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### Literature review Casual sex between men

This chapter looks at sociological investigations of sex between men. First I discuss ethnographic studies that focus on particular settings: beats or cruising grounds, then sex clubs and saunas. What is the picture they give us of what goes on in such settings? Then I look at studies in which men who have casual sex with other men were interviewed about their sexual activities. Finally I consider the implications of the different methodologies: what kinds of answers do we get from the different approaches?

#### **Beats: ethnographic studies**

Several of the key ethnographic studies of men's casual or public sex were performed before current interest in male homosexual activity was inspired by AIDS in the 1980s. This work from the 1960s and 1970s is largely framed within the sociology of deviance; indeed Troiden's paper on 'Homosexual encounters in a highway rest stop' (discussed below, p. 53) appears in a book explicitly called *Sexual Deviance and Sexual Deviants*.

The classic work on sex in what Australians call 'beats'—parks, toilets, beaches and other public places where men meet for anonymous sex (called tearooms in the United States and cottages in the United Kingdom)—is Laud Humphreys' *Tearoom Trade*, published in 1970.

Humphreys did an observational study of men's sexual encounters in public lavatories. In order to observe these encounters, Humphreys took the role of the 'watchqueen' or voyeur-lookout, which he describes as 'a role superbly suited for sociologists and the only lookout role that is not overtly sexual' (1970, pp. 27–8).

The group of lavatories that Humphreys studied were located in a city where most of the lavatory blocks had been built on the same plan; thus detailed patterns of behaviour in terms of positions taken, lines of sight, keeping watch etc. were transferable from one park to another. In these blocks there were no doors on the cubicles (p. 20), so it was helpful for men engaged in sex if someone was keeping watch for 'intruders' such as 'legitimate' lavatory users. The role of lookout was an insider role, but not necessarily one that required active involvement in the sexual activities that took place. The role of non-participant lookout was explicable to the participants as motivated by the voyeuristic component of the role.<sup>1</sup> Humphreys' descriptions of the interactions are detailed and careful. He describes how men arrived, usually by car, and waited in their cars until more men arrived before entering the lavatory, then how they took up certain positions inside to indicate their intentions or waited for someone suitable with whom to have sex. Assignations depended on eye contact and gestures rather than on speech; the scene was almost completely silent. Humphreys identifies participants—players (insertees, i.e. receptive partners or fellators; insertors) and lookouts or watchqueens (waiters, masturbators, voyeurs) and non-players, other characters that can disrupt the sexual interactional membrane—teenagers or 'chicken' (straights, enlisters, toughs, hustlers) and agents of social control such as police (p. 49). Humphreys' analysis draws heavily on Goffman, especially his *Interaction Ritual* (1967).

The sexual practice which led to the 'payoff', i.e. orgasm for at least one of the participants, in each sexual coupling was most often fellatio, occasionally mutual masturbation and rarely anal intercourse. Humphreys reports only two instances of anal intercourse (p. 75) in more than 100 hours of observation including systematic recording of 50 sexual encounters. Naturally, as Humphreys' sociological interest was in how the transactions came about rather than the details of the sexual acts or their potential for disease transmission, he does not pay close attention to exactly what happens sexually between the men once they start having sex, though he does note the detail of whether ejaculate was swallowed or spat out. He does mention that

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1. We can only speculate as to the extent to which Humphreys actually took erotic pleasure in this aspect of his research, and whether his experience of pleasures beyond those of scientific discovery allowed him to enact his role convincingly to his fellow participants. The fact that he was a heavy smoker (Nardi 1995, p. 9) must have helped to give him something else to do with his hands in the long hours of waiting.

sometimes men departed together from the toilets and disappeared into the bushes or went off in a car together. One may presume that encounters that led to anal intercourse, or to more personally engaged interactions involving conversation and even possibly an ongoing relationship, must have been among these encounters which Humphreys necessarily did not observe in full. The perfunctory and impersonal nature of the interactions he observed may even be to an extent a function of his presence as observer—however useful he was as a lookout for those practising speedy fellatio, he might have been an inhibiting presence for those wanting a more intense or personal encounter.

In search of further data about the unwitting ‘participants’ in his research, Humphreys did something that would be very unlikely to occur in a contemporary research project in these days of institutional ethics committees. He observed the car number plates of men using the beats and recorded them, then obtained their names and addresses through registration records from friends in the police. As Humphreys was a former seminarian and pastor he was known to and trusted by the police. Then, as part of a genuine health survey on which he happened to be employed soon after his observational data collection, Humphreys added the names and addresses of his ‘targets’ to the list of people chosen randomly by household for interview in the survey. Thus with a ‘genuine’ excuse he was able to knock at the doors of many of the men he had seen a year or more earlier having sex at a beat, and interview them about various health matters, including their sexual activities. He reports that none appeared to recognise him.<sup>2,3</sup>

Humphreys stresses the harmlessness of beat activity to other users of the toilets, and possibly even avoids discussing some interesting interactional features in order not to blacken the names of his nameless subjects. For example, he insists that all tearoom participants are solicitous about avoiding sex with minors. This is inconsistent with many gay men’s reports that their first homosexual activity occurred in public lavatories as young adolescents. Nor is all tearoom sex as

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2. However, the convention observed by tearoom participants of public non-recognition even of previous partners would tend to mean that if any did recognise him they would not acknowledge it.

3. There has been considerable discussion of the ethics of this manoeuvre in the literature since then (e.g. Nardi 1995), but it appears that whatever harm *might* have been done to the research subjects by their identities being revealed to the researcher in this way—if for example Humphreys had been part of a team, some of whom were not so solicitous for the interviewees’ welfare as he was and gossiped about men they met, or were careless about allowing others access to their research records—no harm appears to have been done in fact. Not that this would justify future researchers using similar methods.

tentatively and voluntarily negotiated as Humphreys argues; see for example Thompson (1994), whose interviews with men with learning disabilities who frequented beats reveal considerable experience of exploitation.

About half of the men Humphreys interviewed (54 per cent) were married and respectable. Indeed he argued that men with a 'shameful secret' were likely to be even more respectable than their neighbours, with the neatest gardens, the cleanest cars and the most conservative and conformist political views. He called this phenomenon the 'breastplate of righteousness'. Their homosexual activity certainly represents a different pattern from the kind of 'deviance'—burglary and receipt of stolen goods as a regular source of income, say—that is normalised within a community or subculture. Many of the 50 interviewees admitted their same-sex activity to Humphreys in the interviews.

Humphreys also did some 'key informant' interviews with openly homosexual men who talked to him in some detail about their use of beats. Thus his data collection was amplified by the interpretation and understandings of participants in the behaviour under study. Although his ethnographic analysis focuses on observable behaviour—and the sexual interactions in the tearooms were notably silent—his overall interpretation of the behaviour observed was fleshed out by interview data giving verbalised accounts of some participants' understandings of what they were doing.

On the basis of observation and the information from the interviews Humphreys divides the men who take part in beat activity into four groups: trade (heterosexual men, usually young, who generally adopt only the 'insertor' role in fellatio), ambisexuals (men who have sexual relationships with both men and women, and may take either insertor or insertee role in tearoom sex), gays (self-identified, 'out' homosexuals, connected to gay community, who use the tearoom for casual sex) and closet queens (closeted men who are not also heterosexually active).

Humphreys' picture of the operation of beats in the United States has been amplified by a few studies since then.

Desroches (1990) undertook what he described as a replication of Humphreys' work. In fact, by Desroches's own admission, it used a different methodology, though concerned with describing the same behavioural phenomena. The study is based on detailed notes taken by police when spying on five tearooms in Canada

with a view to arresting offenders. What it does do, as the author says, is to test some of Humphreys' claims. He confirms Humphreys' main findings that most tearoom participants:

- communicated through nonverbal gestures and seldom spoke
- did not associate outside the tearoom or try to find who each other were
- did not use force or coercion or attempt to involve youths or children
- were primarily heterosexual and married
- departed separately, with the 'insertor' leaving first
- had sex out of sight of the entrance and avoided accidental exposure
- did not undress and very rarely engaged in anal sex
- broke off sex when someone entered the washroom
- rarely approached straight men
- read and wrote graffiti
- lingered in the toilet for long periods.

Desroches adds that:

- Fellatio was not usually reciprocal and the fellator was usually the older man.
- Some men, typically insertees, would take on a number of partners one after the other ('series' encounters). There were also some reciprocal and group encounters.
- Most offenders were neat in appearance.
- Encounters were brief, mostly less than 20 minutes.
- Few of the men had criminal records except occasionally for similar offences.
- Shopping malls had usurped public parks as a prime location for tearooms.

Although published in 1990, Desroches's paper is oddly old-fashioned in style, very 'objective' and impersonal. His grasp of the complexities of sexual orientation and identity seems somewhat naive, as he appears to assume that all practitioners of public sex desire men as sexual objects, although his data say otherwise.

Desroches does not question the arrangements by which this victimless activity is deemed a crime. He records but does not lament the enormous harm done by policing it, through which men are charged with offences and 'outed' as homosexually active. Desroches collaborated with the police but does not assure the reader that his involvement did no further harm to the men.

Desroches asks why otherwise heterosexual men indulge in sexual activity in lavatories, even at some risk to themselves. He offers the following sensible and plausible answers:

1. Beat sex is impersonal and anonymous, and risks no emotional or personal entanglements.
2. It involves little effort and time.
3. It is free.
4. It offers a variety of partners.
5. The danger involved may be exciting.

Desroches does not speculate about what this might say about male sexuality in American culture, or why there appears to be no comparable activity among women.

Variations of tearoom operation are examined by Troiden (1974) in 'Homosexual encounters in a highway rest stop', Ponte (1974), 'Life in a parking lot', Corzine and Kirby (1977) 'Cruising the truckers' and Delph in his book *The Silent Community* (1978), especially in the chapter 'Erotic oases'.

Troiden (1974), Ponte (1974) and Corzine and Kirby (1977) report that in highway rest areas or parking lots, conversation was necessary for an encounter to take place. This was usually highly coded and stylised, opening with a request for a match or the time, and following with discussion of the weather or the location in a way that permits double entendres. If the man approached did not respond positively, the conversation lapsed without anything definably sexual or offensive having been said. Where the physical circumstances permitted it, for example a handy sleeping compartment in a long-haul truck (Corzine and Kirby 1977), sex could extend beyond fellatio to practices that require taking one's clothes off. The setting also influenced the types of men involved in the activity and the roles they took. At the truck stops, the truck drivers were assumed (both by the investigators and by the men interacting with them) to be heterosexual, and to take part in the activity as an 'outlet' (in Kinsey's hydraulic sense). As one of the drivers interviewed by Corzine

and Kirby put it of his first time, 'I was horny that night and decided to give it a go'. The men who cruised the truckers lived in the city or small towns near the rest areas and truck stops in the study. Corzine and Kirby explain that the location of two diners (transport cafés) and two highway rest areas (i.e. lay-bys or roadside picnic grounds) near a major intersection not far from a large midwestern town allowed locals to do a loop, cruising the four locales in search of 'action'. Cruisers were both men from the local gay subculture and 'ambisexuals' (in Humphreys' terminology) whose only contact with gay subculture was participation in impersonal sex.

Like several of the other 1970s observational studies, Corzine and Kirby's paper concentrates on the negotiation that leads to the sexual encounter, but says little about the practices the men engage in or what the sexual interaction means to the men involved. The sex itself is referred to as 'payoff' (Humphreys' term) or 'resolution', thus apparently accepting the notion of sex as an 'outlet' for a pre-existing male libido whose sole goal is ejaculation. The authors note some differences between the encounters they observed and Humphreys' reports of tearoom sex, saying that reciprocity was the norm rather than the exception and that activities included anal intercourse as well as fellatio and mutual masturbation. It is possible that the higher frequency of anal intercourse reported by Delph and by Corzine and Kirby than by Humphreys is due entirely to methodological effects (noted above, p. 49) or to the greater ease of removing one's trousers in the comfort and privacy of a truck sleeping compartment. However, it may also represent a secular change between the largely covert homosexual activity of the 1960s and the growth of gay communities in the 1970s, within which anal intercourse came to be seen and experienced as emblematic of male homosexuality.

Ponte's observational study of a parking lot near a beach revealed clearly different groups of men taking part in the action. A group of young, conservatively dressed college boy types used the parking lot as a social centre as well as a source of sex, and spent time chatting and arranging private parties. They did not speak to the other men using the beat. Ponte did not enter the lavatory block and so did not observe the sexual interactions themselves.

Lest it be imagined that the phenomenon of a public male sex 'marketplace' is unique to the locations described, Delph (1978) assures us that the culture of male impersonal sex extended far beyond New York where his observations took place.

One of his key informants told him of similar communications and participation in ‘gay bars, public parks, and toilets, a “dirty” book store, and the baths’ in two other large northeastern cities. Delph himself reports that a ‘motor tour of the midwest and northeast of the United States and Canada’ revealed that ‘the silent community proved fully functional and accessible’ (pp. 150–1). Another informant reported the same from Atlanta, Georgia. Two more informants reported that they cruised public parks in Italy, Greece, Spain, Portugal, Egypt and Morocco. Another reported beats in Cologne and Munich, finding the procedures for cruising similar to those employed in the United States. Beat culture appears to be international, at least in European, north American and Mediterranean urban settings—and perhaps universal, at least in large cities.

Pan et al. (1995) give a vivid depiction of the stigma and oppression faced by homosexually inclined men in China. They describe an active ‘tearoom trade’. As one of their respondents said,

Some [homosexual men] even on the coldest days [in Beijing] wait in Dong Dang Park benches for hours for partners to go to the toilet with (Pan et al. 1995, p. 8; interpolations by the authors).

Despite being published in the 1990s, this paper uses Kinsey’s seven-point heterosexual–homosexual scale for discussing sexual orientation. The authors’ assumption appears to be that all men who pursue public sex in China are homosexually inclined, although many of them have succumbed to social pressure to the extent of getting married. That some might be heterosexual men getting ‘free sex’, or bisexual by inclination, is a notion they do not entertain; indeed they report that their ethnographic (opportunistic, unstructured) interviews confirmed that the bisexually active men fantasised about sex with men while performing sex with women. This interpretation of the behaviour they report presumably—and quite understandably—arises from their clear concern for the plight of homosexual men in China. The sexual practices Pan et al. describe are similar to those in other countries and times without developed gay cultures, being mainly manual<sup>4</sup> and oral sex with

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4. I use the term ‘manual sex’ to refer to manual stimulation of the genitals of the partner. Often referred to as masturbation (which confuses it with self-stimulation) or mutual masturbation (though it may not be reciprocal), it is distinguished from caressing and groping, which are not intended to bring about orgasm.



only occasional anal sex.<sup>5</sup> Little kissing or affectionate fondling is involved in public sex.

Keogh et al. (1998) report on fieldwork in four beats in London, chosen to represent a range of types of setting: a public toilet near a high street, a cemetery, a piece of bushland beside a railway, and a formal city park with a toilet. Their analysis is discussed further below (pp. 62–4).

No Australian ethnographic work has been done specifically on the beat as a sexual setting. This is not because Australia lacks beats; they exist in almost every sizable town. Outside the gay precincts in the large cities, beats are the main location for male sexual contact and even gay sociality. Nearly half the men responding to the phone-in study Male Call said they used beats to meet men for sex (Crawford et al. 1998, p. 31). Beat sex has been investigated through interviews with men who use beats (Dowsett 1996 and 1997, Bennett et al. 1989a and 1989b,<sup>6</sup> Bartos et al. 1994). Some reports of beat encounters are included in the data analysed for this study (see pp. 119–22 below).

### **Making sense of beat ‘culture’**

Much of the 1970s United States research on homosexual interactions in public places reads rather like a description of the workings of a beehive or ants’ nest—acts, roles, signs are minutely described, but there is no sense of affect or subjective meaning for the participants. As Pryce (1996) puts it in his overview of the research, ‘[Delph’s] and other studies are like movies without a soundtrack; gestures, roles, practices are graphically described, but there are few voices’ (p. 326). This is probably deliberate; one can presume that in the sociological climate of 1970s America, the researchers would have seen this separation of researcher and researched as essential if the work was to be scientific. Ignoring participants’ points

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5. Williams (1995) has argued from ethnographic research and personal experience that men in some Asian cultures are less keen on anal penetration than American gay men, Javanese men for example preferring *coitus inter crura*. The contemporary emphasis on anal intercourse can be seen as a cultural export of Western gay community practice.

6. The beat outreach and recruitment component of the questionnaire study reported by Bennett et al. was not written up as an ethnographic study, but was reported on orally in feedback sessions given by the investigators and their interviewers; I attended one of these sessions.

of view and concentrating on observing the interactions from outside the process has the advantage of enabling close focus on the details of interaction. It also prevents the researcher's own point of view as an actor from swamping the observational data, taking over his or her attention. These researchers<sup>7</sup> were not asking 'what is it like to be these men?' and none were concerned with questions such as 'how can we intervene in this process to prevent HIV?'. They were asking 'how do negotiations take place to enable this deviant activity to take place outside the usual interactional settings for sexual activity?' They consciously set themselves outside the society being studied. Delph, Troiden, Ponte and Humphreys all describe rejecting or avoiding approaches from men while hanging about in public sex settings for research purposes. Ponte did not even enter the toilet block where much of the sex he reports on took place. Corzine and Kirby relate that they made their initial contacts with the cruisers through the local gay community, yet the reader can only guess at their role within it. Delph refers to himself rather comically throughout his book in the third person as 'the observer':

[After observing fellatio in a railway lavatory] By this time, the observer was weary. He had been sitting for over an hour. He determined to withdraw as soon as the next train arrived. As he got up, Reds turned and looked hopeful. The observer hurried dressing and rushed out of the cubicle (Delph 1978, p. 89).

He discusses his role as observer and problems such as sexual approaches, but does not canvas the possibility that rather than rejecting such approaches he might become a genuinely *participant* observer. It can hardly have failed to occur to him.

Tewksbury (1996) reviews these studies among others and comments on the 'detached' approach of many of them. His own study is based on interviews with 11 men (10 gay, one bisexual); he acknowledges the use of beats (though he of course does not use that term) by heterosexual men but does not mention this omission from his interviewee sample.

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7. In his interviews, Humphreys does explore the men's lives and the place of their beat activity within their lives, but he suspends such considerations while reporting his observational data. The analysis of the sexual interactions is not directly informed by any attempt to give them meaning from the men's accounts.

The study of MSMs is not necessarily a study of gay culture, but simply the study of behaviors and experiences of men who happen to engage in sex with other men (whether or not they are sexually active with women as well) (Tewksbury 1996, p. 2).

Despite this remark, Tewksbury appears to conflate the concepts of ‘MSM’ (men who have sex with men) and gay community when he mentions the existence of printed guides to cruising areas available through the gay community, referring to it as the ‘MSM community’.

Tewksbury quotes four interactional features or processes described by Lee (1979):

1. Protected territories facilitate encounters between strangers.
2. Potential partners are screened as acceptable risk.
3. The scenario is negotiated, risks are clarified and limits set.
4. The interaction is controlled so that consent is maintained and withdrawal from the interaction possible.

Lee applies these to SM<sup>8</sup> encounters, but Tewksbury argues that these features also apply to other casual sexual encounters between men who have sex with men, with the exception that in beat sex there is no access control to the setting.

Negotiating the encounter is a skill that must be learned, but it is not difficult: ‘even the naive, inexperienced cruiser can expect to engage a willing partner’ (Tewksbury 1996, p. 5). Encounters are bound by generally held norms of courtesy and civility. Men may withdraw at any time. This may disappoint someone, but there is no sanction enforcing continued involvement. This is different from the normal ‘rules’ for heterosexual sex, either casual or within a relationship: women frequently report feeling socially obliged to ‘follow through’ if the man is aroused, and men’s claims in defending rape charges that women had ‘led them on’ indicate that this is not a misperception on the part of women (Brownmiller 1975, Scutt 1992, and the large date rape literature, e.g. Bernat et al. 1999).

Men may learn beat etiquette from a knowledgeable friend, by watching others, or by ‘violating unknown norms and being subsequently sanctioned’ (Tewksbury

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8. I have used the abbreviation SM here because it is the subcultural pursuit of SM (often colloquially called S&M) that is under discussion, rather than sadomasochism in any psychiatric sense of the term. SM here refers to mutual consensual activity for the purposes of sexual arousal which involves infliction of pain or mock punishment, physical restraint or domination–submission.

1996, p. 6). Delph gives an example of this, where a young man in a busy subway beat looked at the graffiti and said out loud: 'This writing really turns me on!' Everyone else then left the toilet (Delph 1978, p. 25).

Tewksbury's informants describe the men present at cruising grounds as the full range of ordinary men. Ordinary masculine dress rather than gay fashion was appropriate. All men interviewed believed that some of the men who participated in cruising identified as heterosexual. 'Such [men] are more likely to venture into the more easily permeable setting of the public park than they are to cross the boundaries that maintain more recognizable gay settings (such as gay bars and baths)' (1996, p. 8).<sup>9</sup> Cruising in the park is an activity that was looked down on by gays, 'looked upon as, at best, marginal to the gay community' (Tewksbury 1996, p. 8): a man who resorted to going to the park for sex was seen as a 'scuzz' or 'slut'. It is ironic that the gay community, which had fought so hard for sexual freedom not afforded it by the wider community, should still harbour within its ranks people who condemned easy casual sex with almost as much viciousness as that visited upon women who fail to guard their virtue sufficiently. Tewksbury claims that this is due in part to a post-AIDS shift in gay values against multiple anonymous contacts. I find this implausible. It might be more convincing as an explanation for gay community disapproval of gay baths and sex clubs, which favour high-risk activities such as anal intercourse more than does cruising in the park. Gay community disapproval of beats and sex-on-premises venues is a complex matter and is discussed below on pp. 117, 121 and 132–3.

Like other commentators, Tewksbury points to the lack of verbal communication as a key feature of the pursuit of sex in public spaces. Silence acts as a shield against identity disclosures: 'When one speaks, one conveys more information than the mere content of one's words' (1996, p. 10). Silence thus helps to preserve anonymity. Yet despite the lack of verbal language, there is certainly discourse, what one of the interviewees calls 'a subliminal language ... that is not words' (p. 11). Successful cruising requires fluency in this subliminal language, 'a patterned form of communication that requires study, skill, and practice' (p. 12). It is hard to report

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9. This is not only because being seen in a gay establishment poses the risk of stigma. Gay bars and baths demand performance and dress standards, not to mention gym-toned muscles, that many men cannot attain—a point made by one of Flowers et al.'s respondents (Flowers et al. 2000, p. 73).

on—something ‘I’ve never really put words to until now’, as the same interviewee put it (p. 11).

As Tewksbury says, ‘the communication modes are by no means unique to the public sex arena’. Eye contact is crucial:

The ‘prolonged’ look, directly into the eyes of another, which might be considered deviant in ordinary, daily interactions, is the means by which men greet one another and quickly determine whether sufficient mutual interest exists to continue with increasingly intimate contact (p. 12).

One of Tewksbury’s respondents even suggested that the prolonged gaze could be used to identify impostors such as undercover police:

Even cops aren’t comfortable enough to hold your gaze, you know—I mean ‘cause they are not just to the point of doing it. That’s one of the biggest clues for me (p. 12).

Touching, too, even the slightest and most gentle touch, represents a breaking of the normal interactional rule against touching strangers (especially in Anglo-Saxon society) except for very specific permitted purposes. Tewksbury makes the fascinating suggestion that ‘In essence, men seeking male sex partners in anonymous public settings employ some of the traditionally feminine means of communication’ (p. 17).

Krol (1990) also makes the point that beat etiquette uses interactional tools from the wider society: ‘cues, symbols, and gestures [employed in the tearoom] are not subcultural, but rather, are typical cultural tools of the larger, conventional culture’ (p. 276). Krol’s central question is: if the men who participate in tearoom activity are not gay, how do they know what to do? How do they learn? Krol does not mention Goffman, but the interactionist approach and some Goffman-like terminology from Humphreys are imported into his argument.

Krol proposes that people have a ‘tool kit’ of skills they apply for strategies to meet their own ends, for example to get impersonal sex. People’s ‘choices are not driven by their values, but by what they find they have become good at, or at least accustomed to’ (Swidler 1986, quoted by Krol 1990, p. 274). Krol asks ‘should we grant the importance of culture as a “tool kit” over culture as a value collection?’ This has echoes of Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus* (pp. 26–8).

Krol further quotes Swidler saying: 'what people want ... is of little help in explaining their action' because they do not do what they do not know how to do (or, in Gagnon and Simon's (1974) words, do not have a script for). Krol says 'To understand how action is accomplished the researcher must actually examine the mechanics that accomplish that action, not the motives that initially might stimulate it' (p. 274). Accepting this, I argue in Chapter 6 that the notion of 'homosexual desire' is inadequate to explain why some men seek public sex, and still less how they achieve it.

Beats in public toilets operate within an existing social setting as well as within a particular physical location. Lavatory use has rules of interaction within which beat participants conduct themselves. These rules are explored by Cahill (1985) in his 'microsociological analysis of the behavior that routinely occurs in public bathrooms' (p. 33), done with the assistance of five student ethnographers. He concludes that 'typical bathroom behaviors include the open staging of public performances, the concealment of emotional reactions, the indulgence of creature releases, and the inspection and repair of personal fronts' (p. 55). Although a lavatory is a 'backstage' area (in Goffman's terms) where people perform the socially polluting acts of defecation and urination, it is also a social zone. Because a public toilet is open to anyone of the appropriate sex, the area not enclosed by cubicles resembles other enclosed public space, and behaviour there thus 'resembles, in many important respects, the behavior that routinely occurs in other public settings' (p. 38). Orderly queuing, even when people have special needs, is rarely disrupted. If it is disrupted, for example to prevent a small child having an accident, convention requires profuse apology from the 'offender'. In the area outside the cubicles people usually acknowledge acquaintances, though they treat people with whom they are not acquainted with civil inattention.

The usual rules of civil inattention are under stress during the act of using a urinal. Cahill reports that men usually avoid using adjacent urinals. If this is unavoidable, they do not look at the man using the adjacent urinal; he receives not merely civil inattention but 'nonperson' treatment, as if he were not there. Men who are acquainted may converse at the urinals but will not look at each other, particularly at each other's penis. Rather each man stares at the wall in front of him, visually honouring the other's privacy.

In the context of such constrained and rule-governed behaviour, only small departures from the rules are needed for a man to indicate sexual interest: a tiny change in the angle of vision from vertically down at his own penis to the penis of the man adjacent at the urinal, or from straight ahead to slightly to one side or into a mirror. Such tiny indications are not in themselves aggressive or culpable: an unwilling recipient can simply ignore them and walk out. Even if a man inappropriately displays an erection to another, the usual interaction rules would specify that the legitimate toilet user should fail to ‘see’ it. This makes sense of Humphreys’ assertion that non-players are not at risk of harassment by men seeking sex.

Cahill points out that the toilet stall or cubicle is a space over which a user exercises privacy rights during their occupancy of it. In support of these rights, ‘walls and doors of toilet stalls are ... treated as if they cut off more communication than they actually do’ (p. 37); people do not usually talk over them, and exercise ‘tactful blindness’ or civil disregard of sounds and smells emanating from stalls. Cahill argues that because people seek privacy for defecation, they do not use doorless stalls for this purpose; the employment of open stalls for defecation was never seen during observation for the study. This illustrates the unsatisfactoriness of the removal of doors by authorities as a means of ensuring that public toilets get used for their intended purpose and not for illicit purposes such as casual sex or drug taking. Further, the conventions for the civil inattention that is afforded to other users of the toilet assist people in not noticing—or not admitting to noticing—irregular activities such as sex (including masturbation) taking place in a cubicle, even if it is in fact audible.

Keogh et al. (1998) argue that ‘the social and sexual organisation of PSEs [public sex environments, their term for beats] is likely to be complex and “organic” in nature (that is will have grown up naturally around a set of conflicting imperatives)’ (p. 23). Behaviour is determined both spatially and socially.

Some behaviours are not appropriate in certain spaces:

Thus, for example, it is socially appropriate to walk up and down aisles [*sic*] of a supermarket and stand in a queue etc. It is[,] however, not socially appropriate to recline on the counter-tops. Likewise, in a swimming pool, it is not socially appropriate for a man to appear in the woman’s [*sic*] changing room (or vice versa) or to appear naked in [the] foyer (although to do so in the men’s changing rooms would not excite much interest) (Keogh et al. 1998, p. 36, n. 5).

In a toilet one may look around or not, glance at someone or not, urinate or not, choose one urinal rather than another. In a park, one may walk purposively or not, stop or not, look or not. These choices constitute a language of positive and negative signals read by other players.

Thus at beats in locations with open access by others using them for their legitimate purpose, beat-users' behaviour will be bounded by these rules of social appropriateness. Some beats are in what Keogh et al. call 'non-places', locations with no social or civic function, such as railway sidings, ruined buildings, or parks or commons at night. The authors draw out three factors that affect styles of behaviour at different beats: access to the setting, men's physical proximity when using it (e.g. in a toilet one stands quite close to another man), and privacy. In a public toilet it is 'socially acceptable to hold one's penis in one's hand whilst standing in close proximity to another man' (p. 24). In parks, sitting, walking, standing and staring are all acceptable actions. A path creates the opportunity for chasing or following, and bushes give privacy for sex.

Keogh et al. identify three essential stages of cruising:

1. defining behaviour by which cruisers distinguish each other from other people ('is he a player?')
2. reciprocal gestures that confirm mutual sexual interest ('will he play with me?')
3. some form of sexual contact.

The process cannot progress to a subsequent stage if the previous one has not taken place successfully. This prevents mistakes or propositioning of the wrong man.

Approaches may be highly scripted and choreographic or variable and individualistic, depending on the particular situation (p. 24). At sites (such as parks in the daytime) that are easily accessed and used by others, the interactions are more scripted, so that players can be certain of the intentions of others in a setting where there is more risk of encountering a non-player. In less socially and spatially predetermined sites, behaviour is more individualistic. If you are there at all you are seen as a player—there are 'no "innocent" behaviours which cover subversive ones. Instead, social organisation is determined entirely by the real function of the site (i.e. the sexual function)' (p. 25). The type of sexual practice engaged in is affected by the



risks and privacy offered by the site; it is determined ‘by the willingness of couples to take specifically social as opposed to sexual risk’ (p. 26).

Keogh et al.’s excellent analysis chimes with the findings of the American ethnographies of various sorts of cruising grounds and proposes plausible explanations for some of the differences between them. It is therefore all the more regrettable that in their introduction they are so unfairly dismissive of the US work and its motivations, claiming that

These studies have contributed to HIV prevention a reductionist understanding of PSEs, which amounts to a mis-construal. This account:

- conflates PSE use with sexual, mental or social pathology.
- assumes that PSEs are mostly used by heterosexually identified, covert homosexuals.
- assumes that PSEs are the only venue where such covert homosexuals have sex with each other.
- assumes that the sole purpose of using a PSE is to avoid stigma while achieving sexual pleasure (p. 4).

Even if these assumptions *had* been made by the authors cited (who include Gagnon and Simon 1967, Ponte 1994, Corzine and Kirby 1977, Delph 1978, Bell and Weinberg 1978 and—most implausibly of all—Rumaker 1977 and Styles 1979), their error would not have been ‘reductionism’.

Keogh et al.’s analysis of beat behaviour is presented in the context of a report that also looks at anonymous sex in sex-on-premises venues through participant observation and interviews with 20 users, and is informed by two questionnaire studies: one of 1800 gay men attending the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Pride Festival in London in 1997, and one of 194 men recruited in sex-on-premises venues in London. The authors argue that most users of beats and other venues are gay men, and that the assumption that beats and venues are used mainly by other (i.e. non-gay-identified) homosexually active men is ‘entirely unfounded’ (p. 6). Even if they are right in maintaining that only a minority of beat/venue users are not gay-identified men, the figures they present cannot prove this in the absence of evidence on the relative size of the gay and non-gay homosexually active male populations and on their frequency of use of beats and venues. I take up Keogh et al.’s argument again in Chapter 8 when considering implications for STD/HIV prevention.

Male sex in public spaces is placed in a wider historical and cultural context by Arne Nilsson (1998). Partially based on oral-history methods, Nilsson's paper about the lives of gay and homosexually active men in Gothenburg during the decades around World War II confirms much of what Humphreys reports about the operation of toilets as beats, including the role of the look-out and behaviour such as pretending to urinate and showing the penis. The paper also confirms Delph's point that members of the 'silent community' can contact each other at any time in anonymous public urban space—on the street, in public transport etc.

Nilsson acknowledges certain things that are often overlooked, including the connection between the culture of male sexual interaction and mainstream working-class culture. Nilsson acknowledges that as reports were given to him by men who were 'so' (those who identified as what in English at the time would have been called gay, camp or queer) rather than by the 'real men' with whom they interacted sexually, there is a silence around the motivations and experiences of the non-gay men involved in the interactions.

Nilsson stresses repeatedly that the homosexual subculture was part of a larger street life that men had in the crowded living conditions of mid-20th-century Gothenburg. Strict sexual division of domestic labour made home a female space. Men worked, went home, ate and went out, but most had little money for cafés and restaurants: they hung about in the streets. His analysis succeeds in problematising (without using such a word) the notions of public and private. These men did not lead a substantial part of their arguably most private life in the 'private' sphere in the sense of 'home' (p. 100). This is true of male working-class culture, with which male sexual culture shares traits (pp. 98–9), a point also made by Bob Connell and Gary Dowsett, to whose work Nilsson refers (Connell 1995; Connell et al. 1993; Dowsett 1996).

Nilsson acknowledges the gender division of public outdoor space: 'women were working in, bound to, and controlled in their own or others' households'. Men said the only women they met outside were prostitutes. The period after the war brought changes, such as the easing of the housing shortage and liberalisation of liquor laws, and also the first more-or-less open (or at least accessible) homosexual commercial establishments. Public space was the target of clean-up projects and campaigns against boy prostitution; other people entered the space. Employment

rates rose. The basis for the earlier permissive culture among working-class men weakened as part of the embourgeoisement of the working class. More men could afford to have a family. (Before the war a large proportion of men aged 15 to 50 were unmarried.) More men could afford to visit female prostitutes. Gender segregation in non-working time was reduced and a family-oriented lifestyle developed. Use of time became more disciplined and men spent less time hanging around. Women became more available sexually. Adolescents spent longer at school, the category of 'teenager' appeared and car ownership grew.<sup>10</sup> One could describe all of these changes as a move to the 'heterosocialisation' of Swedish society. In this context, visiting homosexual organisations or bars was more threatening to the identity of straight men than the earlier pattern of outdoor homosexual activity had been (p. 107). Nilsson explicitly links family-friendly suburbanisation policies after the war to the aim of preventing street 'vice': the city was dangerous from the bourgeois perspective.

In short, male homosexual life in Gothenburg moved from outdoor to indoor spaces and became specialised into a gay form rather than part of a mainstream homosociality. It is interesting to an Australian reader that Nilsson does not mention the cold. I would have thought Sweden a very inhospitable place for outdoor sex.

Nilsson does not discuss the sexual practices involved in the outdoor homosexual culture, but suggests in a note (p. 110, n. 16) that perhaps part of the attraction of homosexual encounters for married men was that they allowed acts not permitted in marital sex. He coyly refers to these as 'safe sex', presumably referring to fellatio.

Henriksson and Månsson (1995) also mention that their oldest informants told them of sex in public toilets in the 1940s. By examining case files for prosecutions, Maynard (1994) charts the use of toilets for sex between men in Toronto from 1890 to 1930. The culture of sex in public toilets may be as old as public toilets themselves. Despite the development of indoor homosexual venues, beat culture seems surprisingly stable given the historical changes in the social positioning of

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10. However, as the US research shows, the car can be an enabling factor for male-male sexual contact.

gays and in attitudes towards homosexuality during the 20th century.<sup>11</sup>

### **Indoor sexual spaces: sex clubs and saunas**

The classic paper on gay baths, cited by all subsequent researchers as Humphreys' book is by everyone discussing beats, is Weinberg and Williams's 'Gay baths and the social organization of impersonal sex' (1975). Weinberg and Williams set their work firmly in the framework of the study of the social organisation of sexual conduct rather than of its psychological motivations and attitudes. Indeed they dismiss even Gagnon and Simon's work as too individualistic and paying insufficient attention to the location and organisation of sexual scripts within social settings (Weinberg and Williams 1975, p. 124, n. 1). They take as a given, then, that (some) men desire impersonal sex, and set out to ask what the conditions are that allow this desire to be satisfied most conveniently. They note that the pursuit of impersonal sex ideally requires: safety; access to attractive potential partners (at minimal expense); a known, shared and organised reality within which to operate; a congenial atmosphere; and physical comfort. All these features are provided by gay baths.

Weinberg and Williams's observations were carried out in five modern baths in different parts of the United States. Certain features were common to most baths: a steam room or sauna, private bedrooms or cubicles, lockers, showers, toilets and a dormitory or orgy room. Additional facilities sometimes included a burlesque show, television or a snack bar. A patron put his clothes and other belongings in the locker or private room and wore a towel around his waist. He could stay in his room with the door open waiting for someone to come in, or he could cruise the corridors and other spaces. Group sex could occur in the dimly lit orgy room. Although safer than beats and more satisfactory for homosexual patrons, baths (at least in the United States of the 1970s) did suffer raids from the police. Prices ranged from US\$2 to \$12, depending on time of day, the 'lavishness and popularity of the bath' and whether a private room was rented.

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11. Beat culture will presumably be disrupted by the replacement of toilet blocks with the modern single-cubicle automatic toilet which opens its doors after a set number of minutes, exposing the occupant to the passers-by on the street, and switches on its cleaning jets.

‘Because of the known and shared intent, cruising is much less furtive in the baths than in most other settings’ (Weinberg and Williams 1975, p. 130). Custom discouraged conversation, however. Interactional cues included displaying one’s room key, or adopting a position on one’s bed that indicated the desired sexual act, for example lying on one’s front to invite anal penetration. Weinberg and Williams argue that this culture of impersonal sex was ‘fed and sustained by the wider homosexual culture’ (p. 131). It is not quite clear here whether they mean gay community culture or the male sexual culture of beats and other non-gay settings. As in beat culture, there is only minor variation from place to place.

The men’s desire for bounding of the sexual experience and maintenance of anonymity

is facilitated by interactional rules and territories that clearly define sex as an outcome, that limit socializing, and that sustain the expectation of closed horizons regarding the future of the relationship (Weinberg and Williams 1975, p. 131).

The environment was congenial partly because of the simple and gentle ritual interaction patterns, masking rejection and reducing sexual performance pressure. Some participants, however, felt that the rules limiting social interaction also made the baths less friendly than they might have been. Weinberg and Williams argue further that the clean and pleasant environment of the newer baths was ‘positively evaluated’ by patrons. Compared to tearooms, massage parlours, casual pick-ups and street sex workers, baths met the five requirements for ideal impersonal sex.

It is interesting that Weinberg and Williams implicitly regard gay baths as in some way a possible substitute for massage parlours and street sex workers, two ways of buying heterosexual sex—a point also made by Humphreys (1970, p. 115) about the men in his category ‘trade’. In this Weinberg and Williams differ from other 1970s writers and indeed many contemporary commentators, who seem to assume that some element of homosexual desire (that is, desire for the masculine body or preference for sex with men) is present in all men who seek sex with other men, even if that desire does not correspond to gay or homosexual self-image or social location. Within the ‘deviance’ framework, a homosexual was simply someone who engaged in a deviant practice. (This is the way in which Delph (1978), for example, appears to use the term ‘homosexual’.)

The desire for such impersonal sex can be seen, Weinberg and Williams point out, as depersonalisation and objectification, features of the 'market mentality'. Is this a bad thing?

[S]ociology traditionally conceptualizes impersonal relationships as superficial, tawdry, depressing, or pathological. This conception ignores the fact that such relationships may be defined as positive by the people involved. It ignores the fact that participants may interpret the impersonal experience as fun, enjoyable, or satisfactory, and that a market-type social organization may indeed be the best for facilitating such experiences (pp. 134–5).

In his paper 'Urban sex institutions', Armstrong (1980, p. 186) explicitly states that opportunities for impersonal sex were 'rigidly segregated along heterosexual–homosexual lines'. He describes two settings, the gay bath house and the massage parlour (a limited-service brothel offering 'hand relief' or manual stimulation of the penis, presumably illegally). Invoking Merton's (1971) notion of 'institutionalized evasions of institutionalized rules', Armstrong argues that these two settings were not individualised evasions of the usual social rules, but were patterned in well-defined types and adopted by large numbers of people, 'rather than being scattered subterfuges independently and privately arrived at'. The settings had their own cultural rules including a system of sanctions for rule-breakers. This is unsurprising for the contemporary reader approaching such settings with the assumption that they were functioning subcultural institutions, but presumably needed to be said in a sociological context where such activities were conceptualised in terms of 'deviance'. The main contrast that emerges from Armstrong's comparison of massage parlour interactions and those in the baths can be traced to the key difference that the relation in a parlour was a client–worker relationship (one in which the customer is at risk of being cheated, but cannot appeal to the law to assist him in gaining redress), whereas in the baths men chose sexual partners freely from among other patrons. Armstrong challenges the implicit assumption in Weinberg and Williams's classification of 'personal' and 'impersonal' sex that sex with commitment is 'personal' sex.

But as shocked defendants in divorce proceedings tell us, long term sexual partners may hardly know one another and may misjudge the other's commitment. The personal nature of sex is best

defined as a continually changing dimension constituted by participants during a specific time and at a particular place (Armstrong 1980, p. 189).

Styles's (1979) ethnographic exploration of a single gay bathhouse confirms the main physical and functional features described by Weinberg and Williams and by Armstrong, as does Delph's (1978) chapter 'The gay bath'. Styles's account is much more personal, however, and charts a change in his own approach to the research—essentially from an attempt at uninvolved observation to frankly personal and genuine participant observation—over the course of several visits. This is discussed further below (pp. 86–8). A personal account, rich in experiential detail, is also given by Rumaker in *A Day and a Night at the Baths* (1977). Because the bathhouse he described had ceased to exist before his book was published, Rumaker was able to be very specific about the location and many other details of the establishment. However, given that his is a semi-fictionalised account we must allow him some literary licence in perhaps telescoping experiences from other visits into what is reported as his first time at the baths. Compared with Styles's account of how even as a gay man he found bath etiquette complex to learn, Rumaker's account of almost instant ease and success is somewhat implausible.

Another account of a defunct institution is given by Brodsky (1993) about the Mineshaft, a gay bar and SM/leather<sup>12</sup> club in New York closed by authorities in 1985 in AIDS panic. Brodsky calls it a 'retrospective ethnography' because he did not do systematic observation in the setting, but wrote about it after it was closed down. He gives a clear description of the space, its location and the sorts of things that went on here, although he is not equally clear about the specific sexual practices, or even about how the SM interactions operated.

Brodsky saw gay community sexual culture in the 1970s as a Dionysian counterculture to the mainstream 'heterosexist, rationalized, materialist, power-oriented, and erotophobic' culture (ignoring the hippie and feminist countercultures that also critiqued patriarchy and the 'rationalised' state). Brodsky interprets the term 'S&M' as an abbreviation of 'slave and master' instead of or as well as 'sodomasochism'. He rejects the psychological or psychiatric connotations of sado-

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12. Leather is an erotic subculture, strongly influenced by gay biker style, involving leather costumes (with metal studs and other accoutrements), leather implements and often SM sexual practices. Leather culture may include lesbians and heterosexual men and women.

masochism as involving sadism, seen as cruel brutality, and masochism, seen as pathological self-destructiveness. Brodsky stresses the theatricality of SM and uses Goffman's symbolic interactionism for his analysis of the interactional patterns. However, he points out,

analysis must move beyond the symbolic; it must also examine touch, smell, taste, and non-verbal sound as non-symbolic avenues of culturally meaningful experience. In a highly verbal culture, where words and mass-produced images dominate socially constructed reality, the dim lighting and primarily non-verbal communication of the playground eerily emphasized the openness of touch, smell, taste, and non-verbal sound as avenues of experience (Brodsky 1993, p. 248).

Brodsky's stress on physical experience takes him beyond the visual but experientially disembodied approach exemplified by some of the 1970s writers (including Humphreys (1970) in the ethnographic sections of his work). Delph (1978, p. 69–70) at least reports the intense smell of the men's lavatories, but apart from noting that some classes of men would avoid the dirtier and smellier establishments, he does not incorporate the response to the smell or its meaning into his analysis of the men's use of lavatories as sexual spaces.

Brodsky shows awareness of the Mineshaft as a place managed for commercial purposes by non-gay people:

the Mineshaft was not under the control of the homoerotic male community. It was clearly the creation of secondary labor market capitalism and maintained through traditional forms of political corruption. Its owners allowed its use as a vehicle for media exploitation of gay men.<sup>13</sup>

Nevertheless, nightly, it clearly demonstrated the power of culture and social organization to transform sensation and physiological response into erotic experience (p. 249).

Although published in 1993, and written about a venue closed because of AIDS, Brodsky's paper is not concerned with the Mineshaft as a potential site either of HIV transmission or HIV prevention intervention. In this it differs from almost all other work on sites of homosexual contact written since the epidemic (e.g. Richwald et al. 1988, Bolton et al. 1994, ten Brummelhuis and Herdt 1995, Henriksson and Månsson

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13. For example in the shooting of *Cruising*, a film partly set in the Mineshaft that, Brodsky argues, portrayed the gay community very negatively (p. 239).



1995, *Dangerous Bedfellows* 1996, Mendès-Leite and de Busscher 1997, Santana and Richters 1998, Flowers et al. 2000).

Henriksson and Månsson (1995) acknowledge the complexities of the male sex scene as containing gay and non-gay men. They too draw on Goffman's dramaturgical metaphors for social interaction (p. 161). Their research was based in three video clubs, one of which 'describes itself as "Europe's largest porno house". It is run by a large porno and sex club company that normally addresses a heterosexual audience' (p. 162). Patrons could watch films on large screens or one of 60 videos shown simultaneously in cubicles. Another club, which no longer had lockable cubicles, showed heterosexual, bisexual and homosexual films. The straight films were shown in the areas nearest the door, so a progression from 'normality' to 'deviance' was expressed architecturally. In various parts of the building, cruising and sexual encounters took place. Interestingly, Henriksson and Månsson note that establishments, or rooms within clubs, that mostly show straight films were as popular for sex between men as those showing gay films. This raises questions about the fantasy content of the sex that takes place that the authors do not take up.

Patrons learned how to use the premises: 'A considerable degree of cultural competence is required ...' (p. 163). Giggling and whispering signalled unavailability for nervous young men in groups. The display of an erect penis could be a sexual invitation, but Henriksson and Månsson suggest that it could also be read as male space marking and therefore as aggressive or territorial.

Venues contained 'hot' areas (including the toilets) where cruising and sex took place and 'protected' areas, where men could rest or avoid being approached. Despite the presence of heterosexual men who might sit in protected areas and avoid sexual contact, the clubs 'usually do not show the same "membrane" phenomenon as the public toilets. There is no need to adjust your dress and position each time someone walks through the door' (Henriksson and Månsson 1995, p. 165). At some venues owners appeared ambivalent about admitting the fact that sex was actually happening and might be reluctant to distribute condoms or display safe sex messages. 'In other places the owners themselves have deliberately built such services [as glory holes<sup>14</sup>]' (p. 163). Henriksson and Månsson show more awareness of the agency of

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14. A glory-hole is a hole in a wall between two cubicles, much larger than a peephole, mostly used for anonymous oral sex.

the owners in creating the setting than do some other writers such as Delph (1978), Rumaker (1977), Santana and Richters (1998) and McInnes and Bollen (2000).

Taken together, these ethnographic descriptions of gay baths and sex clubs indicate that indoor sex-on-premises venues vary more in their physical set-up and mode of operation than do public outdoor settings for sex. In particular, some are almost exclusively gay, while others cater for a mixed clientele including non-gay men. The physical settings influence, but do not fully determine, what sexual acts take place. Architecture and administration are influenced by legal requirements and modes of policing (e.g. Henriksson and Månsson 1995). The culture of interaction shares some features with beats, though because access to the settings is controlled, protective behaviour that disguises what is really going on is not required. Although each patron must learn the details of the etiquette of a particular institution, the general interaction rules are those that avoid aggression, reduce the emotional risk of rejection, and establish agreement on what sexual practices are to be performed with minimum negotiation. Familiarity with gay community is not required for a man to interact successfully in a men's sex-on-premises venue.

Sex-on-premises venues take very different forms under different jurisdictions. Henriksson and Månsson mention that two video clubs had lockable cabins that were removed in response to a law in 1987 forbidding gay saunas. Where alcohol licensing laws are vigorously policed, sex clubs associated with bars, such as the Mineshaft (Brotsky 1993) or the Paris backrooms described by Mendès-Leite and de Busscher (1997), may not appear on the scene. Where most people's houses have limited bathing facilities, or there is a strong mainstream culture of 'taking the waters' or swimming in hot springs, such as in Hungary, Turkey, Japan, Korea and New Zealand, public baths may remain in general use by men and women and not acquire the reputation—or at least the exclusive reputation—of being venues for homosexual sex. However, despite the differences in the facilities provided in different places, it is clear that there are commonalities in venue culture, at least across Western countries. They appear in some form in all large Western urban centres, whether as backrooms behind adult shops, gay bars or dance venues, 'private' sex clubs, saunas or 'men's health clubs'. Apart from the risk of police raids in some times and places, sex venues everywhere are relatively safe spaces where

patrons do not need to be constantly vigilant against intruders as they would when illicitly using public spaces such as parks and lavatories for sex.

### **Interview studies of men who have casual sex**

#### *Questionnaire studies*

So far I have concentrated on ethnographic studies that took the setting and its interactional patterns as the central topic of investigation. These are a small minority of the research studies that have examined men's engagement in casual sex with other men. Most of the studies of men's sexual risk-taking done since AIDS have taken the individual man as the unit of analysis, even on occasions when respondents were recruited through settings such as sex-on-premises venues and beats (Bennett et al. 1989a, 1989b; Bollen et al. 1998; Earl 1990). This is no doubt a legacy of the medical and epidemiological 'starter motor' for post-AIDS sex research on homosexually active men, which set in motion a number of surveys and cohort studies of gay (and to a limited extent other homosexually active) men around the world. In the United States these included the Multicenter AIDS Cohort Study (MACS; for example Ostrow et al. 1990, 1994), studies done at the Center for AIDS Prevention Studies (CAPS) in San Francisco (for example Hays et al. 1997 and Ekstrand et al. 1999), and others (for example Page-Shafer et al. 1997, Rotheram-Borus et al. 1999). Reports from Canada include Myers et al. (1996), Strathdee et al. (1998), Craib et al. (2000) and Dufour et al. (2000). Several European cross-sectional knowledge-attitudes-practices (KAP) and cohort studies are reviewed and discussed by Bochow et al. (1994), Pollak (1994) and Sandfort (1998). In the United Kingdom early work included that of Johnson and Gill (1989); the SIGMA cohort followed later (for example Weatherburn and Reid 1995; Weatherburn et al. 2000) and Weatherburn et al.'s (1996) study on non-gay-identified men. In Australia major studies have included the Male Call phone-in studies (Kippax et al. 1994 and Crawford et al. 1998), the Social Aspects of the Prevention of AIDS study (SAPA; Connell et al. 1988; Kippax et al. 1989), the Sydney Men and Sexual Health Cohort Study (SMASH, e.g. Prestage et al. 1995; Van de Ven et al. 1998a) and the Gay

Community Periodic Surveys done in various cities (e.g. Van de Ven et al. 1998b, 1998c, 1999, 2000).

The respondents for these studies around the world were usually recruited by a combination of methods including approaches to men attending clinics or gay community venues or functions, advertising in the gay press and snowballing. None could be said to be strictly representative, as the population of gay and homosexually active men could not be adequately defined, let alone enumerated and randomly sampled. Nonetheless, apart from the usual volunteer bias, participants were apparently fairly typical of members of sexually active gay communities in their respective cities, though perhaps a little older and better educated than average. Most of these studies initially aimed to answer epidemiological questions about numbers of partners and sexual practices associated with risk of HIV seroconversion rather than social questions about how, where and with whom respondents had sex. However, much knowledge of social patterns was acquired by the researchers along the way. Sexual behaviour, after all, is not a measurable property of the individual body in the way that blood pressure is. Every man who reported in an interview or questionnaire that he had performed receptive or insertive anal intercourse in the past six months (for example) was reporting on the behaviour of at least one other man as well as himself and often on an extensive network of contacts (Richters et al. 1998b).

Especially in the United States, there has been a plethora of research on individual predictors and motivators for the adoption of—or failure to adopt—safe sex practices.<sup>15</sup> This research employed traditional psychological notions used in other areas of health promotion of the sort that is targeted at individuals to get them to start or stop doing something such as smoking or getting their children vaccinated, notions such as ‘self-efficacy’, ‘locus of control’, optimism, perception of risk, self-exempting beliefs and so on. Australian, Canadian and European behavioural researchers have generally taken a somewhat more social view, addressing the mores of the gay community as the primary topic of study in relation to risk behaviour rather than the beliefs or feelings of individual men, even when data are collected from men as individuals rather than through ethnographic investigation. The key difference is whether men are conceptualised as having continuing psychological

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15. There has also been some in Australia such as that by Ross (Lowy and Ross 1994; Ross 1988a, 1988b) and Gold (1995, 1997).

traits that lead them to ‘take risks’ in whatever settings are available to them, or as more fluid subjects largely constructed by the social settings in which they interact. The argument that setting is more important than individual traits in predicting or explaining risk behaviour has also been proposed in relation to heterosexuals, for example by de Visser and Smith (1999).<sup>16</sup>

### *Men talking about casual sex*

Several studies have shed light on casual sex settings indirectly by interviewing men who use them for meeting men to have sex with (Richwald et al. 1988; Earl 1990; Connell et al. 1993; Bartos et al. 1994; Bolton et al. 1994; Hood et al. 1994; Thompson 1994; Tewksbury 1996; Joseph 1997;<sup>17</sup> Nilsson 1998; Flowers et al. 2000; McInnes and Bollen 2000). Some have done this in combination with fieldwork investigation of the sites (Keogh et al. 1998; Santana and Richters 1998; Leap 1999).

Richwald et al. (1988) interviewed 807 men as they left bathhouses in Los Angeles about their reasons for visiting the bathhouse and their sexual practices while there. The majority (72 per cent) said they went there for sex, 48 per cent to use the bath facilities, 37 per cent to meet friends, 13 per cent to use the gym and an unexpected 6 per cent said it gave them an inexpensive place to sleep. The majority (71 per cent) did not participate in anal intercourse, and of those that did, the majority used a condom. However, 84 men (10 per cent) did report unprotected anal intercourse. High rates of familiarity with the AIDS prevention information provided in the bathhouses were reported. Richwald et al. suggest that closing bathhouses might shift ‘unsafe sexual activity to other locations, such as bars, movie theaters, bookstores, men’s rooms or private homes where the implementation of AIDS

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16. The ascendancy of one view or the other probably has less to do with whether one of the them is true or produces useful results than with which group of researchers—‘scientific’ individualist psychologists on the one hand or social psychologists or sociologists on the other—has a higher profile in the health and medical research establishment of the countries concerned. In countries where ‘working with communities’ came to be valued as an effective (or fashionable) thing to do in health promotion, the researchers who had forged more successful alliances with gay community organisations were more visible and thus more effective in getting their world view approved.

17. Sue Joseph’s book *She’s My Wife, He’s Just Sex* (1997) is not an academic study but a journalistic exploration of married men having covert sex with men and the responses of their wives. However, the interview data, although very briefly reported and not really analysed, contribute usefully to our picture of casual sex between men in Australia.

educational efforts would be difficult' (p. 178). However, no data are offered on whether such other locations are equally conducive to unsafe sexual practices.

Although Earl (1990) describes his paper in the title as a 'field study', the only fieldwork component is the recruitment of the 94 interviewees in Denver (USA), who are then treated as individuals recruited at a particular site. The workings of the sites (two bathhouses, a movie/sex shop complex) are not described. The men recruited in the parking lots of these sites are compared with men recruited in prison and men who were part of a gay and bisexual research cohort. The focus is on public health HIV-prevention rather than sociological analysis, but the author produces a punchy last paragraph after the rather dry tables of figures (which are not statistically analysable because the numbers are too small), noting that these married men having sex with men 'appear immune to discussions of bodily fluids but can relate to who fucks whom'.

Earl concludes that the married men were less likely to tell their (female) partners about other activities than were gay men in serious relationships with men. They were also less likely to use condoms, though he found no difference in their preferred sexual behaviours. The married men were more likely to seek anonymous interactions. In short, the married men tended to be in denial, regarding themselves as not at risk because 'not gay'.

Using a multiplicity of recruitment techniques, the BANGAR (Bisexual Activity Non Gay Attachment Research) project (Hood et al. 1994) recruited 698 non-gay-community-attached homosexually active men in New South Wales for telephone (or, sometimes, face-to-face) interviews. Compared with other samples of homosexually active men, these men were of similar age, clustering around 30, but markedly more had low education levels and/or working-class jobs. They met male partners in a wide variety of settings, including (in order of frequency) through friends, through advertisements,<sup>18</sup> beats, gay bars, adult bookshops and saunas, and straight bars. Although 39 per cent said they preferred sex with men, only 18 per cent identified as homosexual. More than half identified as bisexual, but this seemed to be accepted usually as a description of their actual behaviour rather than a self-

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18. This category was bound to be a popular choice with this group because the most successful method of recruitment for the study was through advertisements in the personal or 'adult services' sections of local papers.

conscious sexual identity in the sense in which such terms are used by gay-community-attached men. For many of the respondents, organising one's social identity through one's sexual preferences simply did not make sense. When asked what they most liked about sex with men, the top choices were receptive and insertive oral sex (both mentioned by around 45 per cent), responses which were twice as popular as 'partner's body' or insertive or receptive anal sex (all mentioned by about 22 per cent). The majority had only casual relationships with men. Among the few with regular relationships, the most common pattern was of one or more mates or buddies with whom they had sex. They did not think of these men as lovers.

Bartos et al.'s (1994) study is based on interviews with 97 men in Victoria who had sex with men but did not identify as gay. The sample was recruited through media advertisements in the 'contacts' columns and also through snowball techniques. Again, sexual identity—in terms of gay or straight—was simply not a major issue for many of the men. Their safe sex knowledge was high, though they displayed some illogical or inadequate ideas of safety. Like Earl's respondents, they tended to assume in their calculation of their own risk of exposure to HIV that the social barriers between their lives and those of gay men corresponded to epidemiological ones—in other words that they were safe from HIV because they were not themselves gay, even though they might well be having sex with gay men. Bartos et al. do not mention social class *per se*, but it appears from their analysis that many of their respondents are alienated from the possibility of adopting a gay identity by their working-class social background, an issue suggested by Hood et al.'s findings and explored by Connell et al. (1993), Dowsett (1996) and Chapple et al. (1998).

Some of Bartos et al.'s respondents had no erotic interest in anal practices. The authors make the point that anal eroticism depends on successful initiation. The men saw as the advantage of sex with men that they could '“get their rocks off” with no emotional complications' (p. 44). This point implicitly rejects the notion of sexual desire as constructed around desire for a certain type of body or gender of sexual object rather than as a desire for 'release' or for a certain sensation or experience, though the authors do not stress this point.

Bartos et al. (1994, p. 54) offer a thoughtful and persuasive account of why rational concerns do not reach into the world of anal intercourse, which can be 'time out of time'. 'If fucking is about leaving the world of the living' (p. 52), if it is a

'transcendent experience' (p. 54), it is almost impossible for the sexual actor to maintain a rational, conscious, everyday awareness of risk and safety. The authors both use and critique the notion of self-esteem as relevant for safe sex. They also consider the question of power relations between partners, in particular ethnicity (attributing power to members of the dominant Anglo-Australian cultural group), age difference and institutional constraints, though they do not discuss social class in this context, or intellectual capacity (see Thompson 1994).

Bolton et al. (1994) write in the context of the debate about whether it is better to close baths or to use them as a venue for HIV prevention education. They recruited a Belgian sample of gay and homosexually active men through media advertising and network recruitment by 'key persons'. Bolton et al. then divided the men into sauna-goers and non-sauna-goers on the basis of the places where the men reported they went 'to socialize or meet sexual partners': bars and discos; beats; bathhouses. These reports were correlated, that is, a man who went to one setting was more likely to go to others. This was especially true of men who frequented saunas and beats ('public cruising areas').

Sauna-goers were found to be no more nor less gay-identified or gay-community-attached than non-sauna-goers. AIDS knowledge was higher among sauna clients. Sauna-goers appeared to be 'psychologically healthier on several dimensions': they had lower levels of depression, higher levels of internal locus of control, and higher levels of self-acceptance in relation to their sexual orientation. This might be related to the more middle-class nature of saunas compared to public sex venues, or to the need to be slim and attractive to go to venues that require nakedness; these factors are interrelated. But no significant differences were found in the men's ages, education, religion or whether they had a regular partner. Sauna clients reported an average of twice as many casual sex partners as non-clients. Their sexual practices differed also: sauna clients had more protected anal sex, whereas non-clients reported more unprotected anal sex. There were no differences in the reports of fellatio (Bolton et al. 1994).

Keogh et al. (1998) interviewed 20 users of sex-on-premises venues, saunas and/or backrooms in pubs or clubs. Saunas were liked for their sensuality, and for the voyeuristic and exhibitionist pleasures of seeing other men's bodies and being seen oneself. Men who preferred saunas liked cleanliness; they found it easier to negotiate



one-to-one sex and condom use in saunas than in backrooms. They also thought backroom clients were (or would be) old, ugly or HIV-positive.

Men who preferred backrooms to saunas thought saunas erotically arid: getting sex was not guaranteed. They preferred being able to wear masculine gear or fetish costumes rather than a towel. Backroom patrons commented that sex clubs extended people's sexual range, offering new and challenging practices such as fisting, and were good for role-playing games and meeting certain types of men.

The best venues were seen as 'sleazy', that is horny, raunchy, erotic, transgressive or fetishistic. Patrons enjoyed the pure physical sensation of anonymous sex, sometimes in a completely dark room crammed with men. Some commented that it was erotic to be surrounded by men having sex.

Focusing on the risk of HIV transmission rather than purely on the nature of the sexual practices, Keogh et al. reflect on the accounts of anal intercourse in venues. They point out that the narratives 'are men's interpretation of events and as such, post hoc rationales for engaging in UAI [unprotected anal intercourse] ... [They] serve us little in trying to describe the reality of events' (p. 19). Narratives of unsafe sex showed a shifting of responsibility from the respondent to his partner, who was usually described as the anally receptive but initiating partner. A recurrent figure in the accounts was 'the controlling, voracious, always receptive, infected but not infecting partner' (p. 20). HIV-negative men or those of unknown status assumed that the other man on such occasions was HIV-positive, but that they were unlikely to have been infected by him because the contact was brief and because they were the insertive partner. HIV-positive men also always assumed that the other man in unprotected anal intercourse was positive, an assumption which protected them from the possibility of having infected someone. The accounts reflected a pattern of risk reduction rather than risk avoidance.

Leap (1999) discusses two sexual sites: the locker room and sauna of a commercial health club, and the backroom of an adult bookstore. The health club was not a male sex club; indeed, staff denied that sex took place there. The patrons were not exclusively gay. Leap argues that gay men (several of whom he conversed with) did not generally use the health club for having sex, although they did sometimes pick up partners there. For gay men, locker room sex was risky sex (because participants were unlikely to use condoms), would lead to discovery by

staff, and was not appropriate: ‘sex is something to do “at home,” not “in public” ’ (p. 123). Leap also interviewed 12 men who regularly had sex with other men at the club, ‘but who refused to self-identify as “gay” and insisted that they were “straight” ’ (p. 124). He rejects the view that such men are all ‘really’ bisexual or latently homosexual. These men said they would never go to a beat, which they perceived as unprotected and dangerous, in contrast to the protected, secure environment of the health club—where, they felt, ‘there is no reason to worry about discovery: people respect each other’s privacy, and they leave each other alone’ (p. 126). Nor, because of families and girl friends, could such men take another man home. Thus the gay and straight men constructed the ‘privateness’ of the health club quite differently.

Although Leap visited several backrooms, he did not like to have sex there, and found this put him in an interloper-observer position. His analysis is thus based largely on interviews with several men who patronised a particular bookstore backroom in Washington, drawing heavily on one man’s account. Paying a US\$14 fee allowed a patron from the main gay bookstore ‘through a turnstile and through thick black curtains into the darkened area beyond’ (p. 119). His main informant reports that ‘most people are there just to enjoy the raw sexuality of it, having different people suck you off’ (p. 132). Anal intercourse was relatively uncommon and the management did not supply condoms. All the respondents referred to consensual etiquette about seeking permission to ejaculate in a partner’s mouth or proposing anal sex. The backroom provides a safe sexual setting without the risks inherent in visiting a beat: it is seen as a private, safe space. Leap goes on to discuss the constructedness of the notion of ‘private’ and how it differs for different actors.

Although one of Delph’s informants failed to establish any homosexual contacts in Edinburgh and Glasgow, beat culture does thrive there too, despite the weather. Flowers et al.’s recent paper ‘The bars, the bogs, and the bushes’ (2000) explores the different purposes and meanings for gay men in Glasgow in pursuing sexual partners in gay bars on the one hand and in beats (‘cottages’ in Britain) on the other. (I discuss this further in Chapter 5 in the context of the analysis of my own data.) The study is based on interviews with a convenience sample of 20 gay men, sampled by the snowball method. The authors’ view is practical: ‘If a man wants sex, cottaging offers an inexpensive and straightforward alternative to a night out in the bars’

(Flowers et al. 2000, p. 75). Beats also offer sex during the daytime, whereas many bars operate at very late hours. Descriptions of the process of making contact correspond exactly with the United States studies:

PF: How's it work in the toilets?

R: In toilets? My experience is basically you stand there pretending to go to the toilet, you look over, glance over, if the other guy's interested he'll flash. You kind of know by eye contact he's kind of interested in you. You'll either go off with him somewhere or go into a cubicle and do it (p. 75).

The constraints of the physical setting are also explored and compared. Anal intercourse is unlikely in parks because the participants are usually standing up, 'which is quite awkward especially when two people are different heights', as one informant points out. And the vegetation of a particular park can make a difference to sexual practice:

I have been fucked in park X because it[']s a lot more open and you can, if you bend over you can hold on to a tree trunk. Whereas in park Y there's so much brushwood you're more likely to get your eye poked out ... (p. 79).

However, Flowers et al.'s discussion does not mention the key fact that many of the actors in the 'bogs' and 'bushes' are non-gay men, who are not part of the gay bar culture at all. This is central to the conventions of sexual interaction in beats and a key omission in their analysis. A silent elision of the distinction between gay-identified and homosexually active men has occurred in the course of the conceptualisation of the study question and is perpetuated in the findings.

McInnes and Bollen (2000), in their study based on interviews with 20 men about their use of sex-on-premises venues, resist the temptation to identify patterns or typologies of sexual practice in such venues, though they quote a long and interesting narrative of one man's attendance at a venue. The authors see such generalisation or rule-making as too determinist or constraining: 'these generalising models tend to determine the structure of sexual contexts in advance of their enactment' (p. 29). They are concerned to make a theoretical point about the use of the choreographic metaphor and improvisation in the description of the doing of sex.

Nonetheless, in their opening paragraphs, summarising the types and functions of venues, they report that

The spaces inside sex-on-premises venues are organised to serve different functions. Saunas and sex clubs have both public areas for sex and private cubicles for couple or group activities. The public areas include dark areas designed for group sexual activity. More public and well-lit areas can be thematically designed or designed to facilitate certain kinds of sexual activity, sado-masochistic activity, for example. Wet and dry venues also have coffee or 'chill-out' areas where men can sit and chat, drink coffee etc. All three types of venues have areas where men can watch pornographic films. Unlike the wet and dry clubs, backrooms usually only have darker areas for sex or cubicles, sometimes specifically designed with 'glory holes' for oral sex (McInnes and Bollen 2000, p. 27).

In a wider context, Dowsett's (1996) fascinating study, using a life history method, of the relationship between his subjects' homosexual activity and their connection to (or disconnection from) the gay community includes many vivid accounts of beat sex and other casual encounters. His analysis of men's different commitments to homosexual sex has informed my own ideas and hence my analysis in Chapters 5 to 7 so deeply that I find it hard to select specific points drawn from his work; indeed, much of this thesis could be seen as pursuing questions raised by his work. Compared with many other more abstractly discursive analysts of gay identity and desire writing in the 1980s and 1990s, Dowsett is resolutely practical. He is sensitive to economic and class issues (informed in part by his work with Bob Connell) and to men's bodies and the spaces they inhabit (Dowsett 1997; Connell and Dowsett 1992; Connell et al. 1993).

Dowsett (1996) says that it is an open secret among boys that they can be sexually active with each other and with older men. Although this is policed in an anti-homosexual culture, it can be absorbed into general naughtiness rather than perceived as perversion by the boys concerned:

the world of children is full of excursions into the forbidden and, despite injunctions against sexual activity generally, there is a profound silence on homosexuality specifically ... the body's sensations rule (pp. 142-3).

Dowsett more than anyone else except perhaps Nilsson (1998) integrates casual sex between men into the wider world of masculine culture, and thus is able to deal

perceptively with the margins of gay community and the settings in which non-gay-identified men have sex with men.

I have returned repeatedly to the issue of non-gay men participating in homosexual activity. Partly this interests me because it tends to be overlooked by researchers concerned with gay community and identity, and by gay-community-run HIV prevention work. I discuss this further in Chapter 8. But it is also important for a cultural interpretation of how sexual settings such as beats and sex clubs work if they are not part, or are only marginally part, of gay subculture. Until the 1970s all male homosexual activity was part of a secret world, whether it was a pair of former classics scholars meeting in a country house or gentlemen's club, or two sailors consorting in a dark corner of the dockside. All participants were 'discreditable', in Goffman's sense (1968). Gay liberation and the development of more-or-less open, if ghettoised, gay communities saw a split form between 'out' gay men and other homosexually active men. Non-gay men who have sex with men have if anything become *less* visible and more vulnerable, partly because the stigma of homosexuality that they seek to avoid is now ever-present, constantly invoked, even in the primary school playground (Plummer 1999), rather than unspoken and even unheard of, as it was to their grandmother's generation.<sup>19</sup>

### **Sex work**

One other mode in which casual or anonymous sex between men may occur is commercial sex. The stigma attached to homosexual encounters until the last few decades has meant that commercial sex has not been as clearly distinguished from amateur sex when it occurs between men as when it is heterosexual, either by social researchers or by society at large. Commercial sex between men was viewed largely as part of the 'problem' of sodomy and vice rather than as a separate issue from homosexuality in general. Whether commercial sex actually should be seen in interactional terms as fundamentally different from non-paying sex is a moot point.

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19. Joseph's (1997) astonished reaction to the existence of homosexually active heterosexual men is an example of the assumption that the 'problem' of male homosexuality has been dealt with now that the option of adopting gay identity exists for homosexually inclined men.

Be that as it may, much research into male (and indeed female) sex work has focused on the sex worker as victim or deviant rather than on the conduct of the sexual interactions. Recent work that reports details of sexual interactions has STD or HIV prevention as its focus, and tends to look at factors such as the worker's level of education, housing status, sexual orientation, place of work, drug use and mental health in relation to outcomes such as practice of anal or oral sex, or consistent condom use (Minichiello et al. 1998). A rare exception is Browne's interview study of 10 male sex workers, which explored the meanings of their commercial sex encounters (Browne 1994; Browne and Minichiello 1995). Male sex workers divided their customers into types, such as 'marrieds', 'easy trades', 'undesirables', 'sugar daddies' and 'heaven trades'. Browne concludes that the psychic and erotic context of the encounter emerges from male sex worker self-programming, assessments of the clients and their wants, nonverbal interactions and ongoing discursive dialogues. No ethnographic work has been done on male sex work in Australia. In part this must be due to methodological difficulties. The ideal method of investigation would be participant observation, but it is hard to imagine a postgraduate research committee or institutional ethics committee approving a project in which investigators either do sex work or participate as clients.

### **Conclusions and methodological issues**

In the research I have discussed there is a clear difference between, on the one hand, the observational research that sets out simply to describe what happens in casual sex settings and to analyse it from the outside, and on the other the interpretive research, based on interviews, that focuses on people's understandings of what is going on, the meaning of sex for them.

Observational sociology, especially of the 1970s, had a strong ethical commitment that the observer should stand outside the action, disturb it as little as possible and record it as neutrally and objectively as possible. That is in part what made it science and not mere diarising. Of course such observers are not entirely theory-free. They have a view about what is happening, or they would have no idea what to record (flies buzzing about? height of ceiling? colour of clothing?), but they are

looking for behavioural generalities and explanatory patterns, not individual emotional and circumstantial issues. Neither Humphreys nor Delph is wondering why a certain man came to the beat *today*, or why he finds one man attractive rather than another, or prefers one sexual practice to another.

Such observational ethnography, done in a detached but orderly way, gives us good (i.e. reliable, replicable) descriptions of the workings of the settings. It treats of matters of fact. By deciding in principle merely to record the nature of the space, what happens, who moves where, who says what, the observer concentrates at a fine-grained level of observation that allows the elements of social interaction to be seen. This enables the conclusion that public sex interactions are built up of elements that are not special acts drawn from some other arcane world, but are composed largely of the interactional elements of normal social interaction in public places (Tewksbury 1996; Cahill et al. 1985). If the elements of interaction had proved to be genuinely strange to uninitiated observers (for example if the etiquette was known only to men who had access to gay subcultural knowledge), the behaviour observed in public sex settings would be very different.

One key advantage of such observational research is that it includes everyone at the site, not just those who volunteer to be interviewed. The corresponding disadvantage is that we only get to know about what an observer can be allowed to see.

The advantages and disadvantages of being an insider or an outsider in ethnographic research are explored by Styles (1979), who narrates how he tried to do research in a gay bath as a detached observer. He was an insider in the sense of being a gay man and thus a member of the community from which the bath patrons were drawn, but he planned to research the sexual interactions at venues without having sex there himself. He reports that it did not initially occur to him that as a member of the 'natural' client population of the baths he might fail to understand what was going on, how the interactions worked. But he considers that he did fail. He then turned to the use of informants and also took part in sex at the baths, and felt that he greatly improved his understanding of what was going on.

Styles's initial plan was to 'scout out the various scenes of sexual activity in the bath and diagram the bath's physical and sexual layout' (p. 131). He planned to talk to a few customers about their bath-going and take notes in the toilets. His first visit

on a busy and crowded weekend evening was chaotic: he did identify the sexual arenas, but they were dim and hard to observe, and there was a long queue for the toilets. With fogged glasses he could see nothing in the steam room, and the blaring music and an amyl nitrite-induced headache left him unable to converse. However, further observation on less crowded occasions allowed him to start to analyse the behaviour, particularly the ‘postures of availability’ in orgy rooms:

Sexual availability is indicated by standing free of the wall or against a mattress; by standing upright rather than slouching; by draping the towel over the shoulder rather than keeping it on the hips; by standing in the dark rather than ... the light; and by keeping arms at the side of the body rather than folded across the chest or clasped in front of the pubis (pp. 139–40).

In the best empirical tradition, Styles checks his hypotheses by experiment:

I would go into the orgy room and stand in a particular position for a time, counting how often I was approached and by whom (p. 140).

Styles’s tactic of using himself as control in this mini-study would cheer the heart of any methodologist. An observer of ordinary venue behaviour would be likely to attribute such differences in pick-up success to the men’s differences in personality or physical attractiveness, as do men being interviewed about their venue use. The difficulties men have in identifying what it is that they find attractive about one man and not another are discussed under ‘Choosing a partner’ in Chapter 6.

Through this process, Styles collects plenty of data on the nonverbal character of orgy room sexual behaviour but little about what goes on in the steam room or cubicles. An interviewee teaches him that eye contact is needed to invite a man into your cubicle. After doing five interviews and cultivating some informants, Styles came to ‘suspect that [his] reporting was superficial—that it missed essential features of the social and sexual life of the gay bath’ (p. 141). After a struggle with his conscience about having sex in the bathhouse where he was doing research, having resolved at the outset not to do so, Styles changed his strategy and ‘plunged fully into the life of the baths’ (p. 142). He found that being an insider gave him access to the emotional life of the baths, not just observation of actions like Humphreys, whom he mentions critically. Styles then did whatever he wanted while at the venue, joined in, and ‘began to use myself—my own experiences, my perceptions, my desires, my



interests—as a way of clueing [*sic*] myself into the concerns of other bath-goers’ (p. 142). He became concerned with evaluating other bath-goers as potential sex partners, including their physical appearance, and became ‘more self-conscious about the actual negotiation of a sexual encounter ... what had seemed before largely a technical matter of nonverbal communication became charged with emotional significance’ (p. 143). But (I would ask, though Styles does not) is the emotional significance of the behaviour for the actors an epiphenomenon, or is it a necessary part of the data needed for a sociologist to understand what is going on? The only test can be how well an explanatory theory that omits the emotions can predict the forms of behaviour.

Styles discusses the ‘insider–outsider’ tension sensitively and undogmatically, and concludes that there is no right or wrong way to study a social setting. He describes as myths the ideas that insiders are too biased or that outsiders don’t understand. Such claims, he says, are not empirical generalisations but ‘elements in a moral rhetoric that claims exclusive research legitimacy for a particular group’ (p. 148). He sums up by making and arguing for four points:

- (1) There are no privileged positions of knowledge when it comes to scrutinizing human group life.
- (2) All research is conditioned by value biases and factual preconceptions about the group being studied.
- (3) Field work is a process of building up images from one’s biases, preconceptions and new information, testing these images against one’s own observations and the reports of informants and accepting, modifying or discarding these images on the basis of what one observes and what one has been told.
- (4) Insider and outsider researchers will differ in the ways they go about building and testing their images of the group they study (pp. 148–52).

I discuss the implications for these arguments when applied to my own work in Chapters 3 and 5.

The interview studies, on the other hand, give us information that would never be available through mere observation, or even through full participation by the researcher, at least in settings where conversation is rare and/or highly limited, stylised and coded. This information includes men’s attitudes to casual sex settings, their reasons or justifications for using them, their self-conceptions and their

interpretations of the behaviour of the other actors. However, as the men who volunteer to be interviewed are likely to be different from the total population of men who have casual sex with men, this information is likely to be partial however varied it is.

A complete picture of the workings of these settings can therefore be built up only by accretion from different kinds of work, by what can figuratively be called triangulation. We cannot settle for a single study that gives the answer, in the sense that a perfectly designed allocation-blinded randomised controlled trial of a suitably selected patient group can give the 'right' answer about the effectiveness of a new drug. Different people's interpretations are needed in order to put the picture together. Even among participant observers, 'sympathetic introspection' gives different results depending on each researcher's relation to the phenomena. An ever-present danger complicating the process of syncretisation of multiple findings is that studies of a supposed single phenomenon such as beat sex may differ because of genuine differences between the times and places, because of geographical location or legal or social circumstances.

It is interesting to note how often Goffman's work and terminology are invoked by researchers into sexual settings. It is hard to tell at this distance whether this is because he was inordinately influential in 1970s sociology or because (despite the fact that he himself did not write much about sex) his approaches and concepts proved very fruitful for ethnographic researchers of sexual settings. Indeed, as I argued in Chapter 1, symbolic interactionism is a very productive framework within which to study sexual behaviour in general. Goffman's game-playing and dramaturgical metaphors and concepts such as 'interaction membrane' are very useful for analysing what goes on in settings for public sex.<sup>20</sup>

What gaps are there in this work? The possessor of an overactive sociological imagination can always find more topics to research. How do Australian beats at beaches differ from American highway rest areas? How do police raids, legal interventions and health promotion projects affect the operation of saunas and sex clubs? How do part-heterosexual venues such as Sydney's (SM) Hellfire Club differ from exclusively male ones?

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20. They would also be useful for analysing sexual interactions within extended relationships, but that is not the concern of this thesis.

The gap that strikes me most forcibly in the body of work I have been outlining is the lack of integration. The ethnographic studies are concerned mostly with the 'what' and the 'how', and to some extent the 'who', from the perspective of the observer. Many of the interview studies, on the other hand, attempt to address the 'why', from the perspective of the participant. The two kinds of research problematise the 'who' in different ways. Humphreys does both, in dividing the men he observes in the tearooms into categories of player (insertee, insertor, voyeur etc.) and non-player (straights, toughs, police), and dividing the men he interviews into categories according to their life situation in relation to acknowledged homosexuality, but he does not put these two categorisations together. The interrogation of categories is the strength of Dowsett's more nuanced account in *Practicing Desire: Homosexual Sex in the Era of AIDS* (1996) and also the focus of Leap's discussion of the notion of privacy in relation to sexual settings (1999).

Although in principle the two kinds of study could throw light upon each other, on the whole they have not done so. This is what I hope to do in the following chapters, using the findings of the observational studies to inform my interpretation of interview data.