self in subculturally approved ways. Some thought/practice involved authenticity in the guise of negotiation with and ambivalence in response to the signs of ageing and ageist discourse. Although the stories examined in this section go beyond the authenticity of dressing for comfort and no fuss grooming, they function in less disciplinary ways than the accounts analysed above. The moment of negotiation and ambivalence occupies a space between complicity and resistance, which co-exist uneasily (Lovell 2003: 9 – 13) if not dialectically. Similarly, Rosenfeld argues that identities are “interpretations made with awareness of and often in conflict with competing discourses and categories of the self” (Rosenfeld 2003: 88). The conflicted nature of some of these stories suggests then a potential for critical thought and agency.

Typically, negotiations with ageist and age-related discourses were expressed in stories of ‘making the most’ of an ageing body-self that is still worthy of investment. This was
encapsulated in Sam’s (45) advice to, “Look as good as you can for as long as you can but without making it your life’s quest.” But, ambivalence was also visible in observation accounts which indicated limits or only going so far to look younger or desirable:

*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... Indeed, he left the bar at periodic intervals for a smoke (Field notes, outside Canale Uno mid evening 7/5/09).*

The vignette above indicates that the man in question might have developed, accentuated or shaped parts of his body that are more on view or discernible. Biceps and pectoral muscles register within the gay male erotic imaginary but the slight potbelly suggests that the man in question might draw the line at spending too much time at the gym on an overall body project in pursuit of the ‘six pack.’ Indulgence in pleasures thought injurious to bodily health and the man’s appearance indicate that he might be leaving certain parts of the body, including the face, which registers as the most attractive feature within gay male culture, to chance or nature. This negotiation between potentially injurious pleasures and body management regimes suggests that men may consider that there are aspects of their ageing appearance over which they have more or, indeed, less control.

**4.3.2 a) Pragmatic acceptance of the signs of ageing**

Ageing capital could also be used to put physical ageing into perspective. This registered in informants’ statements recognising its genetic inevitability - physical processes over which men considered they had little if any control. Such claims were important in neutralising anxieties about ageing and were visible in the kind of mundane, pragmatic statements that saw the signs of ageing as ‘part of life’s pattern.’ They were consistent with the notion of authenticity as involving minimal intervention in the production of midlife appearance:

“Grey hair? Well... shit happens; you just get on with life.” (Will 48).
I don’t think things are as… tight as they used to be… Everything heads off to the Isle of Wight… (Laughs). It’s not something I’ve given a whole load of thought to. Because that’s what you’ve got. You can’t change it… There’s bugger all we can do about getting old… I only worry about things I can have control over. Getting old, I have no control over whatsoever… I’ve already got lines but it’s a bit too late to worry about that. (Clive 45).

Clive’s account registers the physical changes with ageing – things not being as “tight” as they were and “heading [downwards] to the Isle of Wight.” Ageing capital is discernible in the prioritisation of other concerns over anxieties about ageing and over which he has more scope for agency. Clive went on to talk about plans to switch careers and his hopes of meeting someone who might become a significant other or partner. In comparison to these achievable goals, anxiety about ageing was considered a waste of time and energy. Indeed, for Clive, ageing offered certain benefits and was described as much less a priority than being able courtesy of life experience to appreciate in middle-age the joys of “a decent bottle of Barolo.” Here growing older had been an education in itself. Associating with older gay men had resulted in gains in cultural capital.

Generally though, informants’ negotiation with ageing and ageism indicated forms of reflexive knowledge and practice which commonly involved mediation between appetitive and more self-governing dimensions of the self. This kind of story could also involve stylistic distinction - finding a balance between forms of self-presentation that were “not too old-fashioned or too modern.” (Sam 45). Such statements index how men might use ageing capital to achieve the kind of equilibrium to which Sam refers. Ageing capital was also central to an authentically presented middle-aged self in terms of men’s creative appropriation of what the fashion industry makes available whilst withstanding pressures to conform to what gay men are supposed to wear. This represents a moral claim for individuality (with overtones of social class) in an increasingly standardised world.

But, accounts that registered the gains of ageing could also be ambivalent:

I don’t dwell much on the limitations. I focus on the opposite of age. I don’t focus on what you can’t do bodily anymore but on what I can still do. (Rob 50).
At first blush, Rob’s words suggest a claim for positive psychological adaptation to the physical changes that accompany growing older of a kind that would not be out of place in any ‘ageing well’ manual or account (see Baltes and Baltes 1990; Bergling 2004). Rob’s claim to midlife authenticity - acceptance of the limitations it can involve - is ethical in that it does not involve self-aggrandisement in relation to others but his claim to be managing offers only limited, selective challenge to the assumption of ageing as pathology. Although Rob adapts to the physical changes and welcomes the psychological ones (gains in maturity), it is significant that he feels it necessary to “focus on the opposite of age,” which reinforces the idea that ageing is still a category to be avoided rather than embraced per se.

Almost every informant reported concessions to dressing “a bit more modern” (Ben 50) but this kind of story led men to question the meaning of age, ageing and age-appropriate self-presentation, “I always dress a bit younger… But, how should you dress when you’re 55?” (Tommy 55). For seven informants, who were more middle class in cultural terms, reflexivity was evident in gains in knowledge with age concerning the kinds of clothing that suit the body-self:

Ok, I’m at the time of life when I think about clothes I’m going to look good in; what suits me rather than the latest fashion with skinny jeans halfway down your arse that we are 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… as fashion is really geared to younger people… But, the middle classes can get away with looking younger, trendier because they have more money to look stylish. (Ben 50).

This account of choosing clothes to compliment the ageing body-self without compromising midlife status suggests a form of ageing capital that recognises social class as crucial to the production of an ‘authentic’ appearance. Ben links the ability to “get away with” a more fashionable, youthful appearance with possession of the requisite economic (and possibly the cultural) resources to secure the appropriate taste. The informant’s account suggests a midlife gay male habitus capable of social criticism – not only of the standardisation of the fashion industry but also of how some men are excluded from the ‘pink economy.’

Moreover, informants’ understanding of their age-related bodily ‘imperfections’ suggested the use of technologies of the self that resulted in forbearing attitudes to the bodily
‘imperfections’ of others. For Leo (61), “A little imperfection goes a long way… Okay, you’ve got a bit of a love handle, that’s okay and I don’t feel so bad about myself.” But, again, we might question why anyone should feel less ‘bad’ about themselves. For another informant, ‘authentic’ ageing identity could be represented as ongoing negotiation between two aspects of an interior self in flux: one ‘idealistic’; the other ‘realistic’:

I’m realistic about my body… I can see it physically changing… I guess I would like to try and combat it to a degree like I suggested about exercise and so forth… I’m quite happy with it… though I can be critical of it… But, when I am critical of parts of my body… because there is a bit too much fat there or whatever… it’s in a kind of an idealistic way. But… it makes me think that I really should make the effort to get a bit trimmer. (Jonathan 42).

Here, the ageing body is not something to be enjoyed but controlled. The desire to ‘combat’ a changing, thickening body here highlights a struggle between an internalised critic, the product of ageist discourse within gay culture amply reinforced by consumer culture, which requires a ‘better,’ trimmer body as a sign of self care. But, this demand is tempered by a more forgiving ‘realistic’ dimension of the self that might entail giving into sensual pleasures.

4.3.3 Reclaiming the value of the middle-aged body

This section largely adverts to the kind of reflexive practices or technologies of the self deployed in particular fields to revalorise the ageing, midlife body. They were more commonplace in observations, though all informants mobilised some critique of ageism. The capacity to recount such stories supplies the potential to disrupt the dominant idea that youth represents the benchmark of desirability and is representative of Manchester’s gay bar scene and culture. An ‘authentic’ self looms large in these more critical accounts, which suggest deployment of ‘technologies of the self’ and ageing capital working to reclaim the value of the midlife body and avoid constraints on the expression of identity and men’s ways of relating (see also chapter 5).

Midlife gay men’s stories of agency were couched within changes in work on the body that signalled a form of authenticity in the guise of freedoms from the pressures of exercise regimes, youthful self-presentation. The labour of exercise regimes to stay trim, toned and
younger looking could be rejected for pragmatic reasons – they were considered unworthy of sustained effort or else they entertained the view that regulating one’s weight was less important than maintaining a healthy, mobile self in the face of illness (Alec 46, Ben 50, Joanthan 42, Rob 50, Vince 48 and Warren 52). Stories of bodily agency and claims for differentiation from younger and peer aged ‘gym bunnies’ had moral dimensions that were at times linked to social class (see also chapter 6). But, there were various other ways in which ageing capital could be used to recuperate the midlife body that did not imply derogation of others:

I used to feel a bit second rate in terms of body… but this characterises my earlier life when I just never felt attractive full stop… If my tits are a bit saggier or I don’t go to the gym that’s okay… (Bill 55).

Big 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 goatee. His style of cruising for was direct, utterly confident, and unapologetic. He communicated the right to look and to be looked at. (Field note, Diva’s Bar 12/6/09).

In the first narrative segment, thinking on the self results in reclamation of the middle-aged body as more attractive. Bill’s comparison between his younger and middle-aged self suggests the claim of someone freed from the grip of the punitive aesthetics that characterised his formative years on the gay scene. The second (observation) account indicates a proud distinction or rather stylisation of the older, fatter body beyond dressing for ‘comfort’ and ‘no fuss’ grooming and in ways that proclaim the right to exercise and receive the sexual gaze. Recuperation of the ageing gay male body-self then had a decidedly erotic dimension:

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 thing is that rugged, unpolished look. (Davie 44).

Davie’s narrative is significant because, although he recognised that younger gay men can be attractive (but were to him less desirable), ageing capital is used to recast the meaning of age lines. Here they are considered to authenticate an ageing body. The informant reads them as
clues to an interesting past, a biography replete with picaresque sexual adventure, knowledge and experience that suggest sexual skill. Indeed, ageist discourse, which casts age lines as pathological, is consciously reversed to reclaim the signs of ageing as symbolising a holistic form of exterior bodily and interior psychological attraction in sync. Age lines can index a more honest, self-accepting, ‘authentic’ midlife/ageing gay masculinity; one that is all the more alluring for being imperfect, “unpolished.”

Moreover, a personal story involving impotence, which, according to Government figures in a recent television advertising campaign, is supposed to affect 40% of men over 40 (40over40.com/), involved age-inflected technology of the self in reversal of ageist discourse to reclaim socio-sexual citizenship against the odds of nature. Bill explained his ‘impotence’ as arising from physical ageing and not as a result of psychological difficulties and provided insight into the kind of thinking in relation to the self (and others) that has allowed him to subvert discourses that would deny his sexual citizenship:

Erm, it probably means that I can’t fuck… most of the time… And if you can’t do one thing, well, we can do something else… But, although it’s a bit limiting… it didn’t stop me doing other stuff. I probably went down the route of… accepting it and adapting my sex life accordingly… What you’re up against is the stereotype of what sex should be… Well, I’m not too bothered about what it should be… I think I used to be but that’s something I associate with when I was a lot younger… It has forced me to think about sexual satisfaction in much broader terms... What should it (sex) be like? Nowadays, I’ll just take it as it comes (laughs at pun). It’s about discovering what is pleasing between people… I’m not a performing seal. I’m not a machine. I’m a real, flesh and blood human being… with real feelings, a real story to tell… So, it’s about… putting the humanity back into the sexual situation. (Bill 55).

Bill’s account indicates the use of age-related technology of the self to negotiate the kinds of sex that do not involve penetration or orgasm as the defining endpoints. The informant has unravelled age-inflected, homonormative discourse that sanctions what ‘real’ gay sex should consist of. The informant’s thinking challenges the sexological default position within the therapeutic work of Masters and Johnson in the 1970s (and common within gay culture) that ‘real’ sex is penetrative and should involve a literal pay-off (Hawkes 1996: 29). Instead, Bill adverts to sexual practices and pleasures that he finds intrinsically satisfying. He describes a
form of sexual ethics that treat the whole body as a field of erotic possibilities, enjoin mutual pleasure and re-establish him as a sexual citizen. His resistance to the youthful athleticism and machine-like, ‘porn star’ sexual efficiency contains the claim that his experience of sex in midlife has been characterised by attempts to re-humanise it.

4.4 Conclusion

Adapating Bourdieu’s notion of “distinction” (1984), this chapter has focussed on how midlife gay men differentiate themselves and express their ageing selves through forms of situated claims-making (concerning style, the body and personal ethics) from younger, peer aged men ‘ageing badly’ and old gay men. In terms of the research question about self-expression, middle-aged gay men’s bodily practices are differentiated much more along the lines of age or generation than class or ethnicity. These forms of distinction (articulated through everyday) cultural practices were commonly mobilised through narratives, spoken and performed, that suggest uses of ageing capital central to which is a multivalent authenticity (or lack of it) in which ‘dressing for comfort’ (Holliday 1999) and ‘no fuss’ grooming practices loom large. In general, authenticity provides a notional, practical moral framework that has both ethical and unethical dimensions through which the changes and continuities of gay male ageing can be understood. It can refer to a more ‘natural’ ageing body-self where exterior/surface dimensions should faithfully reflect the more ‘real’ interior self and one that is ‘properly’ gendered and raced. Informants’ stories of differentiation constitute moral claims in relation to other gay men. Their self-presentation practices were contrasted with more elaborate, ostentatious and youth-coded forms of embodiment in the gay village.

Further, midlife gay men’s notion of authenticity through self-presentation can operate in three (sometimes contradictory) ways that affect expression of midlife gay identity and how men relate or not to gay others. Study participant’s stories of ageing enjoin capitulation to, negotiation with and resistance to homonormative ageism. In more self-governing mode, midlife gay men’s moral claims about the character of younger gay men on the village scene as fashion victims (cultural dopes) is both disciplinary of those who mobilise this critique and expressive of ageism towards the latter. Although rejection of forms of appearance associated with younger gay men were understood as a marker of maturity rather than loss, informants’ critiques of such forms of self-presentation set limits on their own freedoms of expression.
through the body in ways that reinforce age divisions and ageism. Further, midlife gay men thought to be dressing in overly youthful ways are held responsible for having chosen an inauthentic, *age-denying* form of embodiment that is equated with ageing ‘unsuccessfully.’ In consequence, they are thought to rule themselves out of legitimate midlife gay male sexual citizenship. These midlife ‘cross-dressers,’ who breach the boundaries of age-appropriate self-presentation, are considered culpable of refusing to develop ageing capital and face up to the threats and opportunities that can accompany growing older. Ageism was expressed towards the desexualised embodiment of old gay men whose closeness to mortality excludes them from sexual citizenship. This indicates how discourses of ageing and ageism operate in multidirectional ways in local gay male culture but also point up how younger gay men’s dominance on the ‘gay scene’ is far from overwhelming. However, the authenticity of dressing for comfort and no fuss grooming practices challenges the assumption that midlife gay men are prone to over-investing in appearance as a result of discursive pressures emanating from within a highly sexualised culture.

Ageing capital is also implicated in expressions of authenticity that involve negotiation with ageism. This could entail mediation between self-governing, appetitive and agentic dimensions of the self. Negotiation with ageing and ageism also involved accounts that referred to pragmatic acceptance of ageing as natural, genetic inevitability – another expression of authenticity. In more resistant mode, informants referred to forms of work on the body that signalled relative freedom from the pressure of exercise regimes, weight management, youthful self-presentation etc. In more critical mode, authenticity could be used to recuperate and re-aestheticise the midlife/ageing, gay male body-self as desirable, creative and aesthetically pleasing. The ageing body-self and the signs of ageing could be positively resignified as sexually desirable and socially valuable (see also the next chapter). In a similar vein, ageing capital and age-related technologies of the self could trouble the very concept of ‘impotence’ and reconfigure it as opportunity for mutual sexual exploration freed from the exigencies of youthful sexual athleticism. Taken together, the three modalities of authenticity described above help constitute a dynamic gay male midlife cultural politics of ageing afoot on the Manchester gay scene. This cultural politics can involve reversal or subversion (if temporary) of the usual hierarchies of value on the village scene and within gay male culture where men (provided they are not too old) can be recuperated as socio-sexual citizens. Within the spaces and temporalities that constitute gay male midlife cultural politics, compliance, negotiation and resistance to ageism co-exist uneasily and dialogically.
Having examined how midlife gay men’s work on the body illuminates understandings of ageing and the working of ageism in Manchester’s gay culture, I now add a layer of complexity by locating dressed and groomed embodied selves in spaces that are part of Manchester’s gay village.
Chapter Five. Life on the Bar Scene: Interaction in Age-Coded Spaces

5.1 Introduction

So far I have covered midlife gay men’s practices involved in the production of appearance. Appearance is inevitably contextual such as in the home, when out shopping, in the workplace and in spaces of leisure. The bar scene is central to Manchester’s gay culture and men’s stories of ageing. As already indicated, the socio-sexual norms of the village can exact more effortful kinds of self-presentation. In line with the research questions, this chapter explores how thinking about ageing influences men’s ways of differentiating themselves through bodily expression and what their situated, relational practices say about local responses to ageing and ageism. I therefore address how forms of sociation occurring within some of the spaces and thoroughfares that make up Manchester’s gay village involve capitulation to, negotiation with or offer respite from or resources for resistance to gay ageism. In line with the methodological strategy in chapter 3, I offer explanation and analysis of the different stories told in diverse spaces, by subjects involved in various interactional practices that constitute the gay bar scene.

The forms of interaction within the village indicate the operation of varied socio-sexual norms which result in spatialisation of the bar scene largely along the lines of age and, to an extent, social class. Men thought to represent the differences of race and disability also figured here though as problematic presences or, more often, absences. The norms prevalent within these spaces sanction different choreographies of display, approach and touch at different times in different places. As a corollary, I contend that participant narratives and practices relating to experience of being a middle-aged gay man on the bar scene are divisible into three kinds. These responses to ageing and ageism are not mutually exclusive nor do they correspond neatly with forms of social experience/difference such as class or race. The first kind of story, and the dominant one generated in interviews, offers a version of the village as divided and disenchanted where men experience restrictions on expression of identity and relations. The rules of the game here mean that midlife gay men experience the bar scene as the major site of exclusion, a space where they report either being overlooked or subjected to the critical gaze wielded largely by younger others. Midlife gay men can be negatively differentiated. Being reduced to the bodily signs of ageing can be thought inimical to men’s holistic sense of authenticity, which is central to their notions of legitimate midlife gay male
sexual citizenship. Second, and most commonly produced within observations, is an account of the more convivial dimensions of gay male culture consistent with accounts of queer spaces as sites of innovation and (informal) political contestation through expressive play (Brown 2007). Here the scene figures as a sensorium consisting of visual, aural, tactile, gustatory, olfactory and kinaesthetic pleasures. The gaze, whether as doer or recipient, is multiplex and can operate in more benign even affirmative ways. It can be actively invited, desired or else deployed or deflected in ways that deprive it of its power to judge and constrain. Midlife gay men can deploy ageing capital (age and emotionally-inflected knowledge of gay culture) and age-related ‘technologies of the self’ (forms of thinking on the self that can enable men to challenge ageism). They can recuperate sexual citizenship through erotic and playful practices (sometimes with younger gay men) that help humanise spaces and thus make the bar scene more habitable. This story marks limits to the dominant assumption that the bar scene overwhelmingly represents a site of exclusion due to loss of looks (‘physical capital’) as gay men grow older (Bennett and Thompson 1990: 66 - 7; Berger 1982: 15; Brown et al 1997: 8; Hostetler 2004: 160; Kiley 1996: 339; Steinman 1990). It also troubles the caricature of the bar scene as based on competitive, calculating sexual strategy and as no place to find love or friendship (Berger 1982: 14; Brown et al 1997: 31; Edwards 2006: 149; Lee 2006: 129). Third, there is a more ambivalent account of the intermixed pleasures and dangers that ‘the scene’ has to offer where midlife gay men negotiate with ageing and gay ageism. Such accounts, overlooked by the literature, indicate that partaking in the scene’s sensory delights, can involve sacrificing the more serious, interior aspects of ‘authentic’ midlife subjectivity. In this narrative, the gaze of other men can be experienced in contradictory ways. In sexualised spaces, it can be sought as a sign of continuing desirability, socio-sexual citizenship yet simultaneously experienced as constraint in ways that suggest awareness of the risk of hostility, heightened self-surveillance and suspicion of others. Men’s bodily discomfort, related to a tenuous sense of legitimacy or belonging on the bar scene, can compel self-protective behaviours. Also, within this mixed story, intergenerational sociation is possible but there appear to be norms limiting proximity and how gay men of different ages might approach and touch each other. The rules relating to closer physical contact mark the line between the sharing of social experience and the forbidden sexual.
5.2 Different men, different places: a ‘politics of place’ in the village

5.2.1 Changing patterns of use and the limits of cosmopolitanism

Informants differed in terms of how they positioned themselves in relation to the village scene and attendance could fluctuate (see below) though most men reported using the bar scene to socialise less as they grew older (see Brown et al 1997: 77; Heaphy and Yip 2003: 896). (See also chapter 8). Twenty one interviewees reported occasional to fairly regular attendance on the scene. Relationship to the scene could be rather pragmatic. Leo (61) described using the scene during the week for the pleasures of ‘people-watching’ after work and to relieve solitariness when his partner works away from home. The remaining six informants reported using the scene more rarely as a convenient rendezvous prior to or after a concert, cinema, theatre or other social activity. For Paul (53), the dilemma of the scene was that, for all its problems, it was preferable to isolation from other gay men:

I’m either rebuffed or I feel rejected and it makes me think there’s no point in trying. ...But, then, I go to the village because it’s better than being completely separate from people... from gay life.

Fluctuating attitudes towards and uses of the village scene resulted from ageing capital (here signifying a sense of increasing maturity), related changes in social capital (friendship networks) and changes in economic circumstance. Losing or gaining employment could affect participation in friendship circles and opportunities for socialising in the village and beyond (chapter 8). These fluctuations were then located within the context of subjects’ broader lives and commitments. They were often explained as an outcrop of ageing capital – natural consequences of growing older (see also chapter 8).

The village has a reputation for being a more cosmopolitan space but this has been challenged. On the basis of large scale, multi-methods, interdisciplinary research, Binnie and Skeggs have argued that the village is not only thoroughly commodified – one of the various “packaged zones of enjoyment” in Manchester city centre (Binnie and Skeggs 2004: 46 - 7) - but also exclusionary. They argue that, far from being a space of acceptance, the presence of working class heterosexual women within the village figures as problematic. They are defined by the more culturally resourced lesbian, gay and middle class straight women users
as “the constitutive limit” (Binnie and Skeggs 2004: 58) against which the latter distinguish themselves. The relations of class, gender and sexuality combine in ways that enable the habitus of middle class users with a greater knowledge of how to occupy the cultural spaces of the village to consume (through the gaze) the spectacle or (inferior) objects of knowledge that brash local working class women are thought to represent (Binnie and Skeggs 2004: 45, 50, 54-55). Whilst this perception maintains some currency given remarks overheard on the scene disparaging the presence of hen party groups, such an account reproduces a binary of lesbian and gay users as resourced cosmopolitans and portrays working class heterosexual women users as powerless. It is as if the dynamic character of inequalities and some of the nuances in relation to sexuality and women’s agency have been forgotten or suspended. It also overlooks some of the more accepting attitudes, courtesy of ageing capital, among gay men as well as how gay men themselves can be ‘othered’ on the grounds of age, race and disability (see below). Also, midlife gay men have some capacity through ageing capital and technologies of the self to transcend commodification. The more convivial moments of the village scene (see below) would contest a view of power relations where gay users are represented as uniformly entitled but so thoroughly duped by its seductions that they are incapable of acting independently of such forces.

However, there is evidence in this study that the cosmopolitanism of the village has been overstated with regard to the differences signified by race. Observation accounts support one informant’s view that ‘the scene’ is a predominantly “white space” (Alec 46). Given Manchester’s ethnic diversity, ‘non-white’ people were conspicuous by their absence and those who might attend were attuned to its risks:

...Maybe they could be racist... You don’t know whether they like talking with coloured people... And you don’t want to offend anybody or upset yourself by trying to be friends and being rejected... At times... with their shaven heads... and the white laces in the boots... You wonder, ‘is it for fashion or maybe because they belong to a white supremacist group?’ (Alec 46).

Describing himself as “mixed race,” Alec conveys a sense of the partial tolerance of people who are read as non-white. But, he makes palpable the kind of risk represented by a form of appearance (skinheads) that is commonplace among middle-aged gay men. For the two ‘non white’ interviewees, racism in gay commercial spaces or the streets of the gay district had
been experienced more often indirectly in ways that reflected white people’s assumptions about their exoticism (Hall 1997). But, Alec’s statement suggests a ‘community’ that is not ready to hear and understand stories about the differences of race. Relations of trust might be compromised given the semiotics expressed by racist gay skinheads (with white-laced Doctor Marten boots).

5.2.2 Midlife gay men’s spaces

How subjects present themselves and the kind of venues they frequent inform how they might be read as different types of gay men. In terms of self-presentation, most commonplace were the generationally significant variations on a masculine ‘look’ that involved checked shirts, jeans or combat style trousers with thick-soled shoes or boots. There was much evidence in the observations of age-related fetish wear that included leather, rubber, military uniform and the ‘skinhead’ retro-style that many would recall from their youth. Fetish wear could also extend to the ‘scally’ image associated with younger straight men who represent an ‘underclass’ such as t-shirts, tracksuit bottoms, baseball cap and training shoes. It has been argued that gay men buy this kind of image, convert it into “symbolic capital” (or physical/sexual capital) when attending ‘scally’ or ‘chav nights’ in London gay clubs. But, in consuming images of working class masculinity, gay men distance themselves from the lowly status that the ‘scally’ or ‘chav’ betoken, expressing symbolic violence towards the young men so labelled (Johnson 2008). Whilst this is credible, it overlooks the possibility that some middle-aged men like Ben (50) use ageing capital related to the body to eroticise images of working class masculinity and dress in such style to attract the kind of men he likes rather than as a means of derogating young working class straight men. In a similar vein, Halperin has noted how gay men’s appropriation of hegemonic masculinities does not necessarily entail straightforward mimicry, derogation or even adulation. For instance, developed muscles signify “less as armature than objects of desire” (Halperin 1995: 114).

In an American context, similar forms of gendered and class-coded presentation have been identified as part of a historical trend since the 1940s towards “virilisation” of gay male appearance (Chauncey 1994: 358). This is encapsulated in the moustachioed, be-denimed ‘clone’ in the late 1970s and early 1980s who appropriated American blue collar dress. There was also some evidence available within observations of embodied styles that consciously adverted to an alternative, retro ‘punky’ image. These were more apparent in mixed spaces
and, in particular, *Posh!*, which seemed to be a venue where a more eclectic range of embodied styles were permissible. There were only a few instances of men who presented styles that could be read as feminine or of men who adopted styles associated with younger men like the elaborate, asymmetric, ‘exotic bird’ or ‘tropical fish’ hairstyles, ‘skinny,’ hipster drainpipe jeans. This style was noted especially in observations in the mixed *Changes Bar* and *The Empire*. There was also differentiation in terms of body ‘types.’ Not all gay men are the bearers of primped, muscled, toned physiques. Observations indicated that there were many more men who dispensed with such labour. In contrast to this idealised physique, there were numerous ‘bears’ whose fatter, hairier, older bodies represent a claim for desirability beyond the toned, glabrous, youthful form considered the mark of value on the gay commercial scene.

How midlife gay men think of, express themselves and interact with others is not reducible to self-presentation or the places that men frequent (Daniel 46). But, congruence between midlife gay men’s taste for the decor of a venue (field) and tastes for self-presentation (habitus), which hark back to the formative experiences of their youth and the gay scene (Kates 2002: 383 - 4), are suggestive of a historically informed, age-inflected cultural politics of place and taste:

I mix more in *The Classic, Together* and *Mystery*… I prefer going to places like that ‘cause it’s a lot more down to earth… a lot less pretentious… Whereas if you go somewhere like *Canale Uno* or *Queer* (bars frequented by younger men), there are a lot more disco bunnies, ‘trendy Wendys’… and I feel uncomfortable there… I become a lot more aware of what’s going on around me… have to be a lot more observant… of how I interact with people… and that kind of disconnects me from what’s going on… and stops me from just enjoying myself. (Davie 44).

Though he described himself as originating from a middle class background, Davie feels more at home in the ‘down to earth’ spaces associated with midlife gay men. The *Together Bar*, to which Davie refers, is a smaller, intimate late night, ‘men only’ cellar bar and decorated to appeal to a masculine-coded, sexually charged atmosphere (aided by the style of music played in the venue) with its uniform black interior with minimal lighting. It is a ‘broad church’ but tends to attract ‘bears,’ ‘leathermen’ and those attuned to BDSM sex. Davie’s account was typical in that it contrasts the spaces frequented by middle-aged men.
with the more mixed, ‘trendy,’ ‘pretentious’ (overtly stylish and middle class) interior spaces, (characterised by glass, light wood and chrome) associated with younger gay men and their embodied styles. Here, middle-aged gay men could feel hyper-alert and stand out as matter out of place. The informant’s account indicates that differences in venues’ interior design and decor and differences of embodied style are important symbolically and emotionally. This resonates with research conducted in the village that found that bars were expressions of, “communitas, individualism and diversity” and were used as, “individual expressions of identity” as well as mood (Haslop et al 1998: 320 – 1). The differences of decor and personal style Davie evokes suggest the operation of an age-inflected symbolism that involves habituated preferences for particular types of bodily display, erotics and forms of interaction.

Moreover, although the village scene is differentiated by age, midlife gay men’s styles of dressing and grooming are also internally differentiated:

I just dress differently and that creates an immediate barrier, as I’m not seen as belonging to the same crowd… With gay men of my age, there’s very distinct kinds of groups... the leather/denim and er... rubber crowd... And then you’ve got yer ‘bears.’ And they all have a very distinct…. dress code almost… I think the gay scene’s always been like that… symbols that you can identify people sexually into the same kind of things that you are or have similar interests. (Davie 44).

Differentiation in appearance, along the lines of erotic preference, can result in divisions among midlife gay men. Failure to adopt any of the styles popular with midlife gay men as identified above can mean exclusion from socio-sexual citizenship among one’s similar aged peers. Embodying certain images appears to be the passport to social acceptance ‘or belonging’ and sexual opportunity. Differences in dress, grooming and bodily styles and the venues associated with them could represent certain midlife gay male ‘urban tribes’ (Maffesoli 1996). These semi-permanent, generationally significant forms of self-presentation reveal the fault lines of erotic preferences that might shape who is included in or excluded from certain forms of identification and erotic or social ‘scenes’ within a larger scene. Davie also offers clues as to the significance of dress on the Manchester bar scene as a particular discursive space (Kitchin 2002: 207 – 09, 212 – 14). For example, Davie experienced the scene’s capacity to compel as inevitable and beyond the power to change, “the gay scene’s always been like that” (Kitchin 2002). Here, image is (almost) all and
demands that men dress beyond mere ‘comfort.’ This kind of story is indicative of how the requirements for self-production on the scene and the emphasis on bodily surface violate the holistic subjectivity considered central to authenticity. There is some historical, cross-national evidence to support Davie’s thinking. For example, Chauncey’s study of gay male subcultures in New York between 1890 and 1940 indicates certain continuities in practice. His description of these past practices, running along highly gendered axes of butch and feminine, as, “multiple systems of classification, inflected by class and ethnicity” (Chauncey 1994: 130) might be applicable to the village today. Although their precise expressions may differ, the classification systems extant on the Manchester scene comprise different styles of dress, grooming and mannerisms as forms of identification as ‘top’, ‘bottom,’ ‘leatherman,’ ‘skinhead’ etc. Such labels might then indicate how the aesthetics of differentiation are implicated in ethics involving “a conceptual mapping of male sexual practices predicated on assumptions about the character of men” (Chauncey 1994: 14). This involves a more consciously, working class coded, masculine style of embodiment where ‘tops’ or those taking a dominant role in sex are more highly prized (Morrison 2004: 177).

5.2.3 Men ageing with a touch of class?

Some of the descriptions above hint at how influences of social class play out in contradictory ways (for example around the figure of the ‘scally’ or ‘chav’). The differences of social class were part of the politics of place, being particularly visible in the many observed congruencies between the type of venue (sub-field) and forms of embodiment (habitus) common among the clientele it attracted:

Mid-fifties, the ‘v’ of his crisp, white t-shirt was visible under a tasteful, brown striped jumper, body-hugging padded tabard-style jacket, tailored jeans with turn ups and expensive-looking, calf-length, criss-crossing lace-up boots. This appeared to be in sync with a body, whose outlines appeared ‘buffed’ through regular gym exercise... I later overheard him talking without a recognisable regional accent (perhaps trying to chat up) a young man with whom he was familiar in a way that suggested a knowledge of the university system. (Field note, Canale Uno 30/12/08, mid evening).

The above example of embodied style suggests ageing capital in the form of a care in coordinating what to wear and how to present a dressed, groomed and shaped middle-aged gay
male self in a mixed venue reputed to attract a more ‘trendy’ clientele where ‘smart casual’ is expected. The detail of the man’s dress suggests the economic means and cultural knowledge to achieve an age-appropriate image that is presentable, recognisably masculine and is indicative of a claim to socio-sexual citizenship in this particular milieu.

In contrast, The Old Cock tended to sanction a much more relaxed style of dress and was populated by seemingly working class middle-aged gay men. Even when men dressed smartly, it was often in a less fashionable or avuncular way that suggested that the wearer had found a style from their era and remained faithful to it. This hints at the kind of ageing capital discussed in chapter four suggestive of self-acceptance and resonates with Woodward’s idea of “sartorial biographies” where the person may have found the comfort of their ‘real,’ or more permanent “sartorial self” (Woodward 2007: chapter 3). But, this self-acceptance can be contrasted with how regular clients of The Old Cock might be understood elsewhere on the scene. In effect, its regular customers risk being damned by association given the venue’s association with ‘rent boys’ (male prostitutes) who are thought to serve the sexual needs of the ‘old queens’ who go there. The bar’s clientele represents forms of habitus that fails to achieve standards of display that would legitimate them in the ‘smarter,’ more fashionable, youth-coded canal-front venues:

Man circa late fifties/early sixties, big glasses and wearing a very worn looking, tweed-style jacket and dark, nylon trousers where the fabric seemed to be shiny, thinning at the knees. He seemed familiar with two other men of about the same age, similarly dressed. His skin was mottled and whenever he laughed, he revealed crooked, brown-stained teeth, some of which were missing at the sides. (Field note, The Old Cock 12/11/08, late evening).

In the instance above, the man’s appearance, like that of his associates, could be described as ‘old-fashion’d if not dishevelled. His appearance suggests poorer physical health - the mottled skin and dental condition. The forms of self-presentation of many of the older clients observed in this bar suggested a relative lack of economic means and possibly the embodied cultural knowledge to look appropriately smart and more youthful. This kind of appearance was not particularly amiss given the rules of the game (or of acceptance) in this kind of social space where the production of a youthful, glamorous self may have been felt less as an imperative. But, many of the pub’s clients might be thought to typify a form of embodiment
that represents the alterity and dereliction of an ageing, socio-economic and sexual underclass that would exclude them from socio-sexual citizenship in spaces like Canale Uno. During observations and when socialising, I have overheard younger and middle-aged gay men talk about going to The Old Cock to ‘slum it.’ At best, this could involve time-off from scrutiny in the smarter venues and at worst it represents a form of differentiation that involves ridicule and consuming the spectacle of the (older), less entitled, infrahuman other (Binnie and Skeggs 2004).

5.2.4 Interaction: rules in time and space

The village is a site of night-time leisure, consisting of set of spaces where having fun is not just legitimated but might be considered a moral duty:

Sometimes when I’m there I think, ‘Is my hair looking that bad or I’m looking fat…’ and I feel self-conscious…. Also, people talk to me as though I look really worried or down... Tell me to “cheer up.” And that really upsets me. What am I supposed to do about it? (Paul 53).

Feeling uncomfortable on account of his age, weight and condition of his hair not only indicated how midlife gay men might be on heightened alert to their bodily ‘imperfections’ but can also attract censure for looking ‘serious’ in ludic space. Paul’s rhetorical question at the end of the above statement suggests that the injunction to “cheer up” breaches his sense of authenticity – the ability to be or express himself in situ. His normal mien or habitual expression/bearing is called into question as it breaches the liminal, celebratory ambience thought to be appropriate for the village. That Paul’s sense of discomfort disturbs some people also indicates that there are social norms in operation in the village governing sensual geographies of display, touch and approach. These norms reflect changeable temporalities within spaces which are experienced differently at different times/days of the week. As Taylor’s work (2010) on queer music scenes suggests, subjects require knowledge of the scene’s temporalities to know how to negotiate them and dress and behave for the right time and place. For instance, Tuesday evenings might attract an appropriately attired after-work crowd engaged in more muted forms of display and interaction whereas late nights at weekend oblige less inhibited, eye-catching group performances. Such forms of interaction were more characteristic of Club Mystery and Together (‘men only’ spaces largely frequented
by the middle-aged) though, in any venue, the appropriateness of interaction is equally dependent on how full or empty it is at any given time as well as the amount of alcohol consumed.

However, places like The Old Cock stood out for its more relaxed rules relating to approach and touch:

*Within minutes of my sitting down close to the bar area, a man about mid-forties who had come in after me who I had only dimly noticed came and sat by me without much ado. He had a few drinks already and started a conversation that consisted mainly of repetitious details about himself. He repeatedly asked me the same questions about myself – where I live, how I stay slim etc. After commenting on my physique several times the man became rather ‘touchy-feely’ and grabbed my knee. I signalled via facial expression that this was not acceptable. He stopped and then asked a few times if I wanted a drink.* (Field note, The Old Cock, late weekday evening 12/11/08).

The man’s direct approach was surprising because it breached the usual rules of engagement, including those relating to cruising and chatting up. Normally, this kind of encounter begins with an exchange of lingering looks as a prelude to approach, which indicate cultural rules or even a grammar of approach, as implied in Humphreys (1970) classic study of sex between men in public toilets. The person in question had no doubt that he counted in this venue as a sexual citizen but his overture was discomforting because it suggested ownership of my body and presumed my consent possibly because I was sitting alone looking around the bar. This may have given the impression that I was more than ready for a sexual encounter. The man in question was though aware of social norms governing bodily autonomy when he read my lack of consent expressed through facial expression and tried to repair the interaction (through the offer of a drink). This kind of sexual overture was only experienced in this venue but it was one of several upfront (though less invasive) appraisals of my body through looks and words.

By contrast, in the more mixed or ‘younger’ spaces and at certain times of the day, sexualised or other disinhibited forms of self-presentation and interaction risk ridicule, censure or the penalty of social distance as behaviour out of place:
Early sixties, unshaven and with long, unkempt, grey, wispy hair with a bald patch on top. He accosted or pointed brazenly at anyone who came within his orbit. He ‘gatecrashed’ a party of three – gay man (late forties) with two straight friends (couple, mid-thirties). At one point, the older man mimed pulling out a Priapus-sized penis from between the legs of the straight man. The trio laughed but rictus smiles suggested underlying embarrassment - they were tolerating a drunk. This ‘pantomime’ provoked wry amusement from those far enough away from him and discomfort and/or disdain from those within the man’s orbit. On finding out that the younger man was straight, the drunken man challenged the heterosexual couple’s presence in a gay bar. The trio left soon afterwards. Shortly after this episode, a man (early forties) who had witnessed the event angrily confronted the perpetrator for his behaviour towards the heterosexual couple. (Field notes, Canale Uno 30/12/08, Sunday early evening).

This kind of display by a middle-aged gay man of alcohol fuelled, ‘age-inappropriate’ behaviour also registers as part of a complex politics of place. In this instance, the man’s self-presentation as dishevelled and his disinhibited behaviour could be read as problematic in this venue on an early Sunday evening. The protagonist’s appearance and behaviour can be read as a lack of ageing capital or at least a lack of decorum. The man’s behaviour, whilst tolerated through gritted teeth, resulted in disdain from other drinkers who were concerned to maintain actual distance between the man and themselves. The angry challenge to the older man’s behaviour towards the heterosexual couple, defending their right to occupy gay space, whilst morally tenable, is also suggestive of how some midlife gay men might appropriate the right to police behaviour in certain spaces of the village. It is suggestive of how kinds of self-presentation, display and interaction are read as indicators of moral character (Rose 1999: 73), which are legitimated or not according to time and place.

5.3 Alienated men: the bar scene as disenchanted space

Accounts generated in observations and interviews indicated that the village scene can be experienced as a site of critical scrutiny, erasure as a sexual citizen, degraded relations and intergenerational conflict (Bennett and Thompson (1991); Berger (1982); Cruz (2003); Friend (1991); Hostetler (2004); Jones (2000); Lee (2006); and Pugh (2002)). Being reduced to one’s assumed chronology and appearance reprises a familiar understanding of the scene as
hypersexual marketplace characterised by promiscuity, ‘superficiality,’ self-serving, calculating behaviour where middle-aged men face exclusion. Daniel (46) expressed a widely shared sense of alienation where men might be physically ‘on’ the scene but not feel part ‘of’ it. As a consequence of the bar scene’s obsession with sexual opportunity, subjects might succumb to intense pressure to adopt pretences in order to ‘front it’ in ways that conceal the very human quality of vulnerability (Daniel 46), thus denying men’s integrity and authenticity. Indeed, all interviewees recounted experiences which referenced the emotionless, disenchanted forms of relating in a milieu where fast sex is the bottom line and older men are excluded from the party. The village could be a locus of disappointment, jealousy, conflict and isolation within a group or crowd. Anyone going there might risk betrayal and its many temptations could destroy couple relationships (Sam 45). It is a space where men might expect hostility rather than support:

The gay scene isn’t the most friendly of places… Given the opportunity to put somebody down, especially among our own peer group, we’re actually very good at it. And we’ve spent an awful lot of time… demanding respect and understanding from the straight community… whilst actually forgetting that we don’t look after each other very well. In fact, I have had far more respect off the straight community. (Clive 45).

Clive’s story is interesting not only because he feels more respected and supported by his straight (male) associates (Price 1995: 5) but also because it invites consideration that younger gay men might feel alienated (Mann 1996: 351) when socialising in the village. This critique of alienation, itself suggestive of a form of age-inflected emotional cultural capital, is reflexive insofar as it comments on the irony that gay men might unite to demand respect, recognition and civil rights yet are not very good at supporting each other. Clive intimates that this is not something that has been lost but something the ‘gay community’ has yet properly to discover (notwithstanding any lessons learned from the HIV/AIDS crisis). Clive’s critique is also ethical because it contains a desire for a more united and supportive community. It registers collective responsibility for this alienated state and expresses a wish that men might work across differences to address the social cleavages and the ageism thought integral to gay male culture (Adam 2000; Bennett and Thompson 1991; Berger 1982; Bergling 2004; Brown et al 1997; Cruz 2003; Hostetler 2004; Kaufman and Chin Phua; Jones 2000; Lang 2001; Lee 1991; and Pugh 2002).
However, the dominant account generated in interviews portrays the commercial scene as youth-oriented space where midlife gay men are reduced to their apparent chronology:

It’s completely worked out bodies… beautiful, white, shining teeth… It’s all youth, body etc… Yes, people might admit that they’ve got a little bit more wisdom but who needs wisdom when you can get a nice firm pair of buttocks? (Sam 45).

The sense of alienation that men referred to was evident in the visually-dominated character of the village bar scene where subjectivity is read in terms of fragmented body parts – muscles, ‘shining teeth’ and ‘nice firm buttocks.’ Surface appearance, which bears the signs of age and ageing, is, again, described as being privileged over the more ‘authentic’ interior qualities of personality, values, wisdom and the whole person (Martins and Tiggeman 2007). In referring to the labour that goes into producing appearance, the “worked out bodies,” Sam registers the socially constructed character of age and, indeed, youth itself. He might reflect how middle-aged gay men feel when confronted by their younger counterpart but his words suggest an institutionalised form of moral and epistemic differentiation from other gay men. Here other gay men, younger ones in particular, are thought to over-rely on the visual, which constrains them into seeing subjectivity only in objectified, fragmented ways (Martins and Tiggeman 2007). The presumption that younger gay men over-privilege bodily labours is itself a form of stereotyping that expresses ageism towards them. It needs to be borne in mind that Sam was responding to a magazine image of younger gay men, dressed up and out ‘clubbing,’ which will have coloured the content and framing of his story. But, we might ask who Sam’s words are describing when observation sessions that focussed on presentational styles in the context of cross-generational interaction showed that quite a few younger men did not approximate the pristine physical qualities that the informant describes. Such views suggest, a more problematic use of ageing capital where the notion of authenticity – specifically, its appeal to holism - represents a claim for distinction and self-worth in a hierarchy that denies midlife gay men’s bodily value.

Moreover, there is evidence that age-coded spaces in the village are normatively policed by younger gay men:

*I was accosted by a friendly drunk (early thirties) in company with two other men of a similar age who continued to scan the dance floor. Having established that this was
my first visit, he asked if I was, “more of a ‘Mystery type boy’?” (Referring to a club associated with older gay men). Although intoned in jocular fashion, its undertone was that I’d been rumbled as a ‘gatecrasher’ at a youth club. (Field note, Disco Inferno 12/6/09, early hours of Saturday morning).

The above description is one of several instances where I was interpellated; quite literally called into being or named (and shamed) as a middle-aged gay man in younger or mixed aged spaces. Disco Inferno was a place where younger men enjoy a sense of entitlement by virtue of a more youthful body. The ironic designation of me as a ‘boy’ suggests an impostor whose real identity had been unmasked. I was the wrong age in the wrong place. Whilst I might still count as a credible presence on the wider gay scene, just about given the reaction of my interlocutor’s friends), my experience suggests that middle-aged gay men count as sexual citizens provided they stay within their own distinct spaces with their own kind.

Moreover, high expectations around appearance operating within the gay district suggest that policing of space extends to midlife gay men who are physically disabled:

Outside were several men who used wheelchairs and walking sticks (mostly fifties and sixties). A younger man (early thirties) was overheard referring to a wheelchair user as, “a spastic” and asked out loud, face etched with distaste, “What’s he doing here?” When challenged by the older man, who, ironically, he had been chatting up, the younger man breezily confirmed that he had used the very term. The older man replied evenly, “That’s a putdown. My boyfriend is in a wheelchair.” This prompted a rather hysterical explanation, “Oh, it’s just a word... I never meant anything by it,” followed by a very terse, ‘Sorry’ that was barked, almost spat. The younger man swiftly turned back to face the group he was with. (Field note, Together Bar, early Saturday evening, ‘Pride’ weekend 29/8/09).

This observation was generated at Manchester Pride (a late summer, weekend carnival in the village). The disablism from the younger gay man was shocking for the overtness of its psychic violence, though it is worth noting that disabled people are routinely excluded and discounted from sexual citizenship on the gay scene (Butler 1999: 207 – 210). It is particularly significant that the man in question appropriated the right to insult people within his orbit and within a space that is understood as occupied largely by middle-aged gay men.
There is an irony in that the perpetrator seems attracted to a man older than himself and did not appear to understand that his comments might have caused offence to the person he was chatting up and those around him likely to be aware that disability can result from ageing and HIV. Although this scenario is a more brutal example of ageism, the older man’s response serves as a salutary reminder of the use of age-inflected emotional and cultural capital that enables him assertively to level with the younger man whilst avoiding any violence to the latter’s dignity.

However, scrutiny of the ‘imperfections’ of the ageing body was by no means confined to younger men but was also deployed by men of a similar age:

It’s like two friends of mine in Classic Bar... they’re just always commenting... like, ‘Have you got make-up on?’ Or because of me eyelashes, ‘Have you got mascara on?’ They think it’s funny but it becomes wearing... The rumour going around is that I’ve had my anal hair bleached... It’s like being over-analysed... It’s as if they’re trying to catch you out all the time, like, ‘Oh, have you had something done, some treatment... botox or whatever?’ Just stop ra- ping me! (Sam 45).

Sam’s protest concerning the “rumours” about the extent of his grooming practices and that friends are “trying to catch him out” are redolent of the kind policing of gender and efforts to look young analysed in the previous chapter concerning those thought to be trying too vigorously to maintain youth. The palpable anger with which Sam intoned his statement indicated that this expression of the gaze or rather fine scrutiny could be experienced as even more of a violation of the ageing body-self because it was perpetrated by associates; people he thought that he might be able to trust and who themselves are likely to have experienced ageism. Sam’s friends’ constant surveillance under the guise of banter and humour is a reminder of how ageism is internalised by middle-aged gay men and informs interaction between them.

Contrariwise, subjects might equally experience erasure rather than scrutiny by their peers in spaces that might be understood as their own territory:

*Late forties/early fifties, a small, wiry figure wearing an elaborate leather harness, leather wristband, white jockstrap and boots. Mostly he sat alone near the back wall*
on a barstool, legs akimbo and looked around the bar at men quite freely in a way that suggested determination. Despite his efforts, he was met with little if any attention. (Field note, Together Bar 29/3/09, early hours).

The man observed may not have approximated the kind of physical standards of desirability considered to be demanded in the village and, in this case, in a space associated with middle-aged men. The subject’s state of (un)dress and demeanour can be read as communicating self-recognition as a sexual citizen, a wish for sexual opportunity with the kind of sex/sex partner that he was seeking in place associated with middle-aged gay men into BDSM sex. His erotic gaze was trained quite freely onto others, which indicates a certain amount of confidence and determination. But, the protagonist risks inviting the gaze of others, which could attract ridicule for appearing ‘desperate’ or indiscriminate. Despite giving off very clear signals, the man’s efforts were met with civil indifference: nobody appeared to deride his appearance or the strategy to attract a sex partner but he went largely unnoticed throughout the evening. This suggests either habituation to such overt displays or the denial of sexual citizenship because the subject is marked as less desirable in the sexual economy of surface appearance. The man’s experience suggests limits on middle-aged gay men’s willingness to hear the claims to sexual citizenship being made by men who may not meet the high aesthetic standards expected in situ.

When midlife gay men venture into mixed or ‘younger men’s’ spaces, they could find them internally spatialised or zoned along the lines of age:

On the podia and on the dance floor were quite a number of men in their twenties and 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 one man, mid-forties, who seemed to be very carefully picking his way alongside the edge of the dance floor (heading for the toilet) 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 was embattled by the club experience. (Field note, Disco Inferno 12/6/09, early hours of Saturday morning).
The role of the man who seemed to experience *Disco Inferno* as an onslaught was peripheral to the main event. Like the few other men of his age who were present, he was a solitary figure and stayed well back from the edge of the dance floor. This indicates that midlife gay men experience a fragile sense of legitimacy within such spaces where they can literally be reduced to the status of immobilised onlooker at a party. There were no bare-chested displays of dancing on podia by older men. Indeed, the whole sensorium, involving bodies in motion, sounds, sights, smells appears to be violently out of sync with this particular midlife gay man’s habitus. The club featured in the above description was visited a second time on its Monday ‘1980s night’ reputed to attract middle-aged men. Even on ‘retro’ nights, the older men observed were mostly in their forties and none appeared older than mid-fifties. They tended to remain on the periphery and survey the dance floor from a distance or corner, rarely moving in order to ‘cruise.’ When in peer aged groups, middle-aged men tended to remain internally focussed:

*The campery had begun to ratchet up a notch among this group of peer-aged men - a gaggle of men in ‘Fred Perry’ t-shirts and combat pants. “Thriller” was played and one of them did a remarkable facsimile of the jerky dancing by the zombies in the 1980s Michael Jackson pop video. At one point, the comedian turned round suddenly to see one of his companions and screeched as if he had been confronted by the very ghost of the just-departed Jackson himself. This remarkable, spontaneous act of comedy caused howls of laughter. The younger men nearby barely registered the antics of the group of men and the group did not pay much attention outside of itself for much of the night* (Field notes, *Disco Inferno* early hours of the morning 29/6/09).

The scenario suggests that the group of middle-aged men did not feel unwelcome in younger gay men’s space but rather staked a claim to occupy and enjoy themselves within it. In this case, there appear to be few limits on how these well-presented, socially confident, midlife gay men in the security of a group express their ageing selves. It was a very uplifting example of the kind of adult play and humour that are often integral to intimacy and friendship. But, this scenario also points to alienated experience. The men’s antics went as good as unnoticed by the younger men close by, (who would have known the reference the impersonator was making). The men in the group were indifferent to the younger men (largely in pairs) outside of it. This mundane mutual inattention suggests the operation of norms in relation to age that sanction civil indifference and social distance between men of different ages where nobody
was insulted but men are still divided. This kind of experience again suggests limits to Plummer’s claim that gay culture serves as the basis for an “interpretive community” (1995: 134), which overlooks the impact of deep, habituated divisions of age. Why gay men of different ages should be so divided is explored in more detail in chapter 8. Suffice it to say for now that if younger men are habitually indifferent to middle-aged-gay men, middle-aged men can imagine younger men as manipulative (if thought of as ‘on the make’) or can even trivialise them as empty vessels.

5.4 The scene as spectacular: seriously ludic practices in liminal spaces

If interview stories were largely about bodily discomfort, surveillance of the self and by others and as sense of exclusion, observation sessions produced stories of display and relating that suggested mutual care, and claims to sexual citizenship and belonging on ‘the scene.’ Contrary to Binnie and Skeggs (2004) and Whittle (1994), the commercial gay scene is not uniformly alienated, commodified space. It is also the locus of aural, visual and kinaesthetic pleasures where the notions of age and ageing can be blurred and ageism challenged (consciously and subconsciously) and forgotten about through performance. As intimated, the village is the site of many different displays of gendered sexuality such as drag performance, cross-dressing, trans, fetish, ‘indie,’ retro, skinhead and dressing for comfort. There are many colourful, spectacular, theatrical forms of self-presentation and opportunities for participants to look or be looked at. Such performances indicate continuing enjoyment and successful negotiation of the scene in terms of how to make it work rather than as an oppressive experience. The possibility of sexual opportunity, chances to let go of inhibitions and for respite from harsh ageist scrutiny on the scene that are available in its ‘older’ spaces might go some way towards explaining why some middle-aged men continue to frequent parts of the village.

On this particular account, parts of the gay district can figure as a space where midlife gay men might proclaim continuing validity of an ‘authentic self.’ The gains of ageing capital (maturity, sense of self) and deployment of age-related technologies of the self (forms of thinking that can free men from negative constraint) might liberate midlife gay men from pressures to justify their ageing presence. In short they may, “no longer have anything to prove” (Vince 49), which could signify relative freedom from inhibitions over creative use of
the body that informants reported experiencing when younger. Spaces in the village popular with midlife gay men can enable self-expression without fear of censure or scrutiny:

That’s one thing specially about the parts of the gay scene; as an older gay man, you can get on the dance floor and nobody really bats an eyelid, especially with the moves I’ve got... (Laughs raucously). (Warren 52).

Also, within this account, experience of the gaze, as agent and recipient, can change according to context and signify in various ways. It was widely recognised that men can look or be looked at for a plurality of reasons other than ageist scrutiny:

I go there more to look at people… just to enjoy the sheer physicality of it. (Ben 50).

I’ve got a nice bottom… If I’m going out to pull, especially if it’s it nice weather at Pride and I’ve got me holiday tan, it would be shorts and that in summer so that it can be seen. (Sam 45).

I think the pleasure’s in the cruising more often than the sex. It’s nice being chased around a club or chasing a guy round a club. (Martin 52).

Dancing? …I’m quite physical… I move my body, hips… provocative moves… and it attracts attention (laughs). (Tony 59).

The above statements in their different ways represent claims to continuing sexual citizenship. The gaze can involve looks that convey desire and the sensual pleasure of looking at others and their embodiment, as in Ben’s comment. Sam invites the gaze onto his “nice bottom” (contradicting his earlier statement about objectification and fragmentation of bodies on the scene). Martin describes the greater fun to be had in mischievous, playful ‘cat and mouse’ cruising for sex where the prelude could be more enjoyable than the sex itself. Tony indicates the joys of expressing his ageing self through suggestive dance moves that bring admiration. There is excitement in being the flaneur and being looked at especially in the liminal, carnivalesque context of the annual Pride weekend celebration or if out ‘clubbing’ or doing the circuit at weekends (Kates 2002).
The dominant account generated in observations offers an antidote and challenge to the hegemony of the sorry saga of the scene as uniformly oppressive. Many of the less inhibited instances observed in late night venues (especially those frequented by middle-aged men) may well have been alcohol or possibly drug-assisted but they show, if temporarily, that the doing of gay male ageing identity can (for some) involve creative opportunities for agency and resistance to negative definition:

And I’ve had younger men tell me on the dance floor… ‘What the hell are you doing here...? This place isn’t for old men.’ You have to remember that most of these young people when they see people like us, or me rather (laughs), they see their own fathers… They don’t expect to find… their parents at the same disco, do they? (Laughs). I think it alters their behaviour… ‘cause they can’t get off their tits if they think their parents are watching them… A few years ago, I was in Inferno and someone said to me, ‘I never expected to see my father in here...’ I felt like sayin’, ‘Who the fuck do you think you are?’ But, I controlled it and said something more positive… It got a message across… Anyone can go to fuckin’ Inferno and get off their tits… Nobody should be complaining… What makes them think it’s their domain...? Bullshit! We can all go to Inferno and get off our tits on the same dance floor (Tony 59).

Tony’s defiant presence in younger gay men’s space offers another example of a “politics of the minor” (Rose 1999: 279 - 80) seeking to rework the immediate context in which it occurs. His resistance to attempts at policing this space are significant for several reasons. It indicates reflexive awareness of the power of ageism that operates in a way that renders cross-generational sociation practically taboo – given the reference to parental relations. At the same time, his account troubles the notion that middle-aged gay men intrinsically represent some kind of inhibiting presence for their younger peers. His unapologetic embodied difference and his words place the responsibility on the younger man who confronted him to do something about his ageist thinking. Tony’s questioning of the young man who confronted him is another example of the use of cultural capital associated with growing older to question ageism in situ whilst leaving the antagonist’s dignity intact. Indeed, his statement represents a political, moral plea for a more inclusive gay scene where men of different ages might recognise differences and accept each other as a matter of routine.
Much of the peer age interaction observed in spaces frequented by midlife gay men challenges the endemic assumption that the village scene is uniformly a place of unalloyed ageism and degraded ways of relating. Much of what was observed suggested sociability, friendship where considerations of age might pale into insignificance. These were visible in the many instances of men’s ordinary behaviour particularly where bodily display and interaction suggested the intimate details and small, giveaway tie-signs (Goffman 1971: 37) suggesting close association. There were many instances of mutually trusting intimacies between men of a similar age and some (though fewer) between middle-aged and younger gay men where affection was permissible outside of the couple.

Midlife gay men’s ways of relating could also exemplify a being there for others and skilled social performance:

Tall, early fifties, cropped hair. He was in a group with three men and a young woman in their twenties and thirties but he was the mainstay of it. He practically shepherded the group and made sure that all were included in the interaction. He would bring a member of the party back in if they drifted to the edge of the invisible boundary. He seemed to combine close attention with surveillance of what was happening on the periphery. He was very confident in his subtle, warm, friendly handling of his companions. (Field note Canale Uno 20/3/09, early-mid evening).

The above careful, gentle shepherding of the group appeared to be motivated by concern to prevent anyone of the party becoming detached when the bar was beginning to fill up. The people who knew the man in question could have been so habituated to his solicitousness, accomplished with humour and kindness that they did not appear to notice his subtle attempts to ensure that they stayed together as a group. The handling of the group is suggestive of emotionally inflected ageing capital expressed through habitual bodily performance that imperceptibly oils the wheels of intimacy and friendship whilst ensuring participation and group cohesion.

Further, the viability of the midlife gay male body-self was discernible in forms of display and interaction where subjects were recipients and providers of play, pleasure and mutual care and attention:
The smaller man (early forties) looked up at his companion (late forties) and began to stroke the other man’s chest quite unselfconsciously. They looked at each other in a way that combined belonging with lust – as if anticipating the sex they would later have. They engaged in a kind of facial play where the older man arched an eyebrow, widening his eyes as the other smiled broadly and salaciously... About 20 minutes later, the younger man, a little worse for drink, began to look lost, fretful. He got out his mobile phone as tracking device and appeared to send a text message. Within a few minutes the older man returned and seeing the anxiety then relief on his friend’s face quipped, ‘God, you are pissed, aren’t you?’ This was delivered less as an admonition than recognition of his friend’s vulnerable state. (Field note, Frontier Bar 1/8/09, early hours of the morning).

The situation just described combines friendship, erotic interest and deeper intimacy in a fairly crowded bar late on Saturday night. Such a scenario resonates with a queer temporality (Halberstam 2005), which challenges heteronormative understandings of ‘proper,’ responsible adulthood, relationality and the hours people keep. The men’s erotic play involved an exchange of subtle, humorous facial expressions that resembled a kind of facial choreography. But, this excerpt exemplifies the strength of the bond that the slightly younger man expressed that when separated from his companion, he saw fit to use his mobile telephone as a tracking device to relocate his friend among the throng. The care and concern is reciprocated by his companion who is amused at his friend’s state of anxiety in a somewhat inebriated state. In their own small but important ways, such forms of interaction, that were fairly common, give the lie to the idea that the village scene is mostly about calculating sexual opportunity and no place to find friendship, love and affection. They indicate the potential for freedom of expression in certain spaces of the village at certain times. They resonate with the forms of intimacy and friendship explored in chapter 8 which can provide the emotional resources and support to enable men to feel included in one aspect or space of gay culture and maintain a sense of self-worth.

Moreover, playful practices between men of different ages were sometimes possible in some of the more mixed age spaces where dancing was possible:

*Man about late fifties/early sixties bald, wiry with another man about early/mid twenties cardigan skinny jeans, little black pumps etc. They leapt onto the dance floor*
at the sound of, Are You Strong Enough? Their Cher impersonations involved energetic, theatrical waving of arms and appropriate facial contortions as they mouthed Cher’s lyrics to each other. During Pink’s, ‘Cause I’m a Fighter’ their theatrics attracted an audience as they punched their fists in the air and towards each other mock aggressively. They began spontaneously to mirror each other’s movements, gestures and shook their ample showgirl breasts at each other. The floor cleared to allow the two men space to manoeuvre. At one point they were dancing side-by-side, moving backwards and forwards in-step, waving an index finger held out in front of them. The song’s histrionic refrain was, ‘One Night Only!’ The audience was transfixed; enthusiastic applause followed. (Field notes, Changes Bar 20/3/09, late night).

The example above was the most eye-catching of several displays of dancing and shared ‘campery’ observed in mixed venues that helped constitute the sensual geography of the village scene. This routine, involving a middle-aged and a young gay man, (who might have been separated in age by nearly 40 years), consisted of mesmerising, spontaneous dance moves, routines and lip-synching that referenced gay disco ‘camp classics’ and musicals. The men’s shared interest here suggests the possibility for unity around embodied knowledge and forms of storytelling which could help overcome age barriers and ageism. The antics of the two men also suggest a form of habitus that involves ability to switch codes between behaviours that are understood as both ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine.’ They were also suggestive of technologies of the self in use at least temporarily. At various points, the two men parodied extremes of gender - macho masculinity and showgirl femininity. In exercising these bodily freedoms, the protagonists point to the performativity of ageing, gender and sexuality. At the same time, this code switching indicates a form of agency involving control over bodily expression which might be denied to the protagonists in other domains of their lives.

5.5 The bar scene as ambivalent space: mixed pleasures and dangers

Bodily displays and interaction were by no means uniformly spectacular. In fact, most behaviour observed, (whether enacted by men as lone presences, couples or groups), was rather mundane (Marshall and Rossman 1995: 92 – 4). As one interviewee reminded me in a post-interview update, (Leo 61), village bars can at times be experienced as non-sexualised
spaces where men might simply talk or observe others without any sexual reference. Many of the subtler, less ‘conspicuous’ forms of social interaction suggested a more ambivalent, contradictory experience of the commercial scene as consisting of conjoined pleasures and dangers within a visual culture. As Bill suggests, the scene can promise much but often fail to deliver:

It still seems a place of great fun… a place where you can sort of express yourself…
But, the other side of it was that it could be extraordinarily tense and a big disappointment. (Bill 55).

Indeed, part of the disappointment, and largely articulated by men higher in cultural capital, related to the norms of the village district that restricted certain forms of talk and action. Forms of self-expression and interaction that might be part of a more ‘cultivated’ habitus or more ‘serious’ aspect of the self were regarded as off-limits. Informants reported pressures to produce the self in compliance with a youth-coded gay male culture focused on hedonism, appearance, consumer and celebrity culture (Kates 2002). Thirteen informants expressed feeling obliged to leave behind or suppress more serious, defining aspects of their holistic, ‘authentic’ selves when entering the village. The minutiae of celebrity, recreational drug use and the like might be freely retailed as valid sources of self-entertainment, a gay male lingua franca. But, talk and interaction beyond such gay ‘mainstream’ topics - anything regarded as ‘heavy,’ political, spiritual, ‘arty farty’ or intensely personal could infringe implicit norms of the village as youth-oriented, liminal space. Such accounts show how social class and certain forms of cultural entitlement and differentiation that might be valued elsewhere can actually be limited in the village where certain expressions of differentiation are unwelcome in a space of leisure.

Further, those enjoying the security of being in company may feel themselves to have a relative immunity from the critical gaze. They may feel a greater legitimacy as presences on the commercial scene when they have the ‘alibi’ of being there for the purpose of socialising with friends. But, there were men who, as lone presences on the scene, commonly reacted to the imagined and actual gaze of the generalised other (Mead 1967: 152 - 63) by resorting to props such as mobile phones, free magazines to deflect, defuse or mollify the effects of the gaze and manage the impression others might be receiving:
South East Asian man? (Mid/late forties?) Well defined arms and torso. His dress suggested much care and investment - 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. Variously, he occupied himself with leafing through a (free) magazine, leaflets and switched between a mobile phone and pocket diary. He snatched occasional glances at the group and around the bar and made subtle adjustments to the nap of his t-shirt. When I looked back later, he was almost holding himself; his right hand holding his left shoulder with one leg crossed over his knee and his right hand on left ankle and foot twitching nervously. (Field note, Frontier Bar 11/5/09).

Whilst studied nonchalance like that observed above was common among midlife men out alone, cultural artefacts could also help finesse, excuse or legitimate the lone presence in sexualised space. These were reminiscent of “body glossing techniques” in temporary “territories of the self” carved out in public spaces (Goffman 1971: 31, 52). The episode above is also significant because the subject’s surface appearance as a viable (gym toned) body and subtle monitoring of self in relation to unknown others seems to be inviting the socio-sexual gaze. Yet, this is contradicted by the protective body language of a ‘defended self’ (Hollway and Jefferson 2000), which suggests the power of the gaze to operate simultaneously as governance in ways that can discomfort, constrain. Such actions could disguise that the subject is looking for sex but does not want to break the cardinal rule that enjoins avoidance of looking ‘desperate.’ Anyone could feel uneasy or vulnerable when sharing a space with strangers but such practices suggest that suspicion of the other rather than a supportive, comprehending storytelling community is the default setting particularly in sexualised spaces. There are then ways in which some midlife gay men might experience the commercial scene as a site of visual pleasure but just as much as a potential locus of hostility that contain risks that could compromise the expression of an ‘authentic self’.

Moreover, the scene as ambivalent space was particularly visible in observations of group interaction within mixed age groups in mixed spaces. This ambivalence was also part of a range of choreographies of approach and touch within the gay district:

Trio of one man (early/mid forties) with two men (early twenties). Although one of the younger men was dancing with the older man, touch was mostly one way: from older
to younger. It was hesitant, occurring only on more neutral zones of the body (upper arm and shoulder). They touched each other so gingerly but the older man especially acted as if the younger men’s bodies had some kind of protective layer. (Field note, *Diva’s Bar* 12/6/09, late evening).

It appears that midlife gay men might have opportunities to enjoy the company of younger gay men within the village. The older body-self can be valued to a degree but that there are unspoken limits to or conditions governing this. The difference represented by the middle-aged body is only partially accepted. Tacit cultural rules, based on the assumption of the one-way attraction of age to youth, could set constraints on what forms of tactility are tolerated between them or rather from middle-aged towards younger gay men. The episode above indicates that all parties recognised these implicit rules governing the permissible extent, strength, direction, place and type of touch. Such age-inflected norms could ensure that the boundary between what is social and what is sexual is not breached. Men of different ages might share a drink and social time together but the older party might need to exercise care not to touch inappropriately.

5.6 Conclusion

This chapter has addressed the age-inflected spaces and different forms of interaction at different times and in certain spaces that make up the Manchester gay village ‘scene.’ There are clear limits at certain times and in certain spaces on midlife gay men’s self-expression and how they interact particularly with younger gay men. The village scene does not always provide an “interpretive community” of fellow storytellers (Plummer 1995: 134). But, whilst significant, such accounts risk obscuring more ambivalent forms of negotiation with the scene and accounts which indicate that it can provide social connections that enable men to escape, question and resist gay ageism. Although ageism operated discursively, it appears to call forth its own opposition in forms of embodied display and relating that suggest capacity to act otherwise.

Manchester’s ‘gay village’ appears roughly differentiated or spatialised largely along the lines of age and class. These social divisions or forms of social distance are also indicative of historically shaped forms of distinction from younger gay men as expressed through a cultural politics of place. This historically informed politics is also reminiscent of a “politics
of the minor” as discussed in the previous chapter made up of small acts constructed from within dynamic everyday social locations that are “concerned with the here and now...” and bring about “small reworkings” of their spaces of action” (Rose 1999: 279 – 80). This cultural politics of place was also visible in the congruence between the taste for decor of a venue (field) and dress/grooming (habitus), at times class-inflected, which hark back to men’s formative experiences on the gay scene. For instance, sparsely furnished, dimly lit venues (and careful ‘dressing down’ in jeans and checked shirts) was contrasted with the chrome, wood and glass interiors and more fashionable self-presentation associated with ‘trendy’ spaces, attracting a younger, seemingly affluent clientele. Midlife gay men’s self-presentation and behaviour were though temporally variable - according to time of day/day of the week.

Midlife gay men’s experiences of the village bar scene are not reducible to one kind of account but are divisible into three forms, which are consistent with the tripartite model of cultural politics described in the previous chapter concerning reproduction of or giving into, negotiation with and contestation of ageism. First, and the dominant story mostly generated in interviews, is a version of ‘the scene’ as divided, disenchanted. ‘The scene’ is experienced as the site of exclusion, erasure or a space in which midlife gay men’s embodied selves are reduced to the signs of bodily ageing. Here gay ageism restricts ‘authentic’ self-expression and who men interact with and how they do so. Being overlooked or subjected to the critical gaze (mainly) of younger gay men encourages men to feel negatively differentiated and excluded from belonging within socio-sexual citizenship in this central expression of gay culture. There are intimations that expression of (reverse) ageism towards younger gay men might represent a form of differentiation that attempts to reclaim value in a hierarchy where the ageing gay body is denigrated. Second, and most commonly produced through observations, is an account of the more convivial dimensions of the gay village. Here ‘the scene’ figures as a sensorium of sensory and sensual pleasures. In this rendition of the village scene, the gaze, (as watcher or recipient) has other meanings. It can be actively invited or deployed in ways that deprive it of its power to judge, constrain. This is indicative of the uses of ageing capital and age-inflected ‘technologies of the self’ that enable midlife gay men to transcend restrictions on display and interaction and to challenge ageism. Such forms of self-expression and relating signify as reclamations of socio-sexual citizenship and belonging through playful activities that can humanise and make parts of the village scene more habitable. This story gives the lie to assumptions that the bar scene is: overwhelmingly a place of exclusion and limits on expression of the midlife self due to loss of looks; and is
uniformly commodified space characterised by degraded forms of relating around sexual opportunity and thus is no place to find love, care or friendship. Third, there was a more ambivalent account of the mixed dangers and pleasures of the scene. These expressions of the self are tentatively optimistic but aware of risk. ‘The gaze’ of others can be experienced as contradictory: desired as a sign of continuing socio-sexual citizenship; yet simultaneously felt as discomfort, constraint that compromises authenticity, obliging heightened self-surveillance and suspicion of others.

There are aspects of gay male culture beyond bars and clubs. I now turn to examination of how middle-aged gay men negotiate relations within the 'homospaces' of the gay cyber scene, Manchester’s gay saunas and its gay social groups.
Chapter Six. Negotiating Relations in Other ‘Homospaces’

6.1 Introduction

This chapter concerns how informants negotiate interaction in gay spaces beyond the village bar scene that were significant in interview accounts. There is no neat divide between gay and straight space. Groups of heterosexual women can heterosexualise the gay village (Binnie and Skeggs 2004) and heterosexual space can be ‘gayed’ (chapter 7). But, I have treated the two kinds of space separately in order to highlight how middle-aged gay men in Manchester report negotiating these spaces in different ways. Specifically, this chapter examines informants’ stories of relations occurring in three kinds of ‘homospace’: the ‘virtual scene’ of gay websites; gay saunas; and gay social/support groups.

The chapter focuses on the research questions concerned with: how institutionalised stories of ageing on the gay scene affect how middle-aged gay men understand and express their midlife selves; and what their accounts of relations in homospaces away from the bar scene say about informants’ responses to ageism and how ageism affects their relations with others in these spaces. I demonstrate how middle-aged gay men in Manchester differentiate themselves mainly from younger gay men through various claims made in their accounts of ageing. Reflecting the methodological strategy in chapter 3 that was designed to illuminate men’s different experiences of ageing and ageism, I demonstrate how these responses are divisible into three kinds. In the first instance, middle-aged gay men in Manchester distinguish themselves in moral terms from the ‘superficial,’ depleted and sometimes dangerous ways of relating they associated with younger gay men. But, the claims informants make here can involve capitulation to the constraints on expression of midlife identity and interaction, which stem from gay ageism and reinforce ageist thinking about younger gay men. In the second instance, negotiation with gay ageism can involve ambivalent stances towards it. Claims to differentiation can reinforce conservative discourse about display of the body for socio-sexual purposes and, at times, reinforce ageism. The third instance involves forms of differentiation that involve stories of adventure that can involve attempts to humanise sexualised space. The notion of midlife authenticity (central to ageing capital) and technologies of the self could be mobilised to challenge gay ageism and the normativity of sexualised space and without implying derogation of others. Such strategies appeared more common among informants with the kind of age-inflected cultural capital (linked to
experience of humanistic therapies and/or higher education) that enables them to deploy a
more consciously political critique of relations in the sauna. These humanising practices are
also suggestive of an “ethics of casual sex” involving care for self and other (Seidman 1991: 187) that troubles the moralistic caricature of ‘recreational sex’ as a decadent or ‘liquid’ form
of sexual relations (Bauman 2003).

Further, the chapter complicates respondents’ moral and sometimes class-inflected claims
that gay groups represent more inclusive, empowering relational spaces than the sexualised
elements of the gay scene. Informants’ accounts of participation in groups indicated
differentiation in various ways. In an American context, it has been noted that middle class
gay men are more likely than their working class counterparts to avail themselves of gay
social groups (Barrett and Pollock 2005: 450 – 1). All the informants who were involved in
running local groups were degree level educated and group users spoke of their participation
in ways that differentiated them from the ‘scene queens’ considered dependent on the bar
scene. But, users also spoke of how social groups provide opportunities for middle-aged gay
men to express aspects of their ‘authentic selves’; something usually denied to them in more
sexualised spaces. Informants also spoke of how the values or normativity of social groups
promoted the performance of a more communal self, which could be contrasted with the
alienated selves thought characteristic of sexualised homospaces. Informants commonly
described groups as offering respite from the ageism and fixation on looks and the body’s
surface thought typical of the bar/commercial scene. Involvement in social groups could lead
to the development of social capital (personal networks, friendship groups) that provided
mutual help and emotional support. Social/support groups also provided opportunities for
voluntary and paid work. Groups concerned with HIV were spoken of as important sources of
re-skilling and empowerment for service users and providers. Although generic gay
workplaces could be more age conscious, ageing capital could be deployed to minimise the
impact of ageism. But, the normativity of gay groups could involve moral (and class-
informed) policing of them as non-sexual alternatives to the commercial scene. This risks
denyng men their adult status, trivialising their sexual desires and reinforcing
heteronormative stereotypes of them as sex-obsessed. There are also limits to their inclusivity
when the hierarchy of bodies associated with the commercial scene is reproduced in group
settings. This was visible in situations where middle-aged men are actually present but
effectively erased/excluded. Here social distance between men is attributable to the
differences of age (Brown et al 1997: 158), race (Icard 1986: 89 – 90) and class (Barrett and Pollock 2005).

6.2 Navigating homospaces: ‘virtual’, hypersexual, ‘actual’

The virtual gay scene was narrated as anonymous, impersonal, sexualised space yet online encounters could be intrusive, threatening and lacking in the social graces that govern face-to-face communication. Gay saunas figured in men’s accounts as hyper-sexualised space where communication is often wordless (Tewkesbury 2002: 82). Although these scenes are no less ‘real’ than the social group scene, the latter was considered more supportive, collective space where emphasis is placed on self-expression and getting to know others.

The ‘virtual’ scene has become an increasingly important part of the ‘gay scene’ over the past decade or so (Mowlabocus 2010) and allows men to ‘cruise’ from the ‘private’ space and comparative safety of the home. The virtual scene is an inherently social space (Ward 1999). For instance, Rob’s ‘netiquette’ consisted of extending the usual social graces of politeness and respect expected in face-to-face interaction to online encounters (Pankoke-Babatz and Jeffrey 2002: 220). The cyber scene is also social in that many websites allow men to engage in cyber sex (via webcam), use message boards, forums and real time chat rooms. Gay saunas, though in theory open to any member of the public presenting as male can be understood more as private space when one considers the financial means, the knowledge of their existence/location and how sexual relations are regulated there both normatively and by the organisation/structure of the physical environment. Lockable cubicles are commonly provided to enable men to have sex out of the sight of other sauna users. Social groups are open to gay and bisexualy identified men who meet any age, ethnic or other criteria for participation (e.g. gay men over 40 or men in the process of ‘coming out’). Their activities veer towards the more private end of the spectrum insofar as they occur within the premises of LGBT voluntary organisations and involve men consciously seeking an alternative to the bar scene.

6.2.1 Men on the virtual scene

Most informants (n = 18) had access to the internet at home but patterns of use and ease of access to the cyber scene were unequal. Four informants who were not in paid work had
limited access to the internet, being dependent on local authority library services or a gay-related voluntary organisation. Sam (45) had made a choice not to have a home computer but could access the internet outside working hours at his brother’s home nearby. Three informants who were not in paid work reported no access to or experience of using the internet, though Keir (42) (long-term unemployed on mental health grounds) had rejected the need for internet access, as had Pete (52), who had given up a full-time professional job to act as a paid, live-in carer for his father. Three informants (novice users) became available online at home sometime after interview including Keir, Les (53) and Tommy (55). The virtual scene has produced its own distinct threats to and constraints on midlife gay men’s self-expression and sense of sexual citizenship. But, there were also more ambivalent responses to discourses of age and ageism online as well as opportunities for age-blurring self-exploration, intimacy and friendship.

6.2.1 a) The virtual scene as constraint

Informants who made use of the cyber scene credited its allure to the opportunities it provided for surveillance of a socio-erotic field (Gross 2003: 266; Mowlabocus 2010: 2). For Paul (53) and Alec (46), this included enjoyment of pornographic material, sometimes free of charge like X-tube - a generic, ‘broad church,’ do-it-yourself ‘pornsite’ with significant gay content. Informants could survey this landscape at one remove in the comparatively safer space of the home (Brown et al 2005: 67). But, although most informants made use of gay websites, the cyber scene was mostly narrated as a site of moral, relational, economic and sexual risk for midlife gay men (Brown et al 2005):

I think sometimes all that people are looking for with online dating is people they can meet up with… Sometimes it’s below 30 and in most cases it’s definitely someone under 40 (Alec 46).

I have blocked younger men who have played games with me. And I would certainly block anyone if they were after money. (Marcus 47).

On Gaydar, it’s just a cock… they very often don’t provide a picture of the face (Jeff 48).
I probably mistrust people that would... want to have sex with me after such a short length of time... so immediately. Because, I think, well, if you can make that decision so quickly, you can go off it again just as quickly, can’t you? And you think…erm, are they just, novelty seekers? (Chris 48).

Notwithstanding the existence of websites encouraging cross-generational contact/dating, men regarded the virtual scene as just as in thrall as the bar scene to ageism (Alec (46), Marcus (47), Chris (48), Jeff (48), Mike (55) and Paul (53)). The above criticisms suggest that the cyber scene is anything but an online ‘community’ and requires middle-aged gay men to negotiate various forms of risk mainly related to ageism and objectification where individuals are reduced to their chronological age or body parts. The statements above portray the virtual scene as constraining, discomforting, dehumanising and exclusionary on account of attempts to manipulate for personal gain and its capacity to compel men to instrumentalise the other and render human relations disposable (Bauman 2003: x - xii).

Rather than opening up another form of interaction, experience of risk might actually prevent communication with others and, in particular, reinforce social distance from younger gay men. Alec’s statement shows how middle-aged gay men are differentiated or ‘othered’ online by younger men and that of Marcus’ points to avoidance of the kind of risks associated with younger, anonymous others seeking financial reward. As indicated in Jeff’s comment, experiences of ageism on the virtual scene were attributed to what could be described as an over-reliance on the visual (Mowlabocus 2010: 16). This tyranny of the visual and objectification of body parts could obscure appreciation of the more ‘real,’ rounded, mobile person. The statements above are also indicative of various forms of differentiation in terms of: age and social class in the shape of anonymous, younger ‘gold-digging’ men whose efforts at pecuniary gain might be “blocked” (Marcus); and moral claims for a more holistic notion of the erotic beyond the fragmented, fetishised “cock shot” (Jeff) or the demands of fickle, calculating sexual “novelty seekers” (Chris).

Moreover, the normative power of the cyber scene to bring about self-governance was implicit in informants’ accounts of the widespread practice largely described as a problem of other middle-aged men of uploading photographs of considerably younger selves onto personal profiles and taking liberties with the age stated on a website profile:
I’ve knocked four years off my age, which, I believe, is really good on Gaydar, cause normally it’s a good 10 years (Sam 45).

Sam reprises the running joke among interviewees that middle-aged gay men routinely shave about ten years off their actual age. He negotiates with this form of ‘deception’ by ‘knocking off’ the number of years he considers he can realistically get away with. Informants were generally highly critical of such strategies. These criticisms are reminiscent of the view analysed in chapter 4 that, in distancing themselves from their real age and differentiating themselves from other middle-aged gay men by clinging onto the signs of youth, men can render themselves morally inauthentic and thus risk ruling themselves outside of legitimate midlife gay male sexual citizenship.

But, telling the truth about one’s age online carried risks:

I think you get to the age of 38 or so and you just become invisible, don’t you? [Laughs]... No, I don’t knock a few years off [his age]... Alas, I’ve now dropped off Gaydar’s horizon (Chris 48).

Like many other informants, Chris differentiated himself from men who deceive about their age. But, his statement clarifies what is a stake when middle-aged gay men are honest. Just like the actual scene, such honesty could elicit erasure from ‘virtual’ sexual citizenship. Such factors prompted five respondents to consider that the only authentic and ethical response to virtual ageism was to enunciate pride in a ‘publish and be damned’ strategy of stating their age. But, tellingly, Chris later spoke of his challenge as a kind of “bravado” (Chris 48). It was also significant that none of the respondents challenged why in the first place age is most often a compulsory requirement in the construction of a virtual identity.

Constraint and risk were key themes in criticisms of the threats that the virtual scene could present to midlife gay men’s sense of self:

I’ve been on the social network sites like Gaydar and what have yer… I find it a bit intrusive... I find it a bit impersonal as well... ‘Cause you don’t know whether they’re genuine or not do you? ...I don’t get as many responses nowadays [my emphasis].... I’d rather meet somebody in a bar or a club or something (Jed 39).
Jed’s moral claim that the cyber scene is an “intrusive” and yet “impersonal” means of communication was typical of informants’ responses to digital technology (iPods, use of mobile phones etc) and the *ersatz* forms of communication it was thought to promote. The youth-oriented cyber scene is experienced as invasive of privacy and yet, ironically, it is depicted as a remote, unfriendly force that denies recognition of individual qualities. In this account, the virtual scene is also riskier than the bar scene because the body language of a whole person in motion can be read in face-to-face settings to enable appraisal of motives and ‘genuineness.’ Getting fewer responses to one’s profile with age is read as a sign of increasing exclusion from gay cyber sexual citizenship. Jed might put up with the virtual scene’s problems to experience some of its pleasures. But, the injuries of ageism and ‘sizeism’ sustained online had caused Daniel (46) to abandon gay cyberspace in favour of generic ‘swingers’ websites where he discovered more accepting attitudes towards his older, fatter body.

Informants commonly made moral claims for differentiation from forms of communicating via digital technology that they associated with younger people and young gay men in particular. A reverse ageism was invoked in the association of gay youth with immediate, impoverished, instrumentalising forms of communication/relating (Paul (53) and Clive (45)). Stereotypically, text messages announcing “U r dumped” were thought to reflect younger gay men’s ephemeral, “shallow” modes of relating (Clive 45). Again, this suggests support for the view expressed in chapters 4 and 5 that ways of relating with younger men are derogated to recuperate some kind of status in milieux where they are read as lower down in the socio-sexual hierarchy. Further, informants’ criticism of speeded up forms of ‘cruising’ that would be neither permissible nor possible face-to-face on the actual scene (Rob 50) suggested a middle-aged habitus out of sync with this particular sphere of existence. The characterisation of certain ways of relating on the cyber scene as “artificial” (Paul 53) indicates that it might be understood by this generation of gay men as a fetishised adjunct to rather than a ‘natural’ development of gay male culture. Dissociation from the virtual scene and the forms of interaction associated with it means that it is to be tolerated rather than embraced.
6.2.1 b) Negotiation with the rules of the virtual scene

The virtual or cyber scene was not uniformly constraining but could be a double-edged experience. One expression of a more ambivalent relationship with virtual scene involved negotiation with its socio-sexual norms. This was apparent in accounts that registered the pleasures and dangers of this socio-sexual space:

I like going on the websites... I enjoy watching the free porn as well.... I once met up with a couple... a man and a woman... through the internet... But... online you see that some people specify that they want white men only… They are generally European but they can be Asian… It tends to be mostly white but once in a while you get black and mixed race people saying that they prefer white people to be friends or to date with... They can be more direct.... less polite about it online. (Alec 46).

The cyber scene had lead to sexual opportunity and adventure for Alec. But, in Alec’s story, it figures as a space where non-white men are negatively differentiated and rejected in more overt fashion for their otherness. The lack of face-to-face contact meant that users could feel freer or disinhibited enough (Suler 2004) to dispense with racial and age-related sensibilities that might apply in face-to-face interaction. But, Alec’s comments are also revealing for their insight into how racist discourse excludes him from what is “European”, and instantiates whiteness as the benchmark of gay male attractiveness (Dickel 2007: 59), which has been internalised to shape the relational ‘preferences’ of some non-white men.

Mirroring accounts of experience on the actual scene, the norms of the cyber scene could violate middle-aged gay men’s notion of legitimate sexual citizenship. It could alienate men whose tastes embrace a more holistic ethic of attractiveness that is not reducible to the visual and visceral but extends to broader qualities of trust, community of feeling and wider aspects of personality:

If they don’t have or won’t send a face pic', I don’t wanna know. I like to look in their eyes.... the windows of the soul... I like to see a human being on the end of it… y’know, this kind of thing that it’s just a cock and nothing else… It’s like dark rooms and that sort o’ thing. (Jeff 48).
Like most respondents, Jeff’s troubling of the ageist aesthetics of the cyber scene (in a way that extends what counts as desirable beyond the surface of the body) is another example of authenticity used to express moral distinction from other website users. Jeff’s account is reflexive in various ways. His engagement with the norms prevalent in gay male cyber space has helped prompt critical questioning of fragmentation of the body-self (as represented in men’s profile images). He also draws attention to the particular humanising, individuating qualities of the face where the exterior (the eyes) provides clues to the inner recesses of a fuller more interesting subjectivity. But, there is also an unmistakeable judgementalism in Jeff’s statement towards use of body parts in men’s website profiles e.g. ‘cock shots,’ faceless torsos, which might function to protect identity, disguise perceived bodily ‘imperfections’ or show off one’s best assets (Brown and Maycock 2005). Further, Jeff’s strategy simultaneously risks reinforcing moral injunctions about what is sexually permissible. The informant’s equation of ‘cock shots’ with anonymous sex in “dark rooms” suggests a form of distinction from those who might be seen as less sexually discriminate and perhaps shallow for their concern/fixation with bodily surface/parts. This indicates how midlife gay men (including men like Jeff who were politically knowledgeable) are subject to power relations whose workings can result in compliance with conservative discourse in relation to age that restrict what counts as legitimate use of the body and online displays of it for sexual purposes. Jeff’s account indicates that as gay men age they might succumb to pressures to exercise greater sexual restraint rather than advance inexorably towards sexual emancipation, thus troubling the idea that ageing capital might work or develop in a smooth linear fashion.

6.2.1 c) Self-reconstruction and recuperation of middle-aged self

However, there were affirmative stories told where the cyber scene figured as more accessible (Brown et al 2005: 63) and less risky than the commercial gay scene:

I do more online because I am quite shy... I’m not that ‘out’... I know very few people there… and it’s having the money to go to the pubs, buying drinks etc… And I find that the people who approach me down there... they are not the right sort of people… Men have approached me to get me to buy them drinks... and not just young guys... So, nothing really comes out of it. (Alec 46).
Alec’s criticism of the bar scene suggests a form of differentiation from men who frequent it, though the letter and spirit of his remarks indicate less a derogation of others than a wish to avoid situations where he is obliged to negotiate interaction with men seeking something other than some kind of mutually satisfying connection. But, the contrast that Alec draws between relating on the bar and cyber scenes points up how online interaction is easier for men who do not have the economic resources or the embodied cultural knowledge and degree of ‘outness’ to experience a sense of self-worth, belonging and right to occupy the spaces of the bar scene.

But, there were various other critiques of and challenges to the widespread view of the cyber and recreational sex scenes as cold, impersonal and superficial. Men’s stories in this respect are indicative of age-related technologies of the self or forms of thinking on the self that legitimated sexual adventure and self-education. Such accounts of the cyber scene could also invoke forms of differentiation that do not imply self-aggrandisement or derogation of others. The opportunities for agency that these stories indexed might go some way towards explaining the continuing allure of the virtual scene in the face of the kind of problems already described. These reconstructive projects of the self did though appear more available to men who were able to deploy the kind of cultural capital (gained through education and/or knowledge/experience of humanistic therapies) that enabled more consciously analytical appreciation of social relationships.

The fact that actual friendships had developed on and after meeting through the cyber scene (Brown et al 2005; Shaw 1997: 142) gives the lie to views of it as emotionless space characterised by calculating sexual strategy. Marcus (47), who had come out comparatively later in life in his early thirties, spoke of his use of the cyber scene as a pathway to confidence-building opportunities that led not just to sexual adventure but also to making connections with and visiting men overseas. He was also one of four informants whose stories demonstrated that gay men can use the cyber scene to transform their erotic practices (Wakeford 2002: 115):

Oh, I’ve done my research alright (laughs)... I found out that if you’re an alpha slave, you have been a master before but you’ve chosen to become a slave… So, the alpha slave will help the novice slaves understand what the regime is... And I’ve met up with people through the ‘net.... I once got talking with a master who said, ‘You don’t
“ever, ever” recruit a slave in that way. It has to be done on a trust basis using boundaries... What he should have done was built you up slowly, given you a taster and then pushed the boundaries a bit more each time.’ (Marcus 47).

Like Vince (49), Ben (50) Daniel (46) and Rob (50), Marcus had used the internet to explore fetish/BDSM or other sex-related websites to develop his knowledge of sexual capital in relation to a particular scene in order to negotiate a whole new cultural experience, which included face-to-face interaction. Marcus’ account refers to an early experiment with a “master” following online research that sensitised him to BDSM subculture. Even though this first experience was not particularly satisfying, the encounter spurred him to experiment and enabled him to find out more from an accomplished BDSM practitioner or “master” about the rules of gay male BDSM culture.

Daniel’s experience below is similarly suggestive of the use of age inflected technologies of the self to free the self from constraints:

“The swinger’s site matches up all genders and all sexualities... (My emphasis). And because of my therapy, I’ve since refined my definition of my sexuality because I’ve realised that you don’t have to stay in the same category. It is not as hard and fast like when I was younger... It is possible to move, to change. (Daniel 46).

Although Daniel reported taking refuge in a swingers’ website as a response to gay ageism and sizeism online, his move was narrated just as much part of a confidence-building “mission” to find bisexual and heterosexually-identified men for sexual encounters. Some of these encounters had developed into friendships involving trust and the mutual labour of overcoming his sexual partners’ reluctance to kiss – the sexual act that his partners considered to compromise any claim to their masculinity. But, Daniel’s engagement with the ‘swinger scene’ had also prompted critical awareness of the fluidity of human sexuality. His ability to understand and embrace the plurality, contingency of sexuality demanded thinking on the relationship of the self to the self, (and to the other), which he links to the process of growing older.

Further, a website profile could represent an opportunity to differentiate an ‘authentic’ midlife self in more playful mode:
I decided there weren’t gonna be any cock shots... I actually wanted it to... give a thumbnail sketch of who I actually am... So, I added a few risqué remarks, ‘Well, if you don’t fancy me or just want to be friends that’s ok but you never know, you could be that special one and you never know ’til you meet me... The least you might get from me is good blow-job.’ (Bill 55).

Although the virtual scene is a highly individualised experience, in the above segment Bill describes the construction of a profile to distinguish himself from men who are simply seeking sexual contact but he does this in a way that does not imply moral superiority over those making such choices. The informant productively reprises a real self - “who I actually am” – that exceeds and refuses to be reduced to the disembodied, objectified “cock shot.” For Bill, designing a profile is used to make claims to a more holistic, multifaceted, middle-aged gay male subjectivity or identity. His story is redolent of Mowlabacus’ conclusion that certain (specialist) websites might revalidate bodies that do not live up to “homonormative regimes of beauty” (Mowlabocus 2010: 13 – 14). Bill’s reconstructive project indicates that some midlife gay men lay claim to an ongoing sexual citizenship of a kind that involves “control over and respect for our bodies, feelings, representations, identities, relationships and erotics” (Plummer 2003: 39). The informant’s practice is another expression of an age-inflected technology of the self that has enabled the subject to question homonormative anxieties concerning the loss of youthful looks. In effect, Bill’s online identity makes a broad appeal to other users in a way that shows willingness to negotiate the contingencies of human relationships and openness to various forms of intimacy and friendship.

6.3 The hyper-sexualised homospace of the sauna

Saunas are important to some middle-aged men because they can offer access to immediate and anonymous sexual opportunity. There are three saunas in Greater Manchester (LGF July 2011): one is in the heart of the village above a shop selling sex toys, fetishwear and clothes; another is based in the city centre within walking distance of the village district; a third is located in an affluent south Manchester suburb four miles south of the city centre. There was until June 2011 a sauna in Oldham, a former industrial town with a large rural hinterland in south Lancashire about ten miles north of Manchester.
Sixteen men reported having made use of saunas for varying lengths of time in the past (from one-off experiences when younger or, intermittently since their twenties). Only four informants reported current, regular use of the sauna. They were either educated to degree level or, like Jeff (48) and Rob (50), familiar with humanistic therapies personally and/or professionally. For, Pete (52) and bisexually-identified Will (48), the sauna served in lieu of private space for sexual opportunity at home. Pete lived with his elderly father (as a paid carer) and consequently did not feel it appropriate to bring sex partners to this shared space. Will shared a home with a long-term female partner who tolerated his bisexuality. For those who were reliant on social security or otherwise lacking financial capital, the charge of £12 - £15 was exclusionary. But, regardless of financial circumstances, relational status or practices, for the majority of informants, recreational sex was associated mostly with a younger self, sexual experimentation after ‘coming out’ or with younger gay men currently thought to be following this well-trodden path. Informants’ accounts concerning the rules sanctioning how men might look at, approach and touch in saunas also fell into the familiar triptych of compliance/constraint, negotiation with or ambivalence in relation to them and resistance through bodily pleasures and conviviality.

6.3.1 Compliance, constraint, risk

Scrutiny of the older body could be felt even more keenly when face-to-face and separated by no more than a modest towel. Informants’ accounts indicated that saunas offer many fewer opportunities for resistance to ageism. Whilst men might challenge ageism online, it is more difficult to negotiate and challenge in situ when it is expressed wordlessly through the gaze (or even refusal of it). But, significant in Pete’s account of negotiating the local saunas, was how socio-sexual interaction was delimited by the material structure and design of any such space. Indeed, he reported that one city centre sauna had been redesigned to remove spaces where men could lie down to have sex, which precluded intimacy in conditions of comfort. It may also discourage prolonged stays (and could no doubt help maximise turnover/profitability at times when demand for the sauna is high). Pete contrasted this experience of leisure in a local sauna (reduced to the disenchanted principles of ergonomics) with the rules operating in saunas in parts of Spain, which he had experienced as more convivial socio-sexual spaces that allowed “foreplay... rather than just a quick fuck” and which recognised that men might want to talk after sex.
The sauna as a site of discursive constraint was particularly evident in accounts that pointed up discomfort in relation to the midlife body:

Sometimes, I must admit, I find myself thinking, ‘What am I doing here?’ ‘Cause I don’t feel part of it. I’ve always felt disengaged from pretty much the whole gay scene, anyway. Er, and I think because of my size and my build, I don’t fit a certain stereotype. (Jeff 48).

I wasn’t very flattered the other night... It was a bit of a double-edged experience though... I got together with this guy, quite hunky, about 30... And after we’d both come, he asked, ‘How old are you, about 51?’ I thought, ‘Bloody hell; that was close...’ So, maybe my age doesn’t show as much in my face as it does on the rest of my body? (Pete 52).

The operation of the gaze within the sauna was commonly thought to reinforce the notion of the toned, youthful physique as the benchmark of desirability. As a consequence, Jeff (48) reported feeling distinctly fish out of water as a fatter, older man. Indeed, part of navigating the delights of looking at other semi-naked men, involved having to face a kind of objectification where younger men equate (if not reduce) older gay men’s sexual appeal and their subjectivity to penis size (Drummond and Filiault 2007: 125). But, Pete’s account indicates that the more the body is exposed, the greater is the potential for the incriminating truth of men’s chronological difference to be revealed. The bodily markers of age can betray a more youthful looking face. But, Pete’s statement is also significant because it registers the discursive force of ageism and how this has impacted upon a highly educated middle-aged man. His encounter with a younger man provides insight into how ageism can inform midlife gay men’s partial, contingent sense of legitimacy in the sauna even when their age is treated by younger men as no bar to sexual congress.

Moreover, accounts of recreational sex in the sauna could invoke age- and class-related anxieties concerning threats to sexual health:

The younger people tend to throw caution to the wind. There’s a few youngsters there, early twenties and they’re obviously HIV positive... a gang that comes from the
Liverpool area and they’re very young and blasé about it… about their whole lifestyle (Jeff 48).

In Jeff’s account the sexual agency of some younger men involves risky if not morally reprehensible sexual freedoms. The narrator distances himself from the behaviour of those concerned and what they are thought to represent. The protagonists in this account are depicted as showing a cavalier disregard for their own well-being and that of others. If anything, this form of differentiation is similar to that described by Skeggs (2000: 133) in relation to how younger working class women’s sexuality has been constructed as “excessive.” Jeff’s statement is revealing of discourse that constructs working class (possibly ‘underclass’) gay youth as a particularly unruly, threatening form of sexuality. In this account class is invoked spatially insofar as the young men described are associated with a city synonymous with a youth-coded underclass, as expressed in folkloric ‘jokes’ about people from Liverpool. The behaviour of this dangerous collective (“gang”) requires social and actual distance from them as reckless transmitters of HIV - their status is presumed rather than based on any knowledge. The young men are held responsible not just for their own sexual conduct but implicitly for that of older others. Not only does this kind of discourse imply quasi-criminalisation of certain young working class gay men but it also denies the emotional resources (ageing capital) of midlife gay men considered the more vulnerable party who are relieved of their part in the mutual responsibility that constitutes safer sex. If anything, this form of differentiation illuminates the force and complexity of the working of ageism in sexualised spaces that at times is intermixed with classism.

6.3.2 Negotiation with the rules of the sauna

There were accounts of the sauna that suggested somewhat more ambivalent stances towards and negotiation with the moral norms shaping its interactional possibilities:

Er… if we’re talking about serious partner material, I would probably say I prefer them about 35 plus probably… If we’re talking about a quick shag in the sauna, then, y’know, any old age’ll do. [Laughs]. Y’know, if there is somebody young and attractive who is happy to have a little number with me, then I’m more than happy to go along with that… delighted, in fact. (Pete 52).
In the above account, Pete differentiates between who he would consider as a significant other and the situational flexibility around age, which might be made more relative in brief recreational encounters but he also marks limits to the fluidity of age preferences for a sexual encounter in gay saunas when flexibility stops at the thought of sex with an older man.

Another form of differentiation suggested renegotiation with the self concerning what kind of sex is permissible in the sauna:

Y’know, I could never have anal sex in a sauna now. Not like my twenties. And I see some people doing it and to me…. that kind of sex is fairly intimate... Okay, I’m not in a relationship but there has to be something, y’know, that kind of trust element. Whereas, like years ago, that wouldn’t have even come into my mind (Jeff 48).

Jeff now reserves anal sex for men who are invited to share intimacy within the sexual space of his home. He contrasts this practice with the more giveaway sexual policy in saunas as a younger man. The dialogue between Jeff’s older and younger selves about what is permissible in this sexualised space marks limits to middle-aged gay men’s deployment of technologies of the self to secure control over use of the body. Such thought and practice also trouble the notion of maturation as involving a linear move in the direction of a more autonomous midlife self, suggesting, again, that midlife gay men might be more prone to sexual self-governance as they grow older.

The sauna then was inevitably a site requiring negotiation of sexual risk. Dialogue with risk was particularly salient for Rob who has been living with HIV for nearly 20 years:

I don’t limit meself... I’m not completely disciplined to saying ‘no’ to unsafe sex. It’s hard to get a hard-on if you’re fumbling about with a sheath of rubber... I take some risks and it gives me the chance to actually tell others I’m positive and am looking for other positive guys... My job is about safer sex but it’s hard to be a role model... I realise sometimes I just can’t say ‘no’... And I see a guy, y’know, he’s positive, who’s bent over and I think, ‘go and take him, he’s waiting for a cock.’ (Rob 50).

The above story indicates the difficulty of being differentiated as a gay man with HIV. As someone working within the field of sexual health, Rob was keenly aware of the need to
promote safer sex through word and deed. But, his statement demonstrates not just the
difficulty of negotiating safer sex in the moment (Cove and Petrak 2004) but also the moral
dilemma for him involved in negotiating a sexual encounter that dispenses with prophylaxis.
Rob’s negotiation with others concerning ‘unprotected’ or more risky sexual relations was
conducted through ageing capital here registering in the self-confidence required to break the
sauna’s largely non-verbal code or vow of silence documented as characteristic of such
spaces (Hickson et al 1993: 84; Tewkesbury 2002).

6.3.3 Resisting through sensual pleasures

There was some scope for critical thought about relations in the sauna. Informants challenged
constraining, moralistic forms of discourse in relation to sexual opportunity and spoke of
efforts to humanise the casual sex scene. Such thought and practice provide a riposte to the
view of the casual sex scene as uniformly oppressive and exclusionary on the grounds of
ageism. It is conceivable that middle-aged working class gay men are able to manage the
rules of the game at work in saunas in ways that involve asserting the self and using humour
to negotiate and manage interaction there. But, like experiences on the cyber scene, the more
critical technologies of the self used to negotiate the vicissitudes of the sauna were more
likely to be exercised by informants who could mobilise the kind of cultural capital that had
been garnered either through therapy and/or education or engagement with sexual politics.

Drawing on age-related technologies of the self, informants thinking could render
considerations of age much less relevant:

It’s interesting going to a sauna sometime or a dark room and stuff and have that age
thing… sort of lessened… ‘cause it’s more of a tactile, sensual… experience… where
it’s more about what goes on or what it feels like… You’re going on touch… ‘Cause
in a darkened environment… you don’t get all the visual stimulation that you
normally get… (Bill 55).

In the excerpt above, Bill suggests that in the context of saunas and “dark rooms” especially,
the thrill of tactility with unknown others can supersede the tyranny of the visual on which
gay ageism relies. Indeed, he indicates that absence of the visual could be experienced not as
a brake on the sexual imaginary but rather as a release from its constraints.
The rules of the sauna and its often wordless communication sanctioned more direct forms of communicating than the bar scene. For Pete, the sauna was preferable to the uncertain and over-familiar rituals of chatting someone up on the bar/club scene with such little reward. Communication in the sauna might be quick and impersonal but experiences of the sauna could prompt men to challenge moralising discourses that negate ‘casual sex:’

   It’s probably not unfair to describe a lot of things happening in a sauna as… instrumental perhaps... But, it is agreed and there’s some equality there... And I have met two men there who went onto become pretty important in my life. (Pete 52).

The above statement indicates critical thinking about more conservative discourses that condemn recreational sex (and the spaces in which it occurs). Its honesty recognises a level of instrumentalisation between men but offers a challenge to the idea that casual sex is demeaning because it reduces the self and other to a mere means for sexual enjoyment; to disengage from their emotions and, in doing so, denies the wider subjectivity and properly human status of both parties. In effect, Pete subverts this discourse through acceptance of use of the body-self with unknown others as both consensual and egalitarian whilst suggesting that an ethic of care can be mobilised in recreational encounters (Seidman 1991: 187). The informant’s thought and practice in this respect offers a critical riposte to the romanticised, restrictive view of sexual relations as valid only when conducted in the context of a monogamous relationship between people well known to each other.

Men’s encounters with unknown others could also prompt reflexive questioning of the bodily aesthetics prevailing in highly sexualised spaces:

   And you see some people get off with others and you think, ‘What’s wrong with me?’ In fact, I may be older but I’m just as nice-looking... What am I giving out? …Is my wall up? ...Y’know, there’s an older guy there and we eventually got talking and he said, ‘You’re so standoffish. I’ve tried to talk to you for a while but you’ve always blanked me.’ And I was horrified that I give that impression. (Jeff 48).

The encounter that Jeff reports is suggestive of an ethical conviviality in various ways. It is significant for its reclamation of the middle-aged gay male body-self as attractive and a self
that includes but is not restricted to the visual i.e. physical appearance. The account is reflexive in its awareness of the contextual pressures towards defensive posturing. But, the incident in question highlights how the carapace of self-protection can be punctured via honest confrontation with the unknown other in a way that demands co-recognition of subjects’ humanity. Despite the emphasis on non-verbal communication in the sauna, the negotiation between Jeff and his interlocutor remind us that highly sexualised space can be humanised.

6.4 Actual homospaces: gay social/support groups and workplaces.

Social and support groups are important in gay culture because they provide forms of social experience where sexual opportunity is not central and make possible non-sexual forms of intimacy across differences of age, class and race. All but five informants (22) reported involvement in a gay social/support group. Eleven informants reported fairly regular attendance at social groups solely as participants. Four informants were users of one group but helped to run others (Davie (44), Chris (48), Rob (50) and Pete (52)). Three informants, Sam (45), Marcus (47) and Chris (48), contributed to the running of a gay-related voluntary group but did not participate as members in any other groups. Those involved in running social/support groups did so mostly voluntarily though three informants were paid employees in administrative roles in gay or gay-related voluntary organisations (Davie 44, Rob 50 and Mike 55). Informants who volunteered in the running of social/support groups were differentiated by their higher levels of education (Barrett and Pollock 2005) and/or knowledge/experience of humanistic therapies through personal and/or professional experience.

6.4.1 Stories of inclusion

Despite their variety (as described in chapter 1), the relational rules of the game within gay social/support groups appeared remarkably similar. Informants considered that groups provide the conditions for more fulfilling modes of relating. Groups were thought to offer an alternative to the harsh aesthetics and ageist critical gaze thought typical of the bar scene. Group spaces were thought to provide respite from pressures on the bar scene to produce the self/surface appearance in certain gay approved ways, “They give you a break from having to wear the gay uniform” (Jed 39). For four degree educated informants, gay social/support
groups had been helpful in the ‘coming out’ process and had helped prepare men to engage with other aspects of LGBT culture. Jonathan (42) spoke of how middle-aged gay men he had met at a social group had “mentored” him in his early days after coming out (Adam 2000). Contacts encountered in groups could develop into enduring forms of social capital that involved inclusion in personal network/friendship groups and that provided mundane and momentous practical help and emotional support:

There’s a couple of friends that I met who were involved in running the social group I went to when I first came out and I’ve kept in touch with ever since and were there for me when my first relationship went pear-shaped and I was a bit devastated (laughs mildly). Erm… so, there are people you can rely on… people who, y’know, if you were ever in a fix, would run an errand or whatever and vice versa (Chris 48).

Several regular group users reported how gay social groups had been crucial in the longer journey towards overcoming social reticence or sense of gaucheness. The emphasis on support, acceptance and friendliness were spoken of as important in promoting the kind of intersubjectivity that enabled men to achieve a measure of inclusion in one aspect of gay culture:

I find that if I go into Canal Street on my own or even with a friend, standing there, it freaks me out. …I stand there like a rabbit caught in the headlights. Whereas when I’m with the line-dancing group, I’m open and I’m laughing and joking… and age just doesn’t matter there… Not liking bars that much, I never felt part of the community. I’m quite shy there… Don’t say much to anybody… Whereas, it’s like, I go downstairs (to the line dancing group) and everybody knows who I am... Something just comes out… another part of me (laughs). (Jeff 48).

In contrast to the bar scene, informants commonly spoke of groups as enabling the expression, assertion or refashioning of a more confident, inner and “real” self that could claim belonging within an aspect of broader LGBT culture. Although it took place in the privately hired function room of a village bar, for Jeff simply walking downstairs was to enter a different world because this gay space is appropriated, humanised through interactions with familiar others where differences (of age etc) are in evidence but become rather unremarkable. Having visited the group twice on a social basis, the diversity of its members
in terms of age, gender, sexuality, ethnicity and apparent social class and the ease with which group members related with each other was strikingly different from anything observed in the village.

Those informants who were involved in the running of gay groups (as paid staff and/or volunteers) spoke of their empowering qualities in terms of the practical opportunities they provide for re-skilling in relation to professional knowledge/practice as well as self-esteem (Chris 48, Marcus 47, Warren 52). This theme was particularly salient in the claims of informants who identified as HIV positive. They make sense when we consider that gay men living with HIV can experience the commercial scene and expectations around ‘gay’ lifestyles as alienating, exclusionary for socio-economic and cultural reasons (Woodhead 1995: 235). In contrast to other workplaces, Davie (44) spoke of his experience of working for a group that supports people with HIV as a welcome alternative to the ego-driven office politics he had encountered elsewhere:

Working here is different to any other place I’ve worked in… ‘Cause I’ve always been suspicious of people at work… but it’s different here... I think... it has a lot to do with people pulling together... around an issue… and I don’t have to think too much about office politics... I’ve always worked in an environment where you have to watch yer back… I know there are office politics here but they’re not so bad… It’s a lot more caring here… There's not that feeling that you have to walk over people to get where you need to (Davie 44).

For Davie, office politics and wider socio-political divisions were eclipsed by a collective sense of purpose that united different people “pulling together” around a common cause. This more collaborative self, motivated by concern for self and others (Nimmons and Folkman 1999) also serves as a counterpoint to the individualistic expressions of the self commonly described by informants as typical of the bar scene. Later in the interview, Davie spoke of how staff at this particular workplace had taken collective responsibility to address difference; they had worked hard to encourage African group users to address homophobia and white gay male users to address racism.

In contrast, however, informants working in the more generic gay organisations (those concerned with community support, campaigning) recognised them as more divided in terms
of their being “more age and image conscious” (Mike 55). Indeed, Mike directly invoked the idea of accelerated ageing (Bennett and Thompson 1991: 66) in drawing a distinction between “old and gay old” when comparing his experiences of negotiating straight and gay workplaces. Ageism in the generic gay workplace was not simply a problem attributable to a few (younger) colleagues. That Mike had been asked at interview how he would feel about working with much younger people suggests that ageism here is normative if not institutionalised. But, although ageism is hegemonic, its dominance is never fully secured:

It’s not always easy ‘cause at work you often find yourself isolated in a group of people that are younger... The trick is to try and establish what the barrier is and why it’s there and does it need to be? And can or do you want to do anything about it? And, it’s very easy to judge somebody on what you see upfront... Whereas, I’ve learned over the years to think, ‘Well, okay, that person hasn’t made the best impression but it may be because they’ve got other problems elsewhere...’ There’s always sides to people that they don’t want you to know about and why should they? It’s the same with me... We can all give off the wrong impression... And I think that sort of reasoning comes with age (Mike 55).

In effect, Mike’s negotiation with others in this gay workspace suggests a form of differentiation by age that involves helping the self whilst recognising the dignity of the younger other. It appears that ageist discourse in gay workspace can elicit the mobilisation of ageing capital, here operating as age-inflected form of emotional intelligence, drawing on personal experience/memory of his own youth, to challenge ageism and minimise its impact. Experience of negotiating gay or gay-dominated workspaces could prompt reflexive, empathic practice in relation to barriers to cross-generational relations. Mike’s use of ageing capital to promote more productive ways of relating with his younger colleagues acknowledges the kind of contextual constraints they might face and the potential for misreading of surface subjectivity. His account is significant for how it illuminates middle-aged gay men’s conscious use of practices aimed at interactional repair and for its acknowledgement of human vulnerability which may have causes in other regions of the lifeworld that are difficult to disclose or discern. Mike also appeared adept at using ageing capital to challenge the kind of institutionalised ageist aesthetics (Genke 2004: 87), which decree that only images of stereotypically good-looking younger men should grace the cover of condom packets and publicity campaigns about safer sex. In these respects, Mike
advocated use of a broader range of images of “real life,” “ordinary” and “older men” and questioned just how many gay men of any age would relate to pristine young models considered not to be representative of gay male embodiment. The informant’s protest is particularly important (though, sadly, remains unheeded) when we consider the urgency of communicating safer sex messages to a highly differentiated ‘gay community.’

6.4.2 Stories of exclusion

Although he created the conditions for a measure of inclusion in his workplace, Mike’s account just above intimates limits to the dominant story of social/support groups as loci of empowerment, healthier forms of relating, inclusion etc. The tacit rules that preserve groups’ different identity as non-sexualised alternative to the bar scene could work in various ways: some of them supportive involving active consent to and collective monitoring of group norms; whilst others were externally imposed and potentially injurious:

The group was a very non-sexual thing... People did have sex in the hostel... But, it was a bit undercover and generally frowned upon. (Clive 45).

Clive describes the normativity that he encountered at a weekend away that was organised around spiritual self-exploration and mutual support. It is as if group space is being claimed as more moral space because it is untainted by calculations around sexual opportunity. But, the injunction against sexual engagement obliged men to suppress rather than openly explore sexual feelings that might be felt as urgent and which constitute an important part of (inter-) subjectivity. This kind of moral differentiation, with overtones of social class, means that any participant wanting to express or actively explore their sexuality or even have sex was obliged to be furtive; to conceal their desires and sexual activity. This amounts to infantilising men who are assumed to be untrustworthy and whose instincts are therefore in need of regulation. As such, it risks reinforcing the kind of heteronormative thinking that reduces gay men to their sexual ‘proclivities’ and equates them with ‘promiscuity.’ This is not a matter of a few over-zealous, sex-negative individuals wanting to take control of others but rather highlights the strength of socio-sexual norms that can impose constraints on forms of relating in contexts where men are expected to avoid displays of sexuality that might be associated with the commercial scene.
In addition, power relations operating within gay social groups were not immune to the ageism and racism that men might encounter on the bar scene (Ridge, Hee and Minchinello 1999: 44 - 46):

I was trying to have a conversation with some younger people and I thought they didn’t want me there talking to them... And all I wanted to do was to talk with someone... and I was just sitting there feeling isolated. (Paul 53).

With the groups, you notice that some people... don’t want to be friends with you outside group meetings. So, you wonder what their reason is... Is it age? Different interests? Race? (Alec 46).

The narrative segments above are illustrative of how, in the first case, the differences marked by age and, in the second case, the enmeshed differences of age, race and class might divide group participants and result in the othering of some individuals. Here we see the bodily hierarchy that constitutes the bar scene reproduced in what is commonly thought of as more benign, inclusive space. Paul’s account poignantly describes experience of ageist rejection (where his wish to negotiate interaction might be understood as sexual overture from an older man) in a social/support group whose express purpose is to relieve isolation. Referring to the very same group, Alec’s words recall the highly conditional tolerance of a middle-aged, black gay man who might be read as working class given his less fashionable ways of presenting himself and reference to “different interests.” Both stories indicate how middle-aged men might be present but their inclusion in interaction within gay social groups or activities outside of them is far from secure. The subtleties of ageism were also reflected in throwaway compliments relating to men’s youthful appearance (understood pre-reflectively as some kind of personal achievement worthy of praise). Jed (39), a bigger, older man who described being perceived as matter out of place on the bar scene, recounted a pleasantly unexpected approach at a group meeting from a younger man who he unselfconsciously defined as “out of my league.”

6.5 Conclusion

This chapter has focused on the research questions that concern how stories of ageing on the gay scene affect middle-aged gay men’s interpretations of their ageing selves, opportunities
for expression of their ageing identities and what their relations with others in these spaces say about their responses to ageism and how ageism works within Manchester’s gay culture. The norms of the two more sexualised homospaces could involve restrictions or negotiation with them concerning expression of ageing identity and relating but some men were able to transcend such limitations. More specifically, I have highlighted how men’s responses to discourses of ageing and gay ageism through the various moral claims they make are divisible into three kinds, which involve capitulation to/reproduction of, negotiation with and contestation of gay ageism. In the first instance, middle-aged gay men distinguish themselves from the shallow, depleted and sometimes dangerous ways of relating they associated with younger gay men. But, this reverse ageism can lead to giving into and feeling oppressed by the constraints on expression of ageing identity and interaction with younger gay men, especially. In the second instance, men’s negotiation with gay ageism involved more ambivalent stances towards it but the ways in which informants differentiated themselves from generalised gay others could reinforce constraints upon online display of the body for sexual purposes and gay ageism. It is possible that these kinds of response to ageing and ageism, especially the ageism expressed towards younger gay men, could serve as a way of recuperating the value of the middle-aged body-self in a sexual hierarchy that demeans the midlife body. In the third instance, claims to differentiation could involve adventure, self-education and the humanisation of sexual space. Here the authenticity central to ageing capital and technologies of the self could be mobilised to express the midlife self more freely and challenge gay ageism without derogating others. This kind of resource was more likely to be deployed by men with the kind of cultural capital that enables them to mobilise a more consciously political critique of relations in sexualised spaces. Such practices also suggest an “ethics of casual sex” involving care for self and other (Seidman 1991: 187) and trouble the moralistic caricature of ‘casual sex’ as demeaning, depersonalised and decadent.

My second argument has complicated respondents’ moral and at times class-inflected claims that sexualised spaces offer only degraded ways of relating whereas gay social groups represent inclusive, empowering alternatives. Involvement in groups indicated differentiation in various ways. Those involved in running them on a voluntary basis were degree level educated. Participation in groups could be narrated as a way of differentiating the self from gay men considered dependent on the bar scene. Groups’ were also recounted as spaces that provided middle-aged gay men with opportunities to express the interior qualities of their ageing selves (authenticity) that are thought to be denied to them in more sexualised spaces.
of bars, the virtual scene and saunas. Informants commonly described groups as offering respite from the ageism thought typical of the bar scene. The norms of social groups were also thought to allow men to perform a more communal, collaborative self that could be contrasted with the alienated selves thought characteristic of sexualised homospaces. Involvement in social groups could lead to forms of social capital (personal networks, friendship groups) that provided mutual help and emotional support. Social/support groups also provided opportunities for voluntary and paid work. Groups concerned with HIV were important sources of support, re-skilling and empowerment for service users and providers. Although generic gay workplaces could be more age conscious, men could differentiate themselves in ways that involved productive use of ageing capital to minimise the impact of ageism therein. But, there were restrictions on expression of ageing identity and the forms of interaction possible within gay groups. The status of gay groups as non-sexual (and thus more moral) spaces could lead to policing of them that risks denying middle-aged men their adult status, trivialising their sexual desires and reinforcing stereotypes of them as sex-obsessed.

The account of gay social groups as inclusive and empowering is also questionable when the hierarchy of bodies associated with the commercial scene can be reproduced within them. This was visible in situations where the differences of age, race and class meant that men might be present but were effectively erased, excluded or othered in situ.

Having explored ways of negotiating the bar scene and three other forms of homospace, I now turn to how middle-aged gay men navigate their way around spaces experienced as ‘heterosexual.’
Chapter Seven. Negotiating Relations in ‘Heterospaces’

7.1 Introduction

Gay men do not live in a lavender ghetto (Knopp 1995: 143 - 4) and they are also concerned with a range of moral and political issues that go beyond any obsession with age ageing and ageism (Kristiansen 2004: 258). This chapter examines relations occurring within the city, neighbourhoods, the spaces of friendship, workplaces and the gym, which are understood as heterosexual - what I call ‘heterospaces.’ It focuses mainly on the research questions that relate to middle-aged gay men’s sense of self-identity as they grow older and what their relations with others in these spaces say about how they experience ageing, ageism and the workings of homophobia. The central theme of the chapter concerns how, through their stories of ageing and relations in these heterospaces, midlife gay men are sometimes negatively differentiated by heterosexuals and differentiate themselves from others (gay and straight) through claims-making in various heterosexual fields of existence. I focus on how middle-aged gay men navigate the risks, ambivalences and opportunities for agency available therein.

In response to the two research questions, although heteronormativity and ageism can operate in conjoined fashion (Meisner and Hynie 2009: 51), ageism was considered much less significant in heterospaces and as setting fewer limits on expression of identity and ways of relating. Again, the methodology adopted in this study has enabled examination of different performances of the self and relating that signify tensions between constraint, ambivalence and agency. Specifically, I contend that subjects capitulate to, negotiate with and challenge heteronormativity. In the first instance, some informants described feeling conspicuous; that their sexuality is transparent in particular spaces such as when on the way to the village or in the local ‘family’ pub and, at times, in heterosexual workplaces that require navigation of casual homophobia often delivered in more covert, ambiguous ways that might confound any charge of discriminatory intent. These kinds of circumstance could compel an automatic self-censoring of everyday practices in the form of body management tactics that tone down (Keogh, Reed and Weatherburn 2006: 31 - 33) or even ‘de-gay’ the self. Men’s bodily discomfort though is not an expression of internalised homophobia or a sense of shame but is a necessary survival skill that reflects an understandable need to protect the self from violence (Berrill 1992: 20) symbolic or actual. Suggesting that citizenship is normatively
heterosexual, homophobia still has the power to evoke fearful, self-surveillant responses to
the (masculine coded) heterosexual gaze among those thought to embody sexual difference
and thus unsettle the ‘natural,’ heterocentric order (Johnson 2002; Valentine 1996: 145 - 6).
Rather than differentiating themselves, here middle-aged gay men are differentiated by others
who claim/exude a greater sense of legitimacy concerning the right to occupy and move
within certain spaces. As implied in a study of the village by Moran et al (2004), gay men’s
self expression and habitual forms of interaction could be significantly restricted. Such
unequal access to public space marks limits to the toleration of sexual difference (Browne,
Lim and Brown 2007). In the second more ambivalent instance, informants differentiated
themselves through their involvement in more intellectual pursuits with heterosexual friends
from younger and peer aged, ghettoised ‘scene queens.’ In one case, the spaces of friendship
with younger heterosexual men were understood as accepting of differences of age and
sexuality. But, negotiating legitimacy in this heterospace could involve denial of any
inequality concerning sexuality and reinforcement of homophobia through moral and
epistemic claims to difference from gay others or the general LGBTQ ‘community.’ In the
third instance, the most common claim made by informants was that the normativity of
heterospaces offered freedom from the ageist gay gaze and sexualised scrutiny thought to
suffuse homospace (chapters 4 and 5). Going against much of the contemporary literature (for
examples, see Deacon, Minchinello and Plummer (1995); Kirby (1997); and Price (1999: 3 –
5)), heterospaces were narrated as providing greater scope than homospaces for expression of
more ‘authentic’ aspects of the self and more fulfilling ways of relating. Informants
habitually invoked the right to go about their business inviolate and described events that
suggested freedoms to mobilise various forms of ageing capital and technologies of the self.
The latter could involve turning the gaze back onto heterosexual male others without
resorting to vengeful symbolic violence. Some informants, regardless of social class, offered
accounts that suggested the ‘queering’ (Valentine 1996: 151 - 2) or ‘gaying’ of heterospaces
through confident, age-inflected performance. The practices to which these stories refer are
suggestive of both a sense of developing self-esteem with age (ageing capital) and the
tolerance towards sexual difference that has developed especially over the last decade. They
also amount to moral and epistemic claims to the ordinariness of their sexuality and its
inclusion within wider sexual citizenship (Weeks 1998: 37). These accounts of heterospace as
more inclusive mark limits to the view advanced in Moran et al’s study (2004) that the
symbolic violence of the state (its ability to judge and constrain vulnerable individuals/groups) and the (threat of) symbolic and physical violence from heterosexuals
structures the social experiences of those seen as sexually different. Concerns about psychic and actual violence will resonate with middle-aged gay men who grew up and ‘came out’ or not in a fervid anti-gay era when government and much of civil society were hostile to sexual difference. Informants would be able to remember a time when gay men were thought to embody the mortal danger of HIV/AIDS (Watney 1987). But, in the light of recent gains in tolerance, Moran et al’s argument is nowadays overstated and risks overshadowing middle-aged gay men’s agency courtesy of ageing capital and technologies of the self.

7.2 Midlife gay men in heterospaces: locality, work and play

This section addresses how middle-aged gay men negotiate the dangers and ambivalences attached to their difference as well as the pleasures they appropriate within heterospaces. City streets and neighbourhoods figured as more ‘public’ whereas workplaces can be understood as more ‘private’ and the local gym as hybrid space - available to the public but dependent on the ability to afford the costs of membership/entry and willingness to invest in such labour.

7.2.1 Stories of constraint: unequal access to public space

Respondents generally took for granted that public space was heterosexually defined (Bell and Valentine (1995: 19); Browne, Lim and Browne (2007: 8); and Burgess (2005: 27)). The experiences of lesbian and gay interviewees in Rosenfeld’s American study of ageing sexuality and ‘coming out’ are described as, “constrained by and structured around conflict with heterosexuals” (Rosenfeld 2003: 99). Indeed, some men’s accounts in this present study indicated the persistent power of homophobia felt by a generation of gay men whose formative years were overshadowed by it:

I was bullied when I was a lad and beaten up… partly because of my size and that I wasn’t that able to defend myself… Certainly… I was seen as very much an outsider and…. I was seen as… as a puff... In many ways, because of that I’ve been quite cautious and wary... and fairly… suspicious and untrusting of men... especially groups of younger men (Pete 52).

Public heterospace has long been problematic for those regarded as sexually different (Valentine 1996: 160). For Pete, anxiety about and alertness in relation to groups of younger males had become second nature as a result of a history of being bullied in the affluent
neighbourhood where he grew up and at the local grammar school. He was read as a puny, sensitive child/youth and thus labelled as sexually different. Pete makes a moral claim that this experience has caused him to become perpetually ‘wary’ of men thought to present themselves in accordance with dominant expressions of masculinity. Pete’s experience of being othered for the lack of proper masculinity he was thought to embody (Connell 1995: 78 – 9) was not atypical. Despite informants’ maturity and gains in self-worth, the male heterosexual gaze could still be feared for its potential to escalate into verbal, symbolic threats and/or actual physical danger (Moran et al 2004: 6; Knopp 2007: 23), though contra Moran (2000: 206), working class men were not singled out for scorn within informants’ discourse.

Even in more liberal times, experiences of the heterosexual gaze underscore the persistence of inequalities in access to and a sense of safety within the locality where the home and friendship with heterosexual men (rare in this study) could also be fraught with risk (Price 1999: chapters 4 and 5):

I like photography... and I used to take photographs around the estate... I like to photograph real life.... But, that got me into real trouble and I had to move... Because of problems with the neighbours, I was given a transfer... They accused me of photographing children for sinister reasons... (Alec 46).

Alec was long-term unemployed, living alone in a flat in a “white area.” He considered that this incident was motivated by perceptions of his sexuality and that there was no racial subtext at play. His interest in photographing the local area and its people was misconstrued as evidence of paedophilic intent and, in consequence, he was forced to escape to accommodation on the opposite side of the city. As reported in chapter 8, the heterospaces of his friendship circles with black friends organised around shared religious faith were also risky because he was not ‘out’ to them. His “double life” meant keeping gay and straight friends rigidly apart and thus concealment and denial of his gay experience (Coyle and Rafalin 2000: 25 – 6). Disclosures to trusted heterosexual friends had previously resulted in rejection. Alec’s experience is striking but was not unique. Following an abortive police investigation prompted by the local authority of a loving relationship with a man in his twenties with learning difficulties, Les (53) felt obliged to leave his hometown in Lancashire to seek refuge in Manchester. He moved because he feared recriminations that might follow
from accusations of corruption of a younger man for whom he had been acting as unpaid carer. When considering buying a new home in a less familiar district in order to escape neighbours’ homophobic intimidation (in an affluent, middle class district), Warren and his partner (then in their late forties) took the precaution of ‘gaying’ themselves to sound out prospective new neighbours’ reactions to their sexuality. It is significant that this highly educated couple felt obliged to resort to confessional tactics to establish the most basic security.

In addition, some accounts of the risks of heterospaces indicated that heteronormativity could be age-inflected:

I’ve often thought of it but wouldn’t dare do it, unless I got a taxi there and back, but I’d like to go out in camouflage gear... But, I’d just feel a prick getting on the tram like that. I’d feel okay once I got there but I’d feel self-conscious about straight people looking at me. It could feel a bit threatening... I imagine if I went up the road in full camouflage gear, I might get a few comments or more... I wouldn’t take the chance. (Jamie 54).

The norms operating within more publicly available heterospaces could impose constraints upon study participants’ expression of their ageing sexuality through dress or other bodily semiology (Keogh, Reed and Weatherburn (2006: 31 – 3). In the above excerpt, Jamie speaks less of negotiating movement through heterospace than compliance with what he considers to be its requirement that men should not dress in an overly ‘gay’ fashion. “Full camouflage” is more associated with the erotic imaginary of this generation of gay men (Levine 1998: 56). Any claim to validity as a middle-aged gay man when moving through heterospace from the gay space of the home to the gay space of the village becomes tenuous. Heterospace is risky space, indeed something to be traversed rather than occupied, where men might have to run the gauntlet of the (masculine) heterosexual gaze before entering the (relative) sanctuary of gay space (Rosenfeld 2003: 135 – 6). The heterosexual gaze can then severely restrict uses of ageing capital or technologies of the self in terms of how men present to the world and suggests pressures towards privatisation of certain forms of self-presentation and expressions of a midlife gay male erotic self that are more permissible in gay spaces. Jamie’s words are a reminder that those thought to embody sexual difference still figure as matter out of place because their appearance threatens the normal heterosexual order (Burgess 2005: 27).
account also suggests that the risks of heterospace are navigated by means of body management strategies (Goffman 1971: 31, 162; Smith 2001) or rather ritual avoidances, self-surveillance and distancing from homosexuality (Rosenfeld 2003: 103). The ‘de-gaying’ of the self indicated in Jamie’s narrative invokes the power or symbolic violence of the heteronormative gaze and its capacity to stigmatise, unsettle and discipline (Johnson 2002). Such anxieties register how heteronormative “knowledge systems” through which those understood as sexually different are “constructed and recognised” operate in ways that render subjects vulnerable to homophobia (Moran et al 2004: 6, 17-19).

Further, a discomforting self-surveillance could be required even in familiar heterospaces where men might feel conspicuous about being read as a gay couple or pair:

There is a pub locally and (laughs hesitantly) it’s quite a family pub-restaurant… We pop down there to eat sometimes and you’re talking away and sometimes we both check ourselves as to what we say… lower our voices… I, I, I’ve never really felt… uncomfortable there… but you feel you don’t want to put yourself into a situation where you are… Also, we wouldn’t walk along holding hands in Manchester… unless in the village… Once we were holding hands near the end of our road late at night but, as soon as a car came, we stopped… I’ve a friend who was physically and verbally abused for that (Jonathan 42).

Occupying this ‘family’ heterospace, located in a middle class area, calls for small but no less significant pre-emptive acts of ‘de-gaying’ of selves through circumspection, self-censorship, modification of talk and the give-away signs of couple intimacy. This required Jonathan and his partner, both highly educated men, to deny their self-worth. Expressing affection appears legitimated only in the comparative safety of Manchester’s gay quarter (Moran et al 2004: 82). The ever-present threat of psychic violence (e.g. ‘cat calls’ or mimicry of the signs suggesting lack of normative masculinity) and/or physical violence from heterosexuals whether in the ‘family pub’ or delivered from a passing vehicle, again, operate as explicit injunctions restricting the expressions of affection that are part of Jonathan and his partner’s modus operandi. Again, this indicates that gay couples are understood as disrupting the ‘natural’ order that consists of ‘proper’ hetero-coded relationality. Although not made explicit in Jonathan’s account, it is possible that the couple’s self-censoring is imperceptibly informed by considerations of age. Jonathan and his partner are men of a certain age and
unaccompanied by female associates, which might otherwise render their presence less conspicuous and thus legitimate. Meisner and Hynie (2009: 53) note that older LGBTQ people may be more susceptible to homophobia (though they do not explain why). The couple’s sense of vulnerability could be exacerbated by perceptions of their age – a homophobic ageism where men can be read as a pair of ‘old perverts’ who might represent a threat to children. If homosexuality is not a natural path (Corvino 1997: 385) or even a less favourable choice (Hawkes 1996: 135 – 6), then it follows that younger people have to be recruited, enticed or seduced into it (Watney 1991: 399). Although perhaps less frequent now, such experiences as Alec’s above indicates that links between ageing homosexuality and paedophilia persist (Berger 1992: 227). (See also the next chapter).

The above instances of inequality in access to public space register the limits of tolerance towards LGBTQ individuals and groups:

> We’ve made a lot of progress, but we’ve still a long way to go… but I think some of the positive changes could be unmade… At the moment, we have tolerance rather than acceptance as part of life’s rich tapestry and all that. (Bill 55).

Bill’s distinction between “tolerance and acceptance,” the latter involving understanding of sexual difference as largely inconsequential, not only registers the contingent nature of relations of domination and subordination (Whittle 1994: 29). It also indicates that more cultural labour is needed to attain full erotic democracy and that vigilance is required to ensure that any gains in equality are not reversed. These stories of in/tolerance support conclusions in Moran et al’s empirical investigation of the experiences of lesbian and gay people living in Manchester (2004), which pointed up how (the potential for) homophobic violence, actual and symbolic, structures lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) uses and expectations of public space (Moran et al 2004: 6). However, the section below on “queering the pitch” marks limits to this argument.

### 7.2.2 Ambivalent stories of negotiating public heterospace

However, the relational norms obtaining in heterospaces by no means completely thwart possibilities for the deployment of age-related cultural capital. But, involvement in
heterospaces could involve classed and age-inflected moral claims to differentiation from other gay men in ways that were double-edged:

I’ve never, ever wanted to be one of those men whose whole life was in the gay community. I’m a man who happens to be gay rather than a gay man full stop. Y’know, it’s like you speak to some people you know and even if they go to the theatre it’s got to have that gay connection, camp cabaret or whatever. Whilst I enjoy that, it’s not what I’m all about... In all honesty, the quality of my non-gay relationships is better.... I don’t have that many gay friends who… I can talk to about stuff that’s important. I mean, I can talk to them but I might not get the quality of response or debate. It doesn’t quite go as far as I would want sometimes. (Leo 61).

We can see from the above excerpt that how one expresses the more ‘authentic’ aspects of an ageing gay self is much less restrictive in heterospaces than homospaces. Here, Leo claims to be more than his ageing sexuality. But, his claim also represents a form of distinction through cultural capital that resists being reduced to a homogenised form of homosexual existence. Indeed, it offers challenge to Bech’s theorisation of gay male “forms of existence” (Bech 1997: 153-154). Here the lavender ghetto of the youthful village scene is contrasted with the benefits of the company of peer aged heterosexuals. The company of similar aged heterosexuals figures as a form of social capital and is depicted as relational space where a more rounded, ‘authentic,’ emotional and intellectual self can be staged. But, like other more educated, economically better-off informants, Leo’s ability to exercise his ageing and cultural capitals in these particular heterospaces is used to distinguish himself from men he imagines to have been seduced into a gay lifestyle in terms of cultural taste.

The statement below from Clive is also double-edged. It has been pieced together from different parts of his interview and reflects a strong, recurrent theme in his narrative. This narrative serves as a case study of the ambivalences involved in negotiating the heterospaces of friendship, though it advances a different kind of claim to differentiation than Leo’s story above. Although Clive had become middle class by education, he did not use social class explicitly to differentiate himself but rather differentiated himself from the majority of (imagined) gay others through a form of knowledge:
I’m sure we’d all love to clasp the feather boa to our bosoms and complain that there’s an awful stigma, life is horrible and nobody likes us... [And later]... The way young people have responded gives me enormous hope for the future for the gay community and we should stop this constant idea that we are all being persecuted and that the world is a horrible place to be if you’re a gay man. We need to start accepting that the straight community doesn’t have the problems some of us think they have.... I mean, children are not born racist or homophobic; they learn it. And I think it’s behaviour that is learnt initially in the home... [And later still] My straight mates do not wanna keep hearing me banging on about how much the gay community is hated by the straight community. ‘Cause they would argue, “We don’t hate you; you’re your own worst enemy...” I think it’s become a self-fulfilling prophecy (Clive 45).

On the basis of his experience of friendship with younger heterosexually identified men, Clive describes the differences of age and sexuality as much less problematic and divisive than the “gay community’s” assertion of its difference through criticism of the “straight community” and its ongoing clamour for equality with the latter. The informant’s statement implies a claim to better knowledge of gay and straight cultures than most other gay men. Clive’s commentary is reflexive in various ways. It registers the gains that have been made in tolerance of sexual difference among younger straight men. Later during interview, Clive expressed a desire that we might dismantle rigid definitions of sexuality or that they could at least be reduced to the status of a much less consequential form of difference. Also, his claim that “children are not born racist or homophobic” recognises the socially constructed nature of racism, homophobia (and possibly ageism). If they are humanly made, they can be humanly undone.

But, Clive’s proposition is double-edged in its claim for moral and epistemological distinction from those middle-aged gay men and LGBTQ others thought of as in thrall to a community ideology that continues to be based around if not obsessed with proclaiming victimhood. The informant implies that gay men generally want to perpetuate their victim status – one of “stigma” and “persecution” - for dubious personal-political gain. In effect, elsewhere in the interview, Clive considered gay men much more culpable of policing and shoring up the boundaries of a pure (homo-)sexuality whereas younger straight men were considered more open, though discreetly and after sufficient consumption of alcohol, to the fluidity of sexuality. But, this account is suggestive of a form of self-governance which
decrees that a reasonable level of equality or erotic democracy has been achieved and, as a corollary, LGBTQ people/groups should now refrain from militating for further gains in acceptance and extension of rights. It suggests that the battle for equality has been won (Hughes 2006: 239). The view that most within the “gay community” protest too much and are handicapped by a self-imposed, “self-fulfilling” victim mentality is itself indicative of a homonegativity that affects all who live in a culture suffused by such discourse (Russell and Bohan 2006). Indeed, the informant’s account is reminiscent of the stigmatising or “discrediting” discourses that shape the stories and experiences of gay identity of the pre-Stonewall generation (Rosenfeld 2003: 7 – 12). Clive’s vivid metaphor of “clasping the feather boa to our bosoms” also invokes the notion that protest and expression of grievance by gay men are feminising and thus invalid. If anything, Clive’s account is more suggestive of how the tacit rules of the heterospaces of friendship with his twenty-something male companions can encourage or exact political quietism, quiescence and discretion in exchange for toleration. This “politics of respectability” has been noted by Gould who argues that it stems from the ambivalence of LGBT social positioning where gay men are both insiders and outsiders: they make necessary claims for social belonging whilst being othered (Gould 2001: 136 – 42). Clive’s acceptance of his friends’ views or fears about widespread gay militancy illuminates how heteronormative thinking can lead to trivialisation of any resistance to it whilst simultaneously abrogating heterosexuals of the responsibility to address ingrained homophobia. This example of self-governance reinforces the view that discourse, which others gay men as pathological, operates in ways that obscures how it is constituted and its constraints upon expression of identity (Butler 1993: 227) and the conduct of relationships.

7.2.3 Queering the pitch: positive moves in and appropriation of public heterospaces

The above sections have described how any brake on expression of the ageing self and the conduct of relations between middle-aged gay men themselves and between midlife gay men and heterosexuals is attributed to homonormativity rather than ageism. However, and more often, informant accounts amounted to moral claims that the contemporary rules of heterospaces enable opportunities to occupy, move freely within and appropriate them. Mirroring the trend towards toleration in more recent years, anxieties concerning safety and status within public heterospace were more often eclipsed by counter-discursive accounts, which reference civic freedoms rather than immobilising fear or constraint (Hubbard 2001). Indeed, sexuality can be experienced as “a condition of freedom” rather than constraint
Further, and despite the reservations noted in relation to Clive’s statement above, informants commonly offered accounts indicating that heterospaces provide freedoms of association and ease of communication thought to be lacking in gay male culture:

I’ve never had ageism on the straight scene… but I’ve had it on the gay scene… Plenty! I’ve been on the straight scene a lot and I’ve never got guys 20 years younger than me being offensive to me about me age… in the way that gay guys have… and the girls of that sort of age certainly don’t (Sam 45).

Although heterospaces are not free from ageism, age was experienced as much less important here than in homospaces. Sam’s statement typifies reports of the healthier relationships available in heterospaces where middle-aged gay men could feel liberated from the ageist, sexualised, competitive gay gaze. It was commonly reported that heterospaces provided greater opportunity to express aspects of midlife authenticity that might be considered difficult to enact in homospaces. Heterosexual company in the more cosmopolitan ‘northern quarter’ bars was narrated as a space that was for Sam more likely to facilitate community of feeling and mutual respect across age differences.

Moreover, Jed’s account below pieced together from excerpt from his interview supplies an illuminating case study of how age-inflected technology of the self can be used to appropriate if not queer both heterospace and homospace:

Sometimes I wear mini-skirts and tights and high heels… In the winter I like to wear a fur coat… with a longer skirt… 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 don’t wanna look like the other TVs (male cross-dressers) ‘cause some of them take it too seriously. They try to sort of blend in and they’re quite conservative in the way they dress… I’m making a statement about the gender divide… [Later]. 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… [And later]. But, Marigold is really feisty, in yer face… bit of a vamp… not afraid… And I do put on the act at times… But, it’s all very kind of blurred and confused… [And later]. I have been there [to the village] on the bus a few
times... People might look but they tend not to say much... I get a mixed response, really. There’s been a few comments occasionally... a few might mutter things. But, so what? [And later still]...I was on the bus the other day on the way through our estate and observing some of the younger men. They all tend to look similar. They’ve all got the same masculine ways, the walk, the style of clothing and everything.... And I thought, ‘what makes them like that? Why do they copy each other?’ It’s masculinity... eh? (Laughs ironically).

In contrast to Jamie’s story analysed above, the protagonist does not fear public rebuke for his gender blurring self-presentation. In effect, when ‘dressed,’ Jed adopts an alter ego, “Marigold,” who normalises her difference by going out to the village in full garb on the bus. Indeed, Marigold differentiates herself from the cross-dressers who try to ‘pass’ or “blend in” as ‘real’ women. Jed’s/Marigold’s conscious epistemic and moral claim in relation to a productive gender “confusion” points up the incoherencies of gender and sexuality and is redolent of Butler’s theorising that all genders and sexualities are performative (Butler 1993: 227) – products of often repeated discourse that are social constructions lacking any interior essence. Technology of the self enables Jed/Marigold to do other than comply with the rigidities of conventional gender categories (Butler 1990: 43 - 4). Jed’s account suggests the use of counter-discourse to broaden the parameters of sexual citizenship (Butler and Scott 1992: xv). Jed’s gender difference and cross-dressing have also afforded insight into the performativity of the classed hexis of the young men living on his housing estate and the form of masculinity they represent for him. But, what is also significant here is that Jed/Marigold’s use of technology of the self, grants him/her the ability to train the gay/trans gaze quite liberally on men readable as heterosexual and in ways that avoid vengeful symbolic counter-violence. For another informant, the freedoms of self-expression and the relational opportunities now available in heterospaces were not just about remaining inviolate when passing through suburban and city streets en route to the village but extended to a sense of belonging within a community. Tommy (55) reported having made friends in two pubs in his working class district where he would put on a drag show that involved male regulars helping with music and ‘sets’ and female regulars helping with dress and make-up (Tommy 55).

In contrast to Jonathan’s account of being part of a gay couple in spaces like the local ‘family pub,’ the city centre represented spaces of freedom where middle-aged gay men invoked the
right to go about their lives. Les (53) reported jumping on the bus wearing “a touch of rouge and tanning lotion” on his way to a night out in the city declaring the right to be in this public heterospace because, “my money is as good as anyone else’s: end of story.” This mundane but important claim to equality was also visible in expressions of sexual difference by couples in the city’s retail spaces:

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.’ 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).

Warren and his partner may be differentiated as a gay couple of a certain age out on a clothes shopping expedition. But, the shop assistant, duly despatched to return with a pair of jeans that “show off his (partner’s) nice arse,” and the shop manager are included in the couple’s freely expressed intimacy relating to the choice of an item of clothing designed to make his partner look desirable. These appropriations of heterospace provide another example of a politics of the minor (Rose 279 – 80) that whether comic or serious remind us of the potential there now exists for the ‘gaying’ of public space. Again these cultural political expressions represent embodied moral claims for inclusion within mundane socio-sexual citizenship (Weeks 1998: 37).

The examples given above, present a challenge to Moran’s et al’s study (2004) of gay experiences of violence in Manchester. Their argument is framed within a broader thesis concerning the dangers of reinforcing a claim for rights (for respect, to remain inviolate etc) where those seen as sexually different are constructed as individual ‘victims.’ Focussing on individual victimhood, they argue, not only reinforces notions of LGBT actors as weak but obscures the systemic workings of homophobia (transphobia, biphobia etc) as implicated in state-sanctioned symbolic violence where those with greater social esteem and political power are able to alter or restrict the actions and self-expression of less powerful groups.
Moran et al are right to bring attention to the political damage that can be caused to individuals and groups by casting anyone as a victim and that LGBT oppression is systemic, still institutionalised. Although there is much to be done before any claim to a fuller erotic equality can be claimed (Hawkes 1996: 117 - 23), significant landmarks in less than a decade such as equalisation of the age of consent for sex between males and establishment of civil partnerships by the state now troubles the first part of Moran et al’s argument. The second part of their argument also fails to consider change in attitudes in civil society and the many opportunities that middle-aged gay men appropriate in heterospase as described above, courtesy of forms of ageing capital and technologies of the self. Also, their characterisation of the village as (comparatively) safer space for LGBTQ people, overlooks that gay men can commit symbolic violence towards each other as mentioned in chapter 5.

7.3 Negotiating the heterosexual workplace

Despite gains in tolerance and legislative change in the direction of equality, norms operating in the hetero workplace still construct sexual difference as problematic (Ryan-Flood 2004). In Ryan-Flood’s case study of gay friendly Brighton, 25% of respondents reported experience of homophobic harassment in the workplace and most interviewees described the need to be on guard at work. Even among those who were out, this could involve censoring details of their personal lives that heterossexuales expressed quite freely as well as negotiating covert prejudices and insensitivity. Again, much of this suggests that the differences of sexuality trump the differences of age in heterosexual spaces. Ben (50) described how despite good induction training in equal opportunities, there was a lack of vigilance among managers in his workplace and how colleagues could bracket such sensibilities off from what they saw as the real demands of doing the job. Informants in the present study described how day-to-day equality and parity of esteem for LGBTQ workers of any age could be tenuous. Whilst some men reported receiving or more often (over-)hearing remarks that gave concern for the casual brutality they betokened, homophobic gestures/utterances were generally reported as being delivered nowadays in more circumspect ways (Kantor 2009: xii - xiii). These could be narrated as difficult to confront and invoked a sense of guilt for the recipient for failure to challenge them appropriately in the moment (Ben 50). (Though Ben also described using ageing capital (age-inflected cultural knowledge of the workings of homophobia and heteronormativity to defuse and challenge homophobia through parody of those expressing it) (Shepherd et al 2010: 215 – 19). But, generally, the rules of heterosexual workplaces could
demand alertness and be decidedly constraining in relation to sharing expressions of sexual desire:

The guys in the office and what they wouldn’t do to the blonde in Finance and all that... I get people at work asking me, ‘Do you fancy any of the people you support?’ And I said, ‘If I did, I wouldn’t tell you (intoned evenly without rancour or sarcasm) because it wouldn’t be the same in your eyes...’ I can’t talk about my relationship in the way they talk about theirs. And there was one colleague who said, ‘Oof, she’s gorgeous.’ And, I think, ‘I couldn’t do that. It could be used in another way.’ (Leo 61).

In the above excerpt, Leo explains how, as a (middle-aged) gay man, any overt expressions of desire towards those he supported at work (younger, often vulnerable asylum seekers) could be interpreted in a much more incriminating way compared to his heterosexual peers. He refrained from sex talk within the office not for reasons of privacy (even though this is offered as a pretext for not sharing his desires) or because he wanted to differentiate himself by standing aloof from such talk. Rather he intimates that any disclosures might be used to portray him as a predatory (middle-aged) gay man (Jones and Pugh 2005). Although the informant felt confident about using ageing capital (sense of self-worth, relational skills and knowledge acquired over time) to level with his colleagues about this inequality, his account registers that those associated with same-sex desire are more vulnerable in the workplace because their sexual difference is still assumed as other in the heterocentric order.

However, some informants reported different experiences of heterosexual workspaces. They contrasted the latter favourably with the more age-, looks- and image-conscious gay workspaces (see the previous chapter):

I suppose, if I go out with friends from work... you don’t tend to get that same bitchiness, at least not about the same things as you get on the gay scene. The gay scene can be very mercenary... I suppose I’ve built up more friendships at work... and you get to know people better on a day-to-day level... There’s a basis for knowing what that person’s like. So if you go out with somebody from work and see a bitchy, silly side to them... you know they have another more serious or nicer side as well. And I think that perspective helps me to understand now why people can at times not
be that nice. It may be to do with things beyond their control I don’t know about, so it helps you to stand back and not respond in kind (Ben 50).

If homospaces limited certain expressions of subjectivity, the hetero workspace (and social activities after work) is differentiated in Ben’s account as a relational space where one can get to know others sufficiently and make allowances for colleagues’ personal foibles etc. Like Mike’s use of ageing capital to defuse ageism in gay workspaces (discussed in the previous chapter), Ben’s story shows how ageing capital (here in age-inflected knowledge of contextual norms and relationships) is used to appreciate the discursive and/or structural forces that animate colleagues to behave in less than respectful ways.

7.4 Men at play: querying and queering the gym

As with public heterospaces and hetero workplaces, the norms operating within the ‘heterosexual’ gym could also elicit stories of constraint, negotiation with and resistance to their exigencies. Motives for using the gym were multiple and mixed. They could variously combine claims to maintain bodily health, fitness, attractiveness, sexual marketability and the pleasures of turning the gaze on other men (Ben 50, Daniel 46). For the 11 informants who had ever used a gym regularly, the self-discipline it required was largely endured for its maintenance of desirability as subjects grew older. But, mostly, midlife gay men spoke of the gym as problematic space. In line with the structured dependency thinking of Estes at al (2003) and Vincent (1999) discussed in chapter 2, the economic dimensions of social class resulted in the exclusion of men with long-term medical conditions who were reliant on benefits, notwithstanding concessionary rates of membership or entry to leisure and exercise amenities provided through the local authority (Alec 46, Vince 49). But, among those who could afford the cost of the gym, the cultural dimensions of social class were significant in shaping their experiences of it. Fourteen informants, and generally more educated and/or possessing enhanced capacities for social criticism, were critical of the obedience the gym demanded to develop the gay body beautiful for the ‘shallow’ motive of enhancing attractiveness and sexual opportunity:

There’s only so many hours in the day… so there’d be no time for chatting, eating together, watching a DVD or film together… So, if they were going to the gym all the time, there’d be no chance of having a relationship… If you did it seven days a week,
y’know… your level of conversation won’t be that interesting because all you know is pumping weights instead of discussing the newspaper article or the interesting discussion that you had with a friend or someone else (Sam 45).

I used to exercise spasmodically but I found it boring and frustrating… Whenever I went, it always used to be full of these huge lumps of fellas that could just lift these huge weights and steam’d rise off them And I just didn’t think the gym was geared up to skinny blokes… And I didn’t find the people all that sociable. If you tried to strike up a conversation with somebody, they reacted as though you were deeply unsound… I’m probably too complex to follow a programme through… I also thought there was much better things I could do with my time (Chris 48).

The heterospaces of the gym were not entirely convivial spaces nor were they free from the forms of bodily hierarchy evident in homospaces (Edwards 2006: 49 – 50) dedicated to body projects such as gay gyms or saunas. Interestingly, none of the gym goers reported having made use of a gay gym. In effect, when speaking of their experiences of the (straight) gym, middle-aged gay men could express ageism towards younger and some peer aged gay men and classism towards others regardless of apparent sexuality. Sam described himself as a regular at a private, “gay-friendly leisure complex” which he used for the pragmatic reason of keeping “in reasonable shape.” In the first quote above, Sam differentiates himself bodily, morally, epistemically and in class-inflected terms from obsession with building a better (middle-aged) gay body. This bodily project is equated with a deficient form of embodiment that is often visible in homospaces and a reduced quality of life that neglects the development of the intellect, personality and the capacity for conviviality required to build and sustain relationships. His narrative recalls middle-aged gay men’s discourse of bodily authenticity which differentiates them from the superficiality, lack of maturity and gullibility associated with younger and some peer aged gay men’s self-obsession (Kane 2009: 20, 26 - 28). Again, it appears that ageism works in a way that requires middle class, middle-aged gay men to observe the necessary standards of moderation when working on the body. It can also encourage middle-aged gay men to be critical of younger others in order to assert their value in a culture where the middle-aged body is derided.

Chris’ account of a city centre gym (that he had abandoned well before interview) is insightful for its critique of the gym that some might recognise. Here the gym figures as
‘asocial,’ atomised and alienated space where attempts to be sociable infringe norms that require silence, dedication to solitary projects (alongside solitary others) and which sanction hyper-individualism. Striking up a conversation is seen as unwelcome or disruptive of labour on the self. But, Chris differentiates himself more explicitly than Sam from displays of normative heterosexual masculinity. For Chris, the rules of the game in this youth, hetero and working class coded gym appear triply alienating and damaging to the authenticity of a more “complex” self (habitus) that is used to operating in the realm of mind and strategising in the maximisation of time. Indeed, his ‘fish out of water’ experience as a midlife gay man of a more intellectual predisposition suggests the use of age-inflected cultural capital that enables embodied, classed, epistemic and moral distinction from the self-obsessed forms of masculinity thought to characterise this particular heterospace.

This kind of thinking was roundly challenged by the accounts of informants like Ben (50) whose use of ageing capital reclaimed his local authority gym as a space for sensory and sensual pleasures consisting not least of the visual delights of looking at (heterosexual) men. Besides, ‘working’ out as a gay man does not mean straightforward replication of hegemonic masculinity (Halperin 1995: 114) but could enable middle-aged men to realise, in both senses of the word, Woodward’s idea of a “still watchable older self” (1999: ix) worthy of the regard of others. In this respect, the gym, or particularly the changing rooms (homoerotic space par excellence), could be ‘gayed’ temporarily:

I find it quite exciting… looking at guys and kinda flirting… especially when you go to the showers afterwards. I find that quite a turn-on… There was this youngish guy, local lad and I think he’s straight… Anyway, he was looking when I came out of the showers. And I actually started a conversation with him… He opened up straightaway. And, as I left, I thought, ‘I can do it now [my emphasis] when I want to.’ … I know it’s quite naughty but I quite like winding straight guys up, y’know, perving at them without actually doing owt (Jeff 48).

In contrast to accounts concerning experiences in homospace, considerations of age, ageing and ageism in this heterospace do not appear to count nor be any barrier to sexual inquisitiveness. Not only are the differences of class practically irrelevant in this erotic encounter but Jeff’s anecdote also indicates the use of age-inflected technologies in differentiating the self, which are used here to render the categories of sexuality ambivalent.
(Knopp 2003: 196 – 7). The informant troubles heteronormativity by subtle appropriation of the right to train the gaze on and flirt with younger, (possibly) heterosexually identified men. The psychological force majeure involved in being able to confuse and playfully unsettle heterosexual men, through confident, playful performance of sexual ambiguity is clearly linked to increasing sense of self-worth and confidence that come with age (ageing capital).

7.5 Conclusion

This chapter has addressed how midlife gay men living in Manchester are both differentiated by heterosexual others and differentiate themselves from (younger) gay others through various forms of embodied, moral, epistemic and class related claims in particular fields of existence understood as ‘heterosexual’ – city streets and neighbourhoods, friendship connections, workplaces and the local gym. In response to the research questions, I have argued that heteronormativity rather than ageism can set limits on middle-aged gay men’s expression of identity and their forms of relating in local heterospaces but that subjects also negotiate with and challenge heteronormativity. On the whole, relations in heterospaces were narrated as much freer from ageism and thus more likely than homospaces to enable men to express aspects of their ‘authentic,’ midlife selves and be involved in more fulfilling social relations. I have specifically demonstrated how the contextual norms of heterospace sanction three main ways in which midlife gay men operate within it. In the first instance, which concerns limits on expression of ageing sexual identity and forms of relating, I have described how middle-aged gay men living in Manchester experience unequal access to and within public space (Valentine 1996: 145 - 6). Men can feel conspicuous when on the way to the village which, despite its problems, registers as safer space compared to the local ‘family pub’ and, at times, in heterosexual workplaces that require navigation of casual homophobia. This could compel self-censoring of everyday practices in the form of body management tactics that involve toning down or even ‘de-gay’ of the self (Keogh, Reed and Weatherburn 2006: 31 -33) – less discursive than an essential survival tactic. In the second more ambivalent instance, informants differentiated themselves through their involvement in heterosexual friendships from forms of relating in public space that they associated with younger gay men and young straight men in the gym and in ways that were at times inflected by considerations of social class. But, securing ‘legitimacy’ in heterospace could involve claims that reinforce homophobia. In the third and most common instance, heterospaces were narrated as providing considerably greater freedoms than homospaces to express authenticity
because men are freed from the sexualised scrutiny and ageist gaze thought to prevail in local homospaces. Informants often invoked the right to go about their business inviolate and could mobilise various forms of ageing capital and technologies of the self to differentiate themselves whilst staking a claim to social inclusion. Such practices could involve turning the gaze back onto heterosexual men without vengeful symbolic violence and the ‘gaying’ of heterospaces through confident, socially skilled, playful, age-inflected performance. They amount to mundane yet highly significant claims to ordinariness and inclusion within wider sexual citizenship (Weeks 1998: 37). Such accounts of heterospace as more inclusive mark limits to the view advanced in Moran et al’s study in Manchester (2004) that the (threat of) symbolic and physical violence from heterosexuais (and state-sanctioned symbolic violence) structure the social experience of those seen as sexually different. Concerns about psychic and actual violence resonate with midlife gay men in Manchester who grew up during a fervently anti-gay era when government and much of civil society were hostile to sexual difference. But, the gains in tolerance that register in civil partnerships and an equal age of consent for gay men mean that Moran et al’s argument is now overstated. In disregarding middle-aged gay men’s capacities for reflexivity and agency implicated in negotiation of and claiming the right to ‘be’ in local heterospace, the argument of Moran et al comes perilously close to expressing a symbolic violence of its own.

Having examined middle-aged gay men’s relationships in various homo and heterospaces, I now turn to how study participants’ accounts of close relationships occurring largely in domestic spaces.
Chapter Eight. At Home with Significant Others: the Organisation of Intimacies and Closer Relationships

8.1 Introduction

Middle-aged gay men’s lived experience is not limited to the village, the cyberscene, saunas and social groups. It is also constituted by closer relations occurring within domestic spaces (Gorman-Murray 2006). Nardi has suggested that friendship is the fulcrum of gay men’s lives (1999: 13). But, one is struck by how little scholarship exists on the domestic ‘gay scene’ where the activities of friendship family are often enacted. Berger notes that gay men expect to turn away from the bar scene as they age and to become involved instead in social/support or political groups (Berger 1992: 221). But, neither he nor the literature on gay male ageing or gay identity have much to say about how men actually and creatively extend the gay scene to their own and friend’s homes as they grow older. The above points are ironic when it appears that the domestic spaces of friendship family are more important than the bar scene for middle-aged and older gay men (Heaphy 2009: 129; Heaphy et al 2004: 886 - 7). This chapter explores the complexities and consequences of how middle-aged gay men differentiate themselves mainly from younger gay men through the claims made in their accounts of kinship. I focus on the research questions that concern what the organisation of informants’ closer relationships can tell us about the expression of midlife gay male identity and how middle-aged gay men respond to prevailing ideas of age, ageing and gay ageism. I begin with a sketch of informants’ relationship circumstances before looking at experiences in informants’ families of origin. I contrast the latter with stories of friendship family and consider its pleasures, exclusions and some of the difficulties and ambivalences involved in the negotiation of intimacy. I also consider comparisons and contrasts between the modes of kinship narrated by local middle-aged gay men and those associated with heterosexuals.

My overarching argument is that conditions in gay kinship groups, which rely more on the idea of family as friends (Smart 2007: 674; Weston 1991; Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan 2001) rather than biorelatedness, help re-create midlife identity and crucially shape how informants manage the ageing process. (I use the term ‘biorelated’ because not all ‘heterosexual’ family involves biological relatedness – for instance, several men spoke of step-parents or step-/half siblings). The move away from biorelated family paralleled by prioritisation of connections in friendship families over involvement in the commercial gay
scene involves various claims for differentiation. Friendship family was no mere consolation for the loss of value on the gay scene nor was it stoical counter-rejection of an uncaring biolegal family. Friendship families perform important work in helping to maintain a sense of midlife identity, self-worth and cultural inclusion (Heaphy et al 2004: 889 - 90). The spaces of coupled relationships and friendship family were narrated as comparatively free from ageism and as furnishing the emotional and political resources to withstand and contest ageism on the “pre-fabricated, commercialised” bar scene (Weston 1991: 136) and homophobia (Weston 1991: 106, 113 – 16; Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan 2001: 87). Gay and gay-friendly kinship arrangements enabled informants to mobilise ageing capital to express aspects of the self considered more ‘authentic.’ Here the use of technologies of the self involved questioning of heteronormative notions of family and the practice of sexual relations beyond monogamy. Some informants, however, experienced disadvantaged access to certain forms of friendship family/gay kinship or were practically excluded from this for economic (Weston 1991: 104) and cultural reasons, the latter at times being connected with homophobia (Lewin 1998: 93). Further, claims to differentiation from relational practices associated with younger gay men could operate in benign and ageist registers. On the one hand, informants spoke of friendship/partnership with peer aged men as sustaining and in ways that did not imply derogation. This was evident in stories underlining the importance of being able to relate to others who understood what it was like to have survived more hostile times (Nardi 1999: 17). On the other hand, age divisions could be recounted as inevitable facts of life that did not require or even evaded explanation. Claims to differentiation from younger gay men could involve reverse ageism. Informants’ stories referred to various barriers to cross-generational closeness. Younger gay men could be considered a threat - if perceived as being financially ‘on the make’ (Stacey 2004: 186). When they were imagined, cross-generational intimacies could be reduced to quasi-prostitution (Steinman 1990: 180) where the physical capital of youthful bodies is traded for economic reward or at best the psychological security provided by a ‘father figure.’ Alternatively, informants could differentiate themselves from the “empty vessels” (Chris 48) younger gay men were thought to represent. Here younger gay men figured less a threat than lacking in substance (developed tastes and personality). They could also be constructed as vulnerable thus requiring the older man to exercise a moral duty of care to avoid exploiting them sexually. The discursive force of ageism was also visible in the strong desire to avoid being labelled a predatory older man (Jones and Pugh 2005). Anxiety was also expressed in claims concerning the imagined time-limited trajectory of cross-generational relationships which were considered to be inherently
unstable (Robinson 2008: 116; Steinman 1990: 180 - 2) when, as sexual activity diminishes and the younger party reaches middle-age, he begins the inevitable search for a younger replacement. Such thinking indicates the operation of ageism in a gay male culture which fosters anxieties about the loss of physical capital and sexual citizenship. Along with the expressions of reverse ageism described above, such thinking imposes considerable restrictions on informants’ capacities to deploy ageing capital (emotional strength and self worth) and technologies of the self (capacities to free the self from ageist constraint). It also reinforces social distance between gay men of different ages and indicates, contrary to informants’ assumptions, that growing older is not a linear path towards greater acceptance of the self and others. Finally, I argue against Bech’s view that gay male kinship/friendship family is now barely distinct from the kinship practices of urban heterosexuals (Bech 1997: 198). On the basis of some offerings from the general and gay specific literature on kinship, I argue that informants’ stories of kinship and the practices to which they refer remain distinctive. Middle-aged gay men have greater scope for participation in new relational experiments (Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan 2001: 23) and friendship family still has particular political and emotional significances for this current generation of middle-aged gay men in Manchester.

8.2 Informants’ relationship circumstances

Informants’ relational circumstances varied. Nearly two-thirds of the men interviewed (n = 17) described themselves as ‘single’ though two of these men (Bill 55 and Daniel 46) had maintained several ‘fuck buddies’ or ‘erotic friendships’ over time. All of those who were single lived alone apart from Pete (52) who was a live-in carer for his elderly father, Vince (48) who shared a house with two gay friends and Clive (46) who shared a home he was buying with his ex-partner and now best friend. More than a third of the interview sample (n = 10) were partnered. Seven respondents were involved in long-term cohabiting relationships (between three and 27 years) including bisexually identified Will (48) who lived with a long-term female partner. Three couples were with a partner but living apart, though one of these relationships was described as moribund on account of this arrangement (Fred 55). The relational circumstances of three other informants also stood out. One respondent was involved in a civil partnership of two years standing, though his relationship had begun 14 years earlier and involved a negotiated agreement for both partners to have sex with other men (Ben 50). Another man shared a home with an ex-partner (his closest friend) whilst
being involved in a ‘together apart’ relationship for more than ten years (Jamie 54) and yet another informant shared a home with his current and ex-partners (Mike 55).

8.3 Growing up in the heterosexual home

The vast majority of gay men grow up in heterosexual homes. The heterosexual home was largely recounted as fraught with risk and alienating. Two-thirds of informants (n = 18) described the parental home as alienating (Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan 2001: 77). For instance, Warren recalled the kitchen table boasts of his brother’s friends’ “queer bashing” exploits. But, there were significant differences in men’s accounts of experience of homophobia. Jonathan grew up in a deeply religious home:

It was almost criminal in a way that anyone could let a set of beliefs to allow a relationship basically… to stop even though you feel close… It [upbringing] was a mixture of… erm, self-righteousness and… an awful lot of… emotional neglect for all of us [brothers and sisters]. I know that he [brother] felt initially quite awkward about me being gay… and he made some comment to my sister about having shared a bedroom with me… (laughs)... And in terms of my parents… I keep in touch... I ring her [his mother] as she won’t ring here because of X [partner]… Sticks her head in the sand… so she can handle me… She just about acknowledges that X exists but… doesn’t like discussing anything to do with us. ... We were at my sister’s wedding reception and X was in the same room as mum and dad… X might have said that my dad looked as though he wanted to come over and talk but he didn’t.

Jonathan repressed his sexual feelings for men for twelve years. ‘Coming out’ to his wife aged 33 was recounted as the beginning of a claim to a different, more ‘authentic self’ (“who I am”) and existence. His upbringing continues to cast a shadow over his post-heterosexual midlife away, which results in denial of his difference. Jonathan spoke of fears of hostility and rejection from religious sources in the present though, in the above excerpt, he is critical of a religious discourse that divides families and amounts to child neglect. The seven-year relationship of Jonathan and his partner is denied by Jonathan’s parents and humane communication among all parties is effectively thwarted.
Memories of the parental home were often ambivalent. Feelings of love and care for parents were often mixed with anger. For eighteen informants the norms of heterosexual family had denied what they eventually embraced as an important aspect of identity. It is not surprising then that just over half the interview sample (n = 14) spoke of a gradual diminution of bonds with their family of origin:

Probably more detachment from the family as you get older… My family is a bit more scattered these days... Though you can be a gay man and have a big extended family who call on you for support or who may be able to give you help in return… But, my partner and friends know more about my life... they know me better... my relationship... And it’s these people I turn to (Ben 50).

There is an intimation in the above account of a philosophical acceptance that growing apart from biolegal family is part of the ageing process, especially when families are more dispersed. Ben also recognises that gay men might actually have different kinds of relationship with their families of origin, which can provide support to some gay men. But, his own experience marks a salient theme in interview narratives. Informants differentiated the social family of partners and/or (gay) significant others as a kind of “interpretive community” (Plummer 1995: 134) because, unlike the family of origin, it understands the particularities of gay identity and ways of relating (Nardi 1992). In consequence, relationships with parents and relatives were often described as perfunctory. Jamie (54) reported that connections with his family of origin had attenuated to little more than the obligatory exchange of Christmas greetings or attendance at certain family gatherings - weddings and funerals.

**8.4 The move towards friendship family**

Given the accounts above, It is not uncommon for lesbian and gay adults to describe escape from the “strange space” of the heterosexual home as necessary to rethink their identity and values (Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan 2001: 77 – 82; Robinson 2008: 45). Seventeen informants regardless, of relationship status, described being involved in a friendship family, though for seven of these men, family amounted to no more than two or three close associates who were not necessarily well-known to each other. This familial form most commonly consisted of peer aged gay men and extended to ex-lovers, lesbian and heterosexual friends.
and, in a few cases, biological relatives or ‘in laws.’ Friendship families were dynamic and perhaps more prone to change and renewable than biolegal family. Friends could be lost following significant events (e.g. death, falling out, moving away) but, newer associates can be integrated into kinship. A friend could become a lover and later revert back to being part of a small coterie of non-sexual friends (Rob 50). These configurations recall Morgan’s definition of family as a “set of practices that overlap with other practices” (Morgan 1996: 11-13). This conceptualisation avoids reifying family as an “institution,” understanding it instead as constituted in and through everyday processes. It represents a “moral economy” that involves emotional and practical support and greater openness about who or what counts as family (Morgan 1996: 189-90).

It has though been argued that friendship families have been overstated, especially for middle-aged gay men who are single. Laying claim to one is thought to be a response to homonormative pressure to concoct a cover story to hide loss, isolation and thus preserve a measure of self esteem (Hostetler 2004: 163). Carrington (1999: 116) and Taylor (2009: 7, 27) view the ability to implement such forms of kinship as largely available to middle class gay men with the requisite resources of time, money and the cultural political and relational know-how to co-create and sustain them. On this account, friendship family is understood as a middle class phenomenon and often unavailable to working class people. Indeed, Lewin notes a range of studies in the United States that have shown that the cultural political understandings of working class gay and lesbian people predispose them to rely more on biolegal family and to conceptualise ‘family’ in such terms (Lewin 1998: 93). Although some men faced exclusion from friendship family (see below), informants used their ageing capital to negotiate this kind of kinship with a mundane confidence even in the face of momentous events:

Last year, my partner’s father died and he was like in an old folks’ home... We helped his mum to find this home for him... We saw some that were terrible. I wouldn’t have wanted to live there... It made me feel worried about getting old... We were due to go on holiday twice last year but had to cancel it because of his dad’s condition… and, in fact, we were going to see an ex-partner of mine who lives in Spain. I could’ve gone alone but I decided to cancel as well (Jamie 54).
Jamie’s account shows that time can be made to support others during fateful moments (Smart 2007: 671). His statement implies a moral claim that indicates how age and emotionally inflected cultural capital can be put to use in this case to help his partner’s well-heeled family to find a suitable care home for a dying ‘father-in-law.’ Later during interview, Jamie revealed a capacity to be critical of the practices he had observed within the care homes had had visited as well as the principle of private elderly care. The narrative above challenges Hostetler’s view of middle-aged gay men as lonely old queens covering over their isolation and Carrington’s view that working class gay men are lacking in the resources to be involved in friendship family. Hostetler and Carrington disregard the political knowledge, relational skills and capacities for agency of middle-aged working class gay men (though see below).

8.4.1 Moving from the public gay scene to friendship family in domestic spaces

Relational change was also paralleled by a gradual move away from the village scene towards greater investment in friendship family. Sixteen men described how when younger, their friendship groups often comprised peer aged gay men on the bar scene (the rest either came out comparatively later in their thirties or described never having fitted in with ‘the scene’). This change in relational practice was often narrated as a response to the loss of (bodily) value on the commercial scene (chapter 5) but the development of connections in gay domestic spaces was no mere consolation prize:

I don’t go out on the scene a great deal these days… We’ve got different interests now. We like to have dinner parties (chuckles)…. and we invite our lesbian friends over quite a bit... And, actually, I like staying in on a Saturday night now…. I’ve mainly grown out of the bar and club scene… I don’t feel as though I’m missing out on it anymore... and I just feel that age fades into the background more... I find that having people like this around makes me care less about how I’m seen on Canal Street (Jamie 54).

The gradual shift from bar scene to the home was understood as a natural development of the ageing process (Berger 1992: 221). The bar scene was something one might ‘grow out of.’ Generally, relationships on the domestic scene were thought to be based on mutual value. For Jamie, the spaces of friendship family are differentiated morally from the village scene.
because they are less age conscious and freer from ageist scrutiny (Grossman et al 2000: 172, 175) where, “age fades into the background.” The transition from bar/nightclub scene to home for Jamie then represents less a withdrawal from social engagement with gay others than the extension of the gay (and wider interpersonal) ‘scene’ to domestic spaces.

8.4.2 Differentiating friendship family; care not duty

Moreover, friendship family was differentiated from its biolegal variant on account its “ethic of care” (Weeks 2007: 99), which was contrasted with the sense of obligation thought to characterise links with the family of origin:

I care for them, listen to them and have even helped out financially. But, mum and dad don’t really understand my life... Despite our differences and niggles, we listen carefully to each other’s point of view. We set things aside to support each other. My partner is the one I rely on emotionally... more than anyone and not just because he knows me better but also we both understand what being gay is about. If I mention some homophobic incident, he knows how to respond (Ben 50).

Ben’s account is significant because it contrasts the obligation towards his parents and their lack of understanding of his relationship with the mutual support and understanding of gay experience available to him in his partnership (Pugh 2002: 173-5; Weston 1991; Nardi 1992). Coupled relationships and friendship families more than compensate for any diminution of relations with the family of origin. Ben’s story indicates that the conditions of partnership, which was the mainstay of a very small friendship family consisting of two other peer aged gay men can help middle-aged gay men to continue to develop the emotional and political resources to challenge heteronormative views of family and to claim the validity of their kinship (Stacey 1996: 126; Weston 1991: 166; Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan 2001: 16). The informant’s account also indicates that friendship family is integral to the “interpretive community” necessary to understand stories of homophobia and to help subjects to develop counter-narratives (Plummer 1995: 134).

Relational stories could also involve moral claims to differentiation through involvement in familial networks that were consciously defined along lines of difference in terms of age, gender, sexuality and class as part of a “balanced life.” (Pete 52). These more eclectic
experiences of intimacy might be redolent of Pahl’s “personal communities” that are “not restricted to a particular form of affinity” and are “characterised by people who represent different meanings” to the person concerned (Smart 2007: 684). Although stories of eclectic family were more likely to be told by informants with more middle class cultural capital, Pete’s narrative stood out as an atypical though edifying case study of friendship family that involves the use of an “ethics of the self” (Foucault 1987: 25 - 31) and ageing capital:

I would describe my network of friends as varied and kind of being like a family of choice, really. Er, one of my friends… has quite a few lesbian friends… And she wants us to set up a housing co-operative… involving, different generations… to provide a more supportive environment as you get older… which I would think about in the future. [Later] …There’s much more to you than your body... There’s your mind, your personality, your relationships… [My emphasis] …I would say overall that I give priority to my relationships… [Later] …If he’s feeling like it, I take my father out for a pub lunch if a friend comes round. So, even though I’m looking after him, there’s a sense in which I can be on my own… and his needs, generally speaking, come first… ‘cause that’s what he needs at his age. But, I’m also very clear about my own needs and try to ensure that these are met as far as I can. [Later] …One thing I have learned from associating with people of my father’s age is that there is a sense in which age is irrelevant… [Later] Quite a few friends have been up to stay with us… And that’s been really nice both for me and good for him too… and I’ve got two lesbian friends who will come and look after him if I need to get away for a few days.

In the above excerpt, Pete makes moral, emotional and epistemic claims which differentiate him from others (gay and straight) in various ways. They invoke a certain form of middle class cultural capital (e.g. the “housing cooperative”), though not in ways that imply superiority. The informant describes a network of friends that involve men and women, straight and gay people some with whom he might eventually consider living in more egalitarian, communal and cross-generational arrangements. About three years prior to interview, Pete had made a decision to give up a longstanding career in a well-remunerated public service profession to become a live-in carer for his eighty-year-old father. This decision was framed within an ethics of the self (thinking on his relationship to himself to forge an existence that is consistent with his values), which also invokes qualities of authenticity (“mind” and “personality”). Such an ethics involves the prioritising of
relationships over individualised projects of the body thought to be required for/by the gay commercial scene. It is noteworthy that Pete’s father is included as far as possible in events in the circle of friends in and outside the home. We also get a sense of the home as negotiated space that is gay-friendly and involving mutual acceptance. The relationship with his father, organised around mutual respect for different emotional and practical needs as well as the need for ‘space’ from each other, suggests a level of maturity, empathy and sensitivity that is consonant with ageing capital. Indeed, Pete’s story represents a form of egalitarian “independence within mutuality” that is part of a “friendship ethic” (Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan 2001: 70 - 1). The involvement of Pete’s friends in providing a form of ‘respite’ care suggests an informal but no less important expression of communitas through everyday human cooperation.

8.4.3 The ambivalences of and exclusions from gay domestic spaces/friendship family

We have seen how the spaces of friendship family are positively differentiated in that within them informants can lay claim to autonomy and to develop the emotional and political resources needed to withstand ageism and homophobia. The home also registered as a space for self-expression (Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan 2001: 82 - 3) not least in terms of the cultural artefacts that adorn and constitute it, which include mode of decoration, gay attuned book, DVD and CD collections to the more privately stored sex toys and pornography. The home was important as a distinct sexual space. The privacy, comfort and conviviality with sex partners in the home was contrasted with the clinical “quick fuck” available in gay saunas (Pete 52 and Jeff 48).

However, we have seen how the gay home could be a site of risk in terms of ageist hostility online (chapter 6) and homophobic intimidation from neighbours (chapter 7). Domestic kinship spaces could be experienced as sites of ambivalence and exclusion. Although his home was a space of eclectic friendship, it was ambivalent space for Pete (52) who was not able to bring home a sex partner given his role as a live-in carer. For another informant, and offering some support for Carrington’s view (1999), the economic and cultural dimensions of social class could combine to set limits on access to certain expressions of gay kinship:

My friends with money tend to be more home-based... the dinner parties, barbeques, which I can’t do but would if I were in their position. For them, there is a shift from
the scene and bars to more home-based socialising as an owner-occupier. And once
they become a couple, everything revolves around the house... They’re in and out of
each other’s houses... It’s like their own social network they’ve created (Bill 54).

Bill is highly educated but being single and reliant on social security benefits differentiates
him from some of his more affluent, coupled associates resulting in exclusion from a form the
coupled gay dinner party and barbecue circuit. As a consequence, he felt obliged to continue
socialising in the village, suggesting that experience of relative poverty and being single
could prolong reliance on the village scene. The economic dimensions of social class were
even more sharply felt by Alec (46). Interviewing him in a flat he could barely afford to
furnish was a stark and poignant reminder of the socio-economic exclusion experienced by
some middle-aged gay men. It is not difficult to imagine how his economic circumstances
might differentiate Alec in the eyes of other gay men. Sexual and relational opportunities
could be restricted when a home might not live up to the required aesthetic standards
(Yaksich 2008).

Moreover, the persistence of homophobic and biphobic attitudes could severely constrain
relations with heterosexual associates:

I suppose… a couple of them may know… I don’t always tell them… if they ask me,
I will generally [tell them] but I’ve had some bad reactions with heterosexual friends
in the past who have said, ‘You’re Catholic’ and all that... I’ve lost several friends that
way (Alec 46).

Such attitudes could also severely restrict men’s capacity to be involved in friendship
families. In effect, Alec felt obliged to maintain a rigid separation between a small coterie of
peer aged gay men and heterosexual friends from his church (and country of origin), which
provided a spiritual connection and freedom from racism that were not guaranteed within gay
culture. He was not alone in having to make efforts to keep groups of friends or contacts
totally separate. Will (48) spoke of what he felt to be a necessary censoring of his sexual
interest in the home he shared with his long-term, breadwinning female partner and among
his heterosexual friends, including those he regularly met in the friendship space of his local
pub.

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8.5 Differentiating selves through relational stories

8.5.1 Differentiation from younger selves

The past is a different country – it could figure as a distinct field of experience with its own rules. Informants commonly made claims to differentiation from the relational practices associated with younger selves. Les (53) described his younger self as a “typical screaming young queen” who was part of a coterie of similar others. His life now was more concerned with breeding pedigree cats for show. Although the example below from Keir (42) was not entirely typical of informants’ experience, it points up the kind of transition that gay men can make in midlife:

Oh God, partying... y’know, like, going to a club ‘til the early hours of the morning… then going home and having another drink... then starting again…. Y’know having another night out on the Saturday night… I was about 35 when I stopped drinking... I’ve been going to a social group for the past couple o’ years… of people about the same kind of age as me… and I’m quite lucky I’ve found some nice friends there with similar interests… and you kind of find out how other people have travelled to where they are now.

For Keir, the party had been brought to a halt in his mid-thirties when he began to realise that he had drifted into alcoholism. Ageing figures in his account in the contrast between his heavy drinking clubbing/’scene’ days and the social group of peer aged men that he now attends. His last sentence is suggestive of ageing capital in the sense that having given up the bar/club scene (which in no way figures as a collective experience), he is now more open to hearing and empathising with others’ lived experience. For two-thirds of the interview sample (n = 17), and largely independent of any differences between men, relations when younger had been overwhelmingly homosocial. For the majority of subjects, their circle of significant others during their youth had consisted largely of gay men very close in age who helped sustain each other through the process of ‘coming out’ – exploring the bar scene and other aspects of gay male culture that furnished the emotional, cultural political and social resources for self-remaking. Informants’ networks of significant others had not atrophied at all but had broadened to include a somewhat wider range of friends by age and gender.
8.5.2 Differentiating selves from younger gay men

Differentiation from the relational practices of younger selves can also supply clues as to how informants differentiate themselves from ways of relating they associate with younger gay men in the present. There were notable instances of empathy towards the pressures younger men on the scene might face in terms of alcohol/drug use and self-presentation but this was eclipsed by the workings of a reverse ageism. Informants differentiated themselves through accounts of their relationships from the relational practices they associated with younger men in various ways. Age divisions could be understood as natural but younger gay men could be constructed either as a threat, insubstantial or vulnerable. It is perhaps not surprising then that cross-generational relationships were regarded as inherently unstable and time-limited.

Four-fifths of the interview sample (n = 23) expressed a strong preference in terms of sexual attractiveness and sociability for men over 30 and ideally within about ten years either way of their own age; a parameter that aged along with them (see Kaufman and Chin Phua 2003). Preferences for peer aged significant others indicate a claim for differentiation from younger gay men in ways that do not necessarily entail disparagement of the latter. Central to this age preference was a political and emotional understanding of what it was like to have survived less tolerant times (Nardi 1999: 1):

Well, you feel as though people, er, who have similar experiences can identify with what you’ve been through and may be feeling the same things as you… like when attitudes weren’t as positive (Jamie 54).

Moreover, age divisions could be understood and calmly accepted as natural and inevitable (Robinson 2008: 174):

Oh, they’re lovely people but they just don’t have the same interests in life... I have a bit of banter. Don’t have big, deep conversations with them… I’m just less interested in people of that age. I just don’t gel as I do with older people… I dunno… It’s difficult to explain (Jamie 54).

Jamie’s relations with younger gay men are limited to what he regards as superficial interaction, though the “banter” was still meaningful to him in the context of a socially
diverse line dancing group where he had formed closer connections. Despite his uncertainty as to why he feels less connected with younger gay men, the lack of “big, deep conversations with them” implies a claim to differentiation from younger gay men who are considered not yet fully intellectually engaged or socially formed subjects (see below). Jamie’s account points to the subtle working of age divisions and forms of social distance in a more convivial space.

8.5.2 a) Younger gay men as a threat/source of anxiety

Moreover, commonplace in informants’ claims to difference from younger men was a concern about the trustworthiness of the latter. This was evident in informants’ suspicions concerning the pecuniary motives of the younger party (Stacey 2004: 186):

They could be dubious... after your money or to buy them drinks. (Alec 46).

I’d check my pockets... (laughs ironically)... I have had a bit of experience of that... I’m not against young people but if somebody came up to me out of the blue, I would be very circumspect (Leo 61).

Although the above accounts refer to or assume an encounter with an unknown other in the context of the bar scene, these excerpts provide insight into the operation of discourse that constructs younger gay men as calculating, egocentric and motivated by self-gain. Such thinking reinforces age divisions and younger and older men from developing friendships in domestic as well as more public gay spaces. In informants accounts, intergenerational intimacies figured almost as a form of prostitution (Steinman 1990: 180). This was embodied in the ‘sugar daddy’ relationship where sex and the erotic appeal of youthful looks are traded for the financial support/security that older gay men are usually more able to provide. Les (53) observed:

I think if most gay men saw a pretty young thing with some older bloke, they’d soon assume, ‘Aye, aye, something’s goin’ on here’ wouldn’t they? ...They’d think, ‘Well it can’t be just his looks that he’s after.’ Y’know there’s a bit more to it... [Laughs].
However, Les offered a critique of the stereotypical sugar daddy relationship. In effect, he described having being ‘kept’ when in his late teens until about his mid-twenties by a man thirty years his senior. He offered insight into the complexity of power relations in this situation:

I wasn’t even 18 at the time… when I was with this gentleman who was in his fifties… But, then again… he was so… er, possessive of me. Went to the gay bars, he wouldn’t allow me to buy a drink or a packet of cigarettes or anything… He was a sugar daddy… there’s no other way of putting it. But, it spoilt me in a way… I didn’t… have my own… er, free will, y’know, to spend my money on what I wanted… I was suppressed by X [partner] in actual fact… I took me quite some time to stand up to him and be my own person… Probably not until me thirties, in fact (Les 53)... But, I was with him for 27 years… until he died ten years ago.

Les’ account supplies clues as to how the generosity of older men can restrict or stifle the younger person’s autonomy but the informant elaborates how relations between differently aged men can change to become more egalitarian (Steinman 1990: 194), particularly as the younger party learns to assert himself. Again, the “thirties” appears a watershed shed in this respect. This account not only shows how younger men might be attracted to middle-aged and older men but also how cross-generational intimacies can endure. It is also suggestive of an emotionally inflected ageing capital that enables middle-aged gay men to draw on memories of their own youth in ways that might enable them to be more forbearing of youth in the present.

But, even if there might be parity in terms of economic resources, cultural tastes and sexual and personal interest, anxieties were registered about being old enough to be the parent of the younger person:

I just felt, well, there’s a 21-year age gap. And I actually was older than his parents… And, of course, what would my family think of it? Me racing around with a lad 21 years my junior when I was old enough to be his father? (Marcus 47).

Marcus was concerned about being older than his (former) boyfriend’s parents. Being twice the age of his partner was a shocking enough statistic in itself but his concern, (which turned
out to be unfounded), was with the reactions of his family of origin (and, arguably, broader society). The idea of ‘racing around’ suggests an energy or form of self-display that is indecorous for a man of 42. The informant’s use of the term ‘lad’ to describe his then companion accentuates the chronological difference between the two men and in doing so underlines the power of ageism and how it can enmesh with homophobic discourse that constructs middle-aged gay men as predatory (Pugh 2002: 167). This was startlingly evident in one informant’s claim concerning the motives of older gay men attracted to men considerably younger:

You see these guys… 40, 50 on Gaydar (dating website) looking for guys aged 18 – 25. What’s all that about? I don’t get it. Go for your own age. It’s not illegal but… My nephew’s 26, y’know, its’ obscene… I went to a nephew’s eighteenth and thought, ‘Oh, my God, there’s men of my age wanting to sleep with men like him!’ It’s just not right. (Jeff 48).

Whilst Jeff recognises that there are no legal impediments to cross-generational sexual relations, it is considered immoral for middle-aged gay men to look at younger men, (who in this case are adults somewhat over the age of consent), as objects/subjects of desire. Indeed, Jeff’s statement is redolent of the largely discredited thinking that encourages equation of ageing male homosexuality with paedophilia, which is based on the assumption that males need to be recruited or seduced into abnormality (Watney 1991: 392, 399). At the very least, this discourse motivates Jeff to make a very strong claim for distanciation from the awful stigma of the predatory older gay man (Jones and Pugh 2005) or ‘chicken hawk.’

8.5.2 b) Younger gay men as lacking or vulnerable

In addition, informants often rejected the idea of younger gay men as significant others because the latter were considered insubstantial - lacking in life experience:

I’m looking for an equal… But, that doesn’t mean that somebody who’s 25 can’t be an equal… But, it depends on them being quite a bit more mature than usual and having interests different from people of their own age group (Fred 55).
I think by the time you’re in your early thirties you’re starting to get a better appreciation of who you are rather than responding to, er, peer pressure and, y’know, going with the crowd or doing what’s fashionable or whatever… But, the key thing for me is that… at 25, you’re a vessel waiting to be filled… and personality and experience means a lot to me; it’s part of somebody’s attraction (Chris 48).

Fred’s desire for an equal is mobilised as a positive choice. His statement resonates with that of Jamie examined above in making an epistemic claim for differentiation from the lack of maturity associated with younger gay men. Although Fred entertains the view that some younger men might prove themselves to an equal, this would depend upon possession of an unusual precocity in terms of cultural tastes, social interests and relational skills. In the second excerpt, it appears that maturity (as represented by a stronger sense of the self) begins at 30-ish. Chris makes a somewhat more specific claim that men in their thirties are beginning to accumulate the kind of emotional strength and self-knowledge (ageing capital) which equips them to withstand pressures towards conformity from gay and wider consumer culture. Although Chris invokes a view of attractiveness as wider than bodily surface, like Jamie and Fred, he differentiates himself from younger men through a reverse ageism which contrasts the latter’s inauthenticity (emptiness) with the more rounded subjectivity associated with midlife gay men.

Also, and related to the above point, assumptions about the vulnerability of younger gay men could also significantly shape accounts of how middle-aged gay men would manage sexual encounters and safer sex with younger people:

Well, when they’re 20, I suppose they’re old enough to know their own mind. Then you think, ‘Well, if they’re somebody my age, they should know about HIV by now.’ But, in their twenties, you think, ‘Give them a chance and don’t even allow them any opportunity to take any risks...’ Even if you tell them (HIV positive status), they may be less aware of the actual risks than a well-versed forty-year-old. (Rob 50).

Rob differentiates himself from younger gay men by invoking the extra care he thought necessary in sexual encounters with those who might be less knowledgeable of or risk aware in relation to the transmission of HIV. Although he does not explicitly say so, his concern for younger men might be an expression of empathy based on his own recollections of ‘coming
out’ and negotiating the perils and pleasures, threats and opportunities of the gay scene. In Rob’s account, the older man appears to be under a tacit moral duty to take responsibility for the unworldliness of the younger party. But, such thinking is ambivalent and recalls Les’ earlier critique concerning how the well-meant intentions of the older party might deny the knowledge of and opportunities for younger men to practice relational skills as well as opportunities for them to exercise responsibility and assert autonomy. Not all young gay men are sexually inexperienced. Further, Rob’s moral claim to care for younger men might not just deny them autonomy but his assumptions about middle-aged men are potentially less ethical when we consider that, for various reasons, not all gay men aged over 40 are sexually assertive or confident in their knowledge of HIV transmission (Grossman 1995).

8.5.2 c) Time gentlemen please

Given the above discursive operations, informants generally regarded the differences of age as prohibitive of longer-term cross-generational partnerships. Many accounts imagined any such liaisons as inherently unstable (Steinman 1990: 180 – 2) and thus time-limited:

I’d definitely much prefer a partner in their forties... because you’re almost at the same life stage... You’ve got the same amount of experience to reflect on and maybe the same life goals... You’ve got to think ten, 20 years in the future when, for example you’re 65 and he’s 35 or whatever. Are you still gonna have the same attraction? That same sort of relationship? Are you still gonna be prepared to do the same sort of things? (Chris 48).

In alluding to parity in the life political projects of peer age partners (“same life goals”), Chris differentiates peer aged relationships favourably from cross-generational ones whose fate is considered much less secure. But, this (class tinged) knowledge claim overlooks the possibility that relationships can be renegotiated. Indeed, it has been noted that gay relationships that last more than ten years very seldom end (Mackey et al 1997: 2). Chris’ narrative reduces complex cross-generational relations to physical considerations, which contradicts the more holistic notion of desirability and authenticity. This reasoning also fails to recognise that peer age relationships can wither due to the diminution of sex and that cross-generational relationships might be more likely to wither for other reasons such as
disagreements about money or changes in priorities or personality. The anxieties contained in Chris’ claim are suggestive of the power of ageist discourse to thwart the use of ageing capital (understanding of relationships) and to foster the belief that cross-generational gay relationships can only end in dejection and isolation for the older party. It is significant that in Chris’ story it is the old(er) man (now a lonely old queen) who is denied the emotional resources (ageing capital) required to negotiate the dissolution of a relationship. This kind of thinking is indicative of the power of ageism to produce anxiety in relation to loss of sexual citizenship.

However, stories of scepticism overlook that younger gay men might value more enduring connections (Robinson 2008: 142 – 3). Indeed, there were a few notable exceptions to the general rule where younger gay men could be regarded as equals:

What I wanted from him was comfort… At that time, there was a huge transition going on in my family. Mum had had several strokes… She’d been put in an old folk’s home... which angered me because my brothers had done this behind my back… And although my partner was then half my age (aged 21), he had quite a lot of experience working in old folks’ homes. (Marcus 47).

Marcus’ account demonstrates the capacities of younger and older men to work across age differences. It contains an implicit moral claim for recognition of younger gay men’s capacities to provide emotional and practical support to older men. This kind of account is reminiscent of the more equitable, negotiated arrangements between younger and older partners identified by Steinman (1990: 205) as noted in chapters 3 and 4. There were also reports suggestive of ageing capital (knowledge gained through life experience) as enabling informants to appreciate the authenticity of younger and old gay men. Three informants (Daniel 46, Leo 61 and Vince 48) made favourable claims about the intimate relationships they had experienced when younger with more sexually, socially and emotionally adept middle-aged men who were prepared to look beyond the surface to engage with the ‘real’ person behind the youthful appearance. Keir (42) and Alec (46) had experienced relationships, though short-lived, with men of 69 and 81 respectively. Relationships with old gay men could combine a relational ‘politics of comfort’ with a politics of pleasure, which was to be had in the relinquishing of emotional autonomy entrusted to a protective, solicitous
and all-round desirable older man. As Daniel (46) opined: “It is the father figure, the security, the reassurance... and there’s eroticism in the father figure.”

8.6. The uses of ageing capital and technologies of the self in relationships

8.6.1 The gains of ageing

“With age comes knowledge in one way or another” (Les 53). Les’ words point to a familiar claim for differentiation from younger people and one which expresses the gains of ageing. The gains were most commonly expressed in accounts of growth in self-worth, self-awareness and overall stability (Pugh 2002: 167). Informants’ thinking commonly differentiated midlife as an important transitional stage in the life course and involving reclamation of an “authentic self” (Biggs 1993: 28-32; 1999: chapter 5). For Clive (46), this process occurred within the context of close friendship:

As I get older, I’m starting to realise that it’s a long, painful journey... A good friend said to me, ‘Y’know, Clive, once you realise everybody is as fucked up as you are, life becomes a whole lot easier...’ We automatically assume that everybody else’s life is perfect and yours isn’t. (Clive 45).

For Clive, the difference of age and the emotional changes associated with growing older are painful though educational. This encounter has conveyed to Clive that what we might consider to be our imperfections are actually what make us human and the sooner we realise this, the sooner we might get our lives and self-worth in perspective. Clive’s friend’s plain speaking communicates that anyone could become so consumed with envy at the perfection we attribute to other people’s lives to the extent that we are prevented from understanding how being “fucked up” is part of the human condition. The friend’s advice is less a claim to differentiation than a claim for the appreciation of human sameness in terms of our vulnerability (to error). But, this insight is also illustrative of an age-inflected technology of the self that is more available to older people. Here the conditions of closer relations have enabled Clive to think strenuously on the relationship to his self (and his relationship to others) to challenge and perhaps think/do other than comply with social norms that encourage envy and self-flagellation. Clive’s account indicates the reflexive and self-recuperative
potential of encounters with peer aged friends whose capacity for critical insight might, again, be integral to ‘interpretive community.’

Moreover, ageing capital was discernible in claims to differentiation from others gay and straight by informants who were partnered or involved in intimate friendships but who practiced non-monogamy. Such accounts challenge the widely held belief that sexual relations are only meaningful, authentic and legitimate when they are exclusive. Adam notes that monogamy scripts are not uncommon among younger gay men who are still likely to be under the sway of heteronormative models of intimacy whilst pursuing sexual autonomy (Adam 2006). These age-related political and knowledge claims concerning sexual ethics question the idea that non-monogamy necessarily entails an amoral, libertine separation of sex and emotions. These accounts also represent claims concerning rights to sexual pleasure with known or barely known others without guilt or fear of being labelled ‘superficial,’ calculating, promiscuous and so forth and assert non-monogamy as an ethical and practice. Jamie’s account of experiences with his ‘together apart’ partner of 10 years standing that took place in the context of a “gay nudist group” (held regularly in the homes of associates), serves as one example. The rules of the game in this convivial homospace allowed both parties to enjoy the collective effervescence of the nudist group singly, as part of a threesome or group and with or without the partner’s co-presence at the very scene of the sexual encounter.

Central to informants’ accounts of ethical non-monogamy was the distinction between sexual and emotional fidelity (Weeks et al 2001: 150 - 2):

> I don’t have many rules but one of my rules now is around honesty... There have been times when it’s gone disastrously wrong... But... I valued ‘freedom’ and if that’s just about getting my own way, that’s not a good thing... There were people I was mentally faithful to but not sexually... But, anyway, don’t just do monogamy because it’s expected... the convention, an obligation. Do monogamy if it is a genuine desire. (Bill 54).

Central to Bill’s narrative of change in relational practice is a claim for emotional honesty. His thought-provoking proposition that monogamy should not be taken as the moral default position but itself requires ethical justification in the form of real commitment is suggestive
of an age-related technology of the self. Bill’s words indicate that he has forged a way of ‘doing’ sexual relations that is consistent with his values, ethical in terms of his treatment of others and is critical of dominant notions of what counts as legitimate sexual relations. His account indicates a benign differentiation from ethical monogamists who adhere to their principles and a more critical differentiation from unethical ones who deceive.

8.6.2 The limits of ageing capital and technologies of the self in relationships

Claims concerning non-monogamy could also function in more problematic ways, especially in the guise of accounts that referenced ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ policies that depend on a conspiracy of silence between both partners:

I have had the odd one or two but I’ve not told him. He might have done. I’d rather not know, to be honest. And I’d rather he didn’t know. What’s the point? (Jamie 54).

Although Jamie attends a gay ‘nudist’ group with his partner, he adopts a less open stance in relation to non-monogamy in certain other contexts. The reference to opportune non-monogamy out of the sight of a partner indicates limits to the use of ageing capital (emotional strength) that might be a pre-requisite for the kind of disclosure central to contemporary ‘reflexive intimacies’ (see Jamieson 1999: 487). But, non-monogamy was not always about moral claims to differentiation. It could be countenanced pragmatically (Brown et all 1997: 32). For instance, the non-monogamy of a partner would be tolerated on account of limited sexual capacity:

A relationship that’s ideal for me at my age in the here and now is one that is more than friends but less than lovers in a sexual way... I want somebody who is more constant in my life... a partnership. And even if, because of my health, we don’t have sex, that’s fine with me... I would certainly make allowances for him to see other people for sex if he’s uncomfortable having it with me. But, if there was any emotional involvement there, I wouldn’t be happy with that. (Vince 49).

A degree of licence could be tolerated for any partner because Vince’s state of health, (mental health difficulties combined with HIV and other medical “complications”) affected his sexual appetite and capacity to maintain regular sexual relations. Although it strikes a forbearing
note, the informant’s willingness to accept a partner’s non-monogamy in return for physical affection and emotional fidelity is highly contingent. Vince would “make allowances.” This indicates that, in the absence of any health problems, monogamy would be the norm if not the desired relationship. Further, any non-monogamy that Vince would tolerate involves the imposition of constraint on any partner who would be urged to avoid emotional entanglements with others and in so doing would be required to instrumentalise himself and any others with whom he might have sex.

8.7 Comparisons and contrasts with heterosexual intimacy and kinship

The foregoing discussions have intimated parallels with and differentiation from the relational experiences of middle-aged heterosexuals. In terms of comparisons, we could expect middle-aged heterosexuals to lay claim to a measure of emotional fortitude, relational skill and enhanced knowledge of the working of social relations (ageing capital). Further, one informant drew a parallel between the ageism which bears more heavily on middle-aged gay men and heterosexual women (Rosenthal 1990: 1 - 6):

The older person especially can come in for a lot of stick... get gossiped about... especially older straight women and gay men who are seen as the foolish one if things go wrong.... As if they should have had more sense than to get involved etc. You rarely get this thrown at straight men who take up with younger women... In fact, you also see it in TV programmes where it’s quite normal for older men to be with younger women... Y’know, like Blake Carrington off Dynasty (Ben 50).

The above story contains a moral claim that middle-aged heterosexual women and gay men’s intimate relations with younger others are differentiated unfavourably in comparison to the legitimacy granted to middle-aged heterosexual men’s relations with younger women. The two former are considered more likely to face censure from significant others and wider society for failing to use their ageing capital to avoid dangerous liaisons with younger parties. Unlike middle-aged heterosexual men, they are held responsible when cross-generational relationships go awry. At the same time, Ben supplies a critique of this double standard and its normalisation by contemporary media.
Midlife gay men’s ways of relating with significant others stood out as more distinct for several reasons:

Gay men tend to have more time on their hands to obsess about appearance etc... whereas straight men, y’know, might be more concerned with paying for the kids’ clothes, mowing the lawn... being grandparents...” (Daniel 45).

The comment from Daniel is revealing for its sharp contrast between the self and relational concerns of middle-aged gay and those associated with straight men. Daniel strongly associates middle-aged heterosexual men with the domestic sphere in terms of their responsibilities as fathers and grandfathers. By contrast, middle-aged gay men are differentiated by their involvement in the “bodily projects of the self” (Giddens 1991: 54) that are thought obligatory in ageist and ‘looksist’ gay male culture (Feraois 1998). Although Daniel’s account relies heavily on stereotypes of masculinity, it does draw attention to the different sexual and social opportunities and relational trajectories that are generally available to/required of these two different groups of men. Although parallels could be drawn between Jamie’s nudist group and ‘swinging’ and between Bill’s and Daniel’s “fuck buddies” and heterosexual polyamory, gay male culture and informants’ relative freedom from state regulation of their intimate, familial lives offer greater opportunities for engagement in “new relational experiments” (Giddens 1992: 136 – 8; Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan 2001: 150 - 2). As a consequence of the above freedoms, it appears that gay men’s lives tend to involve a longer period of socio-sexual experimentation before a move to more domestically oriented forms of relationality in midlife (Berger 1992: 222).

It has though been argued by Bech (1997) that gay kinship is becoming less distinct. In more tolerant times, the difference between gay and straight kinship is thought to be more blurred. Kinship practices among younger people in urban contexts are becoming “homosexualised” (Bech 1997: 277). To support his point about this more de-differentiated, egalitarian state of affairs, Bech invokes the adoption of friendship family by young ‘metrosexual’ Danes (and the creation of civil partnerships). The “kaleidoscope” of identities and ways of relating in contemporary urban settings means that forms of kinship associated with gay men have been reduced to a “preference” and no longer represent distinct “forms of existence” (Bech 1997: 277-83). But, empirical work in Britain by Duncan and Phillips (2008) has provided evidence that younger heterosexuals’ participation in anything like friendship family is usually a
temporary arrangement before individuals pair up to create a more conventional family of their own. Marriage, partnership and fertility are not being rejected wholesale but rather deferred in response to broader socio-economic and cultural imperatives (Duncan and Phillips 2008: 15). Young people might feel pressured to develop their careers and create a reasonable financial base prior to settled partnership and the arrival of children. Further, claims to kinship in this present study could distinguish middle-aged gay men from the kinship stories/practices of younger lesbian and gay people who, having grown up in more tolerant times, might be more able to turn to and invest in biological family. There is evidence indicating that younger lesbian couples are investing in biogenetic notions of family. Some young lesbian couples are seeking sperm donors whose physical features are considered likely to produce a family resemblance between any offspring and the non-birth mother (Nordqvist 2011: 1133 - 1140). This reinforces the idea that to achieve validity, relationships need to emulate or approximate heteronormative family. Midlife gay men’s stories and practices of kinship offer a more thought-provoking political alternative to emulating (in vain) heterosexual family.

8.8 Conclusion

This chapter has contrasted informants’ experiences in their families of origin with stories of gay kinship/friendship family, which involve pleasures, ambivalences, risks and exclusions. It has addressed the research questions relating to expression of midlife gay identity through forms of relating with significant others and has indicated how friendship family has distinct political and emotional significances for this generation of middle-aged gay men (living in Manchester). My driving argument is that the norms of gay kinship/friendship family largely help re-create midlife identity, support informants in the management of ageing processes and help to secure cultural inclusion (Heaphy et al 2004: 889 – 90, Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan 2001; Weston 1991). The gradual move away from biolegal family paralleled by a move away from the ‘village scene’ towards connections within friendship families enables men to make various claims to difference through stories of relational practices. The spaces of coupled relationships and friendship family were narrated as furnishing the emotional and political resources to contest ageism (Weston 1991: 136) and homophobia (Weston 1991: 106, 113 – 16; Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan 2001: 87). Kinship networks were spoken of as spaces wherein knowledge and skills concerning relationships were created, reinforced and renewed. They enable middle-aged gay men to mobilise ageing capital to express aspects of
the self considered more authentic. Technologies of the self could also be mobilised to question heteronormative notions of family and enable the practice of sexual relations beyond monogamy in line with personal ethics rather than social expectations or discursive constraints. Some informants, however, spoke of disadvantaged access to exclusion from (certain kinds of) friendship family/gay kinship for economic and cultural reasons. But, informants’ claims to difference through relational practices can involve both benign accounts of difference and accounts that imply derogation of younger gay men. In the first case, men spoke of the importance of relating to others who understood what it was like to have survived more hostile times. In the second case, informants mobilised a reverse ageism, which reinforces divisions between men of different ages. Age differences were recounted variously as inevitable facts of life that either did not require or simply evaded explanation or younger gay men were constructed as a threat if perceived as financially ‘on the make.’ When they were imagined, cross-generational intimacies could be reduced to a form of prostitution. In addition, this less benign discourse involved claims to differentiation from younger gay men as “empty vessels,” which discounted them from friendship/partnership. Here younger gay men were less a threat than lacking in substance. They could also be portrayed as vulnerable and requiring the older man to exercise a moral duty of care to avoid exploiting younger men. The strong desire to dissociate the self from the persistent stigma of being considered a predatory older gay man indicates the discursive force of homophobic ageism that comes close to equating ageing male homosexuality with paedophilia. Anxiety was also expressed in claims concerning the seemingly time-limited character of cross-generational relationships. This kind of thinking highlights fears about the loss of physical capital and sexual citizenship that can accompany ageing as a gay man (Bennett and Thompson 1991; Berger 1982: 15; Berger 1992: 228; Blotcher 1998: 361; Kimmel and Sang 1995: 201; Hostetler 2004: 160; Lang 2001: 95; Lee 1991: 67; Lee 2006: 40; Pugh 2002: 164). It shows how ageism imposes considerable limits on the use of technologies of the self and ageing capital. As mentioned in previous chapters, ageism towards younger men might be an attempt to recuperate self-esteem in a culture that devalues the older body. Rather than recuperating value, this thought/practice marks limits to the notion of ageing as a linear path to maturity involving greater acceptance of the self and others.

Having analysed midlife gay men’s stories within and across various homospaces, heterospaces and friendship networks, what lessons can be learned from the stories midlife gay men have made available through bodily practice and interview narratives? I now turn to
the concluding chapter which summarises the main points of the study and draws out their broader theoretical and political implications.
Chapter Nine. Conclusion: Reimagining Politics and Power Relations

9.1 Introduction

This study has addressed midlife gay men’s stories of growing older in the context of metropolitan Manchester. It has examined how middle-aged gay men differentiate themselves from younger gay men, some peer aged gay men, old gay men and heterosexuals in various fields of existence. The first section of this chapter provides an executive summary of the main issues and themes of the study in relation to the research questions that concern expression of identity and ways of relating. The second section draws out broader theoretical and political ramifications of the study’s conclusions. I contend that the study offers a detailed mapping and analysis of stories and practices that make up middle-aged gay men’s situated cultural “politics of the minor” (Rose 1999: 279 - 80). The final section reflects critically on gaps in thematic content and problems with use of methods and considers what might be done differently if the work were to be replicated or extended.

9.2 Themes and issues

9.2.1 The scene of the research

The first three chapters provided the context of the study in relation to: gay scenes available to middle-aged men living in Manchester; the scholarship germane to gay male ageing identity; and the research methods and methodology used to generate and analyse participant narratives. Chapter 1 offered a sketch of the commercial scene available in the gay village (bars and sauna), the ‘virtual scene,’ the gay social group scene and the more domestically oriented scene of friendship family. Chapter 2 argued that much existing scholarship is based on impoverished conceptualisations of midlife gay male subjectivity and relationality. Much existing work has overlooked both of these as embodied experiences. As a corrective, chapters 4 to 6 have addressed the various meanings of men’s body management practices and the mechanisms through which they differentiate themselves from others. It was argued that the concept of “accelerated ageing” (Bennett and Thompson 1991: 66 - 7) is insufficient to explain the variety of midlife gay men’s responses to ageism and has lead to failure to recognise how a legitimate form of midlife gay male sexual citizenship is articulated through a multiform ‘authentic’ self. Much of the extant literature fails to reckon with the complex processes through which midlife gay men differentiate their selves from younger, (some) peer
aged and old gay men and the multidirectional character of ageism in gay male culture. The research design was formulated to reflect the distinctiveness of gay male midlife as well as study participants’ different, dynamic social locations. Each method used helped compensate for the limitations of the other and yielded different orders of narrative. Interviews, which involved use of photo-elicitation, enabled unexpected leads, socio-historical contextualisation of accounts and comparisons of/contrasts between identity performance and ways of relating between middle-aged and younger selves. Participant observation enabled examination of identity performance as situated within dynamic social relations. The methodological approach of the study has recognised actors’ interpretive capacities but is linked to a strategic ‘pick and mix’ analytical framework developed by Thomson (2009: 163), which at times uses “technologies of the self” (Foucault 1979: 10 – 11, 27 - 8) but situates these within different fields of existence (Bourdieu 1984: chapter 4) where ‘ageing capital’ is more or less deployable. This approach has opened up examination of experience of ageing and ageism as multi-dimensional and as resulting from the tensions between constraint and choice. A form of “situation ethics” was used in the research and power relations between researcher and participants involved dialogue between different ways of knowing.

9.2.2 Work on the body

Study participants’ stories and practices concerning work on the body in chapter 4 indicate that ageing is often understood in essentialist terms (as a natural rather than socially constructed process) and thus one that requires an ‘age-appropriate’ response. Men’s stories of growing older through work on the body also indicate varied responses towards discourses of ageing and gay male ageism. These stories enjoin capitulation to, negotiation with and resistance to gay ageism. Whilst the notion of ‘dressing for comfort’ rather than for fashion (integral to men’s sense of authenticity) contradicts any assumptions about midlife gay men’s obsession with the body and self-presentation, it could also constrain choices around self-display and identity performance. In self-governing mode, midlife gay men’s moral claims differentiating them from the presumed character of younger gay men on the village scene, as read through the latter’s self-presentation (as fashion victims/dupes), is both disciplinary of those who mobilise this critique and expressive of ageism towards younger men. The same principle applies to informants’ critique of peer aged gay men deemed to be attempting to fix themselves within the category of youth. These forms of differentiation indicate an attempt to reclaim value (though at the expense of others) in a hierarchy where the ageing gay body is
usually denigrated. It is worth bearing in mind though that men’s (ageist) criticism of gay youth challenges any simple view of power relations that presume younger gay men’s hegemony within gay male culture. Differentiating middle-aged selves from old gay men, who were conceived of as desexualised and uncomfortable reminders of mortality, not only reinforces the latter’s exclusion from sexual citizenship but also indicates that ageism is integral to multidirectional “flows of power” (Plummer 1995: 26 - 31) within gay male culture. But, informants’ sense of authenticity could also involve negotiation with gay ageism where, for example, a desiring, appetitive self negotiates with a more disciplinary one that might demand sacrifices for a ‘better’ body. In more critical, resistant mode, informant accounts referred to treatment of the body in ways that signalled freedom from the pressures of exercise regimes, weight management and youthful self-presentation. Here, authenticity could be used to recuperate and re-aestheticise the fatter, hairier, older body-self as desirable, creative and socially valuable.

9.2.3 The village scene

The stories expressed through embodied interaction on ‘the scene’ in chapter 5 challenge the dominant assumption among interviewees that the bar scene is largely a site of restriction on expression of ‘authentic’ midlife identities, men’s modes of interaction and their sense of sexual citizenship in gay male culture. The village (or at least its more age-friendly parts) is not overwhelmingly a site of exclusion for middle-aged gay men and, whilst it is a sexualised space, it is by no means uniformly a site of degraded relations. Undoubtedly, there are limits at certain times and in certain spaces on midlife gay men’s self-expression and how they interact or not, particularly with younger gay men. But, these restrictions should not overshadow that men can negotiate with the discursive demands of the village scene (in terms of self-display and interaction) and that certain spaces of the bar scene are sites of creative inter-subjectivity, socio-sexual opportunity and connections that enable escape from, questioning of and resistance to gay ageism. Men’s experiences of the village bar scene are divisible into three forms, which involve capitulation to, contestation of and (problematic) negotiation with gay ageism. First, ‘the scene’ can be experienced as the site of exclusion or erasure - a space in which middle-aged gay men are reduced to their chronology or the apparent signs of ageing. Second, and the story most commonly produced through observations, the age-friendlier spaces within the village enable freer expression of ageing selves and more convivial ways of relating. Here ‘the scene’ figures as a sensorium of
pleasures and the gay gaze (as watcher or recipient) can be deployed/invited in ways that deprive it of its power to judge and constrain. This is indicative of the uses of ageing capital and age-inflected ‘technologies of the self’ that enable midlife gay men to transcend restrictions on display and interaction and to challenge ageism. Such forms of self-expression and relating indicate reclamation of socio-sexual citizenship and belonging and often through playful activities that humanise and make parts of the village scene more habitable. This story challenges the reductive notion of the bar scene as an emotional desert because it is wholly commodified and centred on individualised, competitive calculation in relation to sexual opportunity and thus no place to find love, affection or friendship. Third, there was a more ambivalent account of the mixed dangers and pleasures of the village scene. These expressions of the midlife self are tentatively optimistic but aware of the risk that the norms of socio-sexual space can allow. The gaze of others can be experienced as contradictory: desired as a sign of continuing socio-sexual citizenship; yet simultaneously felt as constraint in ways that compromise authenticity and oblige heightened self-surveillance and suspicion of others.

9.2.4 Negotiating homospaces

Socio-sexual norms operating within the virtual scene and gay saunas (chapter 6) involved restrictions on or negotiation with tacit rules concerning expression of ageing identity and modes of relating but some men were able to question and transcend such limitations. Informants’ responses to ageing and ageism are divisible into three kinds, again, involving capitulation to/reproduction of, negotiation with and contestation of gay ageism. In the first instance, middle-aged gay men distinguish themselves from the putatively shallow, depleted and sometimes reckless ways of relating they associated with younger gay men on the virtual scene and in saunas. But, this reverse ageism, sometimes notably class-inflected, can involve giving into or feeling oppressed by the constraints on expression of ageing identity and interaction. In the second instance, men’s negotiation with gay ageism involved ambivalent stances towards it. The ways in which informants differentiated themselves from gay others could at times reinforce rather than challenge ageism. In the third instance, claims to differentiation could involve socio-sexual adventure, self-education and the humanisation of sexual space. Here technologies of the self and forms of ageing capital could be mobilised to express the midlife self more freely and challenge gay ageism without derogating others. This kind of resource was more likely to be deployed by men with the kind of cultural capital that
enables them to mobilise a more consciously political critique of relations. Such practices also suggest an “ethics of casual sex” involving care for self and the unknown other (Seidman 1991: 187), which troubles the moralistic caricature of ‘casual sex’ as demeaning, depersonalised and decadent. In contrast to sexualised spaces, the gay social group scene was differentiated in informants’ accounts as a healthier alternative to the bar scene. Social groups were commonly thought to provide middle-aged gay men with opportunities to express their ‘authentic’ midlife selves. The norms of social groups were thought to allow men to perform a more communal, collaborative self; the antithesis of the alienated, atomised selves thought characteristic of sexualised homospaces. But, there were restrictions on expression of ageing identity and the forms of interaction possible within gay groups, which question the binary view of the commercial gay scene as degraded and the group scene as empowering. The status of gay social groups as non-sexual spaces could involve over-vigorous normative policing of them as more moral, serious spaces in ways that risk denying middle-aged men their adult status, trivialising their sexual desires and reinforcing stereotypes of them as sex-obsessed. The story of gay social/support groups as more benign spaces is also questionable when the hierarchy of bodies associated with the commercial scene can be reproduced within them. This was visible in situations where the differences of age, race and class meant that men might be present but were effectively erased, excluded or othered in situ.

9.2.5 Negotiating heterospaces

Middle-aged gay men in Manchester do not just differentiate themselves. In chapter 7, we saw that they are differentiated by heterosexuals. In certain public spaces, heteronormativity more than ageism sets limits on expression of midlife identity and men’s ways of relating. But, subjects negotiate with and challenge this homophobic discourse. The norms of heterospace sanction three main ways in which midlife gay men operate within it. In the first instance, middle-aged gay men living in Manchester experience unequal access to and within public space (Valentine 1996: 145 - 6). This could compel self-censoring of everyday practices in the form of body management tactics that involve toning down or even ‘de-gaying’ the self (Keogh, Reed and Weatherburn 2006: 31 - 33). In the second instance, informants differentiated themselves through their involvement in heterosexual friendships from forms of relating in public space that they associated with younger gay men in ways that could be inflected by social class. But, securing ‘legitimacy’ in heterospace could require a political quiescence that reinforces homophobia. In the third and most common instance,
heterospaces were narrated as providing certain freedoms to express authenticity because men are freed from the sexualised scrutiny and the ageist gay gaze. Informants often invoked the right to go about their business inviolate and could mobilise various forms of ageing capital and age-related technologies of the self to differentiate themselves from heterosexuals whilst staking a claim to social inclusion. Such practices could involve turning the gaze back onto heterosexual men without vengeful symbolic violence and the temporary ‘gaying’ of heterospaces through confident, playful, age-inflected performance. They amount to mundane yet highly significant claims to ordinariness and inclusion within the panoply of sexual citizenship (Weeks 1998: 37). Such accounts of heterospace mark limits to the view advanced in Moran et al’s study in Manchester (2004) that the (threat of) symbolic and physical violence from heterosexuals dominates the social experience of those seen as sexually different.

9.2.6 Friendship family

The norms of gay kinship/friendship family explored in chapter 8 largely help re-create midlife identity and help informants to manage the ageing processes. Whilst friendship involved its own irritations (conflict with significant others was often downplayed by informants), kinship was spoken of in ways that indicates that it helped to secure a measure of cultural inclusion (Heaphy et al 2004: 889 – 90, Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan 2001; Weston 1991). The gradual parallel moves away from biolegal family and the ‘village scene’ towards friendship family enabled men to make positive claims to difference through their stories of relating. The spaces of coupled relationships and friendship family were narrated as furnishing the emotional and political resources to withstand ageism (Weston 1991: 136) and homophobia (Weston 1991: 106, 113 – 16; Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan 2001: 87). Technologies of the self could be mobilised to question heteronormative notions of family and enable men to practice sexual relations beyond monogamy in line with personal ethics rather than discursive constraints (whether hetero or homonormative). Some informants, however, spoke of disadvantaged access to or exclusion from (certain kinds of) friendship family/gay kinship for economic and cultural reasons. But, men’s claims to difference through relational practices involved both benign accounts of difference and accounts that involved disparagement of younger gay men and thus implicit claims to superiority over them. In the first case, men spoke of the importance of relating to others who understood what it was like to have survived more hostile times. In the second case, informants
mobilised a reverse ageism in various ways. When age divisions were not viewed as a fact of life, younger gay men could be constructed as a threat if perceived as financially ‘on the make.’ When they were imagined, cross-generational intimacies were practically explained as a form of prostitution. Reverse ageism was also discernible in men’s claims to differentiation from younger gay men as “empty vessels,” which discounted them from friendship/partnership. Here younger gay men were less a threat than lacking in substance. They could also be portrayed as vulnerable, which required the older party to exercise a moral duty of care to avoid exploiting them. The strong desire to dissociate the self from the label of the predatory older gay man also indicates the discursive force of homophobic ageism that echoes the ‘old’ equation of ageing male homosexuality with paedophilia (Berger 1992: 227). Anxiety was also expressed in claims concerning the time-limited character of cross-generational relationships as both parties age. Such thinking highlights fears about the loss of physical capital and sexual citizenship that can accompany ageing as middle-aged gay man (Blotcher 1998: 361).

In summary, the socio-sexual and age-related norms operating in various social spheres indicate that informants’ stories and practices that suggest differentiation of the self from others are implicated in restrictions on expression of identity and their opportunities for interaction especially with younger gay men. But, middle-aged gay men can negotiate with these forms of discourse and mobilise forms of differentiation that indicate the use of age and emotionally inflected cultural political knowledges (ageing capital) and age-related technologies of the self as resources to transcend the constraints of ageism and homophobia. The ability to deploy such resources is inflected by differences of class and ethnicity, though critique of ageism and homophobia was by no means dependent upon being middle class and white.

9.3 The wider political picture

9.3.1 Reimagining the political

Middle-aged gay men’s responses to discourses of ageing and to ageism have wider theoretical and political ramifications. Politics is presumed to be a collective enterprise oriented towards coherent, rational political goals (Byrne 1997: 13 - 14). Indeed, in terms of formal, institutional British politics, there has been a dramatic reconfiguration of sexual
citizenship since the new millennium. Law now exists to discourage discrimination on the grounds of sexual difference in terms of the provision of goods, services and employment opportunities (Weeks 2007: chapter 7). Legal reforms in the direction of greater equality have included civil partnerships and rights of lesbian and gay people to foster or adopt children. Important though these changes are, macro-level conceptualisations of the political often overshadow other more ‘emotional’ forms of political expression (McAdam 1994: 45-50), which include expression of grievance and demands for recognition and respect in micro contexts. The varied practices described above, especially those accounts and practices that are more critical of and/or resistant towards gay ageism and homophobia, oblige reconsideration of what constitutes political action. Informants engaged in a form of political action that was informal, interpersonal though alive to various cultural contradictions and double standards. Extending the concept of the political in a way that resonates with a “politics of the minor” recognises that the impact of social structures and discourse are most often registered and played out at everyday micro-levels of experience (Plummer 2003: 68 - 70). Indeed, although the macro-level changes identified just above make a huge difference to lived experience of (ageing) sexuality, the forms of sexual citizenship described in this study, (which concern the everyday choices and constraints on the resources for self-expression and interaction/relationships), are better suited to illuminating sexual citizenship phenomenologically. The model of sexual citizenship exemplified in this study, (informed by Plummer’s critical humanism), points up how sexual citizenship is played out in various ways that include losses, fears, negotiations, contradictions, opportunities, reclaims and other gains.

As we have seen in this study, political resources emanate from social positioning and engagement within a narrative or “interpretive community” (Plummer 1995: 134). For instance, men can meet similar others who are affected by the crosscutting influences of age, sexuality, class and race, which can provide ideas for critique of dominant, constraining discourses concerning gay male midlife and ageing. Informants’ accounts that revalue the middle-aged body-self are suggestive of a form of communal reflexivity that enables critical appreciation of the constraints on interaction and change in how midlife identity can be thought of and expressed through relationships. Although they amount to individual struggles over definition and treatment rather than conscious efforts to redress or overcome structural disadvantage, subjects’ thought and practice offer intellectual and ideological resources to broaden sexual citizenship. Informants’ stories and practices are indicative of the use of
ageing capital and age-related technologies of the self to assert alternative ways of organising socio-erotic lives as evident in experiments beyond monogamy (chapter 6). Such accounts offer serious contributions to fundamental political debates about human connectedness - how we live, relate to self and others. They point towards alternative political knowledges and practices concerning relational rights and sexual citizenship that involve both belonging and valuation of difference (Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan 2001: 193-6). Such ethical possibilities rarely feature in the campaigns of activist groups let alone political or voluntary sector campaigning institutions.

9.3.2 Re-imagining power relations: a variegated cultural politics of the minor

Middle-aged gay men in Manchester are involved in a distinct form of cultural politics. As already noted, this politics addresses how men are defined and treated at the level of everyday interaction rather than transcendence of (gay) ageism through collective activity and as such resonates with the “politics of the minor” as described by Rose (1999: 279 - 80). The detailed mapping and analysis of midlife gay men’s responses to discourses of ageing and ageism throughout this study and how they differentiate themselves from others have indicated the operation of a variegated cultural politics, which again, involves: self-governance that capitulates to or reproduces ageism and homophobia; negotiation with both of these; and contestation of them. This could be mapped onto Plummer’s theorising that contemporary narratives that story us into existence and are used to make sense of our lives involve “suffering, surviving and surpassing” (Plummer 1995: 16).

Central to innovation of the present study is the identification, description and analysis of the mechanisms by which midlife gay men differentiate themselves from others and simultaneously reproduce and challenge gay ageism. Central to the operation of midlife gay men’s cultural politics of ageing is the portmanteau concept of ‘authenticity.’ In general terms, authenticity serves as a practical moral framework through which midlife gay men might apprehend the changes (and continuities) that accompany growing older. To qualify as a more ‘natural,’ ‘authentic’ midlife gay male self, the surface self (consisting of physical appearance and behaviour) must faithfully reflect the more ‘real’ inner self (consisting of feelings, personality and values). In one mode, differentiating the self through authenticity could restrict how men think of and display their ageing body-selves and how they relate to others. For example, informants used authenticity to distance themselves from the
appearance-fixated attitudes they associated with younger gay men and their ‘superficial’ ways of relating. Informants’ efforts to distance themselves from mortality and social death they associated with old gay men reinforces the latter’s exclusion from sexual and cultural citizenship. Informants’ claims to authenticity also provided insight into the enmeshment of ageist and race-informed discourses when dyeing hair blond is interpreted as a denial of ageing, “oriental” ethnicity (Vince 49). Authenticity also figured in more ambivalent accounts involving negotiation with ageism where, for example, subjects would only go so far in dress or grooming to look younger. In more positive terms, however, differentiating the self could invoke authenticity as a resource to question and challenge ageism and revalue the ageing gay male body-self. The idea of an authentic self as holistic also allowed informants to make alternative ethical claims concerning the desirability of the middle-aged body-self in ways that avoid reducing the value of the self and others to bodily surface.

Thinking of midlife gay men’s politics of ageing in the more variegated way just described enables a re-envisioning of relations of power between men of different ages within gay male culture. First, it allows consideration of ageism as running in multidirectional ways. Second, performances on the village scene that reclaim the value of the older body contradict the dominant cultural story (and retailed by most interviewees) of the bar/club or commercial gay scene as uniformly disenchanted space marred by ageism and degraded ways of relating. These performances indicate more convivial dimensions of gay male bar/club culture as described in chapter 5. Finally, highlighting study participants’ more ambivalent responses to ageing and ageism advances knowledge of gay male midlife and ageing beyond existing scholarship which theorises men’s experiences of them in terms of a simple binary where subjects are either oppressed by or resistant to these influences/constraints.

9.4 Critical reflections, future directions

My ruminations here concern the choice of methods to illuminate the detail of lived experience, problems with publicity to ‘recruit’ informants (which affects the composition of any sample) and themes for further exploration.

Whilst editing the thesis, I engaged with Sophie Woodward’s ethnographic study Why Women Wear What They Wear (2007). This study engaged with participants in the ‘private’ space of their bedrooms and wardrobes at moments when they were involved in the intimate
processes of selecting what to wear. On a practical level, Woodward was able to ask questions in the moment of dialogue with participants, items of clothing and how they were stored, cared for etc. More importantly, gaining access to the actualities of this backstage “wardrobe moment” has allowed a richly descriptive account of acts of grooming (applying make-up), of “dressing as internal ambivalence” (Woodward 2007: 3) and of participants’ sensual relationship to clothes. Here Woodward was able variously to convey the complexities informing ‘choices’ about identity construction and how to dress for a particular context, how meanings are developed in relation to items of clothing - how the feel, smell of clothes can evoke feelings and memories. These factors recall and are located within relations of power. Woodward’s choice of method and its use as a multisensory means of generating participant stories has produced more three-dimensional accounts concerning the (changeable) meanings attached to clothes as expressions of material culture, changes in habitus, identity and relating with age. This suggests an interesting avenue for exploration with gay men, (or any other group).

In terms of any oversight with regard to methods, I became aware in the later stage of writing up that the publicity used to recruit the interview sample may have discouraged certain men. At the level of definition, the question on the leaflet/poster asking, “Have sex with other men?” might have excluded those who were celibate or sexually attracted to other men but unable to act upon their desire for various reasons. At the strategic level, the village as a space within which to access ethnic difference is limited. The village can be experienced as exclusionary for men claiming affiliation with other ethnic groups (chapter 5). It was significant that the three men describing themselves as ethnically different were recruited through gay (or gay-related) social/support groups. Any strategy to accommodate ethnic difference might require more effort to develop rapport and relations of trust with key community/voluntary organisations. Further, to include more working class gay men in any future study, more effort might be required to become more of a presence on the bar scene. Publicity displayed in gay social/support groups tended to elicit the more middle class informants. However, the study was not concerned with representativeness, which is anyway problematic when part of the population of men who desire/have sex with other men is hidden (Heaphy et al 2004: 883). The sampling strategy was designed to include important dimensions of variation between men and the interview and observation samples sample were not so broad as to risk compromising depth analysis.
All research has its limits. Inevitably there are themes that have been explored which might warrant further investigation. For instance, it is difficult to specify the significance of the more convivial experiences of the village in terms of how they might contribute or not to men’s sense of inclusion in or exclusion from the more public expressions of gay male culture. Above all, this study lacks consideration of what younger gay men themselves might think (and do) concerning ageing. Whilst I have no doubt that the village scene can be experienced as devaluing, oppressive (whatever one’s age), it would be interesting to see how younger gay men’s accounts of the ‘gay scene,’ relating and growing older are constituted and expressed. Such a study might open up the range and complexity of younger gay men’s thought and practice concerning relations with or social distance from older gay men, which, in turn, might illuminate social change in relation to male homosexuality. Indeed, this is what Robinson’s (2008) cross-generational study has partly accomplished in an Australian context in comparing and contrasting the narratives on age/ageing (inter alia) between cohorts of young, middle-aged and old gay men. This historically informed research has brought out the comparisons and contrasts between the thought/practices of gay men of different ages in relation to a range of dimensions of gay life. Young gay men too can find the bar scene alienating if they don’t have the right look (Robinson 2008: 82-3) and some older men can thrive in the sauna (Robinson 2008: 79-81).

9.5 The main story recapped

Middle-aged gay men in Manchester differentiate themselves through various forms of moral, epistemic, classed, emotional and cultural political claims-making from younger gay men, peer aged gay men considered acting ‘age-inappropriately,’ old gay men and heterosexuals. The socio-sexual and age-related norms operating in various homo and heteropaces indicate that middle-aged gay men in Manchester experience restrictions on expression of identity and opportunities for interaction with younger gay men especially. But, informants could also negotiate with these forms of discourse and deploy age and emotionally inflected cultural political knowledges (ageing capital) and age-related technologies of the self as resources to transcend the constraints of ageism and homophobia. The ability to deploy such resources is inflected (rather than determined by) differences of class and ethnicity but critique of ageism was by no means dependent upon being middle class and white. This study has also provided a detailed mapping and analysis of the diverse, everyday narratives and practices that make up a multifaceted, situated, cultural politics of ageing. This complex cultural politics of
midlife gay male ageing shows that, although ageism might weigh more heavily on middle-aged and older gay men, ageism within gay culture is also multidirectional.
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Appendix 1. Project Leaflet (Double-Sided) and Poster

Desperately Seeking...

'Men 40ish to 60ish?'

Gay? Bi? Have Sex with other Men?
interested in Talking about Your
Experiences of Growing Older?

Whatever Your Background...

Would you be prepared to talk to a gay male researcher about what you think, feel and do about growing older? Anonymity guaranteed!

- Being interviewed for this study (Manchester University) could help you to know more about growing older.
- Be part of a study that is the FIRST of its kind in the UK.
- Anyone interested or taking part can have a short progress report within 12 months and a summary of findings at the end of the study.

Want to know more or talk before deciding?

Contact Paul on: 0750 347 0091.
Or e-mail: Paul.Simpson-2@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk
Desperately Seeking...

Men 40ish to 60ish?

Gay? Bi? Have Sex with other Men?
Interested in Talking about Your Experiences of Growing Older?
Whatever Your Background...

Would you be prepared to talk to a gay male researcher about what you think, feel and do about growing older? Anonymity guaranteed!

Being interviewed for this study (Manchester University) could help you to know more about growing older.

Want to know more or talk before deciding?

Contact Paul on: 0750 347 0051 or e-mail: Paul.Simpson-2@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk
Appendix 2. Interview Respondents (in order of interview): Pen Portraits

1. **Jonathan** (41) is a postgraduate student involved in a long-term monogamous relationship with a partner of seven and half years. They have lived together for seven years. He had a middle class and very religious upbringing and was married for 12 years and came out in his early thirties. He describes himself as fairly well connected in terms of friendships but has a problematic relationship with most of his biological family due to his sexuality. He describes himself as predominantly gay though as a form of convenient shorthand and recognises that sexual and gender identities can be problematic categories. He goes to the gay district occasionally and his friendships involve gay and straight friends largely ‘off-scene.’ He enjoys creative writing and socialising.

2. **Ben** (50) is a full time administrative worker in the public sector whose highest qualification is O level. He came out in his early twenties. He has been involved in a relationship with a partner of the same age for 18 years. They negotiated an open relationship after four years of being together. They have co-habited for eight years in a house they own outright and he and his partner became civil partners four years ago. Eight years ago, he moved to Manchester from London where he grew up in a working class family/area. He describes himself as gay and all his sexual activity has been with men. He claims to have a few close friends (his lover and one former colleague in London) and enjoys intellectually rewarding solitary pursuits. He socialises occasionally in the gay district. He enjoys listening to music (Europop to popular classical), radio plays, listening to Radio 4, current affairs, playing the guitar and science fiction.

3. **Tony** (59) has not been in paid work for ten years due to long-term physical and mental health conditions and is obliged to rely on social security benefits. He came out in his late twenties though is not out to his biological family. When in work he was an administration manager and has an A level standard vocational qualification. Originally from Northern Ireland and defining himself as ‘Irish’ and ‘European,’ he has lived in Manchester for more than 20 years. He is single and lives alone (“and always will”) in social housing. He sees himself as fairly well connected though has only a few close friends and socialises in the gay district regularly. He attends a gay support group concerned with sexual health. He enjoys listening to operatic music, reading thrillers and military-historical accounts.

4. **Bill** (55) has not been in paid work for ten years and was obliged to rely on social security benefits. (He has recently been employed full time as a support worker in the public sector). Originally from a working class background in mid-Wales, he came out aged 27 and has been settled in Manchester for more than 25 years. He is a graduate and has considerable experience of volunteering and paid work in gay social support, health-related and campaigning groups in the past and has been involved in voluntary work related to social housing. He lives alone in social housing. He is well connected with several close friends and many acquaintances and socialises fairly regularly in the gay district. Although he is single, he has several erotic friendships that combine sex and friendly, affectionate relations. In the past two years, he has been exploring aspects of spirituality. His other interests are theatre, cinema, meditation, reading, listening to “indie” music, current affairs, politics and history.

5. **Keir** (42) has not been in paid work for ten years due to mental and physical health conditions and is obliged to rely on social security benefits. When in work, he was a
manager of small retail outlet. Originally from a working class family in North Lancashire, he has lived in Manchester since his late twenties and came out in his early twenties. He is single and shares a flat with his pet dog in social housing. He sometimes provides informal care for a middle-aged, gay male neighbour and the neighbour and his partner are part of Keir’s mutual support system. He has a few close friends, various acquaintances and strong connections with his biological family, especially his parents. He attends a gay social support group where he has met other midlife/older gay men and occasionally socialises in the gay district. He describes himself as gay and his interests include socialising, walking and certain forms of retro and contemporary pop music.

6. **Davie** (44) is employed part time in an administrative role in a voluntary organisation concerned with sexual and personal health and welfare. Originally from a middle class family in rural, mid-Lancashire, he qualified as a nurse (post A level but sub-degree qualification) and has lived in Manchester for 15 years. He came out in his twenties and describes himself as gay. At the time of interview, he was selling a property to move into rented accommodation nearer his work. He is single and has several long-term close friends (one being an ex-lover) and various acquaintances. He has close connections with his parents, sister and niece. He attends two support groups for gay men and socialises on the scene. He enjoys science fiction films and TV, *Wii*, archaeological digs and reading crime novels and historical accounts.

7. **Mike** (55) is employed full time as an administrator in an LGBT voluntary organisation and his highest qualification is HND. Originally from “lower middle class” family in the southeast, he has lived in Manchester for more than 20 years. He came out in his early thirties. He lives with a long-term partner a few years younger than himself and his best friend (and ex-partner of ten years) with whom he is buying a house. He enjoys pop music, popular classical music, computer games, crosswords and other forms of ‘brain training,’ reading pulp/detective/adventure fiction and socialising with friends largely off scene. He also socialises occasionally in the gay district. He used to describe himself as bisexual but in more recent years has described himself as gay.

8. **Rob** (50) is employed part time in an administrative role in a voluntary organisation concerned with sexual and personal health and welfare. His highest qualification is O level. He has lived in Greater Manchester all his life and experienced a strongly religious upbringing in a working class family. He came out in his late twenties. He is single, lives alone in rented social housing and has a few close friends and various acquaintances. He describes himself as gay and attends two social support groups relating to gay men’s health and welfare and socialises at regular intervals in the gay district, which is close to where he lives. His interests are computing, dancing, watching documentaries, history and some light entertainment, easy listening music and politics (especially human rights and welfare issues).

9. **Sam** (45) is a full time secondary age teacher. He is a graduate and has lived in Manchester all his life and comes from a working class family. He came out in his early twenties. He lives alone in rented social housing. He works voluntarily with a sexual and personal health and welfare organisation. He has a few close friends, many acquaintances and regularly socialises in the gay district and occasionally in two pubs local to him. He has a close relationship with his niece. He enjoys having a flutter, going to a health club (to relax and for light exercise), informative television (e.g. documentaries, history,
archaeology), going to concerts (pop and classical music) and pop divas. He describes himself as gay.

10. **Alec** (46) has not been in paid work for nine years due to a health condition and is obliged to rely on social security benefits. He is a graduate and has lived in Manchester for eight years. He lives in social housing and has a few close friends and several acquaintances. He attends several social support groups for gay men and only occasionally socialises in the gay district due to the prohibitive expense involved. He came out in his twenties (?) though is still not out to some of his black and more religiously inclined associates. He describes himself as mainly gay but with some bisexual experience (though more in the past). He also describes himself as ‘mixed race’ – one parent is black and the other is white southern European and as coming from a working class background. Although he describes having had a fairly religious upbringing, he adopts a sceptical attitude to religion and is put off by its more fundamentalist elements. His interests include using the internet for browsing (current affairs and socialising with known and unknown others, friends at home and abroad), yoga and swimming occasionally, current affairs/politics. He enjoys watching DVDs – action films and straight pornography.

11. **Will** (48) has not been in paid work for three years though describes himself as financially comfortable due to accumulated savings and a divorce settlement. His previous job was as a retail manager (five years prior to interview). He describes experiencing some mental health difficulty following his divorce. He is a graduate and lives with a long-term female partner who is working full time and they live in a house they are buying. He describes himself as bisexual. His partner accepts his bisexuality though he does not share the details of this aspect of his sexuality with her. He is out as bisexual only to his partner and the gay/bi men he has met. He comes from a lower middle class family and grew up in a city in the northwest but has lived in Cumbria, Yorkshire and the southeast. He socialises mainly in his local real ale and uses the sauna in the gay district. His interests include foreign travel, railways, cooking, reading thrillers and detective novels, watching science-fiction programmes especially from the 1960s/1970s.

12. **Daniel** (46) is a full time health services professional with a job with considerable autonomy. He describes himself as financially comfortable due to involvement in property development in the past. His highest qualification is vocational with a high theoretical content and is post A level but it allows him to practice as a counsellor. Originally from a lower middle class family in mid-Lancashire, he came out in his late twenties. He lives with his companion dog, is mortgage-free and ‘single’ but has various erotic friendships mainly with straight-identified men that he has met via a ‘swingers’ website. He has a few close friends and several acquaintances. He occasionally socialises in the gay district subject to how he is feeling and this is often after work (near to the Village). He describes himself as gay in terms of current sexual activities but recognises the fluidity of labels and reports that his feelings/identity have changed in recent years due to self-development opportunities. He is now more open to bisexual experience. He is involved with a gay support group that stresses social justice, acceptance and spirituality. His interests include, walking, gardening and current affairs.

13. **Paul** (53) is a public sector administrator and has a postgraduate qualification. He is single and lives alone in a house that is nearly paid off on the border of Greater Manchester and south Lancashire. He grew up in a working class community in Scotland.
He describes himself as gay and came out in his mid-twenties. He has a few close friends that are mainly heterosexual and live outside the region with whom he keeps in touch by telephone and occasional visits. He has various acquaintances through attending several gay social and support groups. He socialises very occasionally in the Village, though mostly after a group meeting. He has had extensive counselling due to concerns about his self-esteem. His interests include reading biographies of famous writers, historical accounts and thought-provoking modern writers.

14. Leo (61) is a teacher and has a postgraduate equivalent vocational qualification (which has a high theoretical content). He grew up in Manchester in a working class family, came out in his early twenties and has lived in the area for most of his life. He describes himself as gay and has been involved in a cohabiting partnership for 27 years in a home that he and his partner own outright. The partnership has been open to the possibility of sex with other men for many years. He has diverse connections that involve a few close friends, his mother and some of his wider family and various acquaintances on the scene. Although he socialises on the scene fairly regularly, he has more intellectually stimulating relationships with straight friends. His interests include theatre, opera, classical music, theatre, history, thought-provoking modern novels and biographies (including the more ‘pulp’ type e.g. of movie stars).

15. Warren (52) has been able to take early retirement in recent years, though is also able to draw a supplementary form of benefit related to a health condition. He does voluntary work on a full time basis with an LGBT support/campaigning group and is also involved in various local community projects (e.g. health and personal safety). He is a graduate and used to work in civil engineering. He describes himself as gay and is involved in a long-term cohabiting partnership with a man of a similar age (for whom he provides informal care when needed). Currently their relationship is monogamous. Their mortgage is nearly paid off. He grew up in a working class family/area in south Lancashire and has been living in Greater Manchester for more than 20 years. He came out in his mid-thirties. He socialises on the scene occasionally but more so at his local pub or with friends, gay and straight. His interests include gardening, football, reading magazines, historical novels and those of gay American writer, Armistead Maupin.

16. Les (53) has not been in paid work for three years due to a health condition and is obliged to rely on social security benefits. Originally from a working class family in south Lancashire, he describes himself as gay and moved to Manchester nearly two years ago but had lived for many years in Yorkshire with a much older long-term partner who died ten years ago. He is a graduate and had worked for many years in social care provision. He describes himself as gay, is single and lives alone in social housing with his pet dogs. He came out in his early twenties. He socialises on the scene as much as a limited budget will allow. His few closer, longer-term friends, gay and straight, are mainly in Lancashire and he keeps in touch regularly by telephone and occasional visits. His interests include dog showing and socialising.

17. Tommy (55) has not been in paid work for three years (due to a confluence of unusual circumstances) and is obliged to rely on social security benefits. He has experienced three serious bouts of mental health difficulty since his early thirties that have been triggered by overwhelming events/circumstances beyond his effective control. His previous work involved a form of self-employed retail. He is also a trained journalist and his professional qualification he estimates to be post A level but below degree level. He has
some professional acting experience. Originally from a middle class family in Lancashire and currently lives with his pet dog in a house he owns outright. He is single and describes himself as gay and started coming out when in his late teens. He socialises occasionally on the scene but is also a regular at several local pubs in a working class area where he has developed friendships. At one of his local pubs, he has put on drag performances of old stars, interpreting (through mime) show tunes from classic musicals. His other interests include current affairs, theatre, reading broadsheet and tabloid newspapers (to see the difference in style). He has written and is hoping to have published an account of a particularly uncommon and traumatic event in his life.

18. Fred (55) is employed full time as a manager of a small number of staff in a voluntary organisation supporting people with a disability. His highest qualification is A level. Originally from a middle class family in the southwest, he describes himself as gay, has lived in London and elsewhere in the southeast. He came out in his early twenties. He lives alone and is an owner-occupier. His relationship status was uncertain at the time of interview. He reported being in a relationship for about a year with a man 15 years younger than himself who lives in London. He reported not feeling comfortable with monogamy because he likes a varied sex life. He socialises occasionally on the scene and uses gay dating websites to meet sex partners. His interests include theatre, crime fiction, classical music, opera (Mozart and Gilbert & Sullivan), DIY and gardening. He describes having few close friends and some acquaintances and reports difficulty in forming attachments and socialising generally, which he attributes to his upbringing. He has sought support via counselling.

19. Pete (52) is a full time primary carer for an elderly close relative with whom he lives in his own home that is owned outright. He describes caring as fulfilling and invests in close relationships, though his caring responsibilities mean that he is financially restricted. He is single, a graduate and a qualified social worker. He volunteers at a LGBT support organisation. Although originally from Manchester, where he experienced a lower middle class upbringing, he spent some years living in the West Midlands working with young people. He returned to Manchester several years ago and mentors young people in the Manchester area. He has experienced stress and bereavement related bouts (following the death of his lover) of mental health difficulty that required intervention/support. He describes himself as predominantly ‘gay’ partly as a reflection of his sexual preferences and also as a political statement. He has had close intimate relationships with women in past and would not rule out such relations in the future. He hopes for a society where people simply define themselves, among other things, as ‘sexual’ and without the need for the prefixes hetero, homo or bi etc. He socialises only occasionally on the commercial scene, though does go to saunas for sex because he feels he has no real private space at home for such purposes. He has a varied network of friends and associates in terms of age, gender, sexuality and ethnicity. His interests include swimming, walking, listening to Radio 4, listening to music (mainly rock, ‘indie’ and soul), reading more intellectually challenging novels, travel, theatre and cinema (mainly independent and often subtitled films).

20. Jed (39) has not been in paid work for nine years due to mental health difficulties, for which he takes medication and which oblige him to rely on social security benefits. He had an emotional ‘breakdown’ in his mid-thirties and he relates this to experience of physical, emotional and sexual abuse as a child. He qualified and worked as a hairdresser for X years. His highest qualification is a BTEC Diploma (vocational equivalent to A
level). Originally from a fairly economically well off but culturally working class family in south Wales, he came out in his early twenties. He is single and lives alone in social housing and describes himself as ‘a gay TV,’ which he believes challenges rigid notions of gender and can serve as a form of therapy. He feels more confident when ‘dressed’ as alter ego ‘Marigold.’ He also describes himself as ‘a bit of a loner’ and socialises only occasionally on the scene because he generally finds the Village alienating. He is close to his mother and has a few close confidants - mainly people he has met through mental health support groups - and several acquaintances, all of a similar age group (thirties and forties). He also attends a gay social support group. His interests include theatre and performance, creative writing, art and design, gym, pop and light choral music.

21. Chris (48) is an administration manager and has a postgraduate qualification. He grew up in a lower middle class family in Manchester, is single and lives alone in a home he owns outright. He describes himself as gay and came out in his mid-thirties. He socialises via gay dating websites and on the scene occasionally but this is often after volunteering at a gay social support group. He has a few close gay confidants and various acquaintanceships and describes himself as fairly well connected. These days his busy life working and maintaining/renovating his home have restricted opportunities for socialising in the city. His interests include gardening, cinema (science-fiction and thought-provoking foreign films), socialising with friends (often off scene), reading related to genetics, psychology, economics and modern philosophy/ideas.

22. Clive (43) is a graduate working as a manager in administration. He grew up in a working class family in the southeast. He is single and shares a house with an ex-partner with whom he is buying the property and who he describes as his ‘family.’ He started to come out in his late teens and describes himself as gay though recognises the potential fluidity of that category. He socialises “all too frequently” in the gay district (which is near to where he lives) but has a problematic relationship with the scene because of its superficiality and ageism. For more fulfilling social relations, he is involved in a gay day outdoor group. Although he has a few close friendships and various acquaintanceships with men of various ages, he describes being sexually attracted to younger men (20 to about 40) but prefers the friendship and sociality of men of a similar generation. He was the only informant to speak about meaningful relationships with younger heterosexually defined men of which some have been occasional sex partners. His interests include walking, climbing/outdoor pursuits, classical and organ music (e.g. Bach), watching documentaries, reading biographies, thought-provoking non-fiction (e.g. Richard Dawkins) and humorist, Bill Bryson.

23. Martin (52) is a senior administrative manager. He is a graduate. He grew up in a working class family in the East Midlands and has lived in Manchester for more than 20 years. He has been in a monogamous, cohabiting partnership with a man who is slightly younger than himself for six years and they are buying their own home. He is attracted sexually to men of his own generation and when younger preferred men older than himself. His friends are mostly aged in their thirties to their fifties. He and his partner socialise rarely on the commercial scene apart from weekly line dancing group, which he describes as being more like a social event and different from going to a bar. Like several other informants, he reports having some lesbian friends and a few straight (mainly female) friends. He describes himself as gay. His interests include line dancing, the Eurovision Song Contest, theatre, cinema (“eclectic tastes” including action movies,
escapism). His professional commitments leave little scope for reading (fiction) for pleasure.

24. **Jeff** (48) grew up in a close working class family in the east of Scotland. He is educated to GCSE standard, works in administration though has a high level qualification in counselling which entitles him to practice. He reports ‘coming out’ more generally at the age of 43 (just five years prior to interview). He moved to Manchester nine years ago. He describes himself as ‘gay’ though recognises the potential fluidity of this category and reports sexual experience with men from the age of 19. The reason for coming out later in life is largely attributed to his upbringing. He is single and lives alone in social housing and describes himself as gay. He socialises on the scene very rarely due to its superficiality and gets more from social contact at line dancing and attendance at a gay social support group that emphasises acceptance and spirituality. He describes meeting most of his sexual contacts at saunas and some of the men he has met have visited him at home. He has a small group of close associates that include his sister and three gay male friends, two of whom he has known for more than 20 years. Like several other informants, he enjoys his own company and does not see solitude or solitary pursuits as connoting a lack. His interests include various therapies (he is a part-time practitioner), line dancing, watching ‘X factor’ type programmes (to analyse his emotional responses), watching nature programmes and reading self-development/help books.

25. **Vince** (48) has been unable to work for eleven years due to mental and physical health reasons and is obliged to rely on social security benefits. However, he does voluntary work with a sexual health voluntary organisation. He used to work in the public relations/media industry and his highest qualification is A level. He comes from a middle class family in South East Asia and describes his ethnicity as “oriental.” He reports being mostly attracted to Caucasian men. He shares a privately rented house with two friends. He came out to himself in his late teens and describes himself as gay. He is single but would like have a close relationship that need not necessarily be monogamous. He prefers men between their thirties and sixties sexually and socially and describes his small circle of trusted friends as “sufficient.” He socialises occasionally in the gay Village and many of his associates there are known from his involvement with two voluntary organisations concerned with sexual health. He also has friends in his country of origin and is godfather to several of their children. His interests include reading novels with a gay theme and more escapist though still thought-provoking cinema.

26. **Jamie** (54) works full time in an administrative role. He grew up in a working class family in the East Midlands and moved to Manchester 26 years ago. His highest qualification is a vocational one of about O level standard. He lives with an ex-partner with whom he has bought a house outright but has been involved in a relationship for ten years with man who lives separately. Meeting his current partner signalled a change from being very involved in the gay commercial scene to exploring other social activities interests (travel and walking) away from it. The relationship involves occasional threesomes and him having sex occasionally outside of his relationship. He is attracted to men from their twenties to about their early sixties though he prefers men of a similar generation sexually and socially. He has a handful of close friends, mostly gay men, and various acquaintances mainly through walking and line dancing with gay men from their twenties to their seventies. He has very little contact with his biological family (siblings) and his family consists of his housemate and his partner. He came out in his twenties and describes himself as gay. His interests include line dancing, classical music/concerts,
popular music, travel (independent as well as package tours), swimming, gardening, socialising with friends domestically/off-scene, walking (with an outdoor gay group) and theatre.

27. Marcus (47) is a full time clerical worker and a graduate. He grew up in a working class home — “a big, close-knit family” - on the south Lancashire/Merseyside border. He describes himself as gay, came out in his late twenties. He has been involved for about a year with a man aged 36 who lives in the southeast region but is currently working abroad. Because of their necessary separation the couple negotiated an open relationship but this could be subject to review when his partner returns to the UK. He shares a flat he is buying and has a friend of a similar age as a lodger. He volunteers at an LGBT support organisation. He was the only informant who reported enjoying the scene and, despite some experience of ageist hostility, the bars known as younger men’s spaces. He reported that he would like to ‘do the scene more’ but for financial restrictions. He reports having a wide network of associates in the various arenas of his life and has had relationships and friendships with men in their twenties as a midlife gay man. Before the age of about 40, he was attracted to men aged from late teens to mid thirties but he now reports being attracted to men up to about his own age group, though he prefers to socialise with men in their thirties and forties. He has a good knowledge of the dynamics of SM relations. His interests include choral/classical music, current affairs/politics, walking, surfing the net (gay websites).

*Ten of the twenty seven informants reported experiencing at some point a significant degree of mental health difficulty and six respondents reported such difficulties as ongoing at the time of interview.

**Seven men reported being diagnosed HIV positive.
Appendix 3. Observation Venues: Pen Portraits

Venues associated with midlife/older gay men

1. **The Classic.** This provides B&B style accommodation. It is a medium size rectangular bar on Canal Street with several entrances - the central front (patio-style) door is sometimes thrown open during the summer months, weather permitting. It has a long curved rectangular bar at the back of the room, a small raised stage and to the right of this is a pool table. The seating area with tables is situated by the windows. At the other end of the bar is small table reserved for leaflets and free magazines. Its upstairs bar is only open at weekends and is more mixed in terms of gender and sexuality. Heterosexually identified people are generally directed to it so that the downstairs bar can remain a space mainly for gay men. Upstairs has a small bar at the back of the room (on the left as one gets to the top of the landing) and offers more generous seating, including window seating that looks out into Canal Street and a small park. In the warmer months, tables and chairs are placed outside in a cordoned off area with a view of the canal. Its main clientele consists of midlife/older gay men and generally dressed in leather, denim, uniform, ‘bear’ and ‘clone’ style (checked shirt and jeans/combat trousers).

2. **The Frontier.** This is a large oblong bar situated several minutes walk and a few streets away from Canal Street. On entry is some seating and round, brown lacquered tables and chairs near to the main frosted window. The main bar has a 1970s traditional pub feel to it. The long bar is situated to the right and along the left hand side are two tables and seating for four people at each square, brown lacquered table. Near the entrance there is table that holds leaflets and free magazines. On the back wall towards the rear of the bar, there are often posters advertising various events, regular and one-off. At the back of the bar through an archway is a sizeable room with wooden floor that contains a stage to the right with grand piano, some seating to the left (two tables with chairs to fit four people at each table) and a pool table in the rear left hand corner. On certain nights, it hosts a dancing group and a curtain is fixed to wall over the archway to separate the two spaces. It is popular with midlife/older gay men with a strong showing of ‘bears’ and men into leather, denim, rubber and uniforms. It gets crowded late night at weekends and serves as place to go before Club Mystery.

3. **Mystery.** This is a large club popular with midlife/older gay men, especially ‘bears’ and men into leather, rubber, uniforms and associated fetishes. It is attached to The Frontier pub (see 8 below) and is several minutes walk and a few streets away from Canal Street just outside of the village proper. It is open Friday and Saturday nights. It is accessible at street level but the club areas are at lower ground level and quite cavernous, there being four bars and three separate and sizeable dance floors, one which is below lower ground level. The geography of the place is complicated being on two levels with connecting stairs and corridors. On entry, there is a bar with carpets with tables and seating around the edges redolent of the 1970s pub. The adjacent room contains the cloakroom and a sizeable dance floor with a raised area where the bar is situated and a shelf where people can rest their drinks and survey the dance floor and surrounding area. Stairs lead from this bar down to two other sizeable, rectangular rooms below lower ground level. They both have actual bars along the right hand side of the room. One is cavernous and is sometimes used for foam parties and has an impressive light system. Its dance area is marked by several pillars. The other bar is slightly smaller and has a dance area but is situated towards the back half of the room which it more or less covers. The club has a well
maintained outside courtyard at street level for smokers and those wanting some respite from the music and crowds.

4. **The Old Cock.** This is a small, ‘traditional’ working class pub just behind Canal Street. With a 1980s pub feel and dark carpets, it pays some homage to 1990s style that has many prints on the walls and, in several places, antique-looking books to give the air of a cultured person’s living room. On entry, a longish bar is situated a few yards to the right. This has banquette style seating mainly round the edges with small, dark, square lacquered wooden tables and a few small stools and a sizeable recessed area with similar. To the left of the entrance there is a large mirror fixed to the wall behind the seating and two tables. It has a smoking area at the rear just to the left of the small passageway to the toilet area. It attracts mostly midlife/older gay men and has a reputation as a pub that attracts a less smart and trendy crowd and as a ‘rent’ pub where older gay men and younger (often avowedly heterosexual) male prostitutes can meet. It attracts a fair smattering of men who see it as a welcome antidote to the bodily and sartorial scrutiny that operates on Canal Street.

5. **Together Bar.** This is a small, rectangular basement bar, painted black with minimal lighting just behind Canal Street. It has wooden bench seating affixed to the wall at the back of the room. There are several small, round high tables towards the back of the venue with bar stools. It is popular with midlife/older gay men and the leather/rubber/uniform/fetish crowd.

**Mixed venues (age, gender and sexuality)**

6. **Canale Uno.** This is large bar in the middle of Canal Street is on at last three levels with several mezzanine style levels and a large basement with a medium size dance floor (used as discotheque at weekends or for parties and civil partnership receptions). It has many intimate nooks and crannies with seating fitted in appropriately. The interior of the building (the outside a very plain brick building on the outside) was extensively renovated in the arty style of a gothic chapel. It is seen as trendy and a little more ‘aspirational’ - the bar staff is usually younger (rarely over 40) and wears a uniform. The main bar area has seating at the window is generally reserved for diners. A medium size, medium price restaurant is situated to the right of a long and slightly U-shaped bar. The whole interior is made to look retro and is very convincing. It is very popular with heterosexually identified people especially at the weekend and a fair smattering of straight people is visible during the week when gay men are the majority. It is one of the most mixed venues in terms of age, gender, sexuality and class, though tends to attract people with more disposable income.

7. **Changes.** Situated at one end of Canal Street, this large pub with B&B accommodation has three distinct areas. One is a small saloon bar area, which is seldom occupied but could function as a respite space. The second is a larger adjacent room with a slightly raised area where there are several tables with seating; each allowing four to sit comfortably and some respite from music/crowds. On entry, an oval shaped bar is situated to the left and allows bar staff to serve customers in both rooms. To the left of the main entrance, there are small corridors on either side that lead to a cavernous, rectangular space that has a small bar on either side and a sizeable dance floor and surrounding area and a slightly raised stage for frequent (drag performances). It houses a raised DJ booth and has impressive lighting. On the left as one leaves this room to get to
the bar by the entrance, there is square recessed area. The clientele is very changeable. During the week, it tends to be very mixed in terms of gender and sexuality, though the clientele is mainly young (in some cases very young). At weekends, it is more mixed in terms of class and age, including a fair showing of early to late middle-aged gay men. In the warmer months, tables and chairs are placed outside in a cordoned off area with a view of the canal and locks.

8. Diva’s. This is a medium size pub situated just behind Canal Street towards the edge of the Village. Before 9.30pm it operates out of a small saloon bar type room with semi-circular bar in the corner next to the main window. This has some seating to the right on entry and the toilets for this bar are situated at the back of the establishment accessible via a few steps down. This smaller bar is closed at 9.30pm and the adjacent, larger room is opened. This is a rectangular shaped bar with some window seating to the right in a recess, the bar itself is long and situated to the right and there is a small unofficial dance floor just in front of a small stage, which houses the DJ and drag performers on certain nights. There is some seating just to the right of the stage and a few steps down at the back of the bar there is more seating of the banquette type. At weekends, it tends to attract a more mixed crowd in terms of age, gender, sexuality and class but in the week is populated mostly by younger and midlife gay men.

9. Empire. This is a medium size bar on Canal Street at street level with a more modernised and brightly painted larger area with wooden dance floor and stage for karaoke performances and some large, decorative chaise longue type seating. It connects via a doorway with a smaller, ‘quieter’ bar that has a 1970s ordinary pub feel with dark carpets, brown lacquered wooden tables with seating in one corner/sizeable recess. There is a corridor to the left of the main (Canal Street) entrance where there are a few tables and chairs and a rack/small table where people can pick up leaflets and free magazines. Although mostly gay, it attracts a fairly diverse crowd in terms of age, gender and sexuality. In the warmer months, tables and chairs are placed outside in a cordoned off area with a view of the canal and locks.

10. Gemini. Situated a short walk away from Canal Street, this is a medium size, horseshoe shaped bar. On entry and on the right at the back near the wall is a pool table where there is a rack and table where clients can pick up leaflets and free magazines. The bar itself is sizeable and U-shaped. There is seating and square tables by the tinted windows that are opaque from the outside and show only silhouettes from the inside looking onto the street. Looking ahead from the point of entry there are a few high tables with one or two bar stools and there is considerable space to stand and/or dance at the very rear of the venue. It attracts mostly gay men and a mix of younger and midlife/older men. It has a spacious upstairs bar with a medium size wooden dance floor and plays host to at least one community group that is focussed on dancing.

11. Posh! Situated near to the Piccadilly end of Canal Street, this medium size square venue has a wine bar/bistro feel. It has plenty of seating whether for drinkers or diners. The menu is very bistro-like. It attracts a fairly eclectic, mixed crowd in terms of age, dress style though the majority is often older and apparently more middle class. On entry is a small corridor that leads to the bar, which is situated at the back of the venue. The toilets are situated downstairs where there is also a notice board for community and theatrical events. It has a small room (accommodating comfortably about 15 people) that it makes
available to community groups. In the warmer months, tables and chairs are placed outside in a cordoned off area with a view of the canal and locks.

**Venue associated with younger men**

12. **Disco Inferno.** This club consists of one large space. It is a short walk away from Canal Street. It is associated with gay men in their twenties and thirties. The entrance is at street level but the club itself is on the lower ground level. It has one large wooden dance floor that dominates the club. At the edge of the dance floor are three wooden podia each with chrome rails to hold onto. It has three bars at the points in a rectangle. It is open Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday. Monday is a 1980s music night and attracts a more mixed crowd in terms of age. It has somewhat pyrotechnic lighting system, including strobe-type lighting.
Appendix 4: Interview Schedule/Aide-Memoire

Change in relation to experiences of embodied sexuality/identity as a consequence of ageing.

Focus on practical, concrete questions to reach detail of context, events, processes and practices.

Introduction/‘warm up’

Thanks, about the research, ethics/informed consent, questions from respondent.

Embodied practices/perceptions as a result of ageing and effects on sexuality/sociality

Photo/s at different life stage as basis for discussion on how they felt about their bodies/selves then compared to now and/or ‘iconic’ pictures from magazines.

What sort of things do these images make you think of? How do you relate to them?

What do you think about your personality/identity compared to then/X years ago?
How do you see your body compared to X years ago?
How do you see your body/self in relation to a, b, c etc images in photos?
Do you like clothes/shopping for them? What kind appeal to you?

How does your dress style (strategy) differ from X years ago/when younger?

How do you dress now? Do you have a style/image? When go out? Vary with different venues, occasions or with different people?

In what ways do you or NOT live/act your age? Attempts to disguise/delay ageing - probe for grooming, diet, trimming nose/ear hair, body shaving, exercise/gym, ‘behaving younger,’ going clubbing, knocking a few years off Gaydar profile etc. Why?

What do you think about men who make great efforts to disguise their age?

Sexual preferences regarding age/bracket? Why? How has this changed since younger?

Preferences for particular kinds of men/sex – compare/contrast with ‘formative’ years.

Age preferences regarding sociality? Changed since younger?

Do you dance when you go out?

Health indicators – glasses, skin tone, regime, mental/physical health

Other practices relating to ageing that do now that didn’t do/think of X years ago?
**Relationships and associations**

Who is most important person/people? Probe for why and what this means/involve.

Who you provide support to? (Standard question). Probe for what this involves for various parties lover(s), exes, friends, acquaintances, biological family, colleagues, neighbours, others?

Tensions, disputes, negotiations. Is at all plain sailing? What about arguments?

Any caring responsibilities for elderly parents/relatives lovers, friends, significant others? Meanings? Probe for care for people living with HIV and any issues of de-skilling or mental health issues relating to social/public employment participation or lack of.

What friendships/associations do you have with younger gay men? What are these relationships like?

How has getting older affected your relationships with friends/on the scene generally?

Gay scene. If ‘non-scene’ why avoid it and how socialise, with whom or what other scenes involved in? Alternatives to commercial scene? Other forms of connectedness and what these mean.

**About you (standard questions)**

Age?

Brief career details and current occupation type? (Status within organisation/decision making capacity).

Highest educational/vocational qualification?

When/if not working, main interests/activities?

Residence status – rented/owner occupier etc., live alone or share with another/others (e.g. partner/friend(s)).

How define sexuality. Do words used to describe self vary or how?

**Debriefing**

Anything not covered respondent would like to add?

What would respondent like to ask me?
How does respondent feel?

Respondent feedback on questions, style of interview, improvements, other comments?
Appendix 5. Interviewee Informed Consent Information

Introductory Information Letter
Paul Simpson
Dept of Sociology
University of Manchester
0750 347 0051
Date

Dear XXXX,

Doctoral research on gay men in midlife and ageing

Thank you for considering being interviewed for the above project. I’ve attached brief details of the general themes I hope to ask interviewees (plus some other details). Are you determined to grow older ‘disgracefully’ etc.? Do you not normally even think about it? I am interested in any close relationships you have that may involve sex but not about the details of those relations. I am also interested in how sexual preferences could change as we grow older though, again, I am not going to ask about them in intimate detail.

I am interested not so much in whole life stories but accounts of how gay men in midlife respond to ageing. There are no right or wrong answers. I am interested in what you think, feel and do and that you have control over what you decide to tell me. As interviews are very individual, I would hope to tailor any interview to your experiences and it should last up to two hours, depending on how much or how little you want to say. I can arrange an interview room at the University or, if you are happy, I could visit you at your home or other suitable venue of your choice. I can be fairly flexible about times of interview weekday evenings and am free during the day at weekends and can try to fit in with your schedule.

Your identity will remain anonymous. The only people who will see my report will be my tutors in the Sociology Department, Manchester University and an examiner from outside the University but none of these people will know your identity, which will be disguised in any written materials. My home and University computers are password-protected. I am hoping to audio record the interview (to help me write up notes) but would only do so with your consent. Your name will not be connected with this material and any significant or uncommon identifying details that might risk disclosing your identity will be disguised in any reports. The interview could offer a chance to think about things you do that you take for granted and might tell you something about yourself. I will provide you with a brief plain English summary of the findings, including any quotations from you so that you can comment on them and remove any that you are not happy with.

Thank you for thinking about the matter and please don’t hesitate to get in touch if you want more details before making a decision. I will be in touch shortly to see if you agree to be interviewed. There is no pressure on you to take part and it is more than okay to say “no”. You can withdraw any contribution you make in part or in whole during the interview and at any time before 31 May 2010.

Best wishes

Paul Simpson
About the Research

Why is the research being done?

It is part of a PhD study motivated by the lack of research on midlife/older gay men. I am interested in finding out how gay men respond to ageing.

What will it involve?

Most important is your safety and good research means not upsetting you. It will involve questions about how you handle getting older through things like dress and grooming, as well as the relationships that are important to you. What you tell me is important and may give you some insights into yourself. There are no right/wrong answers. I am interested in what you believe.

I will ask about various relationships and what they mean to you. During the interview, if I think you feel uncomfortable about a question, I will not pursue it and if you begin to feel uncomfortable about anything, please don’t hesitate to tell me and I will try to address your concern positively to your satisfaction. You are free to refuse to answer any question and stop the interview at any time without having to justify this, though I may ask you why so that I can get an idea of anything I am doing wrong. If, at any time, you realise that an answer you are giving may lead you to disclose something you would rather not talk about, we can move to the next question but I would need to rely on you to signal that to me.

I would like to audio record the interview and the form attached gives you the option to accept or refuse this. I would also like to take brief notes and will show you what I have written about you so that you can tell me whether they fairly and correctly reflect what you said/think. I may want to write some of what you tell in the form of a direct quotation in my report to support a point I am making. If you have any questions about any aspect of research or need me to clarify any point on this sheet, please do not hesitate to ask.

If at any time after the interview you regret telling me something or want to withdraw your contribution in part or whole, please contact me on my mobile number but this will need to be by 31 May 2010 at the latest and I will ensure that any disclosure does not appear in my report and that notes about you are shredded. If being interviewed causes you distress later on, I will try to do what you advise or negotiate to resolve any upset. If it is helpful, I would also be able to give you details of a suitable support service.

Who will see my details?

Your identity will not be revealed. The report will be read only by the University lecturers and one external examiner who need to assess it. You will remain anonymous and your details disguised e.g. Interviewee 1 or given a name other than your real one. I may want to quote things you say BUT, again, your name will not appear in any documents connected with the research and if anything so unique emerges that would make you more identifiable, we can discuss how we disguise this without stretching credibility or even leaving out a piece of data altogether. A firewall should prevent computer hacking.
Middle-Aged Gay Men and Ageing – Interview Themes

About you

Being “out.”
Occupation type
Interests/activities?
Residence – live alone, share, with partner etc.

Views/feelings about ageing

Middle and old age.
a) positives; b) negatives of midlife (if any)

What you do and think

Attempts to disguise/delay ageing (if at all). Reasons?
Sexual preference/s for any age group/s?
How do you feel about yourself now compared to some years ago?

Relationships

The most important person/people to you?
Age group/sexuality of friends?
What a) older and b) younger gay men think of each other?
Involvement with friends, family, neighbours, colleagues, the scene etc.

Note that these are not exact questions and are just themes I may want to raise and will be fitted to your circumstances/experience. I may want to take up interesting leads that may crop up in the interview. The interview is not meant to be a formal ‘I ask/you answer’ format but should be like a “conversation with a purpose” between equals though more about what you think and do.

Paul Simpson

0750 347 0051
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feelings/positioning</th>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Theory</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>There seemed to be quite a few men 40s with groups of much younger women – perhaps a gay uncle taking them to the Village?</td>
<td>Dancing queen, tall, big hair, very camp gestures and stylised routines, unabashed with a group of younger women considerably younger than him. Expansive gestures to Kylie’s “Your Disco” and wonderful acting out, mouthing the words and looked as though he may have been referencing aspects of Kylie’s dance routine from a video of one of her concerts.</td>
<td>Hexis?</td>
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Appendix 7. Ethical Approval and Safety Guidelines

Secretary to the Ethics Committee
Room 2.005 John Owens Building
Tel: 0161 275 2206/2046
Fax: 0161 275 5697
Email: timothy.stibbs@manchester.ac.uk

ref: TPCS/ethics/08002

Paul Simpson,
Department of Sociology,
School of Social Sciences

27th May 2008

Dear Paul,

Committee on the Ethics of Research on Human Beings
Simpson: The Ethics and aesthetics of how gay men in midlife (40-59) manage aging processes (ref 08002)

Thank you for the amended version of the application form, information sheet and consent form sent in your email of 22nd May. I can confirm that these amendments meet the concerns of the Committee and that you now have ethical approval for the above project.

The general conditions set out in my letter of 6th March 2008, of course, still apply.

We hope the research goes well.

Yours sincerely

Timothy Stibbs
Secretary to the Committee

Dr T P C Stibbs
Secretary to the Committee
UNIVERSITY OF MANCHESTER

COMMITTEE ON THE ETHICS OF RESEARCH
ON HUMAN BEINGS

Guidance for the Safety of Individuals Involved in Research and Related Activities

In considering the ethical aspects of any research project the Ethics Committee is mindful that it has a responsibility toward the safety of the researcher as well as the well being of the volunteer. In particular it has to be satisfied that adequate precautions have been taken when the researcher undertakes any part of his or her study outside the University or normal working environment. This can include interviews in people’s homes, focus groups, visits to community centres, GP surgeries, meetings etc, as well as the journey to and from any research activity.

These notes are based on the guidance drawn up by the Drug Usage and Pharmacy Practice Group within the School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences and we are grateful to Ms Liz Seston for her work on this.

Personal Responsibility

These notes of guidance are intended to provide a framework for individuals involved in research and related activities and should be followed whenever your work takes you out of the University or a normal working environment. You are particularly advised to follow them when interviewing people in their own homes. However, it is your responsibility to follow the guidance.

Before you leave

- Whenever you leave a normal work environment you should inform a responsible person who is going to remain contactable while you are away and can act in an emergency situation. During working hours this might be someone in a departmental, laboratory or hospital office. Outside working hours it might be a reliable friend or colleague. If the area to which you are going is unknown or carries some risk it might be wise to ask the friend or colleague to accompany you at least to the entrance and wait for you.

- If you are going alone you should leave a log with your contact person, providing details of:
  - The date and time of the interview/meeting
  - The number of any official or departmental mobile ‘phone you are carrying
  - A home contact number or personal mobile number
  - Make and registration of your car (if applicable)
  - Name, address, telephone number of place or persons you are visiting (Unless there are very unusual circumstances, you should make the interviewee aware that you have logged this information elsewhere)
  - The time at which you will report back to say that the assignment has finished
• Make sure you have with you a mobile ‘phone whose battery is adequately charged (departmental ‘phones may need pre-booking), an A-Z of the area you are working in and, if appropriate, a personal attack alarm.

• Be prepared for the interview. If you are visiting an unfamiliar area, find out as much as you can from colleagues. If necessary visit the area beforehand in daylight to make sure you know where you are going. Plan your route carefully and always carry an A-Z with you.

• If you feel uncomfortable visiting a specific area or individual on your own, ask a colleague or friend to go with you or invite a respondent to an alternative location (e.g. and office or community centre), offering to pay travel expenses.

• Some environments, such as a prison, probation office or psychiatric ward are safe in themselves, but the circumstances in which you conduct an interview may carry a risk. If you need to undertake a one to one interview with someone whose behaviour is unpredictable and no one else is present, you should satisfy yourself (and sometimes the Ethics Committee itself) that there are adequate arrangements for a panic button and your own quick escape if necessary.

While you are there

• Consider carefully how you dress. Avoid clothes or footwear which makes it difficult to move quickly or accessories which draw attention to yourself. Try to disguise laptops or other equipment in ordinary shoulder bags and keep your mobile well hidden.

• Try to park your car as near to the place you are visiting as possible (ideally in a well-lit area). Do not leave valuables in the car. Be vigilant when leaving and returning to your car.

• Trust to your instincts. If you feel uncomfortable at any point either before or during the interview make your excuses and leave.

Once the interview is over

• After each interview get in touch with your contact to report that the assignment has been completed. If you reach the agreed report back time but are still in the interview, make the call but arrange a new time for report. If you are doing more than one interview in people’s homes you should report back after each one.

• Your contact should have a protocol to deal with a failure to report back. It is suggested that this should include:
  • Provision to call you within, say, 15 minutes of the agreed time
  • If there is no reply, to try any alternative number
  • If there is still no reply contact the respondent to try to ascertain where you are
  • If the contact cannot get in touch with you then some emergency procedure should be initiated. This may mean alerting the police.
• If anything happens to you when you are out on research or related activities (theft, assault etc.) you should report the incident immediately. You should also report the incident to your department or the University security service.

• If you feel yourself emotionally distressed or upset after an interview talk to a colleague or arrange to see the University Counselling Service.

General Issues

• For some projects (e.g. those involving work in hospitals) there may be specific safety issues which are not covered by this guidance. In these circumstances, it is the responsibility of the project leader to perform a risk assessment, to identify potential hazards and put appropriate control mechanisms in place.

• Volunteers and respondents are indemnified through the University’s special arrangements for insuring ethically approved projects, but University staff are covered for personal accident under the University’s Employer’s liability insurance. The names of any postgraduates involved in interviewing outside the normal working environment need to be added to ensure cover, but this will be automatic if they have been named in the ethics application form.

• Car insurance: Occasional use of cars for ‘business purposes’ is covered on the staff insurance. The payment for mileage includes money to pay for the addition of ‘business use’ to personal car insurance.

YOUR RESPONSIBILITIES

• To inform your department when you are out of the normal working environment on research or related business
• To provide information on your whereabouts
• To report back at the agreed time
• To take steps outlined in the notes of guidance to ensure your own safety

THE PROJECT LEADER’S RESPONSIBILITIES

• To arrange to keep records of research staff/students’ whereabouts
• To ensure that arrangements are made to contact researchers if they fail to report back at an agreed time and that protocols to deal with emergency situations are both adequate and understood
• To provide equipment to assist in ensuring the safety of researchers
• To keep a record of any incidents which occur while on research or related activities and report them appropriately
• To ensure that all new research staff or students likely to be involved in this sort of work are given these notes of guidance
• To ensure that postgraduate students are covered under the University’s Employer’s Liability Insurance.

August 2002
Appendix 8: Map of Manchester’s Gay Village (35 venues concentrated in two streets)