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# **Ethnic minority gay men**

*Redefining community,  
restoring identity*

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Peter Keogh  
Laurie Henderson  
Catherine Dodds

**Research Report**

# Acknowledgements

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Our main debt is to the men who took the time to take part in this study. Without their willingness to share their experiences so honestly with us, this research would not have been possible.

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**Peter Keogh**  
Senior Research Fellow



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# Forward: rethinking gay communities

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This report presents the results of one of three studies investigating how social and cultural factors shape gay male identity and influence gay male social life in London today (see also Keogh, Dodds, Henderson 2004a; Keogh, Dodds, Henderson 2004b). These studies aim to problematise monolithic and (we believe) unhelpful concepts such as 'gay community' or 'gay scene' and show how the population of gay men in London is riven with cultural, political and social differences.

It has often been said that 'the gay community' or the 'gay scene' is an essentially White, middle-class concept which excludes men from other classes or ethnic backgrounds. This research shows that this is not the case. Numerically, the population of gay men in London is disproportionately White and mainly British (as is the population of London), but it is also as multi-ethnic and multi-cultural as the broader London population. Although we regularly celebrate the multi-culturalism of the capital, we rarely, if ever describe the gay community in this way. This is unfortunate because the many facets of the gay community which should otherwise be acknowledged or represented in health or social policy for gay men are obscured. As a consequence, social and community services for gay men remain woefully impoverished.

Moreover, by speaking the language of exclusion, we are condemned to always consider weakness as opposed to strength. There is an implicit assumption in nearly all research and policy work on gay men that to be within the charmed (White, middle-class) circle of the gay community is to be 'included' and therefore without need. It follows that, those outside of it are automatically 'excluded' and therefore, disadvantaged, weaker or more needy. These three reports will show that there is no paradigmatic gay experience or group. Rather, there are many ways of being gay, *all* of which are imbued with strengths as well as weaknesses.

The three reports which emerge from this collection of studies can each stand alone, but are best read in relation to one other. One examines the relationship between being less well-educated, working class and having a gay identity. Another examines the experiences of gay adult migrants to London. This report investigates ethnic minority identity and gay identity specifically concentrating on the experience of British-born Black Caribbean men and White Irish immigrants to London.

Our aim in carrying out these studies is to change the way that health promoters and policy makers conceive of the gay male population. We want to replace the dominant 'centre vs. periphery' construction with a conception of the gay population of London as a composite of a range of different experiences; as fractured, antagonistic and constantly changing. Moreover, the factors which account for these differences amongst gay men are larger social and structural factors: ethnicity, religion, education, class, income *etc.* To put it simply, *no* gay man is simply gay, he also has a class background, an ethnicity, an employment history, a family and probably a religious affiliation.

On a policy level, we hope to take gay men's health and social concerns out of the policy 'ghetto' that is HIV. Gay and HIV community organisations should be broadening their policy objectives. We feel they should be seeking to transform the education of all boys as well as increasing the capacity of all families to live with and enjoy their gay children. We feel they should be challenging all services to meet the needs of their gay users and of all communities to capitalise on the presence of their gay members. In seeking to do this, we can all learn from the experiences of gay men from ethnic minorities, gay adult migrants and working class gay men.

# 1 Background

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This report is a comparison of two very different ethnic minorities in London: British-born Black Caribbean gay men and White Irish gay migrants. Our aim in conducting such an unlikely investigation was two-fold.

First, we wanted to investigate the relationship between ethnicity and gay sexuality. We felt that a comparison of two very different ethnic groups with vastly different trajectories would be useful in isolating the range of factors that influence the identity and social interactions of gay men. Hence, when we consider factors such as the importance of biological family, ethnic community, and the effects of racism or discrimination, we can see the various ways they are important to men in different ethnic groups. Finally, we believe (and conclude from this research) that to assert that an ethnic identity takes precedence over gay identity, that a man is say, Black first and gay second is to misrepresent how gay men from ethnic minorities live their lives. We attend to how conflicting imperatives are managed by individuals in ways which can be difficult and painful, but also enlightening and enriching. A man has an ethnic identity *and* a gay identity (and other identities besides). His challenge is to construct a life which allows him to make the most of these legacies while preserving what is important for him. Our challenge is to learn from his experience rather than asserting a hierarchy of identity.

Second, we wanted to avoid conducting a needs assessment. Although needs assessments are invaluable, they often concentrate on the negative aspects of a group to the detriment of specific strengths and advantages. Furthermore, they tend to start from the assumption that the group or population is a problem to be addressed rather than a collection of individuals with a range of positive and negative experiences. Therefore, we wanted to concentrate on the *specificity* of the ethnic minority gay experience (what makes that experience, that group unique) rather than the sexual health needs of specific groups of ethnic minority gay men.

## 1.1 ETHNICITY AND INEQUALITY

Our Government has generated considerable policy aimed at addressing inequalities in health outcomes and service provision at the population level across socio-economic, gender, geographical and ethnic groups (see Milburn 2001). The *Independent inquiry into inequalities in health report* (Acheson 1998) recommends among other things, that the needs, specific health risks and cultural issues particular to different minority ethnic groups are considered in measures to reduce socioeconomic inequality and in the development and delivery of equitable health services (see recommendations 31, 32, 33).

People born in the Republic of Ireland and people of Black Caribbean descent born in the UK respectively make up 0.9% and 1.1% of the population of England and Wales. The 2001 *Census* (Office for National Statistics 2004, see tables S102, S107, S108) provides us with comparative baseline data to assess the health needs of Black Caribbean and Irish men living in England and Wales. From this, we can conclude that:

### Both groups exhibit greater morbidity

- 11.8% of ethnic Irish men and 11.5% of ethnic Black Caribbean men (between the ages of 16-49) report having a limiting long-term illness. This is higher than the national average of 9.9% of adult males.
- 14.8% of all ethnic Irish people and 10.7% of all ethnic Black Caribbeans say they are not in good health compared to 9.2% of all adult males.

### **Both groups report high unemployment**

- 6.7% of economically active ethnic Irish men aged 16-74 and 15.2% of economically active ethnic Black Caribbean men aged 16-74 are unemployed compared with 5.3% in the general population.

The *Youth Cohort Study* (Department for Education and Skills 2002) gives us a similar picture of educational inequality for these groups.

### **Black males under-achieve academically**

- In 1999 31% of Black boys (no ethnic distinctions given) achieved 5 or more GCSEs grade A-C compared to 45% of White boys (no ethnic distinctions given). We cannot comment on Irish men (most of whom would have received their education in the Republic of Ireland).

## **1.2 HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL FACTORS**

In order to understand health inequalities, it is important to examine the historical, social and cultural factors which underlie them. In the next two sections, we examine these factors in detail for both of the ethnic groups.

### **1.2.1 Irish migration**

The history of Irish migration to the UK is long and complex and until comparatively recently, little researched or documented. The preponderance of a conception of ethnicity grounded in the notion of 'race' (as it connects to skin colour / physical characteristics) rather than national or cultural identity has meant that Irish people (who are racially overwhelmingly White) have been counted as part of the White British population. As a result, the needs of Irish people in Britain have historically been neglected because they have not been specified in large scale monitoring initiatives (Commission for Racial Equality 1997). The lack of a systematic passport control between Britain and the Republic of Ireland since partition has compounded the invisibility of the Irish in the UK, as they have been counted as part of the White indigenous population. Researchers have argued that such 'forced inclusion' leaves Irish people more vulnerable to unrecognised inequality (Hickman 1998: 305; Mac an Ghail 2000). Thus, there has been a failure, both at official level and in general discussion of race relations, to recognise the difficulties that many Irish people experience in Britain (Commission for Racial Equality 1997: 2). This situation is further complicated by definitional considerations. The historical and political relationship between the United Kingdom (which includes the contested area of the North of Ireland) and the Republic of Ireland makes the notion of a unified 'Irish' identity untenable. Despite this, it is common to find that the most pervasively cited quantitative research collapses those born in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland into the same ethnic category (Office for National Statistics 2004); or that the only available category for ethnicity is 'White' (Taylor *et al.* 2003).

Irish emigration to the UK has taken place over several hundred years in three significant 'waves' (Hutton 1997). Nineteenth century labour shortages in Scotland and the North West of England resulted in substantial Irish recruitment. Similar labour shortages in the Midlands during and after World War Two led to a second wave of male migrant labourers. In the 1980s, a third wave of younger and more skilled Irish emigrants settled (mainly) in England's prosperous South East. In the last ten years, this situation has been reversed with the rate of migration from the UK to the Republic of Ireland currently double that of the rate of migration in the opposite direction (Mac Éinrí 2001). The distinction between the second (post-war) wave of migration and the third is crucial when thinking about health inequalities.

There is evidence to show that participation in this third wave of migration improved the life opportunities and social mobility of those who left Ireland as compared to those who remained



(Kobayashi 1997). However, there is a persistent and multi-generational effect among the Irish in Britain that demonstrates pervasive inequality. Even several generations on, the health of ethnic Irish descendants is worse than that of the White British population after controlling for socioeconomic status (Abbotts *et al.* 1997; Harding & Balarajan 1996; Hutton 1997). We cannot know the relative numbers of migrants in each wave, but given that in 2001 nearly a quarter of ethnic Irish people living in England and Wales were over 65 years of age (Office for National Statistics 2004), the impact of second wave migrants on the data we have on health inequality cannot be ignored. Furthermore, separate analyses have shown that those who migrate from Ireland to the UK have higher rates of morbidity and mortality than both their counterparts in Ireland and the pre-existing British population (Hutton 1997). We therefore tentatively conclude that the reported health inequalities may mask differences between second wave migrants and their ethnic Irish UK-born descendants on the one hand and third wave Irish migrants on the other. The latter group are likely to experience comparatively less health inequality than the former. However, only future large scale research will show whether or not this interpretation is correct.

The third wave of Irish migration occurred within a remarkably different cultural atmosphere than the previous waves. The significance that the Republic of Ireland attaches to out-migration was also influenced by this third wave in the 1980s. Formerly considered a national catastrophe and a 'brain drain', such out-migration has been re-cast (due in no small part to the efforts of the former president, Mary Robinson, 1995) as an 'Irish diaspora'. The ex-patriot Irish community has been re-defined as a national resource rather than a national shame. As the stigma attached to an emigrant status has abated, the ways in which Irish ethnic identity is maintained and manifested in countries such as the UK are changing. For instance, many second and third generation descendants of earlier Irish migrants choose to define themselves as Irish, as just under one third of those living in England and Wales who declared in the 2001 *Census* that they were of Irish ethnicity were born in the UK (Office for National Statistics 2004: table S102).

### **1.2.2 Black Caribbean migration**

Although Black Caribbean in-migration to the UK started as early as the eighteenth century, total numbers of Caribbean migrants in Europe remained relatively low until the advent of World War I when 15,000 men joined the British West Indies Regiment (Phillips & Phillips 1999). Following World War II the combined critical labour shortage and the need to rebuild infrastructure in England led to the recruitment of substantial numbers of workers from the Caribbean. The granting of full British citizenship to Commonwealth Caribbeans in 1948 led to a huge increase of migration into the UK over the next 10 years. These years were marked by significant racial tensions between White working class and Black migrant communities. Such tensions were used as an excuse to pass the Commonwealth Immigrants Act in 1962 which had the effect of limiting further migration from the Caribbean to Britain.

Racial tensions, inappropriate and insufficient public policy and low levels of education and skills among migrants led to the rapid ghettoisation of Black Caribbeans upon arrival and the development of a culture of ongoing discrimination against them within British society. It is not surprising that as a group they demonstrate the effects of long-term and pervasive inequality. The most recent indictment of such inequality was raised by *The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry* which called attention to the problem of ongoing pervasive structural racism calling this 'institutional racism' which consists in a 'collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture or ethnic origin' (Macpherson 1999). Although this enquiry marks a watershed for the Black Caribbean community in Britain, it remains to be seen how effective any efforts at remedying the situation will be.

Health and social inequalities among Black Caribbeans are well documented with several studies identifying poor health across multiple generations (Harding & Balarajan 2000). Other studies

have shown less effective medical communication between doctors and Black Caribbean patients, inattention to Black Caribbean cultural concerns regarding the uses of medicine and consequent lower adherence to a range of treatments (see Morgan 1995). Other studies show disparities in diagnostic and treatment practices with Black Caribbean people more likely to be diagnosed with serious mental health problems. The elevated incidence of conditions such as schizophrenia is attributed to a combination of factors including socioeconomic disadvantage, social adversity and racism in health and criminal justice settings (Louden 1995; McLean *et al.* 2003).

In the area of employment and education, studies show increased levels of reported employment discrimination and harassment amongst Black Caribbeans (Cooper 2002, Karlsen & Nazroo 2002). In a study of differing levels of educational achievement for Black Caribbean boys, Wright *et al.* (1998) point to the role of cultural and interpersonal factors in Black boys' underachievement citing the role of damaging hyper-masculinity reflected in the high numbers of school exclusions. That is, the experiences of Black boys are heavily mediated through their ethnic and gendered identities which are pathologised within the school system.

As a response to such inequalities, several policy initiatives have been implemented by central government over the last several years (Department of Health 1999; 2002; 2003; Department of Health and Neighbourhood Renewal Unit 2002). However researchers and commentators have expressed concerns that calls for increased participation at a policy level without interventions to remove the barriers to that participation will only result in further social exclusion (Campbell & McLean 2002).

### **1.3 ETHNICITY AND GAY SEXUAL HEALTH**

There is evidence to suggest that gay homosexually active men from certain ethnic minorities are at heightened risk of HIV infection and access health promotion interventions differentially compared to other gay men. Exhaustive analysis of *Gay Men's Sex Survey* (GMSS) needs data indicates that ethnicity mediates need, but no patterns emerge which support any particular hypotheses. Secondary analysis of our data from the 2001 *GMSS* shows few conclusive differences between ethnic groups across HIV risk and HIV need variables except that, of all ethnic groups, Irish men and Black Caribbean men were significantly more likely to have tested for HIV and significantly more likely to have tested positive than men in all of the other groups. There was little difference in sexual behaviour to account for this, except that Irish and Black Caribbean men who had not tested positive for HIV were more likely to have had a positive sexual partner and more likely to have engaged in insertive anal intercourse with a known positive partner, compared to men in other ethnic groups.

Broadly speaking, in terms of overall HIV prevention need, Irish men and Black Caribbean men might be interpreted as showing slightly elevated need. As we have said however, this is not an investigation of need *per se*, but rather an investigation of the *specificity* of the Black Caribbean and Irish experience in relation to sexuality.

There has been little or no research on the sexual health of Irish gay men in the UK and only a few studies of Black Caribbean gay men. Black Caribbean men in general are more likely to experience sexual health morbidity, in its narrowest sense of pathological clinical symptoms and repeat infections (Winter *et al.* 2000, Hughes *et al.* 2001). Fenton (2001) demonstrates that those in ethnic minorities have high rates of HIV and STDs and calls for further research, improved monitoring and targeted interventions involving community partnership. Another report on Black Caribbean gay men (Fenton *et al.* 1999) concludes that men in this group have difficulty articulating their sexual health needs and describing the role of their sexuality within their broader lives. The report recommends increased visibility of Black gay men in community organisations and GU services, the provision of off-scene social spaces for Black gay men, anti-homophobia interventions in the Black community and anti-racism interventions in the gay community.

## **1.4 METHODS**

This report is the outcome of one of three linked studies carried out simultaneously. Broadly speaking, a range of methods were used to recruit over one hundred men into all three studies. The same core interview was conducted with all participants with additional questions asked of men in particular groups (such as men with low educational qualifications or men from ethnic minorities). Men could be prospectively or retrospectively assigned to each study sample and the transcripts of certain men were included in more than one analysis and hence appear in more than one report. With this in mind, our methods for this study are described below.

### **1.4.1 Recruitment**

A range of methods were used to recruit men with differing levels of effectiveness. The main methods used were: face-to-face gay commercial scene recruitment; glossy recruitment postcards distributed on the gay scene; selected recruitment from a pre-existing London panel of gay and bisexual men; advertisements in the gay commercial and community press and on a gay commercial website; and through postcards in HIV and gay community organisations.

The main methods used were gay commercial scene recruitment. The Black Caribbean sample was recruited at gay scene venues with mainly Black or mixed clientele. Black Caribbean recruiters approached individuals with a flier and encouraged them to participate. This method was successful, however, it does mean that we had a particularly scene oriented sample of Black Caribbean men. The same method was tried with Irish recruiters for the Irish sample with no success. This was because there are no Irish scene venues in London and recruiters had to ask groups of (White) gay men whether any of them were Irish. This approach elicited anti-Irish abuse and we terminated it after we had no response from the Irish men we did contact. Finally, we placed a banner on a gay commercial website (Gaydar.co.uk) which, along with snowballing allowed us to eventually recruit twenty Irish men into the study. We restricted recruitment to men born in the Republic of Ireland who migrated to the UK as adults. This is because of the complexity of political and national identities which exist in the North of Ireland. We feel that a similar study is required into the experiences of Northern Irish men which takes into account issues concerning sectarianism. The size of this study would not have done such experiences justice.

### **1.4.2 Instrument design and analysis**

A limited reflexive methodology was used in the design and administration of interviews. In the first phase, a focus group was convened to inform the design of a semi-structured interview schedule. Focus group participants (seven in all) were recruited with the assistance of BigUp. Findings of the focus groups informed the design of a semi-structured interview schedule.

Forty men took part in in-depth one-to-one semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted by three trained interviewers who met regularly to discuss the content of the schedule and de-brief. The schedule was regularly revised as a result of these discussions. Interviews lasted one to two hours. With the consent of respondents, they were audio tape-recorded and fully transcribed.

The interview was very broad following a 'life history' trajectory with special emphasis on the following topic areas: basic demographics; family history; health; education; gay sexuality and coming out; friendship and social networks. In addition, respondents were asked about HIV risk taking and discussed in detail the last 'critical incident' of sexual HIV risk (normally an incident of unprotected anal intercourse). Finally, they were asked about their experiences of, and attitudes toward, HIV health promotion.

### 1.4.3 Analysis

All transcripts were annotated and synthesised. These synopses were used to generate themes which were used to conduct a full thematic analysis conducted by the same two researchers working independently. Various tests and further analyses were conducted to check internal reliability of initial analyses.

## 1.5 SAMPLE DEMOGRAPHICS

		Black Carribean	Irish
<b>Age</b>	Range	22 - 58	25 - 55
	Mean	33	37
	Median	34	37
<b>Ethnicity</b>	White	0	20
	Black	18	0
	Mixed Black/White	2	0
<b>Country of birth</b>	UK	20	0
	Republic of Ireland	0	20
<b>Age at migration</b>	Range	NA	16 - 42
	Mean	NA	25
	Median	NA	23
<b>Years in UK</b>	Range	NA	<1 - 36
	Mean	NA	11
	Median	NA	7
<b>Educational qualifications</b>	no educational qualifications	3	1
	equivalent of 'O' levels or CSEs	10	3
	equivalent of 'A' levels	4	8
	University degree or higher	3	8
<b>HIV status</b>	never tested	4	5
	tested negative over one year ago	6	6
	tested negative within the last year	5	5
	tested positive	5	4
<b>Current employment</b>	unemployed	8	4
	unskilled	1	0
	semi-skilled	2	2
	skilled	6	10
	student	2	2
	medically retired	1	2

## 2 Growing up gay: family, church and education

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In order to understand how ethnic minority gay identities are forged and how particular forms of ethnic gay sociality come into being, it is necessary to explore the factors which shape the experiences of ethnic minority men as they grow up. Three factors emerged as especially important in the personal development of respondents. These were: family and community; religion and church; and education. In this section, we examine the experiences of both UK-born Black Caribbean men and Irish men under these three headings. We might helpfully describe these three elements as the building blocks which shaped the personal lives of the men we interviewed. However, how these blocks fitted-together and the ways in which they mediated emerging sexualities did vary between men from the two ethnic backgrounds.

### 2.1 UK-BORN BLACK CARRIBEAN MEN

In order to describe the UK-born Black Caribbean men's sense of personal identity, we explored the relationship between their ethnic identity, their identity as the children of migrants and their gay identity. We therefore analysed their discourse on communities, families, the church and education paying particular attention to how these impacted on their gay identity and gay social networks.

#### 2.1.1 Family

We asked respondents to discuss their family structure, both when they were growing up and currently. We also asked questions relating to the types of contact their parents had with friends and relations in their country of origin, and with others from their country of origin in the UK.

The main feature of family structures during childhood was their dispersed nature. Parents often did not live together (many were never married, separated or divorced) and siblings (both whole and step) were born and raised in a number of different countries. As a result, cultural difference between siblings was common. Although biological families were often dispersed and dislocated, the symbolic role of the concept 'family' was central in creating a sense of cohesion and personal security. Like many migrants, respondents' parents often moved to areas where they would be surrounded by others from their home countries.

**... my area at that time [...] was very kinda populated by Jamaicans. So it was like we all grew up with other Jamaicans.**

*Did your family feel that was important?*

**[...] Yeah it was the whole thing of having a familiar face or somebody who understands where you are coming from...**

**Black Caribbean, aged 31, unemployed**

In addition, extended family often made efforts to live in close proximity.

**... it was the sense of belonging [...] my mum's closest family they all tended to go to the same place – they all came North and [...] that's where we all grew up. So it was quite obvious that they all intended to be in the same city, [...] that was the aim of it to be close to one another...**

**Black Caribbean, aged 30, skilled job**

The family often extended seamlessly into the Black Caribbean community. This was sometimes expressed through a consciousness of being related to others within the community.

... you'd see people in the street and my mum would start talking to them and she'd say, 'Oh that's so and so and he's a real cousin or whatever or your dad's second-cousin but that was it'. I mean I didn't know I was any relation to them. So there was always somebody who was related [...] it was just like there was the family then there was the extended family, which you know exchanged pleasantries in the street...

Black Carribean, aged 30, skilled job

Many respondents reported that their families shared domestic arrangements such as childcare.

I remember, I never had babysitters. Then we had parties which all the children will go to the parties. We had our own room while the adults were partying in another room. So I've always loved music basically and grown up in that environment.

Black Carribean, aged 32, semi-skilled job

The family was thus emblematic and deeply associated with an ethnic and migrant identity. Moreover, the family was one of the structures through which ethnic identity was expressed and fostered.

### **2.1.2 Religion**

Whether or not their parents, siblings or extended families had a strong spiritual faith, religion – or perhaps more correctly – the church, played a significant part in the childhood of all respondents. All but one respondent attended services regularly as a child and most spent time in other church-related activities. For many, the church was the main organising social force in both their parents' and their own lives.

... there was a period of my life where Sunday consisted of – I got up [...] I went to the Salvation Army for the morning meeting at ten o'clock because I played in the band. Eleven o'clock I did Sunday school there. Now half past eleven – between half past eleven and twelve I left Sunday school and then joined my mother at her church. Then I left her church between two thirty and three and went back to Sunday school at Salvation Army. Then left there, went home, had dinner and was back in my mother's church by seven o'clock at the latest.

Black Carribean, aged 29, skilled job

The social role of faith and the church was clearly connected to the process of migration for respondents' parents or grandparents. Membership of church and faith communities was often seen as a means of continuing or strengthening social bonds made in the country of origin. Moreover, many accounts were marked by a degree of mobility between different churches. Therefore, a family or members of a family might switch between (Christian) churches over time. Often such switches – or even conversions – marked a migration or a move within the UK.

We'd go to Pentecostal, we'd go to C of E, we went to a couple of Catholic churches. The main one that we went to was C of E because it was attached to my school and she knew the priest and so on there because they blessed our house and so on [...] but she would still try other churches.

Black Carribean, aged 33, skilled job

Therefore, in addition to spiritual belief, the church played an important social function both in the upbringing and ongoing lives of respondents. This social function was intimately connected with the changes brought about by family migration and often reflected the complexity of family structures.

### **2.1.3 Education**

Two thirds of the men left school at sixteen with 'O' levels or less. These findings are consonant with national surveys of Black Carribean men (Department for Education and Skills 2001), but certainly not all gay men.

We asked respondents to discuss their parents' and their own attitudes towards education. Overall, parents valued education for their children. Their opinions were strongly influenced by their awareness of being migrants.

**They [parents] were always of the opinion of, you know, 'go to school and learn', you know? That was the first and foremost principle – to learn [...] My dad was also, you know, 'make sure you learn to get by in life – bear in mind you're an ethnic minority – things may be harder for you in Britain.'**

**Black Carribean, aged 33, skilled job**

Some parents' prized their children's education because of the limitations of their own.

**My mother [...] comes from a generation where women weren't educated really. Also she was taken out of school by her father because he thought it was not necessary for her to be educated [...] And so as a result she's pretty pushy. And it's not just she pushed me, she pushes every single younger member of the family that comes within her sphere of influence [...] I know that at some point she must have not been able to read.**

**Black Carribean, aged 29, skilled job**

There was a gendered aspect to the value placed on education with mothers seeing it as a way of protecting their sons.

**My dad came from, for want of a better word, the rough side of the tracks and dealt in weed and criminality and all that sort of thing. And I think my mum was very, very determined that me, particularly being the eldest boy, would not go down that path.**

**Black Carribean, aged 32, skilled job**

However, by far the most important problem with education was, no matter what their attitude, parents usually lacked the knowledge and skills to support their sons in their education.

**[Education] was important but I don't think that they [parents] really grasped that kind of middle-class notion of how important education was. For my parents it was like, 'Yes you will go to school and you will study', but there was no sort of emphasis on, 'When you come home you must do your homework and have you revised and have you done the extra studying?'**

**Black Carribean, aged 31, unemployed**

It is helpful to contrast the experiences of the majority of men with the two who went on to study for a degree directly from school. In both cases, despite coming from similar backgrounds, parental attitudes and parental help at home were key. One respondent's parents showed precisely the same gendered attitudes towards education as those above. However, vitally, he reports his mother's capacity to be supportive in his early years.

**[Education] was a very big deal, very, very important and yes it was very important that I did well at school and [...] Not so much in my teenage years but when I was younger she would make sure that I did homework every night, she would monitor things like my reading and if she felt that I wasn't at a level that I should be at she would teach me herself at home. [...] What she said or what she felt was that as a Black man growing up in this country ... The phrase was always that I had to be twice as good as anybody White and that was the deal so to get there you had to work twice as hard.**

***And did you ever get a sense from your father what his opinions were on things like education?***

**Not really. I mean he was... The impression I got was that he was proud that I was doing well at school and so on but in terms of what he felt defined a man that wasn't the sort of thing that ever came up ...**

**Black Carribean, aged 33, skilled job**

Men's experiences of school exacerbated their educational disadvantage. Those who left school at sixteen with 'O' levels or less (two thirds of the sample) did not value academic work or achievement as boys. They reported that teachers had low expectations of them.

I think my main problem was as I was relatively clever and I wasn't expected to be clever. So I got bored a lot at school which meant that I played up [...] I got in trouble a lot. I know that – and I was willful.

Black Carribean, aged 29, skilled job

Such experiences were clearly related to their ethnicity. This man describes his relationship with his mainly White British peer network with whom he made the transfer from primary to secondary school.

... [as we got] older [...] the whole sort of colour thing, race thing and the social thing. [They know] where they wanna go in their lives and where their parents are pushing them [is different to] where I'm going in my life [...] – the social background. It was OK, but I did notice differences...

Black Carribean, aged 31, unemployed

It was clear therefore, that the men in our sample suffered as a consequence of environmental and social factors that are known to affect the UK education of all Black Carribean boys (Wright *et al.* 1998). The respondents who had gone on to get degrees were aware that their experience had differed from that of other Black boys. One felt isolated at school.

... the fact is that I was good at this school and for a young Black boy that was almost... you know, you can't be cool and be good at maths and good at English that's not going to happen. So I was singled out for being different from a very, very young age.

Black Carribean, aged 33, skilled job

This isolation influenced his choice of friends. He felt he could not be friends with other Black Carribean pupils. As a result, his school experience was overwhelmingly negative.

I just wanted to say that I hated school [...] I never felt that I could be myself. For the whole time I was at school it was always... Not just at school but primarily at school, it was always a charade, always a day waiting that I was actually going to be found out and it was a trial every single day. I can't tell you. It makes me laugh when people say they were the best years of their lives. I would not wish my school years upon anybody.

Black Carribean, aged 33, skilled job

#### **2.1.4 Family, church, education and emerging sexuality**

We have seen that the UK-born Black Carribean men grew up within a strong familial and church system and a relatively unsupportive educational system. These systems influenced their sense of a personal and a social self. That is, they grew up with a strong awareness of belonging to an ethnic minority and the challenges this brought. Like the children of all immigrant communities, they were taught to draw heavily on their familial, communitarian and church networks for social support and a sense of social stability. As immigrant communities reach their second and third generations, they inevitably undergo cultural fractures and changes which include a certain amount of integration and cultural diffusion (Phillips & Phillips 1999). As second generation Black Carribean gay men, our respondents might be expected to experience this process differently to their heterosexual counterparts. Later in the report, we examine their participation in gay culture. Here, we analyse how the social structures in which they were raised prepared them for life as gay adults. That is, once an individual starts to become aware of his different sexuality, what meanings do the structures of family, church and education take on? What are their uses and functions?

One way of examining ethnic identity is to consider the concept of 'home'. Overwhelmingly, they considered their families to be those who lived in Britain and considered London as their home.

Well for me I think home is where you were born frankly. I mean you know as far as I'm concerned I'm British. I mean my parents will probably say that this is their home because they've been living here for X amount of years. But I suppose their real home is from Jamaica. Because that's where they were born.

Black Carribean, aged 33, skilled job



The sense of having little or no connection with their parents' country of origin was related to their gay identity. That is, ongoing connections with their parents' country of origin were avoided because they perceived those countries to be more hostile to gay men than Britain.

*Okay, where would you call home [...]?*

Easy, I'm a Londoner pure and simple.

*Do you have an interest in visiting Jamaica?*

None whatsoever apart from to go and enjoy the beaches.

*Would you avoid it?*

Yes, yes. As an out gay man I would yes.

Black Caribbean, aged 32, skilled job

Negative attitudes towards homosexuality in their parents' countries of origin was seen as a factor which created a greater distance between respondents and their family there. They described their adult visits as those of an outsider or a tourist.

*I've been to Jamaica but I didn't actually go with my mother. I went with my boyfriend at the time [...] I did actually spend some time with my auntie which was interesting because she didn't mention... She didn't mention the fact that I was gay any of the time I was there and afterwards when I came back my mum said to me that she purposefully hadn't because she didn't want to upset me. That was... I'd met her before because she'd been over to England before and things so it wasn't like I was staying with a stranger but...*

*But it was in her territory.*

It was in her territory and I didn't really see much of the rest of the family while I was out there but it was a very, very strange time. That was very, very bizarre – good and bad.

Black Caribbean, aged 33, skilled job

Clearly connections with parent's country of origin were not central factors in an ethnic sense of self. Other social networks or structures were more powerful in expressing an adult gay Black Caribbean identity. Like many gay men, as they grew older, respondents moved out of their close knit communities and away from their families. Although contact with family was maintained, there was an inevitable distancing from original heterosexual familial and friendship networks.

New friendship networks tended to be oriented towards the respondents' gay social life containing both gay and lesbian friends. Invariably, those new gay friendship networks contained other Black Caribbean men.

*And in terms of your own experience now as an adult, how much contact would you say that you have with Caribbean and Jamaican communities in London?*

Probably not that much [laugh]. But I mean I've got friends who are Afro- Caribbean. So you know. But... and like I've been out with two Black guys as well.

Black Caribbean, aged 33, skilled job

For others, the overwhelming majority of their gay friendship network were of Black Caribbean descent.

*99% of my close circle of friends are Black gay men and again 99% of that lot are Black men of West Indian decent. There are no African people in there at all, yes.*

Black Caribbean, aged 32, skilled job

Men valued a cultural commonality with other men of Black Caribbean descent. However, this commonality relates not to being a member of an ethnic minority *per se*, but rather being the child of an Black Caribbean immigrant.

*I think the overriding thing is being born here and being raised through the school system, you know, the work system. It's a really interesting one because on one hand I could sit down with a group of White gay men that grew up in Brixton, had exactly the same experiences as me, watched the same TV programmes in the 70's, played the same games and we could*

have the same conversation. But ultimately there's that thing about what happened when I actually went behind closed doors. I know that my dad was sitting down there smoking weed with his friends, playing dominoes or my mum was going to get up and go to church or whatever. And with a White guy there's going to be that little bit that's missing, 'What do you mean rice and peas on a Sunday?'

**Black Carribean, aged 32, skilled job**

Just as emerging gay identity implied a distancing from family and community structures, the role of the church also came into question as they came out as gay. That is, a questioning or sometimes a rejection of the church often accompanied the development of a gay identity.

... to a certain extent I still believe in it, but I've come to the opinion that you can't... you cannot be a Mormon and also have a gay lifestyle. So basically that's why I stopped going [...] at the end of the day it's a society, it's a club, where you have certain rules and you have to live by it. If you can live by it, fine. If you can't, I don't see why you're a member. So... basically, you have to be either one of the other. At the moment I just don't see myself as a Mormon. And it's not a question of what the scriptures say. It's also the attitudes that I got from some of the members that I didn't like, and that's not how I viewed God or how I wanted to live my life. So I couldn't live with these people. So I had to live without them. Basically I just fell into other things I found more interesting.

**Black Carribean, aged 28, unemployed**

Often however, respondents recognised the need for ongoing faith and spiritual sustenance in their lives. Some, despite a conflict regarding their church's attitudes towards their sexuality, still drew occasional comfort and social support from their religious involvement.

I think about [religion] a lot, because a few bad things have happened to me over the years or negative things. I've not been as happy as I used to be. And so therefore I do think about religious beliefs, you know, albeit what plays on my conscience is, you know, the fact I have a gay life and how the Lord perceives me as to whether I'm doing right or wrong [...] I go to church when invited. You know, if I've got a friend that's singing in a gospel choir or there's a particular church function [...] I take some persuading but I do go. And I think, you know, there's something right there for me. There's something missing in my life as far as church and religion goes.

**Black Carribean, aged 33, skilled job**

A minority reported how a homosexual identity might be maintained within their churches (see Hawkeswood & Costley 1995).

... I don't want to say it's a myth because I don't think it's a myth but there's this view that Carribean communities are homophobic. Within that Carribean community there's often lots of gays and lesbians but it's not spoken about. And so it's like almost you can be accepted as long as you are... It's not as long as you are invisible, you can be visible within the community but I suppose as long as you [...] because there would be people that might go to church and everybody knows that so and so in the back row is gay but you never see him with a man, he never comes to church with a boyfriend and so on and you never see his partner but you knew.

**Black Carribean, aged 33, skilled job**

In conclusion therefore, the structures that inform self-development and provide social support within an immigrant community persist, in somewhat altered form, within the emerging gay identities of the men in our sample. If biological family recedes somewhat, it remains vital to maintain a sense of a broader community by building friendship networks that include other people of Black Carribean descent. Likewise, the social and spiritual role of the church is certainly questioned, but rarely completely disavowed. We see therefore the importance and tenacity of such structures and the manner in which they mediate the development of gay identity.

## 2.2 IRISH MIGRANTS

The same key elements of family, church and education fundamentally inform the experience of Irish migrants. However they do so in very different ways.

### 2.2.1 Family

The Black Caribbean family structures were diverse or fractured, existing across several cultures, countries and religions and abutting a larger Black Caribbean community. The ideal of family within which the Irish men grew up was the opposite. The heterosexual marital family was seen as the basic social, economic and cultural unit of the Catholic state: self-contained and self-sufficient. Divorce in Ireland was not legalised until 1997 and unmarried partnerships, sex out of wedlock and illegitimate children were heavily sanctioned by both church and State as was marital breakdown or separation. Within this culture, problems which emerged within the family were expected to remain there. Irish identity brings with it a strong culture of familial privacy. That is, the intimate life of the family is private and sacrosanct.

Two-thirds of the Irish men we interviewed experienced major upheaval and adversity within their immediate families. Several respondents reported that one or both of their parents were alcoholics. However, such problems generally remained unchallenged. This respondent talks of his father's and ongoing drinking causing problems which his family had never addressed.

*Was your dad functional. I mean could he...?*

Yeah he works and he still works. He even knocked two people down drinking and driving but didn't get done because he didn't stop.

*Right.*

But very functional. Because he's a sales rep [and] the whole thing is based on alcohol. You know the whole job is.

*Do you think that that has had a long-term effect on you?*

Oh definitely. Yeah [...] I mean the drinking, the Catholicism, the Irish culture, you know, I think if I had to draw comparisons I'd say I obtained a lot of my mother's ability to kind of cope with difficult situations and be a peacemaker and take that role on sort of naturally.

Irish, aged 33, skilled job

Other respondents reported major marital problems between their parents which carried on for years. This respondent's parents eventually divorced.

*My parents – by the time I was born – um we were in a very confrontational part of their relationship which lasted until they divorced really. So you know it was quite unhappy in the sense that they were fighting all the time. Yeah that wasn't very happy.*

Irish, aged 36, skilled job

However, it was more common for parents to stay together because of the stigma attached to divorce.

*Why my parents sort of don't speak civilly to each other [...] So we were stuck in the middle of that.*

*Right. So were there lots of fights?*

Regular yeah, just verbal [but] the arrangement continues! [...] It's gone on for 40 years – as long as I can make out 40 years plus [...] We've talked to both of them about [separating] but it's too comfortable an arrangement for both of them. Then there's the 'what will the neighbours think' going on as well. So it's unlikely to happen.

Irish, aged 44, skilled job

Others reported difficulties with step-families which were never resolved. In the following case, family resentment built up over a marriage that was made for very practical reasons by an emotionally distant father.

... there was a lot of sort of family politics. The fact that um my mother married into sort of almost established family already. And that resulted in those kind of – well what they termed an apartheid system in the house where I was like the only full child so to speak of the marriage and the others felt that they were hard done by in various ways [...] Like I say my father had a very hands off approach. And [...] well my mum said once that she thought that he'd only married her to try and find another mother for his children [...] My mother was um sort of in the last chance saloon you might say. She was thirty eight and had been single.  
Irish, aged 25, student

A minority of men suffered far worse problems at home. For example, two men reported family suicides. The following respondent described his violent father, who, at the time of the interview still lived with his mother. He showed great forbearance and sympathy for both of his parents.

Yeah. Because he had plans. And now he had nothing. He had a loan that he didn't expect he'd have. He had a young family. There was five of us. He became quite depressed. But angrily depressed. I mean if something happened and we did something wrong or whatever we were killed. I fell over and broke my glasses on the first day I got them and I ran away because I knew going home would mean a beating. So it was always lots of beatings and stuff. And he pushed my mother off a stool and broke her back.

*What?*

Yeah. Pushed her face through the door. Broke her jaw. So I mean this was going on all the time.  
Irish, aged 38, unemployed

One man reported being repeatedly sexually abused by his uncle within the family home. His parents' dependence on the rental income from his uncle affected their capacity to intervene.

*How many years were you sexually abused at home?*

About four [...] And it was that pubescent time, that turning when you're most vulnerable and therefore most easily exploited [...] I went to church um every Sunday and then for a few years – around the time I was being abused I used to go every morning and uh used to go to confession every week and tell the priest and he'd tell me to avoid these occasions of sin. And it was like well my uncle is put in my bed by my mother and because we needed money and he helped towards the rent. So he was put in my bed with me [...] there was nothing I could do.  
Irish, aged 48, skilled

It was clear that the economic and social conditions which prevailed (and in some cases continue to prevail) in Ireland caused a range of problems for respondents when they were growing up. Economic hardship, laws governing marriage and social mores regarding intimate life all played a part. However, until comparatively recently, such problems were not dealt with by social interventions. The confessional story in the last quote was typical of the way in which problems like these were dealt with. The priest was bound not to break the confidentiality of the confessional, but did not advise the boy to talk to someone who could intervene. Rather, the respondent was told to deal with the problem himself. The imperative of forbearance, self-sacrifice, maintaining familial privacy and above all not bringing shame on the family emerges repeatedly throughout the accounts of the Irish respondents.

### **2.2.2 Religion**

All but one of the respondents (who was brought up within the Church of Ireland) had been raised within the Roman Catholic Church. Overwhelmingly, religious ritual played a central role in family and community life. All Catholic respondents reported attending Mass every Sunday as children. Some reported their parents attending church everyday and sometimes several times a day.

[We were] strict Catholics really I guess. Well you very much had to go by the teachings really [...] And go to church every week and you know we said rosary. We'd say the rosary say until I was about sixteen we would have said it – whoever was in the house – nearly every night.  
Irish, aged 30, skilled

The church was also a medium of social regulation. It was important for parents to be seen to be regular church-goers. Attendance at church signified respectability and active civic participation.

**Oh God! Me dad was [religious] anyway. It was the two things – it was school and Mass. I mean I don't know if you can relate to this but his whole thing was really based on what people see from the outside. And if we were seen going to Mass once a week and seen to be OK in school and generally good citizens, he was happy [...] I think for the sake of family he went to Mass once a week.**

**Irish, aged 33, skilled job**

It was not uncommon for respondents to report having thought about becoming priests in their childhood and adolescence. Such thoughts were associated with a sense of an emerging problematic sexual identity. That is, becoming a priest would allow young men to evade the question of their homosexuality (or at least evade heterosexual marriage). However, such plans were later rejected, though some respondents had entered seminaries before they did so.

**I think I was staunchly religious in my teenage years. So much so I believed I wanted to be a priest but then there was an element of suppressing my sexuality as a gay man in rural Ireland at the same time. But [the priesthood] was a cop out from that. I went to training college to be a priest and stayed for 9 months and it was then I opted out and became a chef.**

**Irish, aged 40, medically retired**

In addition, to evading the question of sexuality, the priesthood also offered a social role for a single young man that brought major kudos to the family and local community. Older men reported their families' pride at their son entering a seminary because of the increased social standing that a priest in the family would bring. The same respondent describes the social pressure to take orders, once he had decided to leave the seminary.

**My mother was so [happy when I went into the seminary]. A lot of the female population of the village I came from were also very happy to know I was going to make my mother very proud. This was the general consensus, and when I left [the seminary] I was told by neighbours I had broken my mother's heart. She [mother] was upset. I think they were all looking to a good day out at the ordination, because automatically the church would get a refurbishment if there was someone in the church so the local diocese would pay for a lick of paint on it, so they all thought 'Oh we'll get the place done up for nothing'.**

**Irish, aged 40, medically retired**

As with the Black Caribbean families, the church played a strong role in social cohesion and in some cases offered a viable role for homosexual men. Unlike the Black Caribbean experience however, there was only one church – Roman Catholicism. This very monolithic church was not mobilised as a vehicle for social movement or change (as it can be in more congregationalist faiths) and all political allegiances and social classes were contained within it. Hence, the question of rejection or acceptance of the church becomes more difficult. Men did not feel that they had much latitude in their interpretations of the church's teachings. That is, it was unthinkable for the Irish respondents (or their families) to consider changing church or converting for social or spiritual reasons.

With the emergence of an awareness of their homosexuality, all men questioned Catholic teaching and all but four had moved away from the church. This process usually started in teenage years and continued into adulthood. This was not necessarily related to a loss of faith or spirituality, but a growing perception that the Catholic Church could have a pernicious or illiberal influence. This is an attitude that these men shared with many young liberal or dissenting Irish people.

**I stopped praying when I was about nine or ten. I stopped going to church when I was about sixteen [...] I didn't really see any point. I didn't really identify with the Catholic Church. I just thought it was hypocritical really just to go if you didn't follow, believe in it.**

**Irish, aged 25, student**

Some men reacted specifically against the teachings on homosexuality, which they felt had an adverse effect on society.

**My parents are Catholic. We were all raised as Catholic. And we used to be quite devout [...] there's a lot of hypocrisy with the whole gay thing and being Catholic. And that's where a lot of the homophobic kind of attitude in Ireland comes from.**

**Irish, aged 25, student**

It is important to emphasise that dissent from the church was social or ideological rather than personal or spiritual. Personally, many were grateful for the sense of security membership of the church had given them, especially in relation to a sense of personal continuity and belonging.

**Yes [religion was] quite strong and Catholic obviously. And you know I went to Mass up to maybe about fifteen or sixteen or something and did my Communion and Confirmation. I found it OK. In a way I feel I'm glad I had some kind of, you know kind of, religious background. I think it's kind of kept me OK, do you know what I mean? I mean the last time I went to church was at my mum's funeral. So I don't go. I used to kind of think about going at Christmas. But I don't really believe in the structure of church and whatever.**

**Irish, aged 52, skilled job**

For others, being brought up within a church gave them a moral sense, even if they had long since divorced it from the church itself and rejected its confessional and atonement aspects. Others have been able to separate their Catholic faith from their own spirituality. That is, they still believe in God, feel very spiritual and pray when they feel the need.

**I do believe in God and I do believe in good and bad and I think religion is a personal thing, but I don't think when I die I'm going to go to hell, because I think I'm not a bad person, I haven't done anything bad. If God judges you it's not on who you slept with or any stupid stuff like that, it's a lot deeper than that. I don't fear God or fear religion, I just don't think Catholic religion is for me.**

**Irish, aged 30, unemployed**

A small minority of men describe an overwhelming sense of guilt during homosexual interactions.

**I think I absorbed huge amounts [of religious messages]. Because you know I went to school and worked towards Communion and Confirmation and between those years was just you know you were bombarded with you're good if you do that, you're bad if you do that and you go to hell if you do that. Even to the point where my Nana died when I was about twelve and I had a very strong sense that she can see what I was doing. So even now I can be having sex with somebody and I can get this flash of Nana looking at me. Guilt is a strong factor and seeing that psychologist was really useful for that ...**

**Irish, aged 33, skilled job**

Four men remained active members of the Catholic Church. They gained strength and support from their beliefs and practice but it was highly personal and there was little sense of community in their Catholicism. Their relationships within the church were between themselves and their priest or with one or two other gay Catholics. Therefore, the emphasis was on the private and spiritual rather than the public and community aspects of the church.

**I will pray every day [...] You know it's still a really important part of my life. I do go to a particular church. But I'm not really part of the community. Catholic churches often aren't very community orientated. Well, they can be but there's always a little clique. But you know most people just go to Mass and then come away from it after you know. I don't engage with the community at all there. I'd kind of like to and I've made a few attempts. But it didn't really work really and so no I don't. But I feel very much attached to the church I go to and the priest is a really brilliant priest.**

**Irish, aged 36, skilled job**

Others do not attend Mass or communal religious observance, but continue to pray. This seems to be both an ingrained behaviour from childhood and something that brings them solace.

**I still do [pray] a lot in my mind. I can't go to sleep if I don't. You know I wake up in the night. I mean I just run through these things in my mind, I suppose it is habit now after fifty-five years of habit. I haven't gone [to church] for a long time.**

**Irish, aged 55, medically retired**

### **2.2.3 Education**

In marked contrast to the Black Carribean sample, the Irish men were relatively well educated. Only one had left school with no qualifications and three with the equivalent of 'O' levels. The remaining 16 gained an Irish Leaving Certificate (an examination oriented towards higher education and roughly equivalent to 'A' levels). Of these, eight went on to obtain diplomas or degrees. Not surprisingly, the younger men tended to be better educated than their older counterparts. All but one received their education in Ireland.

As with the Black Carribean men, the main theme to emerge in relation to education was the attitudes and experiences of parents. Enormous value was attached to education by respondents' families, though the capacity of parents to support their sons' learning was dependent on their own educational background and financial circumstances. In addition, the meanings attached to education and the capacity to pursue it was influenced by the age of the respondent (that is, the period in which he grew up in Ireland) and whether or not the family were farmers.

Men in their 30s and 40s often reported enormous pressure to continue to university with parents exercising control over their choice of subject and profession. In the majority of cases, education was seen as a means of social betterment rather than a desirable end in itself and respondents reported entering schools and professions for which they cared little.

**Both my parents were teachers so they were ... how would I describe the attitude? Definitely they were into us having an education. My mother, more so than my father, was extremely pushy, but you had to have a degree and you can't stop until you get that far at least [...] my mum was going through the thing about the solicitor, the doctor and the medic. She'd decline the college place for me and accept another one.**

**Irish, aged 44, skilled job**

The experience of education was also influenced by class. In a working class or lower middle-class context education remained vital, but was seen as the conduit to a job rather than further education. Younger respondents tended to report that their parents had a more relaxed attitude towards education, seeing it as a means of fulfilment and happiness rather than a means of social improvement.

**My parent's values are that their children were happy. And they never ever put pressure on us to – I was never told that I wasn't studying enough. They might kind of comment that you know other people might be doing more work. But they would never sit down and force me to do something. Because they knew that I was just – well it wouldn't work. You can't force someone to learn. So I never put a huge amount of effort in but I always seemed to do well.**

**Irish, aged 25, student**

We asked the respondents how they experienced school. The sample was split evenly between those who were generally happy and those who experienced difficulties. The ten men who reported being happy associated this with their capacity to control their school environment. For the most part, they were aware of their emerging homosexuality at school and took steps to avoid being bullied. One boy loved dressing up, but never extended this behaviour to school, knowing how 'camp' or effeminate boys would be treated.

*How did you relate with other kids?*

[...] I had dolls. She [childminder] made rag dolls. And looking back it was all very kind of um – but maybe I was also a bit aware that that wasn't really the way to be. But then even from a really young age at primary school I kind of controlled that. Because I used to dress up – at that stage my sister and I would put on plays and I would be the girls [...] And then at school yeah I was never sort of picked on at school or labelled as a sissy. And by secondary school even some of my friends were you know a really macho crowd [...] I was aware – there were a few people who were the really kind of you know camp people that got picked on [...] I knew that if I was that I wouldn't be too widely accepted or liked.

Irish, aged 29, semi-skilled job

The imperative of self-protection and self-determination extended to the academic arena. That is, men reported striving to be academically successful.

[Our teacher's] idea of education was he'd divide the class up and there used to be about 40 to 50 boys in the class – and he'd divided them up into two sections- heaven and hell. If you were in hell you knew about it. So I thought the intelligent thing to do is make sure you stay in heaven if you know what I mean.

Irish, aged 55, medically retired

In contrast, ten respondents described their experience of school as negative. These men reported being bullied or abused. Bullying was elicited by quiet, hesitant or feminine behaviour rather than a direct perception that the respondent might be homosexual. That is, boys were bullied because they did not play sports or fit into a specific model of Irish masculinity.

... it was very much based on you know if you played hurling or if you sang or if you were an Irish dancer [you were fine, but] if you didn't enjoy those things or were not from background that encouraged those things, which I to a certain extent was, you kind of were left out socially, so I would say that I felt, an outcast socially because I didn't play hurling. I didn't want to do any of those things and I guess for a lot of gay people sport doesn't come naturally. I guess I felt isolated, a loner and definitely felt different.

Irish, aged 32, semi-skilled job

Most respondents did not feel that they were bullied because they were gay *per se*. The response of these respondents to bullying, was neither to leave school nor to be disruptive, but rather to keep to themselves and get on with their work.

[Bullying] didn't go on for long periods, you know it wasn't allowed to, bullying wasn't... it was transitional, they would pick on somebody else for the same thing and you just learned to cope with it and avoid the bullies.

Irish, aged 40, medically retired

Three respondents disclosed sexual and / or physical abuse at school and one was aware of others who were being sexually abused. This abuse occurred within religious-run schools rather than the marginally more secular National Schools.

On Wednesday [...] every boy from the class is called to go and see Father X [...] for a chat, a fifteen minute chat. And I can't remember how it would start or how it would end. All I remember was the questions and him touching me. He would start by asking us if we'd be touching ourselves or if we'd had any bad thoughts or if we'd had any sexual thoughts and all this kind of stuff, and how we felt and if we masturbated and if we knew what that meant. He'd explain it anyway. And as he was doing all that he was slowly edging his hand up along your legs. And further possibly, depending on how scared or how you know, afraid you were.

Irish, aged 38, unemployed

Older men more frequently reported being the victims of physical abuse from both priests and nuns (this was before corporal punishment was discouraged in the State school system).



... the nuns were very cruel. So but I always seemed to be the one that got picked on. They'd slap you and stuff like that. Well the [Christian] Brothers used to use a leather strap that was like a big long, not a stick but like a leather kind of strap thing.

Irish, aged 52, skilled job

One man was singled out because of his stammer. Despite the physical abuse he managed to remain top of his class and excel at school.

... I would often get asked a question and couldn't answer it because I couldn't say the words and would get beaten for that. But then in exams I was always top of the class. So it was always confusing for them as to why I appeared so stupid and why I managed.

Irish, aged 48, skilled

Most of the respondents told someone of their abuse at the time it was occurring. Two boys told their parents and were either not believed or were blamed for even talking about it.

And I told my mother [...] That was my first mistake [...] Well she slapped me across the face and told me that I was, you know [...] How dare I. And she was going to pray for me. And I needed to kneel down and go to confession and pray for forgiveness [...] And I was, I suppose I must have been third year when he [abusive priest] started on my brother.

Irish, aged 38, unemployed

Both these respondents did eventually report it to the authorities and the schools were investigated and in one case closed. In these cases the sexual and physical abuse had a negative impact on the respondents' self-esteem and confidence but did not necessarily hamper their academic achievements.

#### **2.2.4 Migration to the UK**

Undoubtedly, migration was one of the most important experiences in the adult lives of our respondents. The majority left Ireland when they finished their education. By this stage, most had achieved a degree of independence from their families with all but seven living away from home. At the time the majority of our respondents emigrated, there was a chronic economic recession and high unemployment in the Republic of Ireland and a service sector boom in the UK (Mac Éinrí 2001). We expected respondents to give economic and employment reasons as their main motivations for moving. We were struck therefore, when the overwhelming majority cited their sexuality as their primary reason for moving to the UK.

For men living in rural and urban environments alike, the lack of a gay subculture and intolerance of gay lifestyles was their primary reason for departure.

I moved because I was gay and living in Ireland right in the middle of nowhere, then I went to college in Limerick but there was no gay scene whatsoever. I was just completely closeted. I was having girlfriends and pretending to be straight but I knew I was gay. So I came to London because I was gay, while everyone else thought I was coming to London to get a job. Obviously I wanted to get a job as well but that was not the reason.

Irish, aged 29, semi-skilled job

Repressive laws, Catholicism and homophobia all contributed to creating an atmosphere that made being out and gay a difficult choice for young men. Many developed strong negative feelings toward their country of birth.

It was to get away from Ireland full stop. There wasn't a great niche for young gay people then, you know. Not only was it like a bit repressive as far as the police and the state were concerned, but England had a proper gay scene. They had a gay community, which obviously at seventeen you would gravitate towards. It had also had more relaxed sex laws [...] Actually I have quite a lot of anger with Ireland. Because it was just so repressive, it was very, very repressive [...] It's a beautiful place to look at and they are friendly, but they're homophobic

and small-minded and the Catholic Church still rules. I know a lot has changed, but for me that is the memory.

Irish, aged 37, unemployed

Harassment and homophobic attacks taking place in Ireland were cited by several men who were deeply affected by the public coverage of these events.

I was working in the west of Ireland in a remote hotel which was seasonal on the Ring of Kerry, and it was due to close in October 1983. I was making arrangements for a follow-on job. Then in August 1983 there was a trial in Ireland of 5 youths who had murdered a man and the 5 youths were allowed to walk free from court because the judge said it was on the statute books that it was OK to kill a queer. There was a mass exodus of gay men from Ireland at that time.

Irish, aged 40, medically retired

Emigration was often unproblematic because men could disguise their real reason for leaving behind the need for employment and economic security. As a cultural norm at the time, families were generally supportive of emigration.

Economically I think my father was saying you know you need a good job so maybe I should stay in Ireland. But because I was going to study I always seemed to have landed on my feet in Ireland so I think they felt maybe I'll be alright. They probably had their own concerns but then they were like 'well if he wants to do it let him do it'.

Irish, aged 25, skilled job

The main reservation expressed by families concerned the fact that their sons were going to the UK rather than the USA or Australia. This was specifically related to anti-English feelings or the perception that their sons would face anti-Irish discrimination in the UK.

My mum didn't like me coming to London. She doesn't particularly like England. She doesn't like English people. This goes back to years ago as well. We're not a Republican family by any means, but I do know her grandfather and my great grandfather died in the War of Independence against the English so it goes back a long way. When I was in university I did a six month internship in New York, and she would have much preferred me to go to America than come to England. She probably would still prefer if I wasn't in England.

Irish, aged 29, semi-skilled job

The majority of respondents did not express regret about their decision to migrate to London. Even those who were having employment or health difficulties at the time of interview maintained that they were better off. The most commonly mentioned advantages to living in London were a sense of freedom and anonymity within a tolerant and culturally diverse population as well as a varied gay social network.

[The advantages are] freedom and lifestyle but freedom's the big one. I mean I didn't have to worry about being found out which was always a worry at the back of my mind. Because I mean a couple of times I have been with gay people and they're friends of mine of people who know me. And then someone can say 'who was that character you were with last night' and carry on. And Dublin, even though it's a big city, it's a very small town. So being here you don't need to worry about that. I don't have to worry about that. There is more anonymity.

Irish, aged 55, medically retired

Once they had moved to the UK, respondents generally maintained contact with their family in Ireland. The degree of contact varied but many remained close to family and visited frequently.

[I have] quite a lot of contact [with family]. I mean I was there this weekend just gone. And I was just on the phone with them as well just before you came in [...] I'm fairly close to my family you know. We're kind of one of those families that kind of live apart but actually are reasonably close and we get on alright.

Irish, aged 36, skilled job

Conversely several men reported little or no contact with family in Ireland. This was generally due to 'falling out of touch' rather than an active rejection on either side.

**... it's always been very patchy. And now I don't have any contact with them at all, with any of my family unfortunately. The last time I spoke to one of my sisters was about ten months ago. It feels very sad actually. At Christmas maybe a few cards will come. But the gulf has just gotten so wide. It's the distance and the differences in lifestyles. I've got nothing in common with them whatsoever and virtually don't know them.**

**Irish, aged 37, unemployed**

Some men report visiting families, but feeling little closeness to them. On the other hand, when parents age or die, respondents often found themselves having to visit more frequently and be more closely involved with family affairs.

**When I moved here I went [back] maybe once or twice a year just for a few days just to see the family very briefly. Then that changed when my father died. Now I go back probably every two to three months and spend more time with my mother and I am building more of a relationship with her now.**

**Irish, aged 44, skilled job**

We asked men about their contact with other Irish people living in London or the UK. Nearly two thirds found contact with Irish people living in London unimportant or unacceptable with an overall tendency to actively reject the notion of participating in an Irish ex-patriot community. Many felt that they had little in common with men in those social networks. They were seen as depending on a certain form of 'Irishness' that they rejected, or as simply being too insular. This was not to say that such men had no Irish friends.

**For a long time I didn't know any Irish people. So I didn't have the thing of coming here with Irish people and staying with Irish people. It has only been in the last 5 years that I've started to have Irish friends and now I have one or two close Irish friends. An Irish friend of mine labelled me as 'post Irish'.**

**Irish, aged 44, skilled job**

Often the development of such friendships signalled the discovery of a deep sense of mutual understanding stemming from a sense of shared history. However, it also relates to the experience of being Irish and gay in the UK.

**Most of my friends are Irish, and my two best friends are Irish. That was part luck and part fate I suppose. It was nice I had Irish friends because it's about recognising somebody similar with similar experiences and history and struggles. It is empathy the English can't have. Having close Irish friends was really self affirming for me. I went through a phase of consciously trying to change my accent. But I have found that through my friendships with my close Irish friend it has made me more confident to be who I am and sounding different to everybody else.**

**Irish, aged 33, skilled job**

## 2.3 DISCUSSION

Our analysis shows great similarities, but also great differences between the Black Caribbean and White Irish ethnic groups. Both grew up within social and cultural structures which were overtly hostile towards homosexuality. Yet, for both groups, the very structures and institutions which rejected their sexuality also gave them a sense of place and identity.

The key difference between the two samples is that while the Irish men were born and grew up in a monolithic culture in which they constituted the overwhelming majority, the Black Caribbean men were born into a culture highly aware of its minority status and the antagonisms that existed between their own and the host culture. Therefore, the social institutions of family, church and school operate in entirely different ways. For Irish men, the family and church operate as well

established instruments of social control. For the Black Caribbean men, they operate as a way of defining a culture of difference and are central to the vital process of setting up structures of support for a newly arrived minority. The institutions of family and church are weighty, unyielding and monolithic for the Irish men, but flexible or socially meaningful for the Black Caribbean men.

In addition, the way that the Black Caribbean and White Irish groups experienced education was very different. In both cases, parents were committed to the education of their sons as a means of social advancement. In the case of the Irish men, there was a clear synergy between this desire of parents and the policy of the State to ensure they excelled academically. As a consequence, the majority did well despite some familial adversity and a range of abusive behaviours from teachers. The opposite was the case for Black Caribbean men. In spite of their family's desire that they do well at school, their families usually lacked the means to support their sons. Moreover, as Black Caribbean boys, little was expected of them at school. School was the first of a range of institutions where they would experience structural or institutional racism.

We have therefore, two very different groups of men. In both cases, the social institutions of family, church and education were all pervasive, but for different reasons and in different ways. What form did dissent take within each of these cultures? That is, how was homosexuality expressed and managed and a gay identity nurtured?

We are used to thinking of dissent as involving a wholesale rejection of one system in favour of another. For the Black Caribbean men, this was not the case. For them, the family and church were at the centre of a community of difference, an ethnic minority defined by cultural and racial singularity and geographical dislocation. As such, family and church were stabilising elements in a new immigrant culture that was finding ways of cultural expression and limited social / political power within a new country. The UK-born Black Caribbean man coming to terms with his homosexuality was implicated within a range of disparate cultures which were themselves in a state of flux and development. The relative hostility of the 'host' UK culture to him as a Black man was manifested in both institutional and diffuse forms of racism. Because of this, it was difficult if not impossible to disavow the immigrant culture of parents and family (which provided some vital sense of his social and cultural situation) in order to embrace a gay identity. Therefore, for Black Caribbean men the process of developing a specific gay sociality involved a careful negotiation of the cultural and social elements within their lives. They must live, to a greater or lesser extent within their distinct 'parent' culture to survive as Black men in the UK. However, they must also embrace and value certain aspects of gay identity and sociality to survive as a homosexual male (of whatever colour or ethnicity) in the UK. The solution to this dilemma cannot lie in disavowal either of the culture into which they were born or a refusal to engage in gay cultural and social forms. Rather, the way in which the men managed this dilemma was to negotiate their space within both. This was done through a series of slow and subtle acceptances and rejections, disclosures and withholdings. The reason that this was possible for the individual was because cultures were never static. That is, the men found themselves at the intersection of two relatively new cultures which are changing and growing at a fast rate: the migrant Black Caribbean culture and gay urban culture.

For the Irish men, the choice was more stark. The families within which they lived were regulated by norms of privacy. The family existed as a self sufficient entity within a monolithic social structure devoted to its own upkeep. Moreover, the church was less communitarian and more personal. These environments did not brook dissent of any kind and there were few cracks within this structure where viable forms of gay identity and sociality might be expressed. This is not to say that there were not gay men living in Ireland in the period discussed by our respondents. However, those that were tended either to be closeted or lived, to their cost, outside of the social system which supported the individual. It is not surprising therefore, that the development of a gay identity depended on an (at least temporary) disavowal of those structures. However, unlike Black Caribbean men, the Irish men had the means to do this.

Most importantly, they could emigrate. The overwhelming majority of the men in our sample moved to the UK as part of the massive 'third wave' of migration in the 1980s. They were relatively well educated and could obtain far better jobs than most migrants arriving in the UK. They therefore constituted a very different groups of gay migrants to the one we have described elsewhere (Keogh, Dodds, Henderson 2004b). Also they were moving from a country in recession with massive unemployment to a country which was experiencing an economic boom in its service sectors. This meant that their opportunities in the UK were maximised while their reasons for leaving Ireland were clear: economic necessity. This leads us to the most important point. The Irish who migrated in the 1980s came from a culture which was oriented almost entirely towards their departure. Families and educational establishments more or less expected that the majority of young people would leave as soon as they were qualified in order to take advantage of compelling economic and social advantages abroad. For the majority within this wave, emigration was likely to be experienced with some regret, but was considered as an overwhelmingly advantageous move. In short, sons and daughters did not have to give a 'reason' to leave family and community and there was no stigma attached to emigration.

For some Irish people, the culture of emigration was a protective and convenient way of extricating themselves from repressive social and familial environments. One such group were gay men and lesbians. We are not saying that these men and women would not have emigrated if they had not been gay or lesbian. Had the culture of emigration not existed, they would probably have felt the need to emigrate anyway but would have found emigration far more difficult than they did. In other words, the culture of emigration masked other motivations for getting away from Ireland.

In addition to the option to emigrate, the Irish men were also White. We have seen that being White and Irish within the UK is a mixed blessing. Being White means that one is not subject to overt racism, however being Irish also means being part of opaque and deeply embedded structures of social inequality that exist in the UK (see chapter 1).

If Black Caribbean gay identity depends on a series of accommodations which serve to preserve the dominant Black culture, and Irish migrant gay identity lies in a rupture with the dominant culture, how are such different identities defined and accommodated among gay men in London? The next chapter addresses this question directly.

# 3 Being gay: the varieties of experience

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In this section, we move on to examine how Black Caribbean and Irish gay men manage their sexuality within their current social context. We look at how their ethnic identity and social networks interact with their gay identity and the ways in which they choose to structure their lives as gay men.

## 3.1 UK-BORN BLACK CARIBBEAN MEN

We start with an analysis of Black Caribbean men's accounts of coming out and scene use.

### 3.1.1 *Coming out*

'Coming out' is generally described as a pivotal moment in the lives of gay men and lesbians. Over the years, it has been theorised and described in different ways. Crucially, there are a number of discourses which inform our understanding of coming out and the way in which individuals experience this process. Coming out is a long-term mediated process marked by significant moments or events: realisation of homosexual attraction, applying the identifier 'gay' to the self, first disclosures, politicisation, first sexual experience *etc.* Different emphases will be placed on different moments and different factors depending on the individual or the group. For example, for some individuals, sexual expression will be intrinsic to a sense of self as homosexual or gay whilst for others, disclosure to as many people as possible will be important.

Often, the process of coming out begins with the first realisation of attraction to men. The men in the Black Caribbean sample, like many others, first felt such attraction in childhood. Many engaged in childhood same sex experimentation which they distinguished from their initial adult homosexual contact. 'Adult' contact was one where the respondent realised that to engage in same sex activity was likely to mark him out as having a specific sexual orientation. The men in our sample reported a wide variety of circumstances surrounding these first sexual contacts. Such circumstances were marked by the time, the social circumstances and the place in which the individual found himself. For example, one respondent describes the experience of being a 13 year old living in East London in the mid 1970s. The period, his relative poverty, his lack of education and his parents' neglect were factors, he felt, left him vulnerable to taking the following route into homosexual culture at a time when he was not particularly aware of his sexuality.

I can remember being at a bus stop. [T]his guy [...] came up to the bus stop, and he started talking and that. And he said to me 'I'm going to some club and that – do you want to go?' [...] So I went to the club and it was a gay club. And it was obviously... what I now know was a rent boys' club [...] And I can remember I did go home with a guy that night [...] Well I had to, because [...] I didn't know where else to go. So I went home with a guy that night and he was quite nice and gentle about things...

Black Caribbean, aged 41, skilled job

The subculture which this respondent entered was typical of that period. Through it, he later entered a Black Caribbean gay social and sexual subculture which was based around house parties. Another respondent, ten years younger, was brought up by his mother who, in contrast, pushed him at school and had high expectations. His entrance into gay subculture was very different.

... I went to a teenage group up in North London [...] I think it was in Time Out actually that I saw the [advertisement for the group]. I can remember ringing them first, getting the directions and standing outside literally for three hours or something and not going in and then going back the week after and [...] it was one of the bravest things that I've ever done to actually go through those doors.

**Black Carribean, aged 33, skilled job**

His reasons for seeking out a gay youth group had more to do with his sense of himself than structural or social factors. Unlike the previous respondent, his motivations were highly personal and he had more resources and control over his contact with gay subculture. He continues:

... I thought I was going mad because I was good academically and because the other members of my family [...] a lot of them ended up in prison, they had trouble with law [...] I was kind of being held up as this beacon of light and my mum was fiercely proud of me much to the annoyance of my uncles and aunts [...] and I just felt that everybody loved me for this person that I wasn't [...] If they actually knew the real [me] they wouldn't want anything to do with me [...] I'd be reading stuff like *Loot* – [an] advert from this guy who wanted to meet young Black boys [...] I remember [...] having this phone conversation [...] with this business man who wanted to meet me. I ended up not going through with it, not meeting up with him.

**Black Carribean, aged 33, skilled job**

The two accounts of entering gay subculture seem different, but they share common elements. Both accounts are marked by social and cultural difficulties attending Black Carribean communities, especially in relation to boys. The former had limited education which he found problematic. The latter was the only boy in his family doing well at school. He found this similarly problematic. They were both entering social worlds where to some extent they would be singled out or sexually commodified because of their ethnicity or race. What was different was how each responded to the situation. The first entered a subculture passively, with little knowledge of his own sexuality or control of his situation. The latter made his own entrance, controlled his surroundings in terms of who he would and would not meet or associate with. Consequently, their later experiences were very different.

Concerns about disclosure to family animated many of the accounts of coming out. Like other gay men, they feared rejection. However, for these men, loss of familial support represented not only loss of the support of parents or siblings, but also the loss of an extended community which provided networks of support and a basis for their identity as Black Carribean men.

Once or twice I went to a gay bar [...] I suppose what I wanted to do was have some foundation for myself in case I got kicked down when I told somebody. I needed some place to go because I could have told them in the very beginning and I'd have nothing, I didn't have a community, I didn't really understand what I was and what I was doing, there was no foundation at all for being what I am now. There was just nothing at all so the last thing I wanted to do was tell somebody 'cos there was nothing to fall back on.

**Black Carribean, aged 30, skilled job**

As we have seen the threat of the loss of family was important because family was the immediate point of access to a range of social institutions and informal structures. We have already seen that not only were our respondents' biological families large, dispersed and fractured, but they also connected to close networks of less direct relationships.

For many respondents, coming out was also a time when they were closely involved with their church. The dilemmas which emerged as a result were two-fold. A minority had a crisis of faith, struggling with deep-seated beliefs that their sexual desires were inherently sinful. The majority feared losing the social support offered by their church.

**... I know it's not by choice that I've [got] the feelings that I have and whatever, and I'm feeling this way but then the Bible's saying well I'm sinning because I'm doing this which just feels natural to me. And I just didn't understand. And that's why I started to – I stopped going to church as well. Because then I felt like a hypocrite.**

**Black Carribean, aged 22, unemployed**

In coming out, men had to manage a host of irreconcilable social imperatives, beliefs and relationships. In order to understand how they managed this, we must think of coming out, not as a single life changing event, but as a life long process by which the individual learns to manage personal and social information about his sexuality according to different social situations. For the men in our sample, these environments included the family, work, heterosexual friends and finally other gay men.

With the exception of one respondent, disclosure of sexuality to family and especially to parents remained highly problematic. Many were aware that their families held highly negative and antagonistic views about homosexuality. This man describes his family's attitude:

**It's a sin, it's evil, Sodom and Gomorrah, yeah every horrible thing – 100%.**

**Black Carribean, aged 31, unemployed**

Others described being confused when their seemingly liberal parents became highly intolerant once their son disclosed his own homosexuality. This respondent describes how his mother's attitude towards a gay workmate differs from that towards her son.

**... she would come [home] and complain to me how people at work would give [workmate] grief for being gay [...] I was like, 'But you can see that [he] is a person in his own right and that he's nice and he doesn't fit into the stereotypes that you think are gay'. [But] she said to me that she could never believe I was gay because she looks at her son and she doesn't see anybody who is gay.**

**Black Carribean, aged 33, skilled job**

The solution for many is simply never to tell family members. The following respondent, who is 37 disclosed accidentally to his sister. Her response was to cry for three days and not to talk to him for a protracted period. Understandably, he is wary about the rest of his family.

**There's no way I'd tell my Dad. I wouldn't leave his place alive. I think he's had his suspicions. But it's one thing thinking about it but to actually come out and say it. No way! And I haven't told my younger brothers either. No way! The one that follows me, he has a position in the church.**

**Black Carribean, aged 37, unemployed**

The remainder of our respondents told stories of coming out to family which involved similar concealment. That is, few felt any desire to tell their families, the option of keeping their sexuality concealed or at least unspoken being far preferable.

The men's accounts of managing information about their sexuality at work, and in other non-gay environments, tells us much about their self-conception. Of interest was the extent to which very few respondents had any notion that it was preferable for others to know that they were gay.

**... if I don't feel that you don't need to know I'm not gonna come out with it because its no one else's business apart from my own. So like yeah people say to me 'are you gay' and I go 'well that's none of your business'. Since I've turned thirty, its gone [from] saying like 'that's none of your business' and 'does it matter?' [to] things like 'yeah' you know I do say yes to them to get their reaction.**

**Black Carribean, aged 31, unemployed**

Many respondents reported great difficulties with taking on the name and identity of a gay man. This man talks about his past experiences:



I never said gay, I'd just say I like men and I like to sleep with men. It was very difficult to say the actual word gay. [The] first person I told I said I actually fancy men – I don't fancy women and that's the way I put it. The word gay was a bit difficult to deal with – 'cos I suppose it has so much attachments to it [...] I suppose the first time I would have said it was when I was probably drunk or something, [...] a few people found out and, you know, they say 'are you gay then?' I said 'yes, yes I am gay', but it was always prompted by them. I'd say 'oh I like men' and they'd say 'what do you mean are you gay' and I'd say 'yes I am, I'm gay', but it was very difficult for me to say it first.

Black Caribbean, aged 30, skilled job

Sexual identity must always be seen in relation to ethnic and gender role or representation. For a Black Caribbean man, what is always immediately apparent to the wider world is that he is Black. Often, his Black role serves to obscure the fact that he is gay. Gay identity is often tentative because it is always contested. It is vital however, to take into account the subjective experience of the individual. Here, although being conscious of the dominance of his role as primarily a Black man, the individual simultaneously maintains a gay identity. This respondent (who works occasionally as a dancer) talks of a conversation he had with another dancer about a Black colleague who is also gay.

There's a White guy in his early twenties [...] he asked me one day 'has Ivan got a partner?' and I [said] 'yes' and he says 'what's her name?' and I [said] 'it's not a she'. His response was very interesting [...] he said 'oh I would never believe he was [gay] out of so many Black guys that I've met [...] I said 'well all of us are not camp and bent you know what I mean? We are still men at the end of the day and we all don't carry a sign with us to say we are gay' [...] It's like he's just got a stereotype view of gay men how gay men are supposed to be and act. We all don't act like you know you're a cat from *Queer as folk* [...] I suppose it does empower you in a sense you know ...

Black Caribbean, aged 31, unemployed

The respondent concludes by saying that a supposition by others that a Black Caribbean man is, by definition, heterosexual can be the source of power and agency and can be a means of testing others reactions. Within such a context, to *not* be immediately recognisable as gay might be seen as an advantage or a strength rather than a weakness. The following respondent plays the two identities off against each other in his workplace.

... because I'm Black, because it's the first thing people see. But then my gayness takes the edge off me being Black and it's almost like a dual edged sword. In certain situations, early on in my career, I was seen as threatening because [...] I was in an industry when there were very few other Black people working in positions of power and I was seen as threatening, short as I am [laugh]. But once people knew I was gay I was less threatening.

Black Caribbean, aged 33, skilled job

It is therefore possible for a Black Caribbean man to turn the traditional disadvantage of being assumed by others to have a certain role, into an advantage. That is, we might see the ignorance of one's gay identity as an unacceptable mis-recognition of the self. However, we might also see it as a specific strength. To exist where one's identity is always contested and open to question is also never to be pigeonholed. The successful management of such a contested identity can enrich interactions and widen the range of social spaces he can inhabit.

Finally, for some, the social identity 'gay' was felt to be an insufficient descriptor of their personal experience or sense of self.

So it depends on the relationship I have with someone whether or not I'm gonna explain to them what's going on or not. Sometimes people sense it, which is fine. [If] someone says to me 'where do you go drinking?' and I say 'well I go to Soho and I go to Mantos'. Some people are fine [...] They will decide just from me telling them where I'm drinking they know I'm gay. We never have to have a conversation about it. [Because] the word gay is a word – they don't understand your lifestyle, you could be gay and live on a farm you know? That doesn't explain your lifestyle. All you're saying is if you sleep with men that's so little of it, you know?

It's tiny in comparison to what your lifestyle is and how you become part of this community, whether you do or you don't, what you wear and where you go and how you react and how you feel more relaxed in different environments...

Black Carribean, aged 30, skilled job

### **3.1.2 Gay commercial scene use**

The specific way in which personal information is managed and the types of gay identity crafted by the men in our sample impacted on their use of, and attitudes towards, the commercial gay scene. Men were, on the whole, negative about the commercial gay scene. However, negativity towards the scene is endemic among all gay men and in this respect, Black Carribean men did not differ. Like many other gay men, our respondents commented on the vacuousness of the scene with regards to social interaction there. Men talked specifically about the lack of a sense of community and contrasted this to the sense of family and community that they had within Black social networks. The sexualisation of the scene was seen to override any possibility of the development of community and therefore it was seen not as a place to make friends or find support.

... in this city you really do need [friends]. I can't think of a worse place to be by yourself [...] it's a big place and it's kinda lonely if you don't have anybody here. It's not like where at home you've got friends, you've got school and you have your family around you. But here it's very difficult because people either wants [sex] from you or they don't. They don't wanna get to know you [...] Eight out of ten times, if some guy comes and talks to you it's because they fancy you and they think they're gonna have some sex tonight. That's fact you know, you can't get away from that ...

Black Carribean, aged 30, skilled job

Some men had responded to this by lowering their expectations of the scene and enjoying it for what it was: a source of fun and sexual partners.

Nowadays I know Mr Right is not in there, do you know what I mean? There's a good shag in there probably without a doubt but I can wait until 5 o'clock in the morning to find out. Let me go and let me dance and enjoy my friends and the good shag will come to me [...] For me it's about enjoyment now, it really is.

Black Carribean, aged 32, skilled job

There was only one man who mentioned the absence of other Black faces on the gay scene.

... everywhere I go I feel in the minority. Because often I will look round and not see a face that's similar to mine. Although it's something I've coped with for a long time [...] as I get older it gets harder to deal with [...] So I will go to places where there are more likely to be Black people. Which is funny because I don't particularly fancy Black men.

Black Carribean, aged 29, skilled job

Therefore, the men were negative about the gay commercial scene for a range of reasons, associated with the lack of community and support, which may or may not be related to their ethnicity. After all, lack of meaningful interaction on the scene is something which very many gay men experience and will not be limited to one ethnic group.

We investigated the specificity of Black gay men's scene experience by asking them questions about how they felt Black gay men were perceived on the scene by White gay men and how they themselves perceived other gay men: Black and White.

The theme that came through strongest was the tendency of the scene to objectify and sexually commodify those who used it. This applied both to the way Black gay men were perceived by other gay men and to the way Black and White men socialised according to their sexual desires. We have already seen how the scene was perceived as a place where there was little authentic or meaningful interaction between individuals. If the scene reduced its participants to sexual personae

or stereotype, this had particular implications for Black gay men. Respondents overwhelmingly felt that White gay men held sexual and social stereotypes about the Black gay men they met on the scene. White men were assumed to see Black men as:

**Domineering. Strong. Exotic. Wild in it's nicest sense. Yeah.  
Black Carribean, aged 29, skilled job**

For some of our respondents, this tendency was viewed very negatively.

**I think some of them think it's quite tokenistic to have been with a Black guy and there's all [...] those myths about the size of Black men and what they can do to you in bed [...] some White guys [...] just see the fact that you are Black and either they like it or they don't like it. It's not like the middle of the road whether you're cute or not first of all you're Black which is kind of difficult to deal with sometimes.  
Black Carribean, aged 30, skilled job**

In addition, social stereotypes were often mentioned about Black Carribean men.

**Yeah, generally unemployed. Lack of finances. They generally think that we're not financially independent.  
Black Carribean, aged 33, skilled job**

For most of the respondents, such stereotyping, though offensive, was seen as part and parcel of a commercial system where all players are sexualised or fetishised to some extent. This was the way that Black Carribean men were fetishised. Moreover, sexual and social stereotyping was also common between Black gay men. Often respondents were negative about specific Black gay sociality, preferring mixed venues.

**I think some Black gay men do have a kind of funny attitude, a real attitude. [...] Very arrogant. Which I can't be doing with really.  
Black Carribean, aged 33, skilled job**

Whilst expressing their frustration, respondents did acknowledge structural reasons for such attitudes.

**[it's] still the Black gay man's attitude towards the scene and that I can't bear [...] We love the basement, we love the dark, we don't buy drinks. Okay, with my PC hat on now there are economic factors that come into that – we don't always earn the same amounts of money.  
Black Carribean, aged 32, skilled job**

Whilst talking about the use and meanings of the scene, we cannot neglect the centrality of sexual desire. That is, some Black men are sexually attracted to White men and vice versa. This has a major effect on patterns of socialisation on the London gay scene and on its capacity for meaningful non-sexual interaction. The majority of scene venues were seen (and indeed are) predominantly White. They were therefore seen to be open to a Black gay man who was sexually attracted to White gay men.

**For example, you can be Black and totally into like White people etc. or White men, and therefore you'll go to a predominantly White club. But if you're Black and into Black, you would tend to try and look for places, or you'd go to certain places where you know there's going to be more Black Caribbean people there. So yeah, it does affect where I go...  
Black Carribean, aged 33, skilled job**

Because the gay commercial scene is based around sexual object choice, it is limited in its capacity as a place for meaningful community interaction (this is the case for all gay men). Because of this, a problem emerges when Black Carribean men seek to find all their meaningful social interaction with other Black gay Carribean men on the commercial scene. The following man expresses this limitation. He finds that he has little to do with other Black Carribean men because he does not sexually desire them.

... If I found Black men attractive then I would have more to do with the Black community, but from my point of view it's on a very superficial level 'hello – how are you, kiss, kiss – are you having a good time tonight?'. [If I had ] relationships with Black men [I would be] more involved in that community [but] because I don't sleep with Black men [...] I'm pretty much hanging around nowhere [...] and I don't know what it's like for Black guys who date Black guys. I'm sure they have a strong [sense of community] ...

Black Carribean, aged 30, skilled job

The solution to the inevitable divisiveness that sexual desire generates does not lie (it would seem) in Black-specific scene events. For the most part, respondents were negative about such events. Some mentioned that the Black gay population simply was not large enough (even in London) to make such events commercially viable. However, more importantly, the range of tastes and interests of Black gay men are too broad to be accommodated within one venue or one night: such nights could never be more than tokenistic.

When you've got all sectors of the community going to this one club it has to play to everybody. Whereas if I go to *Queer Nation* on a Saturday- it's just House. So everybody goes there whether they are White, Black, Asian, whatever [...] But these clubs are having to cater for a whole community which has to play all varied types so you are going to get people who are disgruntled because half the night they are not playing what they want.

Black Carribean, aged 33, skilled job

Those who attended such events were often critical precisely for this reason.

... you've got G.A.Y. [for] teeny boppers, [...] You've got Fiction [for] disco [...] You've got Salvation which is muscle mary. You've got something for everybody and you can dip in and out. You go to Bootylicious there's 17 year old's that have just come out, there is cynical old queens, there's drag queens, there's butch boys [...] everybody goes there because it's like, 'I want to be around my people and this is the only place to go'. Nobody is really into the same thing [...] It's too much of a mish-mash.

Black Carribean, aged 32, skilled job

Others found the separatist connotations distasteful.

I think it's kind of people that just stay with Blacks and don't want to mix. And that irritates me a bit [...] It's like going somewhere where it's completely White – obviously I wouldn't be there...

Black Carribean, aged 33, skilled job

Some respondents felt that a better intervention might be the recognition of the inherent 'Blackness' of gay mainstream commercial urban culture. In other words, clubs should recognise more fully that they are based around Black music and have an overtly Black aesthetic rather than simply being for Black gay men.

... as soon as you say it's like a Black club there's always set notions already in peoples' heads. Instead of it being called like you know a gay club that plays hip-hop, swing and reggae which is the main thing they've just gone right on to the colour issue yeah which I feel that if we're ever gonna [...] get away from this whole colour issue [and] there isn't enough Black clubs [...] if it's a Black club can we try and sell it a different way 'cos maybe if we try selling it a different way, you might get other places opening up [...]

Black Carribean, aged 31, unemployed

The commercial gay scene was not seen as a place in which meaningful social interaction might be conducted – it was not the epicentre of a community. When we asked respondents to consider alternatives, they talked about their social or friendship networks which were, for the most part mixed between straight and gay, male and female and of different ethnicities. For most, it was important to have friends who were Black Carribean and shared common experiences.

I looked round at my friends and I thought 'God I've only got Black friends'. Whereas when I was at school the majority of my friends were White. So I've seen a change in that respect, you know? But I think that's because like, for example, some of my White friends don't understand, [...] like employment prospects or whatever. The reason why I mix with some of my mostly Black friends is because we experience similar problems in life...

Black Carribean, aged 33, skilled job

For most it was important to have gay friends also. However, such friends were met in a variety of places. For some, it was the workplace while others met on the internet.

So I've stopped going out and then I've decided to meet people in different ways. And I've met people through... you know, some people through the internet, for instance. And that's been quite interesting. To be in your flat one minute and within an hour you're in a restaurant next door with somebody! [laughs] That's so fast!

Black Carribean, aged 41, skilled job

Men chose to socialise in a range of places outside of the gay scene. Some referred to Black gay friendship networks.

We don't always go to bars. We go back to their houses and stuff. Go for dinner, nice meal somewhere, the theatre.

Black Carribean, aged 33, skilled job

What was more important than friends of a particular sexuality or ethnicity, were friends who were seen to be on the same level, to have common understandings *etc.* Therefore, men tended to socialise in particular areas.

But I also hang out quite a lot now in South London. My partner lives down here [...] he's got a very close knit of friends who live in close proximity to him. A lot of the time we go out [to] straight bars really [...] They're gay-friendly bars.

Black Carribean, aged 29, skilled job

The church was mentioned by three respondents as ways of making social contacts and meeting partners.

I've just joined actually, the gay church [...] I thought it was all right. I thought the vicar was quite nice! [laughs][...] He's just a really nice guy. But I think I look at people and think 'oh that's a typical type of person, persona, or whatever, that I would like to have a relationship with'. Because I think there's a massive difference between some people I've had a one night stand with that I've certainly even... you know, that we had a one night stand... even by talking to them in the first place they probably would... definitely would not be a person that would be part of my life.

Black Carribean, aged 41, skilled job

## 3.2 IRISH GAY MEN

We move on to examine Irish gay men's accounts of coming out and gay commercial scene use.

### 3.2.1 *Coming out*

We have already seen that for the men in the Irish sample, the main motivation for migration was their homosexuality. They migrated to escape the negative attitudes of family and society at large. Like the Black Carribean men, the Irish men recognised their difference from an early age and struggled with a growing awareness that they were gay as they grew up. However, it was their migration that ensured that their experiences of coming out were dissimilar to Black Carribean men. Coming out for Black Carribean men was defined by accommodation and mediation. For Irish men, it was about personal rupture and abrupt movement. For the Black Carribean men, coming out was a mediated process whereby familial and social structures were preserved and the individual

remained within those structures (to some extent, at least). For the Irish man, these structures were also preserved, but only by means of the individual extricating himself entirely from them. In short, any possible clash between gay identity and sociality and the structure of family, community and church was avoided not by careful accommodation and negotiation, but by migration. It is worth examining therefore, the relationship between coming out and migration in more detail.

Of the twenty Irish men, nine had not come out to their families at the time of interview. Of the remaining eleven, five had waited to do so until after they had emigrated. The remaining six had come out while living in Ireland.

The concerns with which the majority of men wrestled when coming out were mainly social and concerned their family. Many men were concerned about bringing shame or dishonour upon their family.

**I suppose a mixture of slight embarrassment and just knowing I'm letting my family down. That's really it.**

**Irish, aged 29, semi-skilled job**

Concerns about bringing shame on a family or community speak to a particularly social sensibility. That is, few men feared outright rejection from their families. The structure of family was too strong for this to be a possibility. Rather they feared the negative consequences of having to have their families associated with the stigma of homosexuality.

The question of private versus public knowledge of homosexuality within Irish families is central in all of the accounts of coming out. For the six men who came out to their families while they were still living in Ireland, only one case of disclosure was the result of a direct question from a parent. The remainder occurred at extreme points in the lives of individuals.

**I always thought they would be a huge problem because my father came from such a working class background and Galway's a pretty small-minded place. [...] When I did come out to them I was nineteen and I'd had my first relationship and it was very short. I was very upset [...] I called my mother and [...] asked her to come over [...] and I cried for about twenty minutes in her arms [...] Finally I told her I was gay and she goes 'Oh God is that all!' [...] So she was like 'Oh Luke, half the population may be gay'. Then I discovered then that she'd actually worked for the Samaritans doing voluntary work as an advice counsellor and she'd heard it all [...] Then she said 'Do you want to tell dad'. I was like 'I'd better get it over with and I thought that would be bad. He was a little kind of taken aback but he said it's not the end of the world and I've since discovered that his brother's gay and his best friend is gay.**

**Irish, aged 25, student**

The notion of unspoken prior knowledge regarding homosexuality extends to siblings also.

**It's only recently that [my brother] really acknowledged my sexuality. Although he has lots of gay friends and I only found out that he knew that I was gay through a friend of his who's gay who told me that my brother had told him all about me. But my brother had never acknowledged it to me.**

**Irish, aged 36, skilled job**

Once a son had emigrated and was out of the immediate social environment of his family, coming out to family without shaming them was easier. Five respondents came out to their families from the relative distance of the UK by letter or during brief visits. Families had time to adjust to this news on their own. In the following account, the respondent wrote a letter to his parents addressing a number of long standing family issues. It is apparent that finding out their son was gay was a relief to this man's parents after all the concern over his health.

**I hadn't spoken to them for a while and they were worried that I was sick again. I rang my mother and I told her I was going to send a letter and she started crying saying 'You know talk to us' and I said 'No you know I can't' and then she said 'Fine' and put the phone down.**

**Then my brother went there and my parents were saying 'What's wrong with him, is he sick or something? We want to know and we want to help him'. My brother said 'No, no he's not ill, he's gay'. And they went 'OK right, it's not a problem'.**

**Irish, aged 30, unemployed**

Many families had mixed reactions, often preferring not to mention it after initial disclosure.

**My older brother [said] 'Oh we knew anyway didn't we?' I don't talk that much to him anyway and we're not that close. So most of them were OK, except for one of my sister's who was bit horrible to me at the time. She said 'I'm only keeping in contact with you because of my niece and nephew'. [...] But even now, it's still not quite the same for my mum. We just don't discuss it. It's just completely taboo.**

**Irish, aged 29, semi-skilled job**

Therefore, despite disclosure, the family does not incorporate the fact of having a gay son or sibling in day-to-day life. They do not meet partners or engage with the detail of their son's domestic or social lives. In other words, homosexuality was not incorporated and did not take on a practical reality within the family.

A minority of parents responded very negatively to a son's disclosure. In the following account a son discloses to his mother as she is visiting him in London.

**It was an absolute nightmare. It lasted about 6 hours with all the denial that she didn't know anything even though the whole stuff about the letters came up. She said 'I opened your letters and I had an idea and I thought it was a phase' [...] She immediately asked me 'You don't tell your father, I couldn't deal with it!' She has kind of came to terms with it once she realised there were people that knew and I wasn't ashamed about it in any way shape or form. She knew she was going to have to live with it. I thought [not telling father was] the least I could do for her. It turned out 2 years later when my father told me that he knew about my being gay and said 'Your mother blames me and she's been blaming me for the last 2 years'.**

**Irish, aged 44, skilled job**

For the nine remaining men who had never come out to their families, the question of shame associated with public knowledge of homosexuality within the family was central. Men who chose not to come out dealt with this in two ways. A minority actively put on a pretence that they were in fact heterosexual.

**Oh yes, I was dutiful and I had girlfriends and I bought a girlfriend home to play the part and everybody liked her very much [...] I was just looking for approval, looking back on it now. This is what all your brothers had done and now it is your turn too. It was the religion and the disapproval of the family [...] You would bring shame on to the family... and it must not be spoken about.**

**Irish, aged 46, skilled job**

It was more common to adopt a 'don't ask, don't tell' policy with families. That is, the majority assumed that, over time, their families had realised that they were gay even though it had never been articulated. This man lives in London with his long-term partner. Although he is open about the practical side of his living arrangement and his closeness to his partner, his sexuality has never been talked about explicitly. Rather, his family have come to make assumptions regarding the meanings of his living arrangement and sense of intimacy between their son and his long-term partner. Such a strategy was also common with the men in the Black Caribbean sample (as the respondent notes).

**No, I've not talked to my family about my sexuality, although I think they know now. It's kind of emerged [...] slowly became known to them. My mother came [to stay and] the next year my sister sent one of those kind of tacky Christmas cards 'to the both of you'. It says they know – in our family sort of way. And my brother has sort of made some comments. [When**

I'm in parent's house in Ireland] I'd say to my mum I'm just giving [my partner] a call and she'll ask 'Where are you going on holidays'. When I went [to Ireland] this Christmas, I was much more open about talking about what I'm doing or [my partner] is doing. But it may never be named, but it sort of feels like I'm sort of out. My partner hasn't gone to visit my family yet. But that will be the next step. I suppose it might be sort of painful. It does take a long time, getting there. We've been together ten years. He's from a Caribbean family so in a way his situation is quite similar in that his mother gives me Christmas presents – but it's never been discussed. Again it's never been said and he's not sure who knows or doesn't. We feel we don't really need to say it.

Irish, aged 44, skilled job

Both of the strategies described above (pretending to be heterosexual and not explicitly saying one is gay) are more easily adopted if the respondent is not in close proximity to his family. However, the employment of such strategies do not come without a price. Many men reported experiencing a variety of mental health problems as a result. Three men had encountered major difficulties. Their accounts are marked by feelings of guilt and shame and an inability to understand or deal with their sexuality. All three had contemplated or attempted suicide. This man discusses his first sexual experiences.

And we proceeded to his bedroom where he basically lay on top of me and just rubbed himself up and down continuously until he came. And I remember the first time I was just thinking this is horrible. I just didn't want to be here. I didn't know quite how I got myself into this. And I didn't know how I was going to get myself out of it. I remember leaving there, I think I walked back. I spent probably the next six weeks tormenting myself and feeling disgusted with myself and wanting to be dead again kind of thing, but it happened again. Then I found myself feeling disgusted with myself again for six weeks. Guilt, shame, disgust, all the angels would say... And still he'd invite me to come to his apartment and I'd go. But then I was useless to myself and devastated. I went three times and I beat myself up three times. The third time I actually took an overdose. And I was found in my room that I rented by my friend...

Irish, aged 38, unemployed

Seven men reported less severe psychological difficulties. Two had experienced these difficulties as teenagers. All had been in contact with various mental health services for a range of difficulties including drug dependency, relationship issues, low self-confidence and coming out.

### **3.2.2 Gay commercial scene use**

Like the Black Caribbean men, Irish men were similarly sanguine about the negative aspects of the gay scene in London. Older men felt it was for the young. Men in relationships found it too sexually oriented and younger men found it boring *etc.* Like the Black Caribbean men, the strongest specific theme to emerge for the Irish men was the extent of sexual and social stereotyping they encountered. Social stereotypes predominated. Irish men were perceived to have little control over their alcohol consumption, to be stupid or poorly educated. Such perceptions were related to a common perception that Ireland was a poor or backward country with a bad educational system.

Yeah. I think they – certain people who are having a good life here and work well and have studied well might think that that's not really possible in Ireland. Which is a really silly misconception [...] It's like saying you know I studied in the Outer Hebrides or something. [They] don't realise how international it is in some ways you know?

Irish, aged 25, student

Stereotypes could also be positive. For example, Irish men reported being perceived as good company, as being welcoming, gentle and kind. Sexual stereotyping was commonly reported. Without exception, respondents reported an assumption by others that Irish men were hyper-masculine and 'well-endowed'. Men also found that they were sexualised because of their accents.



**I guess my experience has been on the gay scene, when you speak in an Irish accent they are all swooning and saying they love my accent.**  
**Irish, aged 44, skilled job**

Such stereotypes were affected by class-based and occupational factors. Irish men tended to be constructed as highly masculinised, working class or agrarian labourers. This middle-class man from a suburb of Dublin speaks of an ex-partner:

**I mean I had this one guy for a year and he was a bright man and he really fell into his fantasy about me being kind of an Irish farmer you know coming home from the fields. And he'd be cooking me tea kind of thing. Which was a bit bizarre.**  
**Irish, aged 33, skilled job**

Interestingly a sizable proportion of men reported being sexually stereotyped by Black Caribbean men.

**I've got the stereotypes from Black guys actually. I'm not into Black guys sexually but I have Black friends. But all Irish guys are passive and love Black cock. That's as blunt as you can get. But that's the impression I've got [...] like they come to London to get Black cock basically [...] Because I've met Black guys and they automatically presume I'm just available when I say I'm Irish.**  
**Irish, aged 29, semi-skilled job**

Respondents felt that this stereotyping was ubiquitous, unavoidable and for the most part, it was perceived as harmless. Often men described feeling embarrassment for the man who was stereotyping them. Conversely, some men took advantage of it. That is, where the scene is viewed as a sexual marketplace, such stereotyping could be turned into a sexual commodity.

**[They] all love your accent or whatever or love the way you talk. And my Irish accent isn't really strong but it's there you know? And people hear me talking. You know? That's kind of one thing. [...] So they say 'Oh you can talk me into bed' and stuff like that [...] So in some ways it's been positive.**  
**Irish, aged 52, skilled job**

Some men understood the function of ethnic, national or racial stereotypes both in terms of sexual marketplaces and also in order to make sense of a city as large and diverse as London.

**I think stereotypes [...] are very important. You know, we need stereotypes to kind of deal with this very complex world we live in. But I strongly argue against them as well.**  
**Irish, aged 33, skilled job**

The meaning attached to the stereotyping changed depending on who was doing the stereotyping. Specifically, stereotyping was far less acceptable from White British (and specifically English) men than from men of other nationalities or ethnicities. Here political and historical concerns were mobilised. Such stereotyping was seen as less acceptable from certain men because it touched on a traditional national antagonisms to which most of the Irish men in the sample were sensitive. This last point gives us further insights into the way that Irish men perceived the scene and their place within it. When asked about what they valued about the London gay scene, the Irish men referred overwhelmingly to its cultural and ethnic diversity.

**I mean the best thing about the scene in London is that you can meet men from all around the world – such a range of men. I mean I've met many great guys from everywhere. It's fantastic that. I love the diversity of it.**  
**Irish, aged 36, skilled job**

Irish men share this conception of London with other gay migrants (see Keogh, Dodds and Henderson, 2004b). London is experienced as a global city rather than the capital of a country. That is, there was a discontinuity between themselves as Irish men living in the capital of the UK and

themselves as gay men living in a global gay metropolis. Like other gay migrants such a conception influenced their attitudes towards the Irish ex-patriot community, other Irish men and their own sense of Irishness on the gay scene.

Since the majority of men left Ireland to get away from negative attitudes towards their sexuality, it is hardly surprising that they should reject any notion of re-establishing ex-patriot Irish networks within their adopted country.

**I hadn't emigrated just to hang out with Irish people [...] You've emigrated, you've made a leap, make the most of it and actually meet other people. Don't just become one of these immigrants who, you know, stick in the old circles of Irish people and sits around drinking and lamenting about the old times back at home...**

**Irish, aged 28, unemployed**

It is possible that the so called 'old circles' refers to a certain type of Irish ex-patriot community that is redolent of an earlier wave of less well-educated Irish immigrants. This is the type of community that many Irish immigrants of the 1980s and later (straight and gay) might recognise and reject. This man describes his use of Camden. He is at pains to emphasise that he frequented its gay venues rather than its many Irish ones.

**When I came [to London], we weren't going to your Camden's and your Kilburn's and all like that. Like, the traditional place for Irish people to go would have been Kilburn. Because I didn't come here to be a navvie or to work [...] I came here for the gay scene. So in a way I'd no interest in the Irish stuff at all [...] But I happened to be with three other Irish gay boys [...] I don't go to the Black Cap in Camden because it's in an Irish area or anything like that.**

**Irish, aged 29, semi-skilled job**

We raised the question of formal gay social activities based around Irish ethnicity. Just as many rejected generic ex-patriot organisation, so they tended to reject formal Irish gay social activities.

**... there is an Irish gay group [...] I never actually got around to doing it. Because I'm not particularly into hanging out with Irish people. It's not something I do. If I know someone I do, but I'm not going to go out of my way to meet Irish people. So it doesn't worry me.**

**Irish, aged 29, semi-skilled job**

Many mentioned the impossibility of such activities because the Irish gay population was so heavily stratified around class lines and the rural/urban divide. Commonality of sexuality might ameliorate such differences, but they would still be divisive.

***Do you think Irish gay men in London share common histories and experiences?***

**Yes and no [...] I mean I think we share probably culturally the same backgrounds definitely [...]but I mean family backgrounds are as diverse and different you know. I mean like one of my colleagues at work [...] [He] and I talk quite a lot about being Irish and gay. But you know my family came from kind of rich Galway merchant family and his family came from like poor working class Dublin [...] In terms of background – completely different. But culturally our experiences of our sexuality are quite similar. So we have a lot to talk about. Much more than say if we were just Irish and happened to come from those very different backgrounds – it might be less to talk about. Yeah. So yes and no I suppose is the answer.**

**Irish, aged 36, skilled job**

The Irish men were similar to the Black Caribbean men in that they did not see the need for organised gay activities based around their ethnic origin. Moreover, as we have said, there was a discontinuity between their identity as Irish men and their identity as gay men. Furthermore, their identities as gay men within an urban metropolis tended to obscure their identities as Irish ex-patriots. It is clear therefore that men separated out their sense of being Irish from that of being gay. Men were keen to divorce themselves from 'old' immigrants in terms of their occupation, education and mobility. A clear way of doing this (and one they share with other gay migrants) is to conceptualise their gay identity as effectively stateless.

This situation is changing however. The men who were in their twenties and those who frequently travelled to Dublin talked about forms of Irish gay sociality. This was made possible by the burgeoning gay scene in Dublin and other Irish urban centres and the increasing legal and policy liberalisation in Ireland. The most common ways in which this was expressed was in comparisons between London and Dublin gay venues.

**And then pubs in London I just find they're complete rubbish [...] In Dublin they tend to be very extravagant in every way. So you go to a pub and it's like an experience. But here it's just like 'Oh here's a room, let's put a bar there and serve beer and that's it'**

**Irish, aged 25, student**

The same man in his twenties describes his perception that social attitudes towards homosexuality are more liberal in Ireland than the UK.

**I think some people who haven't been to Ireland think – they see it as a lot more rural than it actually is [...] Oh they think that it's kind of backwards in a way. Whereas in many ways it's more advanced than London [...] I remember when I had first job I was like sixteen in McDonald's and there was a big poster up in the staff room saying all about the Equality Acts and the fact that discriminating against somebody because of their orientation in the workplace is grounds for a dismissal [...] And it's only recently I discovered that you don't have that right here.**

**Irish, aged 25, student**

It is likely therefore, that younger Irish men have more successfully integrated a sense of themselves as Irish *and* gay than their older counterparts. This is because they have grown up in a radically different social environment compared to men as little as ten years older than them.

Despite this discontinuity of Irish identity and gay identity and a rejection of ex-patriot organisation, most of the respondents valued friendships with other Irish people in the UK. Irish friendship networks, though universal, tended to be developed later in life, almost by chance and valued retrospectively.

*Do you think Irish gay men need [a gay organisation] that isn't in the mainstream scene?*

**In as much as any group I think benefit sometimes from being with their own. [But] separatism within separatism – no. Being able to meet other Irish gay men is very important. Like talking with [Irish gay friend], you know, I really value that and I think maybe that's a mutual thing. So there's something about mixing with the culture and um sexuality is very important. And in fact before I met [partner] I was kind of seeing an Irish guy [...] and we got on really well too. And that was really nice [...] to talk about things that people here would never know about. You know things that were on telly when we were kids and foods and just things from Ireland, from home really in a way [...] But having said that I wouldn't see myself necessarily going along to an Irish gay men's [group] ...**

**Irish, aged 25, student**

Often, such informal Irish gay socialisation overcame the class and occupational differences we mentioned earlier more effectively than formal social support based around ethnicity.

*Do you think that Irish gay men here share a common kind of background, common stories?*

**It depends. Like I mean my friend Andrew shares a very similar story to me. My friend Rob is [...] very middle-class background and we're so different in our backgrounds that he could be from England. You know. He went to university [...] He's a solicitor. So I think class is very important in that respect. I think people from Dublin, from working class Dublin share a lot of experiences.**

**Irish, aged 33, skilled job**

### 3.3 DISCUSSION

The movement of Black Caribbean and Irish men from their family and community into gay subcultures will be informed by difficulties arising out of common cultural and social factors: racial discrimination, insufficient schooling, fractured families, damaging cultural and social patterning for boys, strongly conservative or religious attitudes of parents and families *etc.* While the ways men respond will be highly individual and will depend crucially on the resources at their disposal, generally the ways in which Black Caribbean men manage coming out and establishing themselves as gay men differ markedly from those used by the Irish men.

Common to all accounts given by Black Caribbean men was the tendency to maintain privacy around sexual identity. This is unusual in two respects. First, the fact that the individual feels he has a choice of whether or not to disclose suggests that he does not see himself as instantly identifiable as gay. Second, it attests to a discontinuity between self-identification generally and identification as a gay man. In other words, one's social identity as a gay man remains somewhat contested.

In conclusion, when we examine how the process of coming out is experienced for Black Caribbean men, we see a very different picture than the one normally described in studies of homosexuality. First, the imperative to 'be true to oneself' as a gay man is almost entirely absent. The importance of the preservation of familial, community and religious structures as a source of social support override any 'gay' imperative. Moreover, the antagonisms between family and community on the one hand and the imperative of 'coming out' on the other are simply too great to sustain a full and immediate disclosure. In short, there are more important things than being 'gay' in its traditional sense and there is no reason for an individual to elicit personal conflict when he can find more effective ways of managing his life which result in a far richer sense of self, encompassing his family, community and ethnic identity and his gay identity.

Therefore, to understand the Black Caribbean coming out experience is to understand that being gay is not the prime imperative. Rather, gay identity and social life takes its place amongst a range of other identities and social ways of being and more often than not is subservient to them. Coming out is therefore highly mediated and gradual. It is not characterised as an active choice of the individual to be 'true to himself': a move, without which, he would find his life unbearable. Coming out is not experienced as a personal imperative, but rather as a series of events which gradually impels the individual to acknowledge rather than assert to others his gay identity. Moreover, coming out is not conceived as a movement between two different subject positions. That is, rather than moving from a position of being 'straight' identified and secretly homosexual to being gay identified and openly homosexual, the option of being secretly homosexual is always kept open, not as an abject state of 'living a lie' or a last resort. Instead, it is seen as an active means of controlling information about one's sexuality. A necessary and acceptable strategy.

This is crucially dependant on the way in which men conceive of themselves. Whereas, one might assume that for many gay men, to be in an environment where their gay identity is unknown amounts to an unacceptable or distasteful mis-recognition of the self: a narcissistic slight. For the Black Caribbean men, personal recognition does not depend on others knowing that they are gay. Men can feel recognised or validated in spite of few close friends or family members acknowledging their sexuality. In this sense, there is little moral or personal imperative to assert at all possible times that one is gay. We are not for a moment asserting that this is ideal. We are asserting rather that it is, at least, functional.

In many ways the imperatives which the Irish men are observing (preservation of family, community *etc.*) are similar to those of the Black Caribbean men. However, the ways in which they go about both being gay and preserving those imperatives are markedly different. The Irish men go about this by migrating. If they were to remain within their families, they would have to find other ways of managing their sexuality. This is not to say that many Irish gay men do not do this. With increasing

liberalisation of Irish attitudes and changes in legislation and policy regarding homosexuality, it is doubtless much easier to live as an openly gay man in urban Ireland than it was even ten years ago. Moreover, the stigma attached to homosexuality has clearly decreased and therefore living openly as a gay man within the family is doubtless becoming easier. The effective reversal of the outward flow of migration and massively increased economic prosperity will almost certainly mean that many young gay men will choose to remain in their country and many older gay migrants will choose to go home. However, for those that left (the subject of this study), coming out is experienced as a personal rupture. That is, they have left Ireland in order to embrace wholly gay lifestyles. In this sense they differ from their Black Caribbean counterparts who tentatively or partially embrace such an identity or lifestyle. We conclude that the reasons for this difference are mainly connected with opportunity. The Irish men are, on the whole, better educated than the Black Caribbeans. They are also White. This implies that they can effect a far easier migration where they are more likely to command highly paid, prestigious jobs and are unlikely to suffer the same degree of overt racism that Black Caribbean men experience. However, like the Black Caribbean men, there are advantages and disadvantages to this position. The Black Caribbean men who manage their sexuality well, preserve and benefit from a sense of familial and community continuity in their lives. They also resist the ghettoisation of gay life and culture constructing a social life which is based on their ethnic and sexual identity. Those who manage it less well are at the mercy of a more or less hostile Black Caribbean community and a ghettoised gay scene. Likewise the Irish men may be seen as benefiting from an exemplary education and all the privileges afforded to White educated males in London. However, they might also be seen as having forsaken their right to live amongst their families and communities in order to live within a foreign country where they are also divorced from the ex-patriot social networks that may otherwise support them.

Both the Irish and the Black Caribbean men experienced the commercial gay scene as a place of sexual commodification. However, a comparison of the experiences of men in the two groups tells us much about the dynamics behind such commodification. Men in both groups turned commodification to their advantage in order to increase their own sexual desirability and all accepted that such commodification was integral to the commercial gay scene. Commodification became problematic, however, when it was associated with pre-existing power struggles or inequalities. Thus, for some Irish men, a sexualisation of his 'Irishness' by an English man is unacceptable because of traditional power inequalities and conflicts between the two countries. For many Black Caribbean men, commodification was unacceptable from White men generally. For others, it was unacceptable from British White men. Thus, commodification becomes animated, painful or significant when it mobilises broader social inequality or political difference. In short, sexual commodification is an unavoidable part of sexual desire. However, its power comes from the framework of meaning within which it takes place.

Black Caribbean men found it more difficult to avoid commodification than their Irish counterparts because such commodification was based on immediately obvious physical/racial characteristics (White Irish men are generally assumed to be British until they open their mouths, a situation which brings difficulties of its own). Commodification based on racial characteristics is especially problematic because it is more difficult to opt out of. Men fetishised because of their age, looks, class or accent can change certain things (or certain things, like age, will change of their own accord) in order not to be so open to sexual stereotyping. The question whether one should have to change certain aspects of oneself in order to socialise is a moot point. However, it is a considerably more difficult for a Black gay man. Faced with this choice, there are two options: to attempt to change the gay scene or simply to see the scene for what it is and to find more meaningful social interactions elsewhere. Most respondents opted for the latter option.

Thus, questions of sexual desire and commodification diminish the potential of the scene for meaningful interpersonal interaction and community building. For Irish men, this was not a problem as they did not desire social organising around their nationality. Like other gay migrants, they

eschewed contact with their ex-patriot communities. However, Irish men differed also from other migrants in that they generally possessed the social capital (in terms of education and earning capacity) not to need the support of ex-patriot communities (see Keogh, Dodds and Henderson, 2004b)

Likewise, for Black Caribbean men, the scene was not seen as the place to investigate or influence Black Caribbean gay sociality or community. Simply put, because the gay scene is based on the twin motors of sexual desire and commodity, it is too capricious, too divisive a setting within which to build a sense of community. We might well be wary of making the scene the centre of community interventions for gay men generally.

For the majority of respondents, Irish and Black Caribbean alike, the commercial gay scene played a part in their social lives, but it was considered a rather impoverished form of social contact. That is, they relied, overall on more integrated and general friendship groups. Their ability to form such friendship networks and their simultaneous reliance on them speaks to the particular way they have crafted their own sexual identity and social spaces as well as the social and cultural paucity of the commercial gay scene.

# 4 Conclusions and recommendations

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In this report we have described the experiences and social organisation of two very different groups. We have attempted to describe the ways in which social and structural factors related to mens' upbringing impact on the development of their gay identity and influence the way they organise their social and intimate lives. We have found that the experiences of UK-born Black Caribbean men and White Irish migrants are markedly different despite growing up within similar types of social institutions and both belonging to ethnic minorities in London.

## 4.1 BLACK CARRIBEAN GAY MEN: DOUBLY EXCLUDED OR GAY PIONEERS?

The Black Caribbean men grew up within a displaced and newly-formed community. As such, this was a group highly aware of its difference and disadvantage and struggling to find some sort of social stability and group identity in its adopted country. Because of this, the family and the church took on a different significance than it had in countries of origin. In response to the inevitable social instability that comes with migration and the growing racism and discrimination, Black Caribbean migrant communities tried to give their children a secure sense of identity and place. 'The family' and 'church' were the institutions through which the individual was placed and cared for. Under these circumstances, the possibility of the loss of the family means the simultaneous possibility of the loss of those social and cultural structures which make it possible to exist as a Black Caribbean man in the UK.

If the institutions of family and church play such a central role, what are the affects of this on the development of gay identity and the construction of a gay social life for Black Caribbean men? Two very different interpretations emerge.

The first interpretation casts Black Caribbean men as a minority within a minority, a doubly excluded group caught at the intersection of two incompatible communities. Some men experienced this. They talked about the difficulty of coming out to their parents and of feeling marginalised on the gay scene *etc.* However, representing Black Caribbean and gay culture as fundamentally opposed and intractable is to misrepresent both cultures and to disempower those who are obliged to exist between them. Both are cultures of resistance and minority. Both are also subject to change. As the Black Caribbean population in the UK enters its third and fourth generation it changes dramatically. Individuals and groups within that culture are forced to adapt to such changes (both good and bad) and to create lives and social forms which best meet their needs. Precisely the same can be said of gay culture.

Such an interpretation, also promotes the myth of the redemptive nature of minority communities. That is, that Black Caribbean culture or gay culture has the capacity to provide an unproblematic 'home' for the individuals who can manage to fit into one or the other (Black Caribbean heterosexuals in the one case and White, middle-class gay men in the other). The Black Caribbean gay man is therefore rendered 'homeless' and 'lost' as he fits into neither 'community'. The reality is very different. Both Black Caribbean communities and gay communities are riven with fundamental differences and conflicts. Neither provides an unproblematic environment for any individual. There are degrees of alienation and no-one is entirely comfortable. Everyone must accommodate, albeit, some more than others. The 'doubly excluded' interpretation speaks to a utopian and highly politicised conception of minority cultures which is not mirrored in individual experience. It is accompanied by an essentially political assertion that minority cultures *should* be inclusive. Whereas this is the ideal, it is not the reality.

The second interpretation is more positive in that it casts the Black Caribbean gay man as having the unique potential to create his own identity and his own social surroundings. This is possible precisely because he exists at the intersection of two mutable, incomplete communities. This interpretation depends on capitalising on aspects which are common to both Black Caribbean communities and gay communities.

Crucially, both are communities of resistance, change and accommodation. In the case of Black Caribbean communities, the institutions of family and church could be characterised as the means of resistance and survival. The mutability of the family – the fact that it encompasses not just blood relatives, but others from the same country of origin and / or trusted friends of parents – means that it could be called a ‘family of choice’. Black Caribbean men already grow up within a culture of difference and resistance where institutions such as family and church serve transparent social functions. They approach their sexuality forearmed with a language of resistance and an ability to adapt social institutions to their own needs. Therefore, the specific forms of gay identity and gay social life they develop are, paradoxically, modelled on the immigrant culture within which they were raised. They are pioneers – creating new ways of being Black and gay.

We can see the ‘pioneering’ elements in the accounts of many men in this study. They talk about managing their social lives so that they can maintain their place within the social institutions that are so vital to them as Black Caribbean men. They also create gay social networks which reject the elements of gay culture and social life they find unsatisfactory. The majority of our respondents spoke animatedly about their eclectic social networks, about the importance of having Black Caribbean gay and lesbian friends, about their selective use of the gay scene and their recognition of its failings. The capacity for self-determination and accommodation of very different imperatives was central to their accounts of creating their identity and managing their gay social lives. We are not saying that such an approach ‘works’ or makes for an optimally happy life. However, for those who do it well, it is at least functional, and at best rewards them with a far richer gay (and Black Caribbean) social life than many other gay men.

Our aim in this report was to resist the tendency to speak a language of need, deficit or weakness. Instead, we were attempting to identify the strengths inherent in the strategies and experiences of Black Caribbean gay men. We conclude that the Black Caribbean gay men in our sample who were thriving were playing to their strengths rather than their weaknesses. That is, they were using specific cultural forms and personal strategies which were part of a migrant culture and applying these to their position as Black Caribbean gay men. In short, they were defining and redefining an experience of being gay which is rarely if ever described and certainly rarely validated. When we design future health promotion interventions for Black Caribbean gay men, we should be seeking to learn from the experiences of the men described in this study. Young gay men (both Black and White) should be encouraged to assert that there are many ways of being gay and of living a gay life. What ‘gay’ is, is constantly changing and always contested. Describing a specifically Black Caribbean gay sensibility and way of living is one way of increasing the power not only of Black Caribbean gay men, but of all gay men to assert their own ways of being ‘gay’.

However, we must also be mindful of the fact that for Black Caribbean gay men attempting to make their own way, there are overwhelming difficulties. Institutional racism, lack of educational and employment opportunities, high levels of mental health morbidity and a discriminatory criminal justice system all ensure that many Black Caribbean men lack the economic and cultural capital to maximise their own health and well-being. Black Caribbean gay men also suffer as a consequence of all these structural impediments.

Expanding the options available to Black Caribbean gay men depends on improving the lot of Black Caribbean men generally. The capacity of Black Caribbean boys who are becoming aware of their homosexuality to define themselves as Black Caribbean gay men can only be optimised if education, employment opportunities and health are improved. Health promotion for Black Caribbean gay



men must involve changing the entrenched discriminatory structures which hold back Black Caribbean men, including the homophobia that is common among other Black Caribbean people. This improves the ability of Black Caribbean gay men to determine their own trajectory, not only within gay social networks, but also in the world of employment and health. Health promotion must increase the capacity of the individual to mould what it is to be gay and what it is to be Black for his own ends, rather than increasing his capacity to 'fit in'. That is, he must be enabled to make a better, more personally rewarding choice than to be *either Black or gay*.

It is also necessary to conduct anti-homophobia work within Black Caribbean communities. This should not be done in a way which perpetuates the notion of being gay as somehow different or foreign, but which mobilises the support of family and friends of Black Caribbean gay men to define their own ways of life. It should also aim to show that it is possible to be gay and still uphold the social institutions central to Black Caribbean cultures. The men in the sample show by their experiences that this is possible.

## 4.2 IRISH GAY MEN: SEXUAL EXILES OR GLOBAL GAY CITIZENS?

For Irish gay migrants, a very different situation prevails. Family and church are again powerful social institutions, but they are monolithic and more connected with social regulation than resistance and definition. The Irish men grew up in a White, Catholic, Irish monoculture. The family was marked by its modular nature – it was the self-sufficient, economic and cultural unit of society. Life within the Irish family was far more privatised and the family was separated out from the broader community rather than seamlessly leading into it. The imperatives of individual and especially familial probity were therefore paramount. Likewise, the church did not fulfil a role of social cohesion. It was essentially not congregationalist, but like the family, private, confessional and all pervasive. The church served the social role of regulation rather than cohesion and definition. As a result, the formation of gay identity and the development of a gay social life was characterised by personal rupture and discontinuity. That is, gay identity becomes singular and segregated, marked by a physical departure from family and home.

What becomes of these men when they come to London? Being Irish in Britain (like being Black Caribbean) is a politically volatile and possibly abject state of being. That is, to live within an ex-colonial power with a long and antagonistic history, where borders are still contested and the effects of sectarianism still felt, might be interpreted as a problematic experience. The men in their fifties faced the residual discrimination that had been routinely encountered by those in the post-war second wave of Irish migration. Men who lived through the mainland terrorist campaigns reported troubling social experiences. Moreover, such a departure from one's family, country and culture can often be damaging. Many of the Irish men reported a degree of alienation. However, unlike other sexual migrants (Keogh, Dodds, Henderson 2004b), there was very little sense of feeling like sexual exiles or outcasts. The reason for this was twofold.

First, Irish men share the relative advantages of being comparatively well educated, White and native English speakers. They also have the opportunity to take the culturally and economically acceptable route of emigration in order to construct a gay identity and a gay social life. That is, the culturally entrenched tradition of emigration from the Republic of Ireland meant that it was socially acceptable to leave. Even though they left Ireland because they were gay, the men we spoke to would, in all likelihood have left Ireland anyway for economic reasons.

Second, unlike their heterosexual counterparts, their sexuality allows them access to a global form of mixed sociality which is gay social and sexual life in London. Irish gay migrants do this not only in London, but in cities all over the world. Those that come to London (or New York or Sydney) are participating in global gay cities rather than local capitals. This point is important in elucidating a specifically Irish gay migrant experience. Gay identity, for all but the youngest men (who are growing up in a very different urban Irish environment) is entirely separate from national or ethnic

identity. As migrants, they are forced to recognise their position as a minority (a new experience for them – unlike their Black Caribbean counterparts). However, their Irish ex-patriot identity and their gay identity exist in different discursive spheres. Thus, for some men, being gay allows them to sideline troubling questions about being 'Irish in Britain'. The question of their Irishness in relation to a dominant British culture is rarely raised within their gay social networks precisely because those networks are generally very ethnically and culturally mixed.

In effect therefore, the gay identity, and much gay sociality shared by Irish gay men in London is global rather than, or in addition to, local. Their conception of London (and the gay community within it) is of a global gay city rather than the capital of England. To this end, Irish men appreciate the international nature of gay society in London: they revel in diversity. As well educated and for the most part, economically solvent, they can maintain relative power within these gay social networks. As White and native English speakers, they can generally avoid the immediate discrimination felt by other ethnic minorities. Although they value Irish gay friends, they generally eschew the notion of organised Irish gay community because this is contrary to their gay self-perception.

However, even weighty monolithic cultures such as those that exist in the Republic of Ireland are subject to change. In the last ten years in-migration has outstripped out-migration in the Republic of Ireland (Mac Éinrí 2001). The resident population is still substantially younger than the aging population of most other European countries and an economic revolution has coalesced with the general cessation of conflict in the North of the island to bring about unprecedented levels of personal wealth and security. Several rafts of human rights legislation and an orientation towards the European Union (and away from the United States) has dramatically liberalised the climate for gay men and lesbians. Moreover, both the culture and practice of emigration seems to have dramatically declined. It is now replaced by a culture of frequent in- and out-migration (by both those born in Ireland and increasing numbers who choose to live there). A specifically Irish gay (or lesbian) identity may remain as elusive as ever, but the global gay identity in which Irish gay men will participate is likely to include a sense of themselves as Irish and of Ireland as part of a global society.

### 4.3 GAY RACISM?

Our findings also suggest some more general conclusions about the relationship between gay identity and ethnic minority status in London. Although the social institutions and the attitudes towards homosexuality that most ethnic minority gay men grow up with are similar, the meanings attached to such institutions and the functions they serve are diverse. Therefore, we can never assume that to belong to an ethnic minority and to be gay is to exist in a state of double exclusion. Ethnic minority gay identity can be global and / or local. It can also be based on a careful accommodation and negotiation of social and cultural imperatives which, if managed well, can result in ways of being gay that are far richer than we might have assumed. On the other hand ethnic and gay identity can be split, and can exist on different personal planes. This is not always detrimental to the individual. Sometimes, gay identity and sociality can ameliorate the problems brought about by ethnic minority status.

Moreover, our findings throw some light on how racism might work within gay social networks. It has often been stated that 'there is no such thing as gay community' but few people try to describe or theorise what actually exists. We suggest that gay social organisation in London might exist on a range of levels. There are the friendship, peer and family networks within which individual gay men are sustained. There are also networks of interest and concern such as those which mobilise around particular issues or problems (gay political or social organisations). Finally, there is a commercial gay network which is based around sexual and economic commodification.

The (very pertinent) question of whether or not racism exists within the gay community is troubling. We have already seen that on the first level (friendship, peer and family), the way in which ethnic

identity and gay identity is managed can lead to a range of beneficial or detrimental outcomes. In the commercial gay network, commodification is paramount. By definition such commodification places a sexual or economic value on the individual which is sometimes problematic because this value is always placed by someone else. The gay scene is an essentially reductionist culture where all men are routinely 'objectified' by other men according to their looks, body size, dress, visible wealth (or lack of it) etc. The relationship between the objectifier and the objectified becomes more animated when historical and cultural factors come into play. The experiences of the men in both of our groups is enlightening here. For the Irish men, sexual stereotyping was generally acceptable unless it came from a White British man. In this case, it became disempowering, hurtful and was actively resisted. The Black Caribbean men found such bodily commodification and sexual stereotyping far more problematic. This clearly relates to an ongoing racial power inequality which means that for some Black Caribbean gay respondents, any form of commodification of their body by a White man is problematic.

We can conclude with two points. First, that the experience and judgement of what might or might not be racism is both culturally bound and largely subjective. Second, it is difficult to see how racism can be extricated from a social network which is based on sexual and economic commodification. Therefore, can such sexual commodification be rightfully called racism (when it is organised around sexual desire)? Is it possible to intervene usefully in such commodification? The vast majority of our respondents were aware of both these points and therefore sanguine about the potential of any intervention aiming at increasing social cohesion on the gay commercial scene.

Gay social networks do not exist in a social, political or cultural vacuum. The men that inhabit them are implicated in endless power inequalities, political, national and religious differences and historical and cultural antagonisms. When we further consider sexual desire based on ethnic or cultural difference, we are entering a very strange melting pot indeed. In conclusion, it is misguided and somewhat dangerous to think of gay social networks which exist in cities like London as homogeneous; or of gay identity giving all gay men a stamp of ethnic or cultural neutrality. This is clearly not the case. Once we can re-conceptualise gay sexuality and sociality as based fundamentally around difference and division rather than consensus and similarity – as intrinsically antagonistic – then we can dismiss the notion of a homogeneous gay community which has the capacity to include some and exclude others.

Describing the various forms of ethnic minority gay experience serves to emphasise how impoverished our conceptions of gay identity and gay social life are. To speak a language of inclusion / exclusion only strengthens the hegemonic power of such misconceptions and makes invisible the diversity of gay experience. Moreover, rather than facilitating interventions, the language of exclusion inhibits social interventions for young ethnic minority gay men because it does not capitalise on their strengths, instead always addressing their weaknesses. It is vital therefore to contest the notion of 'gay' not with political ideology of what should be, but with descriptions of what actually is.

This said, we would be remiss if we concluded that all interventions should concentrate on the individual. Structural factors are inherently damaging to the health and detrimental to the happiness of ethnic minority gay men. However, these are the factors common to all ethnic minority groups. If racism within the gay community exists, the method of intervening must be to counter broader societal racism and the institutional racism that exists within regulatory institutions of power. If gay men from a particular minority ethnic group find themselves consistently powerless within gay social structures, part of the answer is to counter the structural determinants which ensure the relative powerlessness of people from certain ethnic minorities as a whole.

#### 4.4 ENGAGING WITH SOCIAL EXCLUSION POLICY

With these conclusions in mind, how might health promoters go about tackling racial and ethnic inequality amongst gay men in order to improve gay men's health and social well-being? We conclude that traditional 'gay community' interventions will have a limited currency and effectiveness in the case of ethnic minority gay men. Instead, we should be seeking to change the broader social inequalities which gay communities reflect. We should also be increasing the capacity of individual ethnic minority gay men to resist and overcome such inequalities. In a companion report to this (see Keogh, Dodds and Henderson 2004a), we recommended a range of interventions which engage with broader social exclusion policy. We make almost identical recommendations here. That is, we recommend practical interventions to increase the social capital of individual ethnic minority gay men, increasing the capacity of ethnic minority communities to support their gay members and combatting broader racism.

We therefore propose that agencies look outside their current service and policy frameworks to new opportunities and means of tackling the sexual health needs of ethnic minority gay men. This should not be taken as a recommendation to find new sources of money to produce more of the type of written or therapeutic interventions that are already relatively common (Devlin *et al.* 2003) and which for many gay men have been proven to be beneficial. Nor is it a recommendation to increase interventions based in gay commercial scene venues.

The latest version of *Making it Count*, the planning framework to reduce the incidence of HIV infection during sex between men (Hickson *et al.* 2003) emphasises the role of interventions which contribute to meeting the HIV prevention needs of: the communities within which gay men live; the public bodies which provide education, health and social services to gay men within those communities; and the policy makers, researchers and commissioners who shape those services. Similarly, the accompanying *Field Guide* for health promotion activity with homosexually active men (Devlin *et al.* 2003) describes a range of interventions for supporting and developing infrastructure which include community, service and policy interventions. This report recommends a range of interventions under these headings. That is, in addition to interventions with gay men, agencies should be seeking to intervene in a range of policy and infrastructure areas.

Many of the areas of need identified in this report overlap with those that the Government has highlighted in their various social exclusion policies: institutional racism, family adversity, poverty, health inequality and low educational attainment. It is important therefore to interrogate these social exclusion initiatives to see how they can be exploited in relation to ethnic minority gay men and (sexual) health. We can thus ensure that a (small) proportion of the vast amount of spending taking place to undermine social exclusion is used to tackle the inequities that face ethnic minority gay men.

It is possible to operate within current social exclusion frameworks in order to intervene in structures which facilitate sexual health morbidity among ethnic minority gay men. The aim of such interventions should be:

- To increase the capacity of ethnic minority families to support their gay sons, brothers and partners.
- To increase the capacity of schools to teach ethnic minority boys more enterprising strategies around organising their intimate, economic and work life as well as challenging the dominant forms of masculinity and sexuality available to them.
- To support adult ethnic minority gay men to take advantage of the social latitude which a gay identity grants them to change their lives for the better. This might be remedial action in the case of an education system which did not serve them (for example, vocational or other educational opportunities) or an employment system which is hostile to their sexual identity (such as retraining opportunities and interventions with employers' organisations) or a gay community service system which does not recognise or support their values and priorities.

We have identified the following policy and service areas in which agencies could be seeking to intervene.

- Health Action Zones (HAZ)

There are four HAZ in London: Brent; Lambeth, Southwark & Lewisham; Camden and Islington; and City and East London. Gay representation should be increased in the consultative mechanisms of these HAZ. It is necessary to establish how they are identifying the general and sexual health needs of the ethnic minority gay men who live in these areas. Moreover, gay / HIV agencies should be collaborating actively with Healthy Living Centres operating within these HAZs in order to meet the sexual health needs of ethnic minority boys, gay youths and gay men.

- Education Action Zones (EAZ)

These mirror HAZ in London. Again gay representation should be increased within EAZ planning and policy frameworks. EAZ provide the opportunity to focus on schools in the most multi-deprived areas as sites for targeted work among ethnic minority boys. At both policy and practical levels, our agencies need to make schools aware of the impact that institutional racism and homophobia has on the educational attainment of ethnic minority boys. For example, this type of work could take place in partnership with local truancy and school exclusion initiatives.

- National Skills Strategy / National Skills Alliance

The National Skills Strategy aims to ensure that individuals have the skills they need to be both employable and personally fulfilled. It focuses on increasing the effectiveness of existing initiatives. Gay men's HIV and sexual health agencies should increase their own involvement in such initiatives (for example, by becoming partners within the National Skills Alliance). They should also increase their capacity to provide educational services. Such services might include, facilitating access to free tuition for level two qualifications as well as increasing individual access to adult learning grants.

- National Healthy School Standard

This is a means of influencing the local implementation of the PSHE and Citizenship curriculum. It is also a way in which service providers can advocate for the ways in which their own services can support Healthy Schools initiatives. In addition, gay men's HIV and sexual health agencies should have input into training days for existing teachers as well as contributing to teacher training programmes. This work should include the development and provision of toolkits and resource packs around gay identity and sexual health. Greater input and coordination with the Wired for Health website (a widely used resource for students, teachers and specialists alike) is a prerequisite for this work.

- Local Public Service Agreements (LPSAs)










LPSAs are means of securing central government funding for local service provision. Local Authority executives have been advised to seek funding within their LPSA agreement for at least one health inequality target (out the available 12 targets they can put on their application – one of the twelve must be about health and social services). Those particularly being urged to do so are areas among the 20% most deprived in England. Currently, many health inequality targets are concerned with reducing health inequalities based around ethnic minority status. Gay men's HIV and sexual health agencies should find out about the targets that have been selected in local LPSAs and consider how targets around sexual health (particularly as it pertains to ethnic minority gay men) might be incorporated.


In addition, there are a range of governmental agencies charged with combatting racial inequality including the Commission for Racial Equality. It is necessary to consider the ways in which such agencies deal with health and sexual health generally and how they might go about incorporating the needs of ethnic minority gay men into their overall strategies.

Improving the health of gay men from ethnic minorities involves active engagement with policy and practice around ethnic minority populations. It cannot be achieved without seeking to improve the health and social well-being of all minority ethnic populations.




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