Reflections on method

The main reason for using interviews as a method of investigating sexual behaviour is that neither fixed-response questionnaire studies nor observation can give us insights into the meanings and motivations of people doing sex. Watching from the outside as an uninvolved observer does not tell us why the actors are doing what they are doing, what their actions mean to them. In any case, except to a limited extent in sex venues, it is not possible to watch other people having sex. However, the claim that exploring the narratives offered by interviewees gives us the meanings of their actions is very problematic.

For a start there are no definitive meanings to which the actors have exclusive access. They can offer a narrative about what they did and why they did it, from their own point of view. But in searching for interactional regularities in sexual encounters we are explicitly searching for something that is not available to the respondents to report. As Bourdieu (1977, p. 79) says, ‘It is because subjects do not, strictly speaking, know what they are doing that what they do has more meaning than they know.’ In this study, for example, the question ‘What do you think most people expect to do when you have sex with them?’ was not particularly successful in eliciting accounts of what respondents perceived as socially expected of them by others, as distinct from what they themselves wanted to do or did as a matter of course. Perhaps only sex researchers consciously bother themselves with such questions in encounters with new partners.

The justification for using qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews in this study, rather than quantitative analysis of fixed-choice, validated questionnaires, was that the former could provide insights into what men having casual sex with other men desired, what they wanted and what they meant by what they did. In addressing several of the questions posed at the outset the method was strikingly successful,
particularly in areas where the potential of quantitative questionnaire data to shed light on an issue had been exhausted.

Key points where this mode of investigation has been rewarded include the following:

- revealing the way in which ‘withdrawal’ (unprotected anal intercourse without ejaculation, as it was labelled in questionnaire studies and reported in HIV risk surveillance reports) occurs for a mixture of reasons that only occasionally amount to a deliberate choice of avoiding ejaculation as a modified safe sex manoeuvre in place of condom use
- revealing a range of motivations and reasons for having sex and reasons for choosing the place and the partner. These challenge the assumption that homosexually active men are motivated primarily by sexual desire for male bodies
- revealing details of the realities of sexual practice given in narratives of single encounters that challenge the idea that ticks in boxes on questionnaires can (let alone do) accurately report what has happened in sexual encounters

But we do not always succeed in doing what in-depth interviews are supposed to be so good for. Brendan, for example, seemed reluctant to talk at any length, giving many one-word or one-line answers. He said he enjoyed doing ‘this sort of thing’, that he just liked surveys, but gave the impression that he would have been much more comfortable with an epidemiological interview asking him whether he had done such-and-such an act in the past six months and whether a condom was used and allowing him to give a yes/no answer. Perhaps what he wanted out of the interview was to talk about water sports. In the first few minutes he gave the interviewer two cues about this, neither of which were taken up, then said clearly in answer to a question about his favourite practices:

Water sports and [pause] that’s probably the favourite.

Right, do you want to talk about that a little bit?

I don’t mind.

Okay, um, could you just enlarge on your definition of water sports?
Oh well, pissing. You know, piss top or piss bottom and everything that goes with it.

*Do you have a preference for either?*

Both.

[pause] (Brendan)

The interviewer then goes on to ask Brendan about oral sex. Brendan either takes for granted the (gay male) interviewer’s knowledge of the practices involved in ‘pissing’, or wants the interviewer to draw him out. Whether because of distaste, or perhaps a feeling that he cannot ask about a practice that is not an HIV risk without seeming to be intrusive or pruriently interested, or perhaps simply because he fails to see it as ‘sex’, the interviewer declines to pursue the matter. I still do not quite know what ‘piss top’ and ‘piss bottom’ mean. Did Brendan and his partners urinate inside each other or onto each other’s bodies? Where did they do this—in bed? In the bath? At a venue? What does the urine itself mean in this practice? Is the smell, feel or taste exciting, or is it the idea of urination that makes the act meaningful?

**Motivations of respondents**

Agreeing to be interviewed by a stranger about sex is a rather odd way to spend an hour or two, particularly if it involves travelling to an unknown location. The $20 payment can do little except perhaps reassure a respondent that he is doing it for the money (a respectable motivation) if he is uncomfortable with his own actual motivation. Because of its oddness the interview is a transaction where neither party is quite certain of what the other wants out of it at the beginning. Usually both set out trying to please and satisfy the other. Sometimes the key to getting the information wanted is to find out what the interviewee really wants in return. It may simply be the feeling of contributing to a worthwhile sociological study, or to the fight against AIDS. It may be the opportunity to explore ideas with someone more ready to talk abstractly than one’s own friends. It may the frisson of talking dirty to a schoolteacher type. The ‘price paid’ by the researcher for the information sought is often having to listen to a long narration about something irrelevant to the research, such as
the Sites respondent who really wanted to talk about his mother’s death, or the Negotiating Sex respondent who was still resentful of the workplace he had recently left that had failed to promote him for many years.

José, another rather unreflective respondent, was perhaps using the interview—having infected his regular partner—to explore or rationalise or confess or perhaps even somehow atone for his own unsafe practice. Towards the end, the interviewer fails to resist the temptation to depart from the question schedule to go into counsellor mode:

*I don’t know if I’m right but I get the impression from you that you’re slightly troubled by you having unprotected sex. Is that right?*

Yeah, I’m certainly troubled by it.

*What’s the trouble?*

The trouble is that I’m probably ... There’s all sorts of things. Like guys who have sex with me. It’s pretty bad. As long as people let me get away with it. But I’ve never felt ... I feel vindicated only in the short term but I ... it always bothers me. A lot. There’s a young kid I’ve been seeing recently who wanted me to fuck him and come in him. Like, he’s a really young kid. And I just wonder where his head’s at. Is he HIV? Does he care? Or does he just enjoy getting fucked without a condom? (José)

José then related that he had been involved in a recent AIDS organisation campaign that used his picture in a context that implied he was HIV-positive, and how he thought—hoped?—this would do the work of informing his ‘trade’ that he was positive.

**Interviewer issues**

It is no accident that politics, sex and religion have all been banned subjects for discussing at genteel dinner tables. All three subjects have in common that it is difficult to talk about them without doing them: mention cannot be disentangled from use. Talking about sex, particularly the aspects of sex that are not usually spoken of
publicly, is in itself a form of sexual interaction. Therefore the gender and sexuality of the interviewer in relation to the subjects can have considerable influence on the direction and tone of the interview. The interviews analysed here were done either by a gay man (Sites, half of Negotiating Sex) or by a (presumably) straight woman (the other half of Negotiating Sex and all of the Seroconversion interviews).

There are differences between the interviews, but the differences between the interviewers as individuals are more apparent than those between the men and the women. Hédimo Santana, fieldworker and interviewer on the Sites study, is a cultural anthropologist and was interested primarily in the Zeitgeist, in the shifting fortunes of the gay community: the free-for-all of liberation in the seventies, the change towards safe sex in response to AIDS in the 1980s, respondents’ views on evidence for the rise in unsafe sex in the 1990s. He saw my interest (and that of his previous supervisor, Erica Southgate) in the relation between the physical setting and sexual practice as a kind of materialist determinism, and resisted giving it any attention in his analysis of the data. Hence perhaps his lack of interest, as far as his analysis presented in *Sites of Sexual Activity among Men* went, in the interviews with venue operators. They were not talking gay men’s culture and experience.

Colin Bisset and Max Hopwood, called in from other work to do Negotiating Sex interviews with respondents who did not wish to be interviewed by a woman, mostly followed the question schedule more closely than Hédimo or I did. Perhaps because of the influence of other projects they were working on, they focused more on sex as risk behaviour than on practice in its own right—but perhaps also because for them as gay men the line between professionalism and appearing to be too interested in the respondent as a sexual actor was necessarily drawn in a different place from where it is when a woman interviews a gay man.

Olympia Hendry, research officer on the Seroconversion study, is a very skilled and sympathetic interviewer who managed to combine a critical approach to the events being reported at the same time as giving respondents room to give their own narration and interpretation of the events they believed led to their seroconversion. The definition of her role in fact required two inconsistent tasks. One was to establish as clearly as possible what probably actually happened physically that led to the respondent’s seroconversion; this information was needed for the empirical study looking at the relative risk of different sexual practices for HIV transmission. The
other task was to allow the respondent to talk freely about his own theory of what led to his becoming infected. This narrative was to be analysed so as to shed light on men’s perceptions of risk and their processes of making sense to themselves of what had happened to them.

In some ways a straight (or apparently straight) woman who can establish that she is familiar with and not shocked by gay sexual mores is in an ideal position to interview gay men. When being interviewed by a straight man, a gay man always has to deal with the danger of homophobia, whether expressed or suppressed. (Not that the situation is frequently encountered outside the clinical setting. Apart from doctors, there are almost no heterosexual men in this field.) Women are usually less condemnatory of homosexuality than straight men, which makes the interview situation more comfortable from the start. Further, a heterosexual woman can empathise with gay men in regarding men as sexual objects, allowing for a certain amount of fellow feeling and camaraderie that is usually prevented from straying into flirtation, despite the subject matter, by the prior role disqualification of the parties as potential sexual partners. At the same time, a gay man can criticise other gay men, or the gay community, or sex venue culture, to a straight woman without offending her. She is presumed to have no investment in the topic under discussion other than a general concern for health, happiness and HIV prevention.

On the other hand, many would argue that only an insider can elicit an authentic account of a subcultural setting. And there is very little evidence in the interviews of anything that one could construe as sexual awkwardness or flirting between the gay interviewees and respondents. In one instance that reads like a possible attempt by the respondent at switching the roles from interviewee and interviewee to sexual actors, Ralf is being interviewed by Hédimo, who is Brazilian:

But I do. I need male touch. And if I had it, that’s why I like European society so much. You go over, people, men put their arms around you. Straight men. And if I had that a lot more I would not crave so much sex with men. I’m sure. That’s why I really feel so much better in a European society. And I wonder what I’m going to get when I go back there because you know, I was totally seduced by European society when I was there. It is the same in Latin America. Latins. Brazilians. Why do I like Brazilians? (S Ralf)
Hédimo deflects this neatly by ignoring the question and responding with a question about other people: ‘Why can’t Australian men touch each other?’ It is just as easy, however, for an interviewee or interviewer to stumble into offending the other, as it is for inappropriate intimacy to occur. Tony was talking to Hédimo, who was both shaven and ‘ethnic’:

there’s groups you know like little different packs of dogs, the tattoo crowd, the gym crowd, the body-pierce crowd, the skinhead crowd, the bike crowd, the leather crowd, shaven heads, sorry not having a go at you, you know it’s all, you know the ethnics, the Asians, you know (S Tony)

The interview as narrative

In general in this analysis I have treated the interview transcripts as evidence of actual events. This is more like the process that a court adopts in sifting a witness’s evidence than it is like the literary analysis or psychoanalytic hypothesising of the poststructuralist discourse analyst. However, there are some notable features of the interviews as narrative that throw light on the process of talking about sex and on the value of what we can discover from doing so.

An often repeated feature of the interviews was a discursive caesura in the narrative of an encounter between the description of what could be called the courtship or lead-up and the sexual acts themselves. This break was at the same point at which the camera in a mainstream film (as distinct from a porn film) pans away from the actors to the walls or ceiling, or the image switches to one of a train going through a tunnel or someone splashing into water. At this point the narrator would often come to a stop as if the story were over and need to be coaxed into continuing:

I’d actually just finished in the toilet and I was coming out. I think I might have actually been shirtless, had a leather vest on and this guy just—I think he probably reached out to play with my chest, I don’t know, I can’t—I think that’s what happened and then I found and all of a sudden we were kissing and I said, do you want to go to a cubicle and that was it really.
Right. So, you went to the cubicle?
Yeah.

And can you carry on from there?
[Laughs] Can I carry on from there, okay? Um.

Maybe you can tell me what practices that you or what things you did that night?
Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, okay. He wanted to, this is embarrassing [laughs]. It was all oral. (Richard)

The narrative continues, but line by line interspersed with interviewer prompts, without the fluency shown in the account of the circumstances of the meeting. Sometimes it seemed that all the respondent needed was reassurance that continuing with the explicitly sexual part of the narrative was acceptable:

Well, it’s hard to see actually, but you can tell if someone is looking and yes, he did meet my eyes, but when other people would walk past—I think I might be getting somebody else mixed up there, but I think, yeah, he was um you know, like he would masturbate when I was looking, but not when somebody else walked past sort of thing. So, there was an indication it was creating a connection, yeah and so that was how we made contact. Then I approached him, yeah.
Go on.
Do you want me to say what we did?
Mm hm. (Anthony)

Anthony does continue with the account, but only after a reflection on the meaning of the other man sitting a step above him in the steam room (see p. 124). This caesura appeared in interviews in all three studies, and is also strikingly apparent in an interview quoted by Dowsett (1996, pp. 144–5). After a long, explicit and sexy narration of the cruising and approach of the two partners, the interviewee concludes:

Anyway at that point he walked toward me and I slid off the rock and we did it there and then in the middle of the rocks.
(What did you do? I warned you I was going to ask explicit questions[.])
Yeah, you did, didn’t you. We fucking.

(Straight away?)

No. We kissed first (Dowsett 1996, p. 145).

After this patch of short sentences and brief uninformative description Dowsett’s respondent resumes his earlier fluent and expressive manner. In many of our interviews, however, there is a change of register at this point. Whereas before the break the tale is being told about people in colloquial language, using the active voice—I did this, he was wearing that—after the break the language shifts, though often only temporarily, to an abstract style using technical terms and absent agents, as in Richard’s ‘It was all oral’ (above) rather than ‘he sucked me’ or ‘I went down on him’.

The caesura appears to represent the point of shift from one form of discourse, that of telling the tale of a conquest or of an amusing thing that happened the other day, to another kind of conversation, that is an interview with a sex researcher. The first style of conversation is familiar; the respondent has probably told similar tales to his friends on many occasions. The second kind is odd; it may even be the respondent’s first time. He needs special confirmation that all is well before he can proceed. The caesura is analogous to the shift of interactional register in a gynaecological consultation from the conversation between two clothed adults over a desk to the pelvic examination. The patient must be explicitly asked to remove her clothes, because for her to do so too promptly would show inappropriate eagerness. At the same time the gynaecologist indicates his or her new role by donning gloves. Because the patient is exposed at this point, it is particularly important that the doctor stays carefully in technical role and does not display any inappropriate affect. In the same way the interviewer cannot afford to make judgments or display too much affect at this point.

This was where the nonsexual purpose of the Seroconversion interviews actually assisted the recital of explicit narratives of sexual activity. Some respondents were frankly using the interview as a way of finding out for themselves what had happened, as it did not make sense to them. The interviews become a joint process of reconstruction of ‘what probably happened’ as well as memories offered by the man to the interviewer. The interviewer’s ‘higher purpose’ of ascertaining the mode of HIV transmission desexualised the conversation like the doctor’s gown and gloves.
Although the interviewer sometimes reassured the men who hesitated at this point that her detailed questioning was not prurient interest, this assurance was always brushed aside and never seemed to have been necessary.

The discursive break before the explicitly sexual part of the narrative did not seem to be due to a lack of vocabulary. In general, there were few difficulties with sexual vocabulary in this gay sample. Men may not talk much in casual sex, but many gay men talk about sex with their friends and read explicitly sexual fiction and journalism, and watch pornographic videos. Both HIV prevention materials and self-complete research questionnaires distributed in Sydney use explicit colloquial terminology such as ‘suck’, ‘fuck’ and ‘wank’. Most respondents were happy to use these terms—even relieved, if they had been attempting a more technical style that they did not have full control of—though they sometimes needed reassurance from the interviewers that this was appropriate for the setting and would not offend us. Others seemed to prefer more formal or medical terminology, especially early in the interview before the ice was broken. The problem that occurs in interviews with heterosexuals of a tongue-tied search for words for acts or sensations that lack names did not arise.

If there was a noticeable discursive gap, it was in talking about feeling and sensation rather than action. As noted in Chapter 6, there was little mention of sensual practices like fondling and stroking, and almost no use of affectionate words like ‘cuddle’. How much this reflects the reality of the respondents’ sexual practice, and how much it is simply absent from the accounts because it would be an inappropriate way to talk, especially if the interviewer is male, we cannot know.

The existence, mentioned above, of other HIV risk research going on in Sydney means that we have a trained respondent pool. Many of the respondents were part of the SMASH cohort study, which involved six-monthly or yearly detailed interviews on risk practices. Sydney gay men have learned the terms in which to describe these acts, and learned also what acts matter, what one talks about to sex researchers. This, as much as men’s own interests and tastes in sex, may be why they do not volunteer information about what are usually seen by epidemiologists as irrelevant practices,

1. Sometimes this is a difficulty with the lack of colloquial anatomical vocabulary and indeed awareness. One can hardly ask the average female respondent ‘Do you mean you prefer the penis to lodge in the anterior fornix?’ or ‘Was he tonguing your clitoris or your urethral meatus?’ and expect an answer.
mere epiphenomena such as cuddling or manual sex. As Plummer (1995, p. 87) says, ‘for narratives to flourish there must be a community to hear’. The community which hears sexual stories (those about sexual practice rather than about coming out or homophobic victimisation) is the AIDS industry; we have created the stories we are being told.

**Selection of material**

As well as the danger that we have created the respondents’ stories by our ‘training’ of them and by our mode of questioning, there is the danger that by selecting the responses and quotations that appeal to us out of the mass of qualitative data we end up with a fiction of our own making. Systematic indexing helps to prevent memory playing tricks and converting one mention into ‘many men thought’, but there is no getting around the fact that personal judgment and the desire to interest the reader are involved in the selection of quotations. Faced with eight mentions of a topic, one picks the respondent who expresses it vividly. It was the differences in articulacy between the respondents as much as the differences in length and content between the interviews that led to some respondents being quoted much more than others.