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Sexual practice and sexual culture

The etiquette of sex venues

Anonymity

In a large city like Sydney, men rarely meet men they know in a venue, and anonymity can be maintained. This anonymity is partial and is maintained by convention and by the lack of conversation in venues.

But I've been to a sauna recently in New Zealand, where everyone just chatted away, which I found very strange. Um, but you know, that's because I guess it was a smaller city and people generally knew each other. (S Alfred)

Sometimes men have sex on repeated occasions with a man whom they know only through the venue and whose name they do not know. This can also happen at beats. Some respondents mentioned that one did not acknowledge someone one had had sex with in a venue if one saw him elsewhere, though one man saw being ignored in public like this as something of a put-down. Couples in regular relationships sometimes visit venues together, but usually split up to cruise and only share their adventures later in a different setting. It is of course also possible for men who have met elsewhere, or perhaps just eyed each other off in a nearby bar, to go together to a venue for sex.

Some gay men deliberately use venues away from the Oxford Street strip, so that they will be less likely to run into friends. Some said they preferred the more masculine straight men they could meet elsewhere, but some seemed self-conscious about it being known in their gay friendship circles that they used venues. There appear to be two types of stigma associated with venues. One, obviously, is the

danger of being branded as gay or homosexual if one is not 'out'. The other, more subtly, is the attribution of sleaziness or lack of attractiveness by fellow gay men. To have to resort to using a venue can be seen as a failure to attract admirers in social settings.

In those days, early eighties, people who went to saunas were viewed as absolute sluts, even though you know, at the [sauna], they were making bundles of money, [...] There was a number of them. And they were all making money, sufficient to run a business. Yet nobody would ever admit to going to them. (S Frank)

Men do not always admire themselves for resorting to venues:

I don't feel that fabulous about having feral sex at times, you know. You know sometimes, I'm really horny and I want a quick relief and sometimes I go there and have a great time, other times I feel really disgusting going there. I feel like I'm, you know, in the gutter, not because of the sex bit but because of the circumstances. (S Tony)

Silence

Sex venues are not chatty sociable spaces. The general rule is one of silence (Dick described it as a 'monkish establishment'), though men do talk under certain circumstances—typically in a cubicle after sex, or in the 'chill-out' spaces such as the coffee bar or games room. Appropriate behaviour inside the venue is serious. Asked when staff might intervene in patrons' behaviour, Jeff mentioned violence to people or property and loud or obnoxious behaviour, but also inappropriate levity:

basically creating a nuisance, you know, like I know when I first started going to those sort of venues, you know, I went along with a friend. We'd laugh and giggle and, you know, there's a swimming pool and we [...] got asked to leave and not to come back. (S Jeff, venue worker)

A respondent also mentioned encountering this rule at his first visit to a venue:

I feel a bit inexperienced, but I mean I—I just get there and chat, chat, chatting with my friends, checking it out. We gossip though, about people. When we saw a good-looking guys we would say to each other if any of us would be lucky to get him, you know?

Some guys get a bit upset when there's a group of young people who come in, don't fuck, they just walk around.

I know [laughs]. I don't giggle in front of them. When we met at some secluded place, like at the end of the swimming pool, then we would gossip about the guys, like, oh, you have to you see this guy. He is so cute, oh yeah! Like, we don't go giggling around the place. You look really stupid if you do that. I think they look stupid and so naive when they do that. And nobody will approach you, you know, because you are in a group. (S Bart)

Although postcoital chatting is not uncommon, the taboo on conversation can make men feel that they should not be talking even then:

What happens when you meet someone special and you reach an orgasm? What happens?

Well if he wants to chat, then we chat. I don't know, usually I am not the first one to say something. Usually I let that person to say something first, otherwise I just walk away, because I don't want to look as if I am coming on to him, or something like that. (S Bart)

Several men regretted this and found venues chilly and unsociable as a result. The culture of silence has thorough-going effects on the negotiation of sexual practice. This is discussed further below, under 'Body language and negotiation'.

'Private' and 'public' interaction in venues

The spaces within venues have been categorised as public or nonsexual (reception,

coffee bar, TV room) and private or sexual (cubicles, orgy room, dark room), with transition areas (corridors, wet and dry saunas, spa pool, toilets and showers) in between (Santana and Richters 1998, p. 15). They claim of the transition areas that ‘no explicit sexual activity (such as anal intercourse) takes place here, although nudity and cruising are to be expected’. However, the data show that the use of space is somewhat more complicated than that. Toilets are in fact a popular space for sex:

In relation to spaces, where is the space that people will like mostly?

[...] at the beginning of the night when it's first building up, it's the darkroom, yeah um and then ah it becomes the darkroom and the back toilet. The back toilet, people love the back toilet. For sex. (S Jeff, venue worker)

Anthony (quoted in Chapter 5 in the discussion of visibility in sex-on-premises venues, p. 128) mentioned that the stepped and columned steam room at one sauna was a good place for initiating sex. Here men, somewhat shrouded by the steam, may have oral sex and even sometimes anal intercourse, unless they are put off by others joining in. When a venue is very busy, the corridors may become sex spaces rather like the orgy rooms. Anthony felt that one-to-one sex in a cubicle was different from public sex where he could be seen by other people. In (semi-)public he would be less likely to be the receptive partner in anal sex or adopt a position that appeared less masculine or in control.

But you know I'm much more likely to rim, you know, in a private cubicle, and I think [...], even though I have got quite a bit of sex in the [steam room] I'm actually not into people watching me have sex and often in the public sex places there's an unspoken code that you attempt at least to get in on the action and quite often you get these, you know, swarms of like insects you know, all clumped together in one spot. (Anthony)

Jeff, a venue worker, confirmed this:

Or there could be fifty people there and two people will start to have sex in the corridor and ten people will—well ten people will start to help, you know, it's

like not interfering too much, but just sort of touching here and there. Yeah, and another ten could be watching them. So, that could, you know, keep people entertained. It might only be two people having sex. (S Jeff)

Anthony was not the only one to make this distinction between interpersonal sex and the more performative sex of a sexual play or SM 'scene' that can be observed by others or form part of group sex:

You've never said that you've come in any of these by the way?

No I don't.

Does it take you a while or is it that you have to enjoy it?

Yes I have to enjoy it. No, they were plays, you know, if you can distinguish between plays and real sex. (SC57)

McInnes and Bollen (2000) traced out the trajectory of a man spending an evening in a venue. They characterised the non-sexual or 'public' spaces in venues as places for the activity of 'care of the self'. However, men may use these spaces not because they need a coffee or a Kit-Kat, or because they are physically tired and need to sit down, but as a break from being 'on stage' while cruising. Cruising requires careful self-presentation and may involve repeated and possible emotionally exhausting rejections. The 'public' spaces therefore act as backstage spaces where presentational repair jobs can be done (as described in Cahill 1985) or where men can simply drop out of interactional space, 'veg out', and be treated with civil disregard. Elton studied for his university course in the lounge of the sauna, though he said he was the only person who read a book there; the only reading matter available was the free gay newspapers.

Goffman remarks (1972, p. 37n.) that 'This kind of encounter [love-making], if formalized in game-theoretical terms, would clearly have some distinctive un-game-like features: once started, time out cannot easily be declared, kibitzes [people who butt in or heckle like back-seat drivers] are usually lethal, and substitutes ordinarily cannot be brought in.' Venue sex is revealed, therefore, as more obviously gamelike than the kind of sex that Goffman has in mind; time out can be declared, kibitzes are

not lethal, though they may be undesired, and substitutes (or additional players) are sometimes brought in.

The interactional interpretation of the somewhat awkwardly applied terms ‘public’ and ‘private’ to the spaces of a venue is that social and sexual interaction can take place in four modes:

1. Conventional use of public space (such as cafés, public libraries, queues etc.) where the existence of others is tacitly acknowledged but interaction is not required. They may be politely ignored or greeted in a way that acknowledges their off-stage role as (for example) ‘fellow coffee drinker’. To cruise someone in such a space requires the use of opening gambits, usually conversational, that change the men’s role definitions from non-player to (cruising) player. This is equivalent to the first of Keogh et al.’s (1998) ‘essential stages of cruising’.
2. Special use of space for cruising; others are assumed to be here ‘for the same reason’ and to be available for cruising, whether entirely by gesture and eye contact or also by touching or groping. This is public space in the special sense that all the men present are acknowledged to be visible to and seen by all the others—they are in what Goffman (1972) called an ‘unfocused interaction’. Hence the resentment expressed by venue patrons when men spend long periods in cruising spaces without making themselves available.¹
3. After two men have successfully made contact in cruising space, they become an interactional dyad and a (figurative) membrane forms around them. Like players of other games (Goffman 1972), they are relieved of the duty to pay attention to other social goings-on around them and are in a focused interaction. They become players of the game of sex and pay exclusive attention to the sexual partner. However, as the culture of venues does not unambiguously support the idea that sex is a private activity between two people, they may need to move to a cubicle or similar space to maintain the interactional membrane and continue uninterrupted. If they continue ‘in public’, the sex has an element of conscious performance or ‘scening’ to it and may be experienced by one or both players as different from sex had in the privacy of a cubicle. Further players may apply to

1. This is analogous to attending a dinner party but contributing nothing to the conversation; the non-participant has a deadening effect on the joint action.

join the action, usually by touch, and may be accepted into the interacting group or rejected as unsuitable.

4. In crowded pitch-black darkrooms, and occasionally by mutual consent in other settings (for example orgies), normal interactional rules may be suspended altogether. One-to-one negotiation of practice and partner selection, even of a non-verbal nature, will be abandoned and the result is a scrum or sexual melee.

Time of day or night, lighting levels and how crowded the venue is can influence which of these modes a space is being used in.

Respondents who only enjoyed sex as a one-to-one interaction sought settings in which the interaction membrane around the dyad could be maintained; they avoided darkrooms and moved to a cubicle after making contact with a partner in a cruising space.

Cruising

For many respondents the skill of cruising was a given they found hard to describe. Like people who know how to flag down a taxi they do not reflect on the process; they just do it.

It was somebody in the street, you know, eye contact. Talking, eh, talking in the car, 'God I like, you you know, I feel randy. I feel, you know. Let's get to it.' I mean, crude, basic [...] we went to his place. (SC19)

Although the observational studies of cruising settings all stress the importance of eye contact, this was mentioned rather than elaborated on by the respondents. Several men said that the way to learn how to operate in a venue is to go there and watch the other people.

I think the code of behaviour [is] kind of an informal code, and I don't think you can really say: 'Number one, look over your shoulder. Number two, maintain eye contact. Number three, touch the person and see if they accept your ad-

vance. Number four, [laughs] don't talk', you know [...]. I mean those sort of things develop informally so I don't think they can really educate people about that. That's just something that people have to learn by experience. (S Alfred)

Men learn this skill quickly and easily, as seen by the many comments above about the comparative ease of picking up in venues or beats rather than in bars. Cruising is not a special secret knowledge held only by initiated members of the gay community. The very existence of the taboo against gazing into another person's eyes permanently maintains the possibility of the use of the gaze to indicate a special emotional contact, whether sexual, romantic or aggressive. Only in quite specialised settings, such when catching the eye of a waiter in a restaurant, or synchronising a chord in a chamber ensemble, is it usual to employ eye contact without emotional meaning.² When the rules about looking other people in the face are disrupted, for example by mad people or drunks, the effect can be very unsettling or distressing for others. Stopping a taxi would not be so easy if people usually waved their arms about erratically while walking along the street. Similarly the taboo against touching, especially in Anglo-Saxon cultures, means that a very small gesture—such as the driver's hand placed lightly on the thigh of a hitch-hiker—is a clear indication of sexual intent.³

Body language and negotiation

A lot of the time there is no verbal negotiation at all. The person just makes it very clear to you, with their actions, that they want you to fuck them there, on the spot, and they don't want a condom. Ah, they'll sit on you or, if you're standing, they'll just go right up against you and, and actually put you into them. That happens, from time to time. Um, Or, equally, when you're um, playing

2. The rules for how much looking is acceptable vary for men and women, for people of different rank and from culture to culture. The mother of Maxine Hong Kingston's character in *Woman Warrior* comments that white people look at you as if trying to catch you out in a lie.

3. Once, after walking along London's Oxford Street in the Swinging Sixties and looking happily into the faces of passers-by, I found that I had been followed by a man of Middle Eastern appearance back to the street of my grandmother's Mayfair flat. Presumably by the simple act of looking briefly into his eyes (or rather of failing to keep mine demurely averted) I had done what he recognised as a proposition from a sex worker.

around [with the partner's anus], they make it clear that they don't want you to, just again, without saying, you know. The hand goes down ... (S Mark)

Respondents reported a large range of signals used to get a sexual interaction going and to communicate intentions and desires within the interaction. Codes like coloured hankies or keys hung on one side or the other were mentioned by only one respondent, and only to be repudiated.

Richard liked nipple play, so he took his shirt off in venues even though he felt he was overweight. The chest is a relatively 'safe' place for an initial touch, though some men make a direct grab for the crutch to start an encounter or indicate interest; some others thought this rather forward. The combination of returning eye contact and masturbating may create a dyad between two men not close enough to touch. Men may indicate a desire for the partner to fellate them by pushing his head down, or less directly by a gentle touch to head or shoulders. The other man may dislike this, and feel hurried along. To indicate a desire for receptive anal sex, a man might rub his buttocks against his partner's legs, guide his partner's hand to his anus, or turn round, or tear open a bag of lube, or possibly put a condom on the partner. 'Nudging' the penis against the anus (discussed below) was a common way of indicating the desire for insertive anal sex, particularly in darkrooms. Chris detailed the subtle signs the sex worker needed to read in order to know what his client wanted:

A lot of them won't tell you what they want. Because they're too paranoid they don't—because to tell you what they want means they have to admit to themselves that they're having sex with a man and so they leave it up to you and you have to read them and some guys don't like oral; some guys don't like anal; some guys don't like kissing; some guys don't like too much sensual touching; they're all different and you [...] assess them as you go along [...] You can tell if they don't like to kiss because the closer you get to their face the more their head turns away from you and it can be really subtle just a movement of the head, but you know straight away okay mate. So, and like you just do something else, you know. Some guys will let you get this far and then that's it and it's just

like you can't go beyond the lower neck, you know. You can do anything you like down here [gestures to the crutch]. (Chris)

When this process of signalling to and being read by the partner and vice versa goes smoothly, it may be perceived by both as 'natural' flow, as seamless intuitive interaction. Richard suggested that if the partner does not understand, 'there's no point in verbalising it. I think you may as well just give up'. Several men thought using verbal communication a last resort, usually when things went wrong:

I normally find people with groping don't go away. You really have to as they grope your crotch area grab their hand and push it away and there have been times when I've had to do that three, two or three or four times before they actually get the message. There's also been times when I actually just had to say to them to fuck off. (Richard)

Miscommunication

Both verbal and nonverbal communication are subject to the risk of miscommunication. Richard explained at some length and in considerable detail the ways in which he would use body language to communicate his desires to his partners, yet on one point was completely misunderstood by the (gay male) interviewer, who did not relate to the 'surrender' pose that Richard was describing:

Well, I talked about raising my arms up myself. I've found that other people will lift your arms for you, and I tend to do that a little bit myself.

You will lift their arms?

Yeah. Um and I think also that the arms above the head turns into a bit of role-playing as well. It's very SM sort of position with the hands actually tied above the head. Now, I don't normally go for the SM type [...] but that seems to all of a sudden turn man to man into top and bottom.

Okay. The ones with the hands raised being the top.

No, the one with the hands raised being the bottom. If they're raised above the head—right above the head. (Richard)

Sexual practices

Oral sex

Orogenital sex (fellatio) was universally practised by respondents, usually both in both insertive and receptive modes.⁴ It is reported as performed in the previous six months by about 90 per cent of respondents to Male Call (Crawford et al. 1998). Although rimming (anilingus) is technically a form of oral sex, I discuss it separately below. Fellatio can be seen as an assumed or default sexual practice, in that men said they would expect any sexual encounter to include oral and manual sex, though not necessarily other practices. When asked what oral sex meant to them, some men first described either sucking or being sucked, rather than defining the term neutrally. Some men were less enthusiastic about receptive oral sex and said there were circumstances such as beat sex, or sex with a man to whom they were not highly attracted, in which they would rarely perform it. None of these men mentioned any pressure from casual partners to enforce reciprocation, or seemed to perceive any social pressure to do so (but see the comment from SC38 below, under 'Sexual orientation and identity'). Most men, however, were positive about taking either role in fellatio. Tom said that 'pubic hair in the mouth' was the only disadvantage of oral sex.

Those who practised anal sex very rarely ejaculated during oral sex, seeing it as foreplay or sometimes not even sex, just 'mucking around'. Some respondents did not include oral sex in their meaning of the word 'sex' or 'partner':

In the last eight weeks before you seroconverted you had sex with your partner but he's negative but you also had sex with three different men?

4. The term 'receptive' is awkward for fellatio, as the person with the mouth is 'giving head' to the person with the penis, who is therefore receptive in the sense that he is receiving the service. However, for consistency with usage in relation to anal intercourse, I use the term 'receptive' in relation to fellatio to refer to the man into whose mouth the penis is being inserted.

Yes.

Three casual partners ...

And additional sporadic oral sex, bearing in mind those factors. [i.e. not counted in the three partners]

When you say 'sex' you mean anal sex?

Yeah. (SC57)

Well um, when we have sex, we use condoms.

So you don't use condoms for oral sex?

No.

When you say sex, you mean anal sex?

Yes. (SC61)

Using condoms for oral sex is clearly not accepted practice in Sydney:

with oral sex um some people are so paranoid that they won't even suck a dick unless it's got a condom on it. I won't do that, I think that's just ridiculous, apart from the fact it's a horrible practice anyway. (Julian)

You haven't used [condoms] for oral sex?

No, I would not. I mean a couple of guys have used them on me for oral sex and I find that rather uncomfortable [pause]. I think it's a bit silly. I suppose it's sensible but it seems a bit silly. Rather unfashionable. (Brendan)

I've only come across one person in my life who put a condom on and that was in London. (SC29)

Although there have been clear changes in sexual practices and in the use of condoms for anal sex among Sydney's gay and homosexually active men since the advent of AIDS (Kippax et al. 1997), condom use for oral sex has been neither recommended by the AIDS organisations nor adopted by gay men.

Responses were much more varied on the issue of taking ejaculate in the mouth. One man (SC49) reported usually engaging in receptive oral sex, in which he

received ejaculate in the mouth about 80 per cent of the time and swallowed it about 60 per cent of the time. However, it was more common to avoid ejaculation in the mouth altogether; many men said they never allowed it, or only in their regular relationship. When the receptive partner prevented ejaculation in his mouth the insertive partner would finish himself off by masturbating or withdraw at the last moment and ejaculate away from his partner's face and clothes—one reason for the sticky walls and floors in many venues. In saunas, where they were naked and could easily shower afterwards, men often ejaculated on their own body or perhaps on the body of the partner. As one respondent said, 'It really wouldn't be acceptable to come on someone fully clothed' (SC60).

If any reason was given for not taking semen in the mouth, it was related to HIV prevention or 'safety' in general, not explicitly to dislike of the taste⁵ or gagging at deep orgasmic thrusts from the insertive partner. The last point was pursued by the interviewer in a few cases and men agreed that it could be a problem. Yet the HIV prevention explanation may be a *post facto* reason for the practice of avoiding the ejaculate, as it was recorded by Humphreys (1970), before HIV was an issue. The idea that it is rude to find the partner's seminal fluid obnoxious in taste or otherwise was never expressed, in contrast with heterosexual difficulties over this matter.

It was not universally assumed, however, that oral sex would lead to orgasm for the insertive partner, as mentioned by Anthony above in relation to glory holes (pp. 125–6). Receptive partners were seen as having variable skills at fellatio; a few men commented on the fellator's simultaneous use of his hands. A few mentioned that they thought the ability to 'deep throat' essential to good technique, though they conceded difficulties with gagging if the insertive partner had a particularly large penis.

Rimming

Rimming (anilingus) is less widely practised than fellatio but still common; it was reported by about 60 per cent of Male Call respondents. Men were more likely to qualify their endorsement of rimming; some would do it, especially in active

5. Except in one case: see under 'Semen' in Chapter 7.

(tonguing) mode, only with certain partners or in certain circumstances. It was not taken for granted in the way that fellatio is. One obvious reason for this is that it is physically less convenient; a man cannot simply unzip his fly and be rimmed. Concerns about contact with faeces, smell and hygiene were also relevant; these are discussed further below, under 'Faeces' in Chapter 7.

I don't rim people, because I think that is a way of getting hepatitis C or B. Or A. I mean, I'm vaccinated against A, but you know, for me that's not part of what I do. (S Alfred)

Nonetheless, a few men saw rimming as a routine practice to do with casual partners. A few were very enthusiastic about it. For Alfred it was part of an extended range of safe practices like tit torture and 'I don't know, toe sucking' that helped replace anal sex after the advent of AIDS.

Manual sex

The use of the hands in sex was not highly prominent in the transcripts. Because of its nil HIV-transmission risk, manual sex was not discussed in the Seroconversion interviews nor paid much attention in the Sites study. It was most commonly cited when respondents were asked what constituted safe sex, or in the Negotiating Sex interviews when they were asked what sexual practices they would expect to have in a casual encounter, or—if they did not mention it—in response to deliberate prompting. Many men seemed to think of it as part of foreplay, as a way of getting into sex rather than as sex in itself. Yet both (self-)masturbation and manual stimulation of the partner must be responsible for a large proportion of the orgasms in men's casual sex:

You're having oral sex, you're sucking him. You know he's not going to come that way or he says he won't come that way, but for some reason he doesn't want to fuck, doesn't like condoms or something. What would you do then?

Um he'll pull himself off and I'll probably—and I'll caress him in as in—that's the normal—I think that would be the standard way of doing it. (Anthony)

Anthony was the only respondent to mention the practice of masturbation while having receptive anal sex. He said that he could only enjoy receptive intercourse if he was masturbating or being manually stimulated by the insertive partner at the same time but observed that for many other men this was not true.

Soft words like 'fondle' or 'caress' were used very rarely and generally in relation to other parts of the body than the penis. Cuddling was mentioned very rarely.

Fingering

Stimulation of the anus with the fingers was rarely mentioned without prompting as a practice in its own right by the Sites and Negotiating Sex respondents, though many of the Seroconversion respondents reported having done it. A few men said they either liked or disliked it. Unlike oral and manual sex, it was not taken for granted as a component of a typical interaction, but regarded as something that needed to be negotiated. One issue that complicates this negotiation is the communicative function of fingering as indicating a desire for anal intercourse (as mentioned above under 'Body language and negotiation') or possibly fisting. For men 'warming up' for anal intercourse, fingering may be an unremarked but typical component of 'foreplay'. Occasionally fingering—like the use of toys—substituted for the penis when the insertive partner's erection failed.

Fisting

Fisting, the insertion of the hand and sometimes forearm in the partner's rectum (formally designated 'brachioproctic eroticism' by Donovan et al. 1986), was practised by several respondents, usually those connected with the B&D or leather scene. Even among men committed to anal eroticism it was frequently mentioned as a practice they disliked or did not want to try:

No, no, I haven't done that and I'm not in a mood to try. [Laughter] Um though someone asked me to and—

Which way?

To fist him [...] but I mean it just would have done nothing for me, so. It was kind of disappointing because he was very pretty. (Peter)

Chris was particularly vivid about it:

You have mentioned fisting before. Do you like that?

No, not at all.

Even doing it, I mean being the fist?

No, yucky, ooh. It's beyond me. [...] I've done it to people who have really wanted it and I did it to find out—I did it to find out what is the turn-on here and for them it was a turn-on, for me it was a complete turn-off. It was really quite frightening for me. I thought—I just had this vision of what if this person dies while I've got my fist up their bum, you know, like what do you do. It was just a horror—it was a horror for me. I couldn't go through, I couldn't keep it up because all I could think about was this person could die any moment. You know, their whole fuckin' guts could collapse on me and, you know, I'm sort of like oh my god, what do you do? You know. [laugh] I couldn't deal with it. (Chris)

For men who did practise fisting, it raised special issues of trust:

I think you have to first of all know—be very sure that they know what they're doing. They know the anatomy. [...] Um trusting that they don't go too far. Trusting that they don't um make certain movements which could damage your insides. Um um long fingernails obviously are out. So, I don't even have them sort of fingering me down there if they've got long fingernails, let alone anything else. Um I think that a lot of people say—I know that a lot of people say that the bottom is in charge, but I don't necessarily agree with that as far as fisting goes. You are bringing yourself in a situation whereby you are to my

mind not in control and um the person doing it to you really has to, if there is such a thing in fisting, but they have to be gentle. (Richard)

Men who were into fisting often did it at sex venues or as part of elaborate group scenes at home, with careful planning and use of equipment. Using gloves and lubricant appeared to be standard practice.

Anal intercourse

Many respondents said anal intercourse—either insertive or receptive, both or undefined—was their favourite sexual practice, but men differed over whether it was a practice you could assume you would engage in in a casual sexual encounter. For some men fucking was simply sex and the rest was foreplay. To a few, a man who refused anal intercourse was refusing sex and the encounter would be aborted. For others anal sex was something optional that required negotiation. They might practise it only with a regular partner, or only privately and not in a beat or dark-room. Even apart from HIV safety issues, this suggests that there is for many men something especially intimate or emotionally challenging about (receptive) anal intercourse. However, men did not enlarge on the emotional aspects beyond saying that it was ‘more intimate’. Nor did they hint that they experienced it as ‘transcendent’ (Bartos et al. 1994). They are blokes after all.

Learning to enjoy receptive anal intercourse takes initiation and practice for most people who try it, but among men who disliked anal sex, it was not always the pain of receptive sex that they disliked:

So, you say you like being fucked, but if it's somebody not too big?

Yeah, probably.

And being insertive yourself?

No, I don't like it.

What don't you like about it?

Well, I don't feel anything at all. I mean I always use condoms so I don't—I literally can't feel anything or it feels like that. I certainly never come if I was fucking, but I would if I was being fucked. (Peter)

Discussion of anal sex usually moved quickly to issues of safety, and in the Seroconversion interviews was framed from the outset in terms of risk of HIV transmission. Some preferred to have anal intercourse only in a cubicle or at home, where they could more easily negotiate condom use.

Men who said they never had anal sex at all because it was unsafe were those who also disliked it. This suggests that the post-AIDS change in gay culture that dramatically reduced the incidence of anal sex may have been led by men who did not like the practice anyway, and now had a respectable reason to refuse it.

[T]he last time I fucked someone was in 1985 I stopped there I just thought it was highly overrated there are so many other things you can do. I've never liked it done to me I suppose I've never really wanted to do it to someone else 'cause I don't enjoy it at all. I find it very uncomfortable and I suppose that's stopped me from doing it with other people. [...] It's sort of my way of doing safe sex as well, way back ages ago I just decided 'well just don't do it' no problems. (Brendan)

Many men reported seeing other men have unprotected anal sex, especially in darkrooms and sex venues in general. Some also admitted having unprotected sex themselves, sometimes counter to their avowed policy. Although none argued that insertive intercourse was exactly safe, the perception that it was less dangerous than receptive sex fuelled the rationalisation that their practice was not really unsafe either.

There was no universal assumption, however, that anal intercourse would necessarily involve ejaculation by the insertive man inside the receptive partner. This did not usually appear to be because men thought of themselves as using 'withdrawal' as an alternative practice to anal intercourse with a condom (though a few negotiated this within relationships). Withdrawal was common as a sexual practice without preventive intent:

With the receptive, would he ejaculate in you [...]?

Sometimes.

Would he normally?

Generally no, no, I usually withdraw but um that's not really—we don't worry about that either way [i.e. whichever partner was receptive]. Not by choice or safe sex, no. Um, yeah, safe sex wise we didn't worry about that either way. (SC24)

[group sex, met at beat, no condoms]

Was there any ejaculation?

When we were having anal sex, no there wasn't any ejaculation [...]. Um. People withdrew before ejaculation. (SC07)

The practice of avoiding ejaculation inside the partner did not always seem to be consistent with an attempt to prevent semen getting inside anyone:

Was there any semen around or?

Um, well bodies were covered in semen most certainly, and but um, people did not ejaculate in other people [...] but there was certainly an amount of sprog um, it was over everyone's bodies and over everybody's cocks, if you like. (SC07)

Most of the practice was *coitus reservatus*—that is, the insertive partner engages in coitus without the aim of bringing himself to orgasm—rather than *coitus interruptus*, where the insertive partner withdraws at the last moment before ejaculation. Anal intercourse was often practised primarily for the receptive partner's pleasure, and some men find it uncomfortable to continue in receptive role after they have reached orgasm.

[...] but you didn't come in him. You withdrew didn't you?

Not even withdrew just before I came. It was sort of like, OK. We played with the dildo, then you know, I fucked him for a little while. But because he came reasonably quickly uh, I withdrew and then masturbated after that. (SC19)

In fact I don't think he was even interested in ejaculating. He just didn't even bother about it. He was doing it for me. (SC26)

Men also withdrew even though they were using condoms. Sometimes this could be interpreted as 'belt and braces' carefulness, but it also suggested a desire to remove the condom for ejaculation:

[...] *safe sex?*

Well always using condoms and [I] would never let anyone, even with a condom on, come inside me. (SC04)

[fucked for 5–10 minutes] then withdrew, took the condom off and blew. (SC02)

One respondent perceived this as universal practice among gay men in his sexual milieu:

So you think everyone does pull out?

Yeah, whether you use condoms or not, everyone pulls out before they come. (José)

José seemed to find coming inside his partner rather emotionally intense for casual sex, though he had trouble articulating what was so 'full on' about it:

Do you practise withdrawal at all?

Um, it's not a big deal. I like fucking.

Does that mean you always come inside them?

No. [Pause] Sometimes I come inside. I'll come inside someone if they say 'Come in my ass'. It's one thing I usually don't do. It just doesn't feel right unless ... it's really full on. Unless they really want it [...] I'll come inside someone if they say 'Come in my ass'. It's one thing I usually don't do. It just doesn't feel right unless ... it's really full on. Unless they really want it ...

So you make a conscious effort to pull out before coming?

Yeah. I don't know. Maybe it's because the porn you see always has that happen.

[...] *Do you find that more erotic, more of a turn-on?*

It is really full on, coming in someone's ass. Shooting a load up their ass. D'you know what I mean? [...] it's much more than an exchange of blood.

Because there's part of you still in them, that means there's been ... it's been less casual?

Yes, it's much less casual, I think. (José)

For another, the emotional value accorded to coming inside was a reason for letting his partner do it:

Basically I enjoy sex without using a condom and having someone blow inside me. I don't feel I've satisfied that person unless I do that. (SC03)

Some men did make a clear statement that the sensation of ejaculating inside the partner was preferable to other alternatives:

it's totally different from being masturbated [...] when you ejaculate while you're fucking it's more total, in a way. (Julian)

Anal intercourse was often not so much either deliberate *coitus interruptus* or *coitus reservatus* as brief intromission, sometimes accidental:

at a beat I put my cock through a hole in the wall, and somebody sat on it. And I and then I didn't realise that's what they were doing, and I thought they were I thought it was oral sex. [laughs] And then I realised it was that and I was you know, I was pretty amazed. So so the all on every occasion when unprotected sex has happened it's that they want you to fuck them you know. (S Terry)

A lot of the time there is no verbal negotiation at all. [. . .] they'll sit on you or, if you're standing, they'll just go right up against you and, and actually put you into them. (S Mark)

Then, I went to the sauna in [state] and I was wandering around, then I saw this person stick their hand out through this hole in the wall. So I went over and I was, I had an erect penis, so I stuck my penis through the hole and that person started wanking me. And then they started sucking. And um, [pause] I was getting a bit close, so I pulled out and then the person put their hand against the hole again so I sort of relaxed a bit so I went, pushed my dick back in. Then I felt this sensation of the person um, sitting on my cock. And I knew it wasn't the same as being sucked. So I pulled out and then I went to the shower and I pissed in the shower, and washed myself off. And that was it. But it to me it was the first time in fifteen years that I'd actually had my dick in somebody's arse without a condom. (S Alfred)

These accounts echo the figure of 'the controlling, voracious, always receptive, infected but not infecting partner' identified in the narratives analysed by Keogh et al. (1998, p. 28).

A notable feature of the patterns of sexual practice reported by these gay men is that they do not assume that the purpose or end of insertive intercourse is the orgasm of the insertive partner. Of course, there is no logical reason why they should. But many heterosexual men would be surprised at this; for them, the discourse of pleasure dictates that coitus is the acme of a sexual encounter, other sexual practices are seen as subordinate or preparatory ('foreplay'), and withdrawal (generally assumed to be *coitus interruptus*) is seen as a major disruption and spoiling of 'the' sexual act. Further, they assume that it must be so, that naturally all men will feel like this. The existence of men who do not feel this way underlines that sexual responses, as well as sexual practices, are socially constructed. For humans, sexual behaviour—however grunty, animalistic and 'natural' it feels—is learnt.

Nudging

Many men made a distinction between momentary penetration without a condom and actual intercourse:

[...] *When he entered you, he started to fuck you without a condom. Is that right?*
Not even fucking me. It didn't even, wasn't even that. [I] just, just, I don't know, sat on it I suppose. (SC23)

Would you let someone fuck you without a condom?

Well once again it would be a matter of, they would insert and I'd say, 'Excuse me, would you mind using a condom?' [...]

How long would you stay in someone?

Minutes. Minute or two. I mean, you don't measure these things but it wouldn't be a long period. If we were going to fuck, I'd always use a condom. (SC37)

In sex-on-premises venues, touching the penis to someone's anus or inserting it briefly, or conversely 'sitting on' someone's penis, was a non-verbal way of indicating a desire to have anal intercourse. This might happen in a darkroom or other semi-public space. If the couple went to a cubicle together, condom use would be negotiated at that point. The earlier 'nudging', even though it apparently often involved shallow penetration, would not be seen by respondents as unprotected sex, because it was not 'proper fucking'.

Disliked practices and refusal

Negotiating Sex respondents were asked 'Has someone ever asked you to do something sexually that you didn't like? How did you feel? What did you do?' All could cite an occasion on which this had happened, though it was not often seen as a problem. Five men mentioned SM or bondage and discipline. Other disliked practices nominated included water sports (urine play), scat (coprophilia), role-playing games, fisting and kissing if the partner had bad breath. Two men cited insertive anal intercourse, though both were happy with receptive. Anthony answered less in terms of specific practices than in terms of the emotional colour of the encounter: he disliked feeling that the partner wanted to use him 'as a toy' or 'stick his dick down my throat'.

These responses confirm that the care which devotees of the more esoteric practices take to sound out prospective partners is necessary and justified.⁶ SM practitioners signal carefully and repeatedly through their dress, body care and adornment (tattoos, piercings etc.) and through verbal and nonverbal cues to find sympathetic partners and ensure that they have consent. These signals are not always entirely unambiguous, however. Both Brendan and Tom enjoyed the leather look, which got them the attention of men whose sexual practices did not interest them at all:

can you talk about your attraction to S&M, what sort of activities are you talking about?

I, I don't mean painful things when I say that I mean sorta like leather, the leather look and crowd, that sorta thing.

Perhaps it's more the milieu around S&M than the actual practices, do you prefer to be in that kind of environment?

Yeah, I mean some of the practices do not interest me at all I mean anything to do with any type of pain I'm not really that interested in at all, I would say like 'stop that now', but um, the look, the look's all right, fits in with older guys. (Brendan)

I have a look that appeals to leather men [but] that's not what I'm into [...]. Generally you can get out of it just with straight sex and [...], but as soon as you start feeling the two, three, four fingers going in [pause] no no [laughs], this is getting out of my control I'll I'll stop at that point. (Tom)

Perhaps because of his leather-style self-presentation, Brendan encountered people interested in scat more often than would the average beat or venue user:

I mean people have hint, people have hinted at scat you can tell where they're

6. In the 1996 Male Call survey (Crawford et al. 1998), fisting, water sports, use of sex toys or cock rings, SM and dressing up were classified as esoteric practices. They were found to be far less popular than touching, kissing, mutual masturbation, oral sex, finger fucking, anal intercourse and rimming, which were practised in the past six months by 60 to 99 per cent of respondents. Percentages reporting esoteric practices ranged from 2 per cent for SM with blood to 35 per cent for using sex toys.

coming from and you can change the subject very quickly [...]

Okay, when you say people hint at scat what are some of the hints?

Oh, you know, talking dirty you know what they're saying they might be getting at asking [pause] I suppose they expect you to pick up on that and go with it. I mean I wouldn't know what they are leading at I'd just probably change the subject. Very politely [laughs]. (Brendan)

Men found it easy to say no. They expected that either they would continue with mutually acceptable practices, or that the encounter would be aborted without rancour. They did not fret about the feelings of the 'rejected' party, though in other parts of the interview they might remark on men who were more or less gracious in their casual sexual interactions. Even Dirk, who reported considerable anxiety about whether he was pleasuring his partners, even to the point of having difficulty enjoying himself when they were doing things to him (such as fellating him), thought that male partners could cope if he rejected their requests:

So, has anyone ever asked you to do something sexually that you didn't like?

Um yeah, it's usually guys who want to be fucked [...] on the one hand I feel I'm letting them down, but on the other hand [...] I don't feel that bad about it because it's something I really don't want to do. Um and I do know there are plenty of other, you know, if that's the only thing that they're going to get off on then I think it's their problem not mine. (Dirk)

There were a few accounts of bad behaviour resulting in the rejected partner feeling hurt:

I remember negotiating with one guy for a while about um sort of I think um fucking or something and then I said something about um I felt like I wanted to just laze around and cuddle for a while and I didn't want to necessarily fuck straight away and then suddenly he went 'oh well if you don't think you're capable of doing it um you'd better call it off now because um I can't—I don't like to be disappointed' and then just walked off and I thought—I felt like I'd been rejected for what I said and what I'd actually said was something about I'm

not a machine, I don't intend to—I think it was pretty rude, I don't intend to just act in a mechanical way with you. I want some lead-up time. I, you know, enjoy other things than just um fucking for the sake of either of our orgasms. (S Dick)

This account and the few others like it all located the improper behaviour with the man who was rude in not accepting a refusal graciously, rather than with the party refusing the unwanted practice. Sites study respondents specifically mentioned that gentle rejection of unwanted approaches was part of good venue etiquette.

Casual sexual interactions and personal sexual scripts

Individuals must fit their personal scripts for sexual arousal into the interactional patterns appropriate to the setting. For some men, a one-to-one situation of privacy is essential for sex to occur at all. Peter's script for sex was violated on an occasion when his partner opened the cubicle door so others could watch them having anal intercourse.

Reading the transcripts from a woman's point of view, I was often struck by the demand of instant arousal or instant performance made by some of the interactional patterns of casual sex between men. Dick (quoted above) was rejected by his partner for wanting warm-up time before intercourse; presumably the other man's script required the obvious and immediate arousal of his partner or he would 'flood out' and drop out of role (Goffman 1972) in fear of the encounter remaining unconsummated, or through apprehension that his partner did not find him attractive. Peter got off to a cold start after arriving at the home of a man he had exchanged pictures with on the Internet. He had left his keys in the cab and then waited anxiously but successfully for their return. After this scare the sexy mood was broken, yet the two attempted to move straight into sex:

We went back upstairs and um I think I had some water and we decided to go on the couch and it actually wasn't that smooth um I think I was feeling a bit nervous and so was he. [...] I guess saying well let's go ahead and do it and so we had a go at it. Just we went to his bedroom and we undressed and it was

disappointing that his body wasn't as good as I'd hoped it would be and also um he just um tended to not be particularly vigorous. I mean he didn't lie there, he just—it's not that he just lay there, but I like a bit more reaction from someone when we're into—when we're having sex and it wasn't quite like that. Also he had difficulty having an erection. (Peter)

More than opportunity and desire are needed to create a sexual encounter. As Gagnon and Simon (1974, p. 19) put it, 'Without the proper elements of a script that defines the situation, names the actors, and plots the behavior, nothing sexual is likely to happen'. Some 'at home' encounters seemed to lack a script element for taking the participants from a non-sexual two-blokes-together mode into sexual interaction. Porn videos were often used to create arousal and sexualise the situation.

For Ralf, the mere thought of going to a venue was very arousing:

I never have any problems getting erections. Actually, when I when I used to go to the sex venues a lot, [...] I used to get so excited, blocks away from when I got there [laughs]. Blocks away. I used to have extreme physiological reactions to it. And sometimes, outside [sex club], I used to be shivering. Um, shaking with sexual expectation [laughs]. I had constant hard hard-ons [...] So I used to get in and sort of get my rocks off, so I could relax. (S Ralf)

In venues, men had various ways of dealing with the demand for instant erection and performance that might be made once they had paired off with someone. They would spend time watching videos so as to develop an erection that could be shown off while cruising, or offer themselves as the receptive partner in oral sex, sometimes with a series of partners, until they felt like being insertive.

Safe sex understandings

A crucial issue is that understandings of infection risk, however closely or distantly they correlate with medical views of risk of transmission, must be operationalised in the context of socially reasonable sexual behaviour. As demonstrated earlier in men's

attitudes to the use of condoms for oral sex, most men have a hierarchy of degrees of care that they feel it is reasonable to take:

Did [HIV] cross your mind at all?

[...] It always crosses my mind. You're just relatively sensible. I mean there's degrees of sensibility. If you stick a hand in some bodily orifice, do you put a glove on? If you're sticking a whole hand in, yes. If you're sticking a finger in, no. Um, if you're going to fuck some one, do you wear a condom? Yes. If you're going to have oral sex, do you wear a condom? Probably not, um. Degrees of safety. (SC68)

The discourse of sexual dysfunction

Although respondents often mentioned not sharing the sexual tastes of their (prospective) partners, they rarely made any kind of judgment of other men for those tastes, even when they found the appeal of the partners' preferred practices mysterious. Nor did they criticise men's performance in the functional terms used in sexology (Morrow 1994), except perhaps for the failure to 'get it up', and even that was generally dealt with in a matter-of-fact and sympathetic matter if it occurred during an encounter.

Although there is a whole, you know, group of men out there who um quite happily will fuck [i.e. be fucked] without an erection, you know, and not come at all, you know, and don't have an erection. So, I guess you might call it impotence, but um but I don't really see it as impotence because they're really into it. (Anthony)

A few men reported having had trouble with impotence or lack of libido. Rapid ejaculation was almost never pathologised as 'premature', even if it led to disappointment for the partner. The notion that there was something wrong with a man who could not reach orgasm from insertive intercourse (what sex therapists would call 'coital anorgasmia') was completely absent. The unspoken ethos seemed to be

that each man was responsible for his own pleasure, and if you found yourself with someone courteous and considerate, that was a bonus.

Sexual motivations and investments

One might imagine that men who have dozens or hundreds of partners per year and who frequent settings where esoteric practices like fisting and water sports take place would be unambiguously and enthusiastically committed to sex, energetically and uninhibitedly libidinous. This was not clearly so, though it was true of some respondents. Albert thought that the restriction on one's sex life if one were to stay HIV-negative would be intolerable:

I think if you're HIV-negative and you're paranoid about being, remaining HIV-negative, you would have a very desperately dismal sex life. You'd be concerned about being infected all the time, you would be rejecting people, I suppose, most of the time, because of their HIV status [...] and the only people who are HIV-negative, you wouldn't cross the road to ... (S Albert)

Some of the men were enthusiastic 'fuck bunnies'. Max, now in a relationship, considered himself to have toned it down recently (though he was in a venue five days earlier). In the past he was out having sex every night when he wasn't working:

sex can happen anywhere. It can be in the back seat of a car, in the toilet of a pub, in a lane behind a pub [The last time was] in the dunny at the [bar]. Basically yeah, and I went there to have a beer and gamble and unwind [...] I just met this man and we were talking and next thing, you know, we were in the bog fucking [...]

So it's okay, like, we have these drugs, we'll go and we're going to make a night of it and a day of it [...] I mean, I'm not going to bring anyone home who's gonna play for a half hour and then sleep and wake up and call you love in the morning, no thank you. [...]

Because I was around in the seventies and the eighties and—I was in San Francisco and all those places. And—you know, I have a very hard core mentality to what sex is and, I mean, even sometimes putting your dick in someone's arse isn't sex it's just another part of getting to a point where you're actually going to explode or, you know, both totally explode on another. (S Max)

At the other extreme were men who sought sex rarely, who even seemed not to like it much, and who were prepared to invest few resources in it. Despite the amount of his time Albert spent in search of sex, he seemed to resent this, to see it as something that needed to be got out of the way:

[S]ex is nothing, it's just an activity which you enjoy because you're randy and if you're randy you do something about it. You can go and have a wank in the bathroom [...], which is not always very satisfactory, or you can [...] get off with somebody who you find um sexually attractive and [...] turns you on, you know, you get your rocks off with them.

[...] You will start doing things. You'll stop work, you know, you might have work around the house or you might do something else, you know, you'll stop this and then you'll channel your concentrations looking for sex and uh and this is nice if the activity is there on your doorstep and you can sort of utilise it and dispose of it, you know, it goes away and then you get back, then you're relaxed and you're relieved and the tension has gone and you can back on what you really prefer to do, okay. (S Albert)

One man for whom sex was important feared the power it could have over him, and restricted his activities for that reason:

I like to keep my sex drive and my sex life under control to a great degree because I find it can totally absorb your life and take you over to the point where you're going out looking for sex. If you're in a relationship [...] it's always available and it's always there and you wake up with someone next to you, you're feeling horny you don't go to some beat on to my way to work and get off with some stranger,

because you're sexually satisfied. So this is why I've probably been looking a bit too desperately for a lover to move in with for love, to feel needed, be a part of my life, to do things with. Because I find my sex life to a great degree controls me if I don't keep it under control. (SC30)

There was a huge range of orientations towards sex, from the performative and practice-orientated to the relational and emotional; men who took the latter view saw sex as a way of getting human contact rather than an end in itself. Yet there were men who must often have seemed mechanistic, impersonal and genitally focused to some of their partners who nevertheless experienced themselves as searching for the rare *simpatico* sex partner, where the spark or chemistry was perfect. Men spoke vividly of how good sex could be when it went right, and how it made up for multiple less satisfactory visits to the venue, 'dud fucks' brought home or unsatisfactory interactions at beats. Others used the interview to challenge venue culture, to complain that other men were impersonal, or inconsiderate, or lacking sensuality, out of touch with their bodies. Intimacy was not automatically absent in anonymous sex; for some men close physical contact, especially anal intercourse, *was* intimacy in itself.

I think it's a man thing again. People hung up about putting things on their dick that's gonna take away the sensation. I mean, there's nothing like the feeling of a man touching a man [...]

What is so strong about sex that a layer of latex would make it different, when you adorn yourself so much, to attract a sexual partner? I mean, to have sex, you dress in leather, you put on lingerie, you get piercing, you add so much things to your body to make sex attractive. Why a layer of latex would make it less pleasurable?

Mm. Well, that's my observations, I look at it for a lot of people that don't know how to love or don't feel a lot of love in their life they don't have the skills to tell people they love them or they want to be loved and reach out, and touch—that is the ultimate feeling, to be able to actually touch somebody with an organ that is used for pissing and shitting and it's such an intimate thing. That's the only time that you get close to people. [...] So once you put something on them, you're saying: no, well, this is how you have to do it. And people rebel. It's like, well, no,

I need to feel this, I need to feel that somebody actually wants me for, even if it's five minutes or half an hour or whatever (S Max)

Even one-off encounters could be experienced as emotionally important. Genuine emotional closeness could grow out of the physical interaction, and only some men regretted that it would not continue into a relationship outside the setting. Some men had had long-term relationships that had begun in venue encounters. One Sites respondent made a cogent case for the virtues of sex without commitment:

because it meets those needs very well, having the sexual interaction that leaves you feeling satisfied, leaves you feeling satisfied physically, emotionally, spiritually, psychologically and on a whole range of different levels you feel good about it.

There's a notion of, if you were to try and continue any intellectual, or emotional, or physical, or spiritual interaction with this other person, it would then become bad, it would be destroyed in one way or another. Maybe, you know, they are Jewish, and you are Islam, or you are married to another man and they are desperately seeking someone to couple with and, you know, there could be any number of things that could suddenly go wrong with this perfect orgasm, this perfect experience. So it is easier, ultimately, and more productive to have the special experience, have the orgasm, but not engage in any interpersonal bonding, so that you don't feel any responsibility towards the other person.

You maintain the responsibilities that you feel towards meeting your own needs, and to experiencing something that is a shared experience with them, but you don't sort of seek to change their life in any way or have your life changed in any way, you know. It is quite a perfect interaction in terms of expressing your pure sort of sexual being, to be having an orgasm with another man, and then, after a rest, to sort of move away and not have anything to do with this man any more. (S Stephen)

Some who enjoyed sensuality did find it in venues:

[I]n a very verbal society that often works in clichés and works at a very superficial level, it can be quite exciting to contact somebody who's very tactile and sensitive and can use their eyes as a means of communicating things and can use their body as a means of communicating a whole range of things and it's not just um animal in the sense that the lusting or hell-bent on an orgasm, but an entire communication system that starts to develop between two people because they don't have any inhibitions that have built up over expectations or fear of criticism, I think. (S Dick)

But that was not Dick's typical experience of venues, which he found 'mostly essentially pretty alienating and a great deal of objectifying goes on'.

Choosing a partner

Appearance and attractiveness

When asked what they liked in a partner or what they found attractive, surprisingly few men made remarks that indicated erotic fascination with or fetishising of male bodies or parts of bodies—in contrast to the way heterosexual men talk about the attractive features of women. Many claimed that 'appearance' was not important to them in choosing a partner, though this may be partly because they interpreted the word narrowly to mean something like classical handsomeness. This became apparent when they went on to explain what it was about men's appearance that attracted them. A generally masculine and confident demeanour or bearing was very popular, as was looking like a nice person.

A shaved, buffed look was fashionable among Sydney gay men in the 1990s, and this was reflected in a few interviews. Richard felt that shaving his body, including his penis and scrotum, got him the kind of partners he liked, and that people would read the shaved skin as an invitation to sexual attention to his erogenous zones—an interesting point, as a hair fetishist might equally well read it as a desire to look fashionable in the gym bunny style at the expense of sensuality. Julian, who was also quite sensual, said that his resistance to fashion caused him

problems: he got ‘universal condemnation’ for growing his hair long, although he said he hated the bald look common at the time.

The muting of visual cues in darkrooms raises the question of whether men then use other senses to select desirable partners. A few men were aware of smell being a major factor in their selection of partners, but explicit recognition of sexual response to specific body smells was rare, as distinct from a preference for men without unpleasant body odour, bad breath or stale or over-strong cologne:

You know it’s that whole man thing, I mean, you want to smell a man sometimes, you want to smell the man’s smell. You don’t want to smell perfume and roses as such. No, I mean, that gets a bit boring. (Max)

Um I mean when I say the aim is to please the other person [in performing fellatio], it’s not like I’m not enjoying it. I mean as well as them getting off on it I also really like the smell, I really like the taste, really like the sensations (Dirk)

The sexual market

Cruising, whether in a beat or venue, has a frank element of the market about it. Male-to-male competition is open. As a result, the choosing of a partner is complicated by the danger of being publicly seen to settle for the less desirable trade.

I know people have looked at me as an individual, have been very attracted to me but they won’t have sex with me because I’m not part of that group look or I may not [...] fit in with what their friends say or [...] you may not be the look that they want to accept in their circle (S Tony)

To settle for a less desirable partner incurs something of the stigma of the sexual loser, not because one does not get sex, but because one gets low-grade sex or sex from men even more ‘desperate’ than oneself. Desperation is not admirable. It does not just mean how keen to have sex a man is. If it did, the desperate man would have randiness to recommend him, a key element in the praiseworthy performance of

masculinity among men. Desperation means how low a man will go, and the lower he sells himself the less he is worth.

This is perhaps a reason why darkrooms and other places with low visibility (such as the steam room in a sauna) are so effective for cruising. Close up, a man can be recognised, but from a distance, only general shapes are visible. This means not only that patrons can get aroused by the hinted-at, not clearly delineated possibilities, but also that if one goes with a man who might not be seen as very appealing, no one else can be sure of what one has 'caught'. Another advantage of saunas in this respect is that the uniform of a towel or robe and wet hair at least partially conceals many social markers and creates an artificial equality between patrons; a man cannot be teased by his friends for picking up someone in unfashionable clothes.

Sexual orientation and identity

Although all the respondents except Dirk identified as gay, their backgrounds and commitments to homosexuality varied. Many regarded themselves as not part of the 'scene'. One thought himself not a 'good' gay man:

No I didn't [suck him off] then and I never have done to anyone. I'm actually not a very good gay man.

Why not 'good'?

Because I don't like doing most of the things that gay men are supposed to like doing although I don't mind them being done to me.

You don't like doing it?

No, no, I don't have any impulse to do it whatsoever. No. You see penises don't interest me at all. Not the slightest bit of interest.

Have you been with women?

Oh yes, I was married. (SC38)

Respondents' views of the sexual identities and orientations of their partners was considerably more varied. Many had had sex with men they knew to be married or not gay. Chris was fascinated by the psychology of these men, many of whom he had

met through sex work (see quotation on pp. 140–1). Julian mentioned the need to negotiate with straight men:

I said well maybe we can, you know, work it so that if you satisfy me first I can then satisfy you because with a lot of straight boys particularly when they have male-to-male-sex they lose interest in it as soon as they've come. [...] the guilt soon emerged as well because he was basically straight, you know, girlfriends come and go, but um he's remained, as far as his male partner is concerned, totally faithful to me. (Julian)

The fact of being attracted to straight men was an occupational hazard for men whose notion of masculine appeal involved features found more often in straight men than gay men:

there's a whole gentle masculinity that I find, you know, extremely attractive and I have fallen in love with a couple of straight men in the past (Anthony)

Anthony was not the only one to mention that he found obviously gay or campy men—'queens'—unattractive.

Another attractive feature of non-gay men was the imputation that they were less likely to be HIV-positive, though this was possibly just a rationalisation of risk-taking, as in the case of respondent SC05, who met a 'clean-cut' young man in a dinner suit at a suburban hotel, and assumed that he was therefore 'safe'.

Opinions were divided on whether you could tell a non-gay man by his sexual practices. Several respondents said that straight men were sometimes uncomfortable with kissing. Such men were more likely to be found in beats and in the backrooms in the business district where brief visits were the norm and the dominant practices were oral and manual sex rather than anal intercourse. However, a few men pointed out that some gay-identified men were not interested in anal practices, and it could be that some straight men visited venues in search of anal practices that they could not do with their girlfriends or wives.

Jeff talked about the ambiguities of vetting prospective venue patrons:

Would you be able to know whether the person who come[s] in the door is gay or is straight?

No, you generally know that they've been to a place like that before by just their actions. If they appear slightly hesitant then you have to say: you know, it's a gay sex-on-premises venue. A lot of people—I remember like one guy, for instance, wouldn't respond so I was thinking has he actually heard, does he know, can he conceive of what's going to go on here. I turned around to him and said: are you gay? And he said: no, I'm not. You know, like he was quite aggressive and I said well I can't let you in. And he said: but I want to suck cock and I said oh so long as you know that, you know, you're going to have sex with another man. Oh yes, yes, but he wasn't gay. (S Jeff, venue worker)

The good lover

Negotiating Sex respondents were asked what made a good lover (i.e. good at sex, not necessarily a good live-in lover). The responses were various, reflecting the individual men's different levels of interest in emotional intimacy, sensuality or grunty hot sex. The main criteria nominated for the good lover were personal virtues: sensitivity, affection, versatility, attentiveness, consideration, unselfishness, communication skills, the ability to pick up signals, assertiveness, willingness to experiment, lack of inhibition, experience and comfort with his own body. Features of attractiveness included 'a fantastic body', a confident, masculine demeanour, and not being a queen or obviously gay.

Some respondents explicitly regretted the exclusively genital focus and lack of sensuality in many men they encountered. Some mentioned approvingly the sexual technique of partners who could warm them up with fingering and licking so that they could enjoy receptive anal intercourse. Others seemed to have no concept of technique and attributed the success of a sexual encounter simply to chance, circumstances such as drug use or their own level of sexual tension. Peter said that whether things went well had less to do with his partner than whether he had not had an orgasm for a while; his measure of things going well was that he came very quickly.

The dominant view of the good lover was that he was a nice person. This is not just a matter of people romanticising sex and ignoring specifically erotic sensation as distinct from interpersonal emotional interaction, though one might suspect that if one were interviewing women. It is because the units of meaning of erotic interaction are put together in the same way as in other interactions. Sex is not special and different; it is made of the same elements as the interaction where a hairdresser asks the customer if the water is the right temperature. This fact, however understood, is presumably what supports the ‘good sex is all about communication’ school of thought in sex and marriage counselling. However, the view that sex is all about communication and being nice to the partner ignores facts about the body and sexual tastes that seem less amenable to explanation in interactional terms. These are discussed further in Chapter 7.