

Older single gay men: Questioning the master narrative of coupledness

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Abstract

This thesis fills an important research gap in the sociology of ageing and life course, and the sociology of sexualities and intimacies by exploring the understudied experience of singlehood among older gay men. It is a qualitative study based on semi-structured in-depth life story interviews conducted with 25 self-identified gay men over the age of 50 who live in England and have been single for most of their lives.

The primary objective of the study is to investigate how older single gay men interpret and assign meanings to their lives in later life. In considering the role of narratives in bridging structure and agency, the thesis suggests that the older gay men's narratives of singlehood need to be understood with reference to the master narrative in society that privileges couplehood. The master narrative undoubtedly informed and at times overshadowed the ways in which the older gay men understood their lives. But at the same time this thesis finds that the research participants engaged with the master narrative in a variety of creative ways – they did not only *adopt*, but also *adapted* and *subverted* the dominant story line.

These counter-stories do not only reproduce, but have the potential to reinvent, the meanings of relationships in contemporary societies. To achieve this, resources were needed in reframing the master narrative. From a life course perspective the thesis suggests that the older gay men's earlier life experiences and current social locations influenced the narratives they told. Only some of the older single gay men were able to (re-)claim sexual citizenship while others were denied this. In

addition, the older gay men's story-telling was filled with ambivalence and ambiguities. As a whole, the thesis sees the older gay men's stories as displaying agency within structure.

Keywords: Ageing and Life Course; Sexualities; Older Gay Men; Singlehood; Life Story Interviews; Qualitative Research

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Note on data reporting

Extracts from the interviews are indented in the text.

T: denotes ‘Tung’, the researcher’s first name.

[]: words inside the brackets have been added by the researcher.

Throughout the thesis, the interviewees/respondents are referred to as ‘research participants’ to highlight the co-constructed nature of the interview encounter and the data generated.

All names reported in this thesis are pseudonyms, to ensure the research participants’ anonymity. These include the research participants’ own names and the names that they brought up during the interviews, such as those of their previous partners, family members, friends, or colleagues, etc. Any identifiable information, such as specific names of cities, organizations and job details has been removed. Recognizing that any representation of data necessarily involves my own judgement, the quotes presented in this thesis have been edited minimally.

A summary of each participant’s story can be found in Appendix 1 of the thesis.

Part 1 Background

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Locating the study in the research literature

This thesis examines long-term singlehood among the current cohort of older gay men living in England. It is a qualitative study based on semi-structured in-depth life story interviews, each lasting between two to six hours, conducted with 25 self-identified gay men over the age of 50 who live in England and have been single for most of their lives.

The research aims to add to the sociological understanding of older single gay men who constitute a research gap in the sociology of ageing and life course and the sociology of sexualities and intimacies.

The combined influence of gender and ageing has been understudied (Arber and Ginn 1995, Arber, Andersson and Hoff 2007, McMullin 1995). Even when gender is studied, it is not unusual for ageing studies to ascribe gender as an aspect that concerns women only, rather than both genders (Krekula 2007, Russell 2007). It has been noted that it has taken some time for academics to realize that ‘old men, as well as old women, have gender’ (van den Hoonaard 2007: 277). This renders older men ‘invisible’ in contemporary societies (Fennell and Davidson 2003, Fleming 1999, Thompson 1994). I have discussed this more fully in another publication (Suen 2011a: 71-75).

Driven by the necessity to fill this gap in older men in the research literature, this thesis originally set out to collect stories from both older gay men and older straight men. It happened that more than two-thirds of the participants successfully recruited for and participated in the study self-identified as gay. To enhance coherence of the analysis, the thesis therefore focuses on older gay men.

This focus on older gay men is also warranted in view of the scant research undertaken in this area until relatively recently. Although a strand of research in social gerontology has begun to recognize the need to understand the lives of older men as gendered, the focus remains mostly on older straight men (e.g. Davidson 2004, Perren, Arber and Davidson 2003). Older gay men, on the other hand, are understudied in both academic research into ageing and life course, and sexualities. They have been under-studied in ageing studies which are generally synonymous with studies of heterosexual older people. At the same time, older gay men are also understudied in sexualities and lesbian and gay studies, which have tended to focus on younger people. For example, when Plummer (2008) reviewed his first ten years of editing the international academic journal *Sexualities* (1998-2008), he remarked that only one major article had focused on older people. This thesis therefore represents a rather fresh approach that brings together the various strands of thought in the fields of the sociology of ageing and life course and the sociology of sexualities and intimacies. This is in part a response to a call that the intersection of the two fields can be fruitful but has been seldom explored (Plummer 2010).

At the same time, singlehood as a research topic has been relatively neglected. Although there has been ample discussion of contemporary changes in intimacies (e.g. Giddens 1991, Giddens 1992, Illouz 1997, Jamieson 1998, Elliott and Lemert 2009), these sociological debates still centre in one way or another how the traditional forms and meanings of couplehood and relationships have changed or remained. Those who have not entered into relationships, i.e. singles, remain at the margin, if they are even considered in academic discussions at all. Even when singles were studied, younger and female singles were generally the focus (see Chapter 2 for a discussion of this). The experience of singlehood among non-heterosexual older people remains very much unknown. This thesis therefore addresses the research gap that ‘gay and lesbian singles have been neglected altogether’ (Hostetler and Cohler 1997: 199).

This omission of gay singles in research has been suggested to ‘most likely reflect the understandable, if misguided desire on the part of well-intended, humanistic social scientists not to confirm social stereotypes of lesbians and gays’ (Hostetler and Cohler 1997: 200). As researchers saw singlehood either as failure to find a partner (an involuntary state) or problematic ideological choice (an undesirable state), they did not want to present single gay men’s and lesbians’ lives. Also, the rising political discourse of fighting for same-sex partnership and same-sex marriage meant that discussions concentrate more on lesbians and gay men who were partnered rather than single. As a result, the lives of gay singles become relatively overlooked.

Although there has been very limited research into non-heterosexual singlehood, figures show that singlehood is not a rare experience among non-heterosexual people, especially among gay men. Currently it is impossible to find representative data of gay men, but a review of survey data (Hostetler 2009) from the 1970s to 1990s suggested that while around 45 to 80 per cent of lesbians were in a committed relationship at any given time, only around 40 to 60 per cent of gay men reported the same. ‘Somewhat in the vicinity of half of gay men describe themselves as single at any given time’ (Hostetler and Cohler 1997: 202) and these rates did not appear to vary much by age (Hostetler 2009: 500). A more recent estimate even showed that only 28 per cent of gay men were living with a same-sex partner (Black, Gates, Sanders and Taylor 2000).

As such, the findings of this thesis will add to the sociological understanding of singles as well as older gay men. The findings will highlight how ageing and sexualities intersect.

1.2 Thesis focus

This thesis focuses on the ways in which older single gay men interpret and assign meanings to their lives. The scope is to investigate the subjective interpretations and meaning-making processes at the individual and discursive level. However, it will become apparent that their ‘individual’ or ‘personal’ accounts need to be understood with reference to the larger societal and historical contexts.

Informed by the narrative perspective (see Chapter 2), this thesis suggests that the participants' narratives bridge structure and agency, when individuals construct themselves a story to live with against the master narrative of coupledness in society.

This study used '50+' as the marker to define 'older' and allowed the participants to self-identify as 'single' and 'gay' – the decisions around these criteria will be explained and justified in Chapter 3.

1.3 Main argument

This thesis proposes that there is a master narrative in society that privileges couplehood (Chapter 5). As Foucault (1978) pointed out, some ways of interpreting reality are privileged while some other coexisting ways are marginalized. These 'social and cultural frameworks of interpretation' (Mishler 1999:18) become a canonical story, a culturally dominant story, or a master narrative (Bamberg 1997). The master narrative can be so taken-for-granted that it brings with it implicitly assumed 'accepted causality' (Janeway 1980: 582). It can serve as a form of social control and constrain alternative ways of understanding.

This idea of a 'master narrative' was used as a key analytical tool in organising and presenting the interview data. This was because during the interviews, the participants repeatedly highlighted that they faced social pressure from people surrounding them, including family members, friends, colleagues or acquaintances, who asked them about their being single. It was striking that

almost no participants mentioned that they did not receive any social pressure at all. It thus seems evident that, heavily influenced by heteronormativity, the master narrative privileges couplehood over singlehood (Chapter 5). If an adult remains single for a significant period through his life course, it is generally taken as a signal for something ‘wrong’.

As a result, I saw the participants’ story telling as a process and an action. They were actively creating and constructing what being single meant to them, against the backdrop of the social pressure to partner up. In other words, the participants were social world makers though they do not make their social worlds of their own choosing (Plummer 2001: 20).

Of course, the master narrative also lives in a world of pluralism and difference. It is necessarily plural and is always changing. Given the fluidity and changes in different relationships norms, the master narrative may have grown weaker, but it certainly has not completely disappeared (see Chapter 5).

This master narrative in turn serves as the frame against which many older gay men used to interpret and assign meanings to their lives. However, although this master narrative undoubtedly informed and at times overshadowed the ways in which they understood their lives, the older single gay men in this study did not only *adopt* (Chapter 6), but also *adapted* (Chapter 7) and *subverted* (Chapter 8) the dominant story line. They developed ‘alternative story lines’ that challenged the meanings of singlehood that have been ‘given’ in society.

In each participant's story, there were moments when he adopted, adapted and subverted the master narrative. These dynamics changed depending on where the participants were and the timing of the year (Chapter 9) and also through their life course (Chapter 10).

However, resources were needed in reframing the master narrative. From a life course perspective the thesis suggests that the older gay men's earlier life experiences and current social locations influenced the accounts they gave. Because of the differences in resources they had, only some of the older single gay men were able to (re-)claim sexual citizenship while others were denied this. Moreover, the thesis argues that the older gay men's story-telling was filled with ambivalence and that ambiguities often prevailed (discussed in Chapter 11).

1.4 Thesis outline

This thesis contains 11 chapters, which can be read as 4 parts.

Background: Chapters 1 and 2 set the scene for this study. Chapter 2 will review the current research literature related to this topic, focusing on research conducted into singlehood and older gay men.

Methodology: Chapter 3 will outline how the research has been carried out, and will justify the decisions made throughout the research process. It will also debate some ethical dilemmas encountered during the research.

Findings: Chapters 4 to 10 present the results of data analysis. Chapter 4 will provide an overall view of the argument. Chapter 5 will discuss the master narrative of coupledness in society with reference to the social pressure the participants felt. Chapters 6, 7 and 8 will accordingly examine how the participants adopted, adapted and subverted the master narrative in the process of interpreting and assigning meanings to their lives in later life. How these dynamics changed in different social spaces and at various timings will be presented in Chapter 9. Chapter 10 argues that these dynamics changed over the participants' life courses.

Conclusions and futures: Chapter 11 will draw conclusions by discussing the research findings, suggesting topics for further research and highlighting the potential for knowledge exchange.

Chapter 2: Literature review

This chapter will review current research in the two areas most relevant to this thesis: singlehood and older gay men's lives. It will provide pointers for issues this thesis will highlight.

2.1 Research into singlehood

The review of research into singlehood will show that:

- older, non-heterosexual singles' lives have been understudied;
- singles' well-being is moderated by physical health, social health and psychological health;
- singles' experience changes over the life course; and that
- singles display agency by discursively repositioning themselves in the face of the social pressure to partner up.

Sampling singles

In terms of sampling, women's experience of singlehood (e.g. Baumbusch 2004, Dalton 1992, Ferguson 2000, Lewis and Moon 1997) has been studied much more than men's. Research into single women generally portrayed them as resisting the dominant gendered story which assumes that marriage and family represent the ultimate destination in a woman's life (e.g. Lewis and Borders 1995). Single women were generally depicted as pioneers who defied social expectations in search of fulfilment of personal goals and achievements, in career or other

domains of life. In many such studies, it was made clear by the researchers that they intended to present women's experience of singlehood more positively. As a consequence, the experience presented by these studies may have been incomplete or not entirely fair because of the preconceived agenda the authors have in mind.

By comparison, men's experience of singlehood has been relatively little studied. Even when single men have been studied, the research referred mostly to straight men. Among older straight men, older widowers' experience has been of most interest to researchers (e.g. Davidson 2002 and Bennett 2007). On the other hand, with the notable exception of Hostetler's work (2009) that examined the meanings of 'single by choice' among 'mature gay men' (defined by him as aged 35 and over) in a Midwestern city in the US, gay men's experience of singlehood has been almost totally neglected.

In terms of chronological age, the singles studied were usually relatively younger. This focus on younger age groups partly rested on the assumption that singlehood would only be a temporary stage for most people and so singlehood would be more common among and relevant to younger people.

Implications: There is a need to understand singlehood among older, male and non-heterosexual singles. This study sets out to fill this research gap by looking at older gay men who have been single for most of their lives.

Reasons for singlehood

Certain topics have captured the attention of researchers who studied singlehood.

Previous research first focused on the reasons for singlehood. (1) Childhood experience, e.g. 'troubled' relationships with family of origin (Carnelley and Janoff-Bulman 1992, Rallings 1966, Spreitzer and Riley 1974, Schachner, Shaver and Gillath 2008: 481) and (2) a desire to preserve psychological and social autonomy (Budgeon 2008) were listed among factors associated with singlehood. For women, education and career opportunities were argued to be reasons associated with staying single (Baumbusch 2004, Ferguson 2000, Houseknecht, Vaughan and Statham 1987, Spreitzer and Riley 1974, Stein 1975, Ward 1979). However, it was found that men who shared similar characteristics (better education, higher occupational status, and intelligence) were least likely to remain single (Spreitzer and Riley 1974: 541, Ward 1979).

Quantitative research into well-being

The second focus of research was into quantitative assessment of well-being. Although this thesis focuses on the qualitative processes through which older single gay men interpret and assign meanings to their lives, previous quantitative research provides a few useful pointers to socio-economic variables that may influence the experience of being single. Therefore, previous quantitative research is being discussed here.

Four major areas of concern have been: (1) sexual well-being (Davidson and Darling 1988, Stall, Heurtin-Roberts, McKusick, Hoff, Lang 1990, Peart, Rosenthal and Moore 1996, Rosenthal, Fernbach and Moore 1997); (2) financial well-being; (3) physical well-being/health, and (4) psychological well-being. In these studies, singles were defined as ‘never married’, and generally treated as a homogeneous group, to be compared with those who were married, divorced and widowed.

It seems to have been widely accepted that married people enjoy better physical well-being. It has been found that married people have a longer life expectancy than those who are unmarried and this pattern is claimed to have been ‘repeatedly demonstrated throughout the 20th century in a large number of countries’ (Hu and Goldman 1990: 233). Two main explanations are given for this difference, namely ‘marriage protection effect’ through the promotion of better health behaviour (Umberson 1987) and ‘marriage selection effect’ – that people who are healthier may have been selected or self-selected themselves into marriage in the first place (e.g. Waldron, Hughes and Brooks 1996).

However, the effect of marriage on health behaviour seemed to differ by gender. It was suggested that the effect of marriage on mortality was more significant on men, compared with women (Gove 1973). Although marriage was found to promote better health habits, the effect was relatively greater for men than for women (Umberson 1992). For example, a study found that married men, but not married women, practised more positive health behaviours than their unmarried counterparts (Brown and McCreedy 1986). At the same time, it seemed that

departure from marriage had a bigger impact on men's health, compared with women's health. It was proposed that men suffered more health risks than women following widowhood (Stroebe and Stroebe 1983). The overall picture indicates that marriage seemed to be more beneficial for a man's health, but less so for a woman's.

Research has also suggested that married people generally enjoy better psychological well-being than unmarried people, measured by different mental health indicators (e.g. Anderson and Braito 1981, Gove, Hughes and Style 1983). It has been argued that the influence of marriage on psychological well-being is gendered. Married women seemed happier than single women, but single women seemed happier than single men (e.g. Glenn 1975, Marks 1996) although there are signs that this pattern may be changing gradually (see the discussion in Williams 2003).

It has also been pointed out that there are factors that mediate this association between marital status and psychological well-being. The first such mediating factor is social networks (Barrett 1999). For example, Clark and Graham (2005: 132) pointed out that the term 'singles' can be misleading because unpartnered people do have other forms of relationships – with friends, siblings, parents, nieces, nephews, colleagues and teammates – and such relationships are important for unmarried people's psychological well-being (Dykstra 1995). It was suggested that among never married older people those who had more contacts with siblings, friends, and neighbours were less likely to report loneliness (Pinquart 2003).

Shanas (1979) used substitution theory to explain that in the absence of a spouse or children, never married people substitute by having more remote family or nonfamily members in their social networks. This seems to have been supported by research that suggests that single women find alternative committed relationships outside marriage, to ‘combat’ loneliness and isolation (e.g. Simpson 2006, Primakoff 1988). Other mediating factors suggested included psychological factors such as self-esteem (Cockrum and White 1985), personal mastery, agency, self-sufficiency (Bookwala and Fekete 2009), past educational attainment (through neuroticism and stress) (Bishop and Martin 2007) and functional status (Pinquart 2003).

Implications: In terms of singles’ psychological well-being, which is most relevant to this thesis, physical health (functional status), social health (social networks) and mental health (self-esteem and self-sufficiency) have been suggested to serve as important moderating factors. However, such studies have been carried out with heterosexual singles. Do these factors have the same influence on mediating how older single gay men feel about their lives? This will be addressed in this thesis.

Qualitative research into lived experience

Another strand of previous research was the explorations of singles’ lived experience, using mainly qualitative research methods such as interviews. The studies could be divided into those interested in respectively younger and older singles’ lived experiences.

Almost all the studies that looked at younger singles started with a clear agenda to present singlehood in a more positive light to combat the stereotype that singles are necessarily lonely and unhappy, and subsequently presented an overwhelmingly positive picture. Stein's article (1975), as the title 'Singlehood: An alternative to marriage' indicated, was a prime example of such studies. The respondents described marriage as 'restriction and obstacle to human growth' (Stein 1975: 493) and being single as associated with 'freedom, enjoyment, opportunities to meet people and develop friendships, economic independence, more and better sexual experiences, and personal development' (Stein 1975: 494). It has been advocated that there is a need to recognize that singles are enjoying a satisfying way of life, attaining self-respect, independence and freedom as singles (Stein 1976). Along a similar line of thinking, De Jong-Gierveld and Aalberts (1980: 350) examined the question whether singlehood was a 'creative or lonely experience'. It was argued that among a subsample of unmarried and divorced men and women, some could be categorized as 'creative singles', who seemed to be 'able to cope with their situation of living alone' and reported few feelings of loneliness and emptiness (De Jong-Gierveld and Aalberts 1980: 365).

The above studies, drawing on samples of young respondents, created an almost care-free picture of singlehood (Budgeon 2008) which can be seen as an effort at 'normalizing' singlehood within the larger societal culture. Non-academic books that were themed around singlehood were trying to do the same, such as: *Single and Loving It: How to be Happy and Whole When There Is No Other Half*; *Positively Single: The Art of Being Single and Happy*; *Happy to be Single: The Pleasures of Independence*; *Being Single and Happy - How to be Successful on*

Your Own; Living Single, Fulfilled and Happy: The Complete You; How to be Happy in No Man's Land: A Book for Singles.

But how about when singles grow older? Does the experience of being single stay the same? The answer to this is contested: some studies suggested that the experience of singlehood in later life became more positive, whereas some suggested that it became more negative.

Some researchers suggested that, like their younger counterparts, older singles enjoyed freedom and independence. That included freedom to make decisions, be what one really wanted to be and not having to worry what a partner might think (Baumbusch 2004: 113-114).

However, other researchers have suggested that the experience of singlehood became increasingly negative with age. As independence is an important component of being single, when health deteriorates in later life and mobility issues become a problem, the viability of an independent lifestyle may decline (Ward 1979: 863) and the resources to maintain this fluidity and autonomy may diminish. Practical support may become an issue for people who do not have a partner in later life (Keith, Kim and Schafer 2000).

Some studies found that priorities could also change in later life. For example, it was found that younger never married people felt more excited about life than their married counterparts, but such difference was not found in the older age group (Ward 1979).

As reviewed above, social support is important in moderating well-being among singles, especially older singles (Barrett 1999). However, when singles grow older they may find that their access to social networks become more restricted. This may make them feel lonelier. For example, it was noted that in later life, the never married, compared with the married, are disadvantaged as they may find 'a lower probability of having a confidant and lower levels of interaction and perceived support' a problem (Barrett 1999). In one study, it was reported that among the older never married men interviewed, 'deep wounds and feelings of loss and abandonment' emerged on the death of parents and siblings. Deep attachment to parents was conditioned by years of close association and co-residence (Rubinstein 1986: 131).

Some authors suggested a view that the never married, compared with partnered people, may derive more satisfaction and social validation from work as compensation for a lack of gratification derived from marriage. As a consequence, retirement in later life could be an especially salient and difficult transition for the never married (Ward 1979, also see a review in Keith 1985: 410-411).

It has, however, been pointed out that the above could be a cohort-specific experience (Ward 1979). As institutional arrangements and social attitudes towards singles change, the experience of singlehood in later life may also change.

On the other hand, it was suggested that the happiness of those who never marry may increase with age as they come to terms socially and psychologically with

singlehood (Ward 1979) by developing alternative social networks, sources of identity and self-realization.

Some researchers suggested that never married people may even be ‘especially good’ at dealing with the challenges of ageing. That was because they did not have to experience desolation. Isolation refers to the experience of being alone, and desolation is the process of becoming alone. Desolation represents a discontinuity in patterns of social engagement that can generate feelings of loneliness. Gubrium (1974) thus compared desolates (those who were recently divorced and widowed, hence in the process of being desolated) and non-desolates (the long-term widowed, never married and currently married who engaged socially) aged 60 to 94. Results showed that those who were never married evaluated their lives more similarly to those who were married. It was argued that as the never married did not have to face the crisis of losing a spouse, they did not have to experience the negative effects of desolation like the widowed or divorced had to. This proposed the view that having never been married is like a ‘premium’ in old age, since the effects of desolation are avoided. It was argued that never married people would have developed psychosocial resources that facilitate living alone, and are used to resolving the issue of self-validation through ways other than marriage. It was proposed that single elderly ‘constitute a distinct type of social personality in old age’ which may even be ‘especially suitable’ for ageing. Similarly, in another study, some respondents expressed that being single for a long time meant that they were already used to the idea of taking care of their own needs. For example, one older woman who had never been married in that study said:

‘I think it would be easier to be alone than adjust to being alone. I mean there is no adjustment if you have not been alone, and yet you have to, you’re independent to a degree as a single person.’ (Baumbusch 2004: 114)

In a way, there seemed to be an acculturation process for people who have been single for a long time, because they have become used to being on their own.

Previous research has tended, however, to focus on discrete life stages, i.e. either earlier life or later life when the experience of singlehood was examined. Very little previous research has been carried out into how the experience of singlehood changes over the life course. One exception that explored the notion of ‘transitions’ among singles was Davies’s study (2003). Qualitative interviews were conducted with 15 single women and 15 single men (defined as heterosexual childless individuals who had never married) between the ages of 38 and 57. It was found that transition was represented by a change in self-attributed status that occurred over time. It was argued that there was a process of ‘becoming single’ when someone identified more with singlehood than marriage (Davies 2003: 347). Occasions, such as birthdays and buying their own property, were perceived by the respondents in the study as important watersheds. Based on observations from clinical cases, some therapists also tried to look at singlehood from a life cycle approach (Schwartzberg, Berliner and Jacob 1995, see table 1 below). However, the framework was built from a therapeutic angle to help the clients, rather than derived from social scientific study.

Table 1: Life cycle approach to the changing experience of singlehood

Life Cycle Stage	Emotional Process
Not Yet Married	Shifting relationships with the family, restructuring interaction with family from dependent to an independent orientation
	Taking a more autonomous role with regard to the world outside the family in the areas of work and friendships
The Thirties: Entering the 'Twilight Zone' of Singlehood	Facing single status for the first time
	Expanding life goals to include other possibilities in addition to marriage
Midlife (Forties to Mid-fifties)	Addressing the fantasy of the Ideal American Family Accepting the possibility of never marrying Accepting the possibility of not having own biological children
	Defining the meaning of work, current and future
	Defining an authentic life for oneself that can be accomplished within single status
	Establishing adult role for oneself within family of origin
Later Life (Fifties to when Physical Health Fails)	Consolidating decisions about work life
	Enjoying fruits of one's labours and the benefits of singlehood
	Acknowledging the future diminishment of physical ones
	Facing increasing disability and death of loved ones
Elderly	Confronting mortality
	Accepting one's life as it has been lived

Source: Reproduced from Schwartzberg, Berliner and Jacob (1995: 56)

These discussions of the change in singles' experience over the life course suffer two major drawbacks. First, the discussions assumed that all singles went through similar changes in their experience through the life course. The uniformity of the models underestimated the diversity of experience among singles. This uniformity also implied some kind of moral judgement. Both studies by Davies (2003) and Schwartzberg, Berliner and Jacob (1995) reviewed above assumed that the experience of singlehood was somehow going to change for the better through the life course. Although that may have been what therapists would have wanted their clients to achieve, it may not be a reality for all singles. Second, the life course

changes discussed were based mainly on heterosexual ideals. The changes in the experience of singlehood through the life course as suggested by Table 1 above are not applicable for gay men.

It has been discussed that there is a research need to better understand the temporal dimension of the experience of singlehood. As early as the 1980s, Ward (1981: 355) wrote:

The implications and viability of singlehood are likely to vary at different stages of the life course. We need to know more about the sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction for the never-married, how these changes with age, and the extent to which the never-married confront personal issues and tasks (both social and psychological) as they age.

However, it seems that how singlehood changes at different life stages has still been relatively unexplored, and it is still advocated that:

More research is needed to better understand how contextual, interpersonal, and internal factors interact to shape attitudes and experiences of singlehood at different ages and for different birth cohorts. (Koropecj-Cox 2005: 95).

Implications: The lived experience of being single has been suggested to be dissimilar at different life stages. There is a continuing need to further understand how singles' experience changes over the life course. It is particularly important to note that the possibility that these changes in the course of a life time may not be uniform. The changes in non-heterosexuals' experience of being single over the life course also need to be taken into consideration.

Narrative perspective and singles' negotiation strategies

It has been suggested that story-telling serves different functions, including solving problems, reducing tension and resolving dilemmas (Bruner 1990). During the process of story-telling, individuals develop 'a self to live by' (McAdams 1993). Story-telling activities provide individuals' lives 'with unity or purpose and in order to articulate a meaningful niche in the psychosocial world' (McAdams 1993:5).

This is in keeping with the idea that identity has increasingly been transformed from given into an individual task, as Giddens, and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, among many others, have pointed out. Both the individualization thesis proposed by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) and the idea of 'plastic sexuality' discussed by Giddens (1992) have suggested relationships are gradually becoming 'reflexive projects'. In the book *The Normal Chaos of Love*, for example, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim argued that 'love is becoming a blank that lovers must fill in themselves' (1995: 5) – love is to be discussed, negotiated, justified and agreed upon. Gubrium and Holstein: The 'self no longer references an experientially constant entity, a central presence or presences, but, rather, stands as a practical discursive accomplishment' (2002: 70). Identity becomes fluid and negotiated, achieved rather than ascribed.

The stories individuals tell do not only mirror their experience, but also reconstitute their experience (Andrews, Squire and Tamboukou 2008: 15). Stories guide actions (Somers 1994). As Ochs and Capps (1996: 16) stated: 'Narrative

and self are inseparable in that narrative is simultaneously born out of experience and gives shape to experience’.

Only a small number of researchers have studied singlehood from a narrative perspective, to understand how singles interpret and assign meanings to their lives. They argue that the dominant ideology ‘bestows a range of social, economic and symbolic rewards on those who couple, leaving those who do not in a position to account for their marginalized condition’ (Budgeon 2008: 309). The hegemonic narrative privileges couples. As such, singlehood is experienced as ‘a troubled category’ (Reynolds and Wetherell 2003) and a ‘deficit identity’ (Reynolds and Taylor 2005). It has been found that because of such perspectives, some single women conceptualized unmarried status as a ‘temporary stage’ preceding or preparing for marriage or the consequence of failure to maintain heterosexual relationships (Sandfield and Percy 2003). Therapists also came across cases of singles finding it difficult to face pressure from families and peers, and some ‘used marital status to evaluate their lives, and based on this measure, wonder if there is something lacking’ (Schwartzberg, Berliner and Jacob 1995: 4).

There are, however, both ‘passive victim’ as well as ‘active challenger’ in the face of stigma (Link and Phelan 2001: 378). One of the things singles do is tell stories to create a positive self to live with. They ‘develop how they want to be known in the stories they develop’ (Riessman 2003: 8) to refashion a different self. It has been found that single women used ‘resistant thinking, managing interactions and embracing singlehood’ as strategies, ‘redefining the negative aspects of their identity and replacing them with more acceptable attributes’ (Link and Phelan

2001: 390). They were also found to repeatedly construct couple relationships as 'difficult, draining and problematic' (Budgeon 2008: 314), strategically 'distancing themselves from the couple ideal in order to manage the discrepancy between their self identity and social identity' (Budgeon 2008: 313). One rather consistent theme in the literature was that 'single by choice' was used by single women as a solution to deal with ideological dilemmas (Reynolds and Taylor 2003, Reynolds, Wetherell and Taylor 2007). Single women switched between externalizing and internalizing the blame for why they were single and had not married (Lewis and Moon 1997). They used progressive narratives to work against assumptions and cultural stereotypes so that 'most importantly, they position the speaker, rather than any outside observer, as the authority in the success of her life' (Reynolds and Taylor 2005: 210). They developed 'discursive "tools" to construct and present themselves as fulfilled, successful and acceptable' (Zajicek and Koski 2003: 379).

Hostetler (2009), the only researcher to date who has specifically researched older single gay men, also argued that those gay singles he interviewed who claimed they were single by choice should be understood as using a 'narrative strategy' and exercising a form of secondary control to preserve ego integrity. He used a few indicators to measure whether the participants were in fact 'single by choice', including (1) a single-item indicator in the structured interview instrument: asking the participants whether they agreed with the statement: 'It is my choice to be single'; (2) combining question (1) with another question: 'How likely do you think it is that you will find a long-term relationship in the future?'; and (3) using an adaptation to singlehood tool to measure how satisfied they were with being

single. It was found that even among those who said they were single by choice, many reported that they were not happy about singlehood and that it was not their preference. Few spoke of a conscious decision to remain single. The choice to be single was seen as temporary, meaning that some of these single gay men may have made a choice to be single, but only for the short term, rather than permanently. For example, some saw 'choice' as a temporary break to 'take some time out' to rethink what they wanted to get out of relationships – the goal was still to enhance future relationships. No participant claimed explicitly or alluded to ideological motivations for being single, such as resisting heterosexual norms. The 'decision' to remain single seemed to have been made retrospectively in the context of other life experiences and past choices. Without even being asked, many of the single gay men felt the need to justify and explain why they were single. He suggested that 'single by choice' would be better understood as an interpretive strategy:

Voluntary singlehood is a gradually adopted, developmental and narrative strategy – a way of reading the past, present and future – through which these single men convince themselves that things are as they were meant to be. (Hostetler 2009: 521)

In a way, singles could be described as being engaged in coping (Lazarus 1993: 234). Like many people who could not, or intentionally chose not to, follow the dominant cultural frames – such as gay 'bears' (Gough and Flanders 2009), non-heterosexual Christians and Muslims (Yip 2005), people who are obese (Puhl and Brownell 2003), people who are involuntarily childless (Miall 1994) and people who have different kinds of illnesses (Frank 1995) – the singles used different ways of story-telling and repositioning to make sense of their experience.

Implications: The review above shows that singles display agency in the face of the stigma attached to being single. In particular, they tell different stories to themselves and the researchers to reposition themselves and to develop a more positive sense of self to live with.

Review of research indicates the following:

- In terms of singles' psychological well-being, which is most relevant to this research, physical health (functional status), social health (social networks) and mental health (self-esteem and self-sufficiency) serve as important moderating factors.
- The experience of being single changes over the life course.
- Singles display agency by discursively repositioning themselves in the face of the social stigma attached to being single.

However, the research reviewed above has mainly been carried out with heterosexual participants. Whether the findings apply to older single gay men is not known.

2.2 A life course perspective on older gay men's lives

Although we do not know much about older single gay men's lives, the life course perspective (Elder, Johnson and Crosnoe 2003: 5-10) can serve as a theoretical lens to provide some pointers for understanding older gay men's lives. The perspective has been regarded as 'one of the most significant social science developments in the last quarter century' (Settersten 2006: 3) and 'perhaps the

pre-eminent theoretical orientation in the study of lives' (Elder et al. 2003: 3). It is generally understood to encompass a few major paradigmatic principles (see Elder et al. 2003, Settersten 2006). Summing the principles up, the perspective sees life course as 'a joint set of interdependent trajectories', and that 'no period of life can be understood in isolation from people's prior experiences, as well as their aspirations for the future' (Mortimer and Shanahan 2003: xi). This suggests that any life should be seen as a result of a 'nexus of social pathways, developmental trajectories, and social changes' (Elder et al. 2003: 10).

Socio-historical embeddedness

The principle of time and place from the life course perspective suggests that people's lives are embedded and shaped by social and historical times and places. Hence, to understand older gay men's experience of singlehood, it is necessary to understand the social and historical environments in which they grew up. Mannheim (1952: 298) argued that earlier formative experience can contribute to a unique world view or frame of reference that remains a powerful force throughout people's lives:

Even if the rest of one's life consisted of one long process of negation and destruction of the natural world view acquired in youth, the determining influence of these early impressions would still be prominent.

The older gay men in this study were aged between 50 and 73 (see Chapter 3), and were therefore born between 1937 and 1960. Although this spans a period of 20 years, it can be argued that they belong to a specific cohort, because they were 'born in the same time interval and ageing together' (Ryder 1965: 844). It

may even be argued that they belong to a generation which is defined as ‘groups of people who share a distinctive culture and/or a self-conscious identity by virtue of their having experienced the same historical events at roughly the same time in their lives’ (Alwin and McCammon 2003: 27).

Weeks, in his classical work *Coming Out* (1977), has outlined the homosexual politics in Britain from the 19th century to the present. The brief summary below is necessarily going to be an over-simplification due to space available in this thesis.

When this current cohort of older gay men was born, homosexuality was still criminalized in the UK (in England until 1967) and treated as a mental health problem. Homosexuality was criminalized for more than 400 years in the UK. In 1533 buggery¹ became a capital crime in the English Law, which meant that two gay men could be sentenced to death for having anal intercourse. Even in the case of attempted buggery, those involved could be sent to jail for two years. The Offences Against the Person Act 1861 abolished the death sentence for buggery, but buggery still carried penalty of imprisonment from ten years to life.

In 1885, Section 11 of the Criminal Law Amendment Act, known as the Labouchère Amendment, was enacted. In terms of the Act, all male homosexual acts (‘acts of gross indecency’) were illegal and punishable by up to two years of hard labour. This amendment was significant: whereas before only certain acts (primarily buggery) were outlawed, now for the first time all aspects of

¹ Buggery: anal intercourse between men and women, two men, and men or women with animals; but mostly it was mainly taken to refer to anal intercourse between 2 men.

homosexuality itself were made illegal (David 1997: 17). In 1895, Oscar Wilde was tried following investigations of his alleged affairs with Lord Alfred Douglas, and was sentenced to two years' hard labour.

In the 1920s, the term 'gay' came into usage and led to the emergence of 'gay sensibility' in London (David 1997: 74) but homosexuality was still almost shrouded in secrecy. A secretly coded language, Polari, was developed among gay men to protect themselves from being prosecuted (e.g. Kulick 2000).

During the Second World War that followed, it appeared that sexual mores became more relaxed. The possibility of meeting other gay people, or at least the chance of expressing homoerotic desire, increased (Jivani 1997: 9). However, the situation changed immediately after the end of the war, partly owing to the return of an emphasis on the family unit as the building block for economic recovery. Conviction of reported indictable homosexual offences nearly doubled from 1,405 in 1948 to 2,513 in 1961, around 24 times higher than the beginning of the century (David 1997: 153-4). Plainclothes police sometimes waited outside public lavatories to catch men who practised cottaging. The 1950s was called a period of 'witch hunts' (Jivani 1997: 9), and the writer Colin Spencer recalled the fear felt by gay men (David 1997: 157):

They were terrified of the knock on the door in the early morning or late at night; the idea that the bed sheets might be inspected for semen stains – which was something that actually happened! There was suddenly a police state in England in the Fifties.

Sometimes the police were so desperate to prosecute that they resorted to making accusations on false grounds. One gay man who was wrongly arrested by the police recalled the psychological effect:

‘I felt dirty, I felt that they had sort of disfigured me – I really did feel as if they had torn half my face away... and I was terrified to go out... even just to the shop. I was terrified that I was going to be picked up again by another police car, that they were after me, and of course my sex drive disappeared completely.’ (David 1997: 103)

It was perhaps understandable that in any year up to and including 1967, suicide was sometimes used as a ‘desperate escape route’ (David 1997: 7) from this homophobic environment.

In 1957, following the infamous Wildeblood trial in 1954, the Wolfenden Report, which took a ‘pragmatic stance’ on homosexuality, was published (Weeks 2007: 53). The report recommended that homosexual behaviour in private between consenting male adults (aged 21 and older) should be decriminalized. In 1958, the Homosexual Law Reform Society was formed to look further into the issues raised by the report. The decade that followed saw the emergence of the sexual revolution as the pill became available in 1961. The civil rights movements also changed attitudes around social inequalities in general. British society, like many Western societies, began to witness a shift in power between men and women, separation between sex and marriage, sex and reproduction, and marriage and parenting (Weeks 2007: 62).

A historical landmark was reached in 1967, when homosexuality in private was decriminalized in England and Wales for two consenting males over the age of 21.

It needs to be noted that there were limitations to this ‘legal victory’. First, it was carefully crafted so that homosexuality was ‘decriminalized’ – it was no longer illegal – but still not welcomed or embraced. Second, the age of consent was set as 21, higher than that of heterosexuals’ at the time. Third, the law stated that homosexuality was acceptable in private, but not in public. Nevertheless, although the decriminalization in England and Wales came about 170 years later than in France, the first West European country to decriminalize homosexuality, it is difficult to overstate the importance of 1967 as a watershed.

The decriminalization, however, should not be taken to mean that the situation improved immediately after 1967. In fact, medical treatments to change homosexuals into heterosexuals peaked in the 1960s and early 1970s (King and Bartlett 1999). A small number of gay men underwent treatment voluntarily, but most were being referred by their general practitioners, or had to undergo treatment to avoid imprisonment. The treatments included ‘psychoanalysis, behavioural aversion therapy with electric shocks, and nausea induced by apomorphine as the aversion stimulus, discussion of the evils of homosexuality and suggesting the gay men to find a prostitute or female friend to try sexual intercourse’ (Smith, Bartlett and King 2004). Some of the patients reported being sexually abused and physically assaulted during such treatments (Smith et al. 2004). ‘Living in the shadows’ remained the dominant metaphor for gay men until the 1970s (Weeks 2007: 59).

Growing up in this historical social environment may mean that the older gay men in this study, compared with later cohorts, have a different understanding of the

terms such as ‘gay’ and ‘queer’, and of the idea of the closet (Seidman, Meeks and Traschen 1999) and may have reached their developmental milestones at different ages (Drasin, Beals, Elliot, Lever, Klein and Schuster 2008). They thus can be argued to belong to the same ‘sexual generation’ (Plummer 2010). The impact of this on their experience of singlehood needs to be explored.

Gay men’s diverse life courses

The principle of life-span development from the life course perspective suggests that human development and ageing are lifelong processes.

Earlier models saw a gay man’s life course as stage-based (see discussions in Hammack 2005), but have been criticized as reductionist and universalist (Hostetler and Herdt 1998). Later views see gay men’s developmental processes as better conceptualized by ‘differential developmental trajectories perspective’ (Hostetler and Herdt 1998) emphasizing the diversity of life courses amongst gay men.

For example, it has been pointed out that among older gay men there is a great deal of diversity in terms of marital history, coming out history, having children, and the nature and extent of friendship networks, among many other things (Herdt, Beeler and Rawls 1997) and that we cannot automatically assume that all older gay men share similar experiences. Hence, in this study, it is important to examine how older gay men’s diverse earlier life experiences can result in different experiences of singlehood in later life.

Gay men and ageing

There has been an ongoing debate about whether ageing is a positive or negative experience for gay men. This thesis will contribute to these discussions.

First, it has been suggested that gay men may be especially ‘good’ at coping with ageing. It has been argued that because gay men have to learn to live with a stigmatized identity in their earlier lives, and with the associated challenges such as battling homophobia and coming out, they achieve ‘crisis competence’ (Friend 1980, Kimmel 1978). As Berger put it:

The older homosexual mastered... a crisis of being stigmatized: He learned to manage an identity that was in disfavour almost everywhere. A similar crisis of being stigmatized characterizes passage into the status of old age for all men and women... studying the coping mechanisms used by homosexuals to deal with their stigma may shed light on how the elderly can learn to manage the stigma of old age. (Berger 1982: 38)

These ‘adaptive coping talents’ (D’Augelli 1994) that have been developed may help them to better adapt to acquiring another also often marginalized status of being old. Therefore, in one study in the 1980s, 52 per cent of older gay men expressed positive feelings about perceptions of their age and 59 per cent expressed positive feelings about their looks (Gray and Dressel 1985). Another study in the 1990s found 68 per cent said being gay or lesbian helped with the ageing process (Quam and Whitford 1992).

Second, it has been suggested that gay men may have developed especially close linkages with their ‘families of choice’, who are flexible but often strong and

supportive networks, made up of friends, lovers, blood relatives and others. These 'chosen families' carry with them special concern over mutual care, responsibility and commitment (Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan 2001). These family members may continue to play a significant part in non-heterosexual people's later lives. In one study, more than a third of older lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) people interviewed reported receiving care from people other than healthcare providers in the past five years and more than two-thirds provided care to other older LGB people. More than 75 per cent of those interviewed said they were willing to provide care to LGB people in the future (Grossman, D'Augelli and Dragowski 2007). This view suggests that social support may be considerable among some older LGB people in later life.

Third, some research findings have suggested that growing older allows gay men to explore and understand more about themselves. In a study of older gay men's perceptions of their bodies, it was found that most talked about how over time they had become more accepting of who they were both as men and as gay men:

In old age, they have arrived, for the most part, at a notable level of comfort with themselves... in part, their conversations suggest that aging itself has contributed to a growing comfort level. (Slevin and Linneman 2010)

There was hence a suggestion that 'ageing' may mean 'sageing' for some older gay men, who felt wiser and happier in later life.

Others, however, argued that gay men might experience ageing as especially negative.

First, it has been argued that older gay men experience double discrimination, because they carry the dual identities of being 'old' and being 'gay', both of which categories may be discriminated against in a society that is simultaneously ageist and homophobic.

Second, it has been pointed out that homophobia within a heterosexist society may affect older gay men, for example, in terms of their access to social services. When older gay men were asked to imagine the future of care (Hughes 2008), they often expressed worry whether service providers would be aware of their specific needs. It was perceived that in a residential care setting, administration, care staff, and residents of retirement care facilities themselves can all be potential sources of discrimination (Johnson, Jackson, Arnette and Koffman 2005). Indeed, it has been found that many social services were not aware of the specific needs of older lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) issues (Hughes, Harold and Boyer 2011). Older lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people are invisible in aged care (Harrison 2001). Heteronormativity prevails in residential aged care facilities (Tolley and Ranzijn 2006). In my own action research work between 2009 and 2011 raising awareness of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender issues among some care home staff in Oxfordshire, I found many members of staff showed a worrying level of misunderstandings of older lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people and their care needs (Suen 2011b). For example, some care home staff equated sex with sexuality and some male staff were afraid that they would be physically 'touched' by gay residents. Some staff held the religious view that homosexuality is a sin. This has even led some older lesbians and gay men to wonder whether they had to return to the closet when they entered into

formal care (Jackson, Johnson and Roberts 2008) and others to express the desire for LGBT-exclusive care facilities (Johnson et al. 2005). This may mean that older gay men, in particular those who are single, may have unmet care needs in old age.

Third, although ‘families of choice’ may step in and provide care as suggested by the studies reviewed above, some researchers questioned its limits. Weston (1991) questioned the lack of institutional support for families of choice whereas Nardi (1999: 128) similarly pointed out that gay male friendships lack supportive ‘legal, religious and social structures’. Researchers have argued that relationships in older LGBT people’s lives are shaped by access to combined economic, social, and cultural resources (Heaphy 2009) and that it is important to take note of diversity and intersectionality (Cronin and King 2010). These notions suggest that social support may not be available for all older gay men.

Fourth, it has been proposed that gay men may face more pressure as they aged than heterosexual men because of ageism within the gay community. It has been pointed out that young, muscular and smooth bodies are dominant and held as the ideal in media images of gay men, in magazines and in pornographic movies (Duggan and McCreary 2004). This is also especially true in the ‘gay scene’, the more visible part of the gay culture (Christian and Keefe 1999). This results in the formation of a ‘hegemonic aesthetic’ (Filiault and Drummond 2007) which can have adverse effects on gay men’s body image (Levesque and Vichesky 2006). Older gay men’s bodies in turn become marginalized (Jones and Pugh 2005). In many studies, older gay men repeatedly spoke of the youth obsession of gay

culture and of its consequences for themselves and others (Slevin and Linneman 2010).

It has been argued that because of this emphasis on youth that persists in the gay community, gay men think of themselves and others as middle-aged and old earlier than heterosexual men, a phenomenon referred to as ‘accelerated ageing’ (Bennett and Thompson 1991: 66):

Because of the gay community’s emphasis on youth, homosexual men are considered middle-aged and elderly by other homosexual men at an earlier age than heterosexual men in the general community. Since these age-status norms occur earlier in the gay sub-culture, the homosexual man thinks of himself as middle-aged and old before his heterosexual counterpart does.

It could be that older gay men, through their involvement in the gay community, may experience ageism as they interact with younger members of the community (Heaphy 2007).

This may mean that the older gay men in this study could find it more difficult to find potential partners because of their age. For example, in a study of dating advertisements, it was found that gay men were more likely than straight men to state age preferences, with a predilection for younger men (Kaufman and Phua 2003). It remains to be seen whether this applies to the older single gay men in this study.

The concept of agency

The principle of agency suggests that individuals construct their own life course through the choices they make and the actions they take within the opportunities and constraints of history and social circumstances:

The course of our lives is shaped by many forces and events, not the least of which by ourselves. For good and bad, we are to a large extent architects of our own life course. Within the constraints imposed by biology, history, social structure, good and bad fortune, and other factors we may or may not be aware of, we try to control the direction of our lives by exerting our will, pursuing our goals, and affecting our circumstances. While we are indeed products of social and physical forces, we are also causal agents in the construction of our environments and ourselves. (Gecas 2003: 369)

The concept of agency can be found in different disciplines (Gecas 2003): in sociology, for examples among many others, in Marx's idea of material resources, in Bourdieu's idea of habitus, in impression management and self-presentation in everyday encounters as suggested by Goffman's idea of symbolic interactionism, and in psychology in the form of self-efficacy and a set of linked concepts such as 'self-determination', 'locus of control', 'proactivity', 'effort', 'mindfulness', 'resourcefulness', 'mastery', and 'autonomy' (as in Settersten 2006). It has also concerned social gerontology for the past few decades, and there have been models which emphasize the significance of individuals and decisions and actions in determining life outcomes. Such ideas are exemplified in the models of 'successful' and 'healthy' ageing (Rowe and Kahn 1997, Bowling and Dieppe 2005).

It has been suggested that gay men's and lesbians' lives are especially tied in with the idea of agency (see a discussion in Heaphy 2008). Lesbians and gay men have been seen as exemplars of self-fashioned identities (Giddens 1991, 1992).

Gay men have to construct their own life course because there are no ready-made role models they socialize with in a heterosexist society (D'Augelli 1994: 127) and they 'must create a self out of (or despite of) the heterosexual self that is given to them' (Blasius 1994: 191). It has been suggested that there exists virtually a lesbian and gay 'ethos' of self-making and self-determining that is closely akin to 'reflexive habitus' (Sweetman 2003). Such agency has been discussed in the areas of family life, and friendships and community, non-monogamy, ageing and parenting (Heaphy 2008: 2.3).

As such, the older gay men's experience of singlehood in this study can be understood as not predisposed, but actively rewritten, redefined and negotiated.

However, agency does not operate without structure, but within structure. It would thus be especially helpful to note how individuals set goals, take actions, and create meanings within parameters imposed by social settings (Settersten 2006), and may even bring about changes to those social parameters, when trying to understand the older gay men's negotiations with singlehood. While structural and psychological constraints can be attributable to homophobia and heterosexism, sexism and gender stereotypes, and race and class (see a review in Hostetler 2009: 503), older gay men's agency should not be undermined and understated.

2.3 Summary

The literature review in this chapter has shown that:

- The experience of singlehood is mediated by physical health, social health and emotional health.
- The experience changes at different points in singles' lifetimes.
- Singles engage in negotiation and resistance to refashion a self identity.

However, research into singles has been carried out mainly with younger and heterosexual people, whereas studies of older and non-heterosexual singles have been lacking. Given that studies on older gay men's lives have found that:

- older gay men's lives need to be understood as socio-historically embedded;
- older gay men have experienced diverse life courses;
- older gay men's experience changes as they age; and that
- older gay men express agency

It is important to investigate older gay men's experience of singlehood taking these factors into account.

This study aims to explore at the discursive level the subjective interpretations and meanings that older gay men assign to their lives as singles. This research is interested in a set of interrelated research questions:

1. How do older single gay men interpret and assign meanings to their lives in later life? How do dominant ways of thinking affect these processes?
2. What are the mediating factors in such meaning-making processes?
3. How do the meanings that single gay men attach to being single change over the life course?

Overall, the study is interested in what the research participants' narratives can tell us about the lives of singles and older gay men. The next chapter, Chapter 3, will discuss how the study was carried out.

Part 2 Methodology

Chapter 3: Research methodology

This study has adopted a qualitative approach to answer the research questions.

In-depth life story interviews each lasting for two to six hours were conducted with 25 self-identified single gay men over the age of 50 residing in England. In any research, it is important to consider three fundamental questions:

First, is the ontological question: what is there that can be known – what is knowable? It deals with the assumptions one is willing to make about the nature of reality. Second, is the epistemological question: what is knowledge and what is the relationship of the knower to the known? The assumption that one makes about how knowledge is produced depends upon how one conceives reality (ontology). Third is the methodological question: how do we find things out? How this is answered depends on what decisions have been made about the above ontological and epistemological questions. (Haywood and Mac an Ghail 2003: 102)

This chapter aims to provide justifications on epistemological, ontological and sometimes ethical grounds for the decisions made about the research.

3.1 Choice of research methodology

This research has aligned itself with qualitative research methodology for which there are at least three justifications.

First and foremost, the reason for choosing qualitative research methodology concerns the issue of ontology. There are competing paradigms in the social sciences with regard to ontology, the two most distinct occurring at the opposite ends of the spectrum being positivism and constructionism. These two paradigms

see 'realities' differently, with positivism positioning facts as something that can be 'known' and 'discovered' whereas constructionism views social realities as constructed in specific interactions. From a positivist perspective, a researcher would see the experience of being single as quantifiable and measureable. It would be assumed that a research participant can readily evaluate and quantify his experience of being single. Enquiries adopting a positivist approach to understanding singlehood would accordingly employ quantitative research methodology. This may take the form of a questionnaire, asking the participants to rate their experience of being single and seeing if any correlation exists with variables such as age and socioeconomic status. Indeed, there have been some researchers who are interested in singlehood, primarily psychologists, who have employed such an approach. Examples include studies that measured the strain associated with being single (Pudrovska, Schieman and Carr 2006) and life satisfaction (Barrett 1999, Cockrum and White 1985), among others, as indicators of well-being among singles.

This current research, however, is interested, from a constructionist perspective, in the meanings that the research participants attach to, and their subjective feelings and interpretations of, being single. The research is interested in, at the discursive level, how they define and redefine their lives as singles. Qualitative research, which is concerned with 'how the social world is interpreted, understood, experienced, produced or constituted' (Mason 2002: 3), is therefore most appropriate for this thesis.

Second, the decision of using qualitative research methodology has to do with epistemology – the nature and evidence of knowledge. Qualitative research methodology is especially useful at teasing out ‘richness, depth, nuance, context, multi-dimensionality and complexity’ (Mason 2002:1). The rich details, tensions, and at times even contradictions, that the participants presented, would not have emerged if a questionnaire was used to study the phenomenon. Hence, this study takes the view that the experience of being single cannot be captured by cold figures, but needs to be understood from people’s concrete and vivid descriptions. In Plummer’s words, only by taking a closer look at the research participants’ subjective feelings can we examine the ‘concrete joys and suffering of active, breathing, bodily human beings’ (Plummer 2001: 5) and this study aims to be one of the ‘grounded, multiple and local studies of lives in all their rich flux and change’ (Plummer 2001: 13). The research undertaken aims to show the diversity and complexity of the experience of being single. Numbers cannot achieve this, but narratives have the potential to do so.

Third, the choice of employing qualitative research methodology is dictated by the sensitive nature of the topic. The interviews intrude into deeply private and personal experience, such as relationship formations and breakups. Quantitative research methodology does not seem appropriate because it does not allow sufficient interaction to build up trust, which is of paramount importance in a study involving participants revealing such an intimate aspect of their lives (Lee 1993).

3.2 Narratives and life story interviews

Life story interviews were chosen as the research method for this study. Because of the temporal concern of the study, life story interviews, which allow the recapturing of much longer periods of history and reporting of meanings and feelings (Giele and Elder 1998: 26), are especially appropriate for the present research. In life story research, stories are selected on the basis of the provision of detailed information on key, critical experiences (Plummer 2001: 133). In this research, the ‘key, critical experiences’ were those of being single. When the participants told their life stories, they inevitably touched upon the larger societal, historical and cultural environments they grew up in, and that in turn provided invaluable information for answering the research questions.

Life stories can take many diverse forms, including, but not limited to, long, short, comprehensive, topical or edited, naturalistic, researched or reflexive (for a discussion, see Plummer 2001: 17-47). This research solicited stories that were topical and relatively short, each lasting for two to six hours.

It has been commented that there is ‘considerable disagreement about the precise definition of narrative’ (Riessman 1993:17) and that there is ‘little detailed agreement as to what narratives are’ (Plummer 2001: 185). Some authors have defined life stories as follows:

Life story is the story a person chooses to tell about the life he or she has lived, told as completely and honestly as possible, what is remembered of it, and what the teller wants others to know of it, usually as a result of a guided interview by another. (Atkinson 1998: 8)

A life story is a personal myth that an individual begins working on in late adolescent and young adulthood in order to provide his or her life with unity or purpose and in order to articulate a meaningful niche in a psychological world. (McAdams 1993: 5)

It is worthwhile to note that both of the above definitions highlight that narratives, perhaps like any other interview products, should not be taken simply as excavating facts but as verbalizing of experiences (Mason 2002: 64). Tellers of life stories give words to thoughts or feelings that may not have words before (Atkinson 1998: 20). In Atkinson's words, the research participant can 'choose' different ways of telling about his or her life, and according to McAdams, an individual constantly 'works on' the life story. This means that the narratives generated in the study are taken as accounts constructed under specific circumstances at a particular timing – that of the interview encounter. Biography, hence, can be understood as both a product and a process (Schwandt 2007: 21). This is further elaborated in the discussions in Chapter 5.

It also needs to be highlighted that the narrator and the interviewer 'together are collaborators, composing, constructing a story the teller can be pleased with' (Atkinson 1998:9), hence there is a complex web of relationship dynamics in any story telling. Especially in the social sciences, stories are rarely 'neutral', but are 'seduced, coaxed and interrogated out of subjects' (Plummer 2001: 28) and, as a consequence, the interview encounter itself needs to be understood and reflected. This will be discussed further later in this chapter.

3.3 Sampling

In this research the population of interest is older single gay men. Surveys have generally asked respondents about their marital status, but not their relationship status. Consequently, there is insufficient established demographic information available about this target group. In addition, obtaining a representative sample of non-heterosexual people is still near-impossibility (e.g. see a discussion of the challenges of conducting quantitative research into non-heterosexual people in Browne 2008). Therefore, representational sampling is not possible, because the parameters and characteristics of the group are not fully unknown. Therefore, theoretical and purposive sampling, which ‘builds in certain characteristics or criteria which help to develop and test your theory or your argument’ (Mason 2002: 124), was employed for the research.

Snowball sampling, or ‘sampling by referral’ (Welch 1975), was used as an additional strategy. This refers to yielding samples through ‘referrals made by people who share or know of others who possess some characteristics that are of research interest’ and is especially helpful ‘when the focus of study is on a sensitive issue, possibly concerning a relatively private matter’ (Biernecki and Waldoff 1981: 141). This applies to the present study and is considered to be particularly useful for researchers interested in studying difficult-to-reach populations (Lee 1993). At the end of the interviews, each participant in this study was asked to pass on information about the research to any potentially interested friends or contacts. Snowball sampling could run the risk of recruiting participants of similar socio-economic backgrounds, which may jeopardize the diversity of the

sample. Aware of this, I used snowball sampling only as an additional rather than a primary method of recruitment.

3.4 Who counts as ‘single’?

As Silverman (2010: 193) suggested, purposive sampling demands that researchers think critically about the parameters of the population being studied and choose the sample cases carefully on that basis.

Although often used in daily conversations, the meaning of the term ‘single’ is ambiguous and contestable. For much of the research reviewed in Chapter 2, the definition of the term used was not explicitly spelled out. This makes it difficult to know the actual characteristics of the group(s) of individuals the studies referred to. In many of these studies, the legal definition was used – ‘singles’ was used to refer to people who had never married. This definition has its limitations: people can be in a relationship but not necessarily be married. For example, people may choose not to marry despite being in a relationship. In the UK, for example, according to the Office for National Statistics, the proportion of cohabiting couple families increased from 9 per cent to 14 per cent in a ten-year period between 1996 and 2006 (Office for National Statistics 2007). This misfit of the legal definition can be demonstrated further by a looking at the association between marital status and partnership among older men, using the English Longitudinal Survey of Ageing 2007. In the sample, which was aged 50 and older, among men who were never married, divorced and widowed, 24 per cent, 27 per cent and 5

per cent respectively reported having a partner to live with. Seventeen per cent of the never married men also reported having children.

Table 2: Relationship between marital status and having a partner/wife to live with and having children, among 50+ men in England

	Never Married	Married	Remarried	Divorced	Widowed
Have a partner/ wife to live with	23.62	99.00	98.94	26.96	5.27
Have any children	17.00	91.83	89.86	88.46	89.06

Source: English Longitudinal Survey of Ageing 2007 (my analysis)

Most problematic, of course, is the fact that gay men in the UK are still not entitled to get ‘married’ and the uptake of civil partnership is also uneven (Ross, Gask and Berrington 2011).

At the same time, singlehood is especially difficult to define among gay men because ‘assumptions about relationships based on the values and experiences of heterosexuals may not necessarily apply to gay and lesbian couples’ (Peplau and Cochran 1990: 323). For example, it has been argued that gay men who consider themselves as coupled have more relaxed attitudes towards sexual non-monogamy than their heterosexual counterparts. Peplau and Cochran (1990) therefore argued against using cohabitation as the criterion when defining heterosexual and homosexual couples.

Taking the above into consideration, this study allowed the participants to self-identify whether or not they have ‘spent most of their life time not in a relationship’. In social sciences, self-identification has been frequently used in researching groups that are difficult to define. A great deal of research into race and ethnicity has been carried out based on the self-identification of the participants, and such a method allows the exposure of race and ethnicity as ‘problematic categories’, because ‘official’ administrative data and self-reports did not always match (e.g. Kressin, Chang, Hendricks and Kazis 2003). Similarly, research into gender, sexual, and class identities has also made use of self-identification to show the complexities and multi-dimensionality of each of the categories (see Frable 1997 for a discussion).

Obviously, allowing participants to self-identify themselves whether they ‘have spent most of their life time not in a relationship’ means that they would not understand the term in a uniform manner. This allows the meanings of ‘singlehood’ to be illuminated in more complex and diverse ways, from the participants’ own viewpoints. Indeed, the final sample showed that singlehood was understood by different participants in a variety of ways.

Some participants identified as single, but had ‘affairs’ and included in their lives people whom they called ‘fuck buddies’, or longer-term, purely sexual relationships. For example, Darren had a long-term visiting relationship but did not feel that he and the other person involved were committed enough to call each other partners. He said:

‘Anyway we only see each other about once a month and we have separate social lives. We are a long way from describing ourselves as a couple and we don’t really have a lot in common except we do seem to have a “bond” that’s developed over many years. So we’re both single.’ (Darren)

Some other singles emphasized that they were single but not alone, as they were living with flatmates. Most interesting was one participant, Terry, who was living with a ‘boyfriend’ but for some reason thought the relationship was not working at the time of the interview. He considered himself single but still felt somewhat committed to his boyfriend. When he tried to set up casual sexual encounter on the internet or visited saunas, he would still avoid telling his ‘boyfriend’ about it. He emphasized that he was not in a committed relationship and considered himself single. He said, ‘I would say I am single but not free’.

3.5 Who counts as ‘gay’?

As explained in Chapter 1, this thesis focuses on the data collected from the older gay men in the sample. However, to study any identity category, including sexuality, is always troublesome. Sexuality, like many other identity categories, is difficult to define. It is shaped by social forces and therefore socially constructed (Weeks 2003, also see McIntosh 1968). Although society has tended to think along the line of heterosexual/homosexual binary, in reality it is not as simple as that in lived experience. Exclusive homosexuality or exclusive heterosexuality seems to be less common than often assumed. Sexuality would be more usefully conceptualized as a spectrum. It is fluid and changes across the life course. Sexual behaviour is different from sexual identity, which is always bound up with

politics. Decisions about identity categories are ‘pragmatic, related to concerns of situational advantage, political gain, and conceptual utility’ (Seidman 1994: 173).

I am aware that in society at large, when this current cohort of older people was growing up, LGBT people remained hidden. As such, some older men who are sexually attracted to men may not identify with the term ‘gay’, let alone ‘queer’, and would not use either to describe themselves. Some may prefer the term ‘homosexual’, the more common term society used when they were growing up. This memory may have lingering influence. It was interesting that ‘queer’, which has sometimes been criticized as ‘a lofty, abstract, and inaccessible set of textual practices’ (Hostetler and Herdt 1998: 254), has not been used at all by the older gay men to identify themselves in this study.

On the other hand, some older gay men may have come out earlier in their lives and even actively engaged in LGBT politics and see being gay as an identity to embrace. Through the life course, many older gay men may have gradually become more accepting of their gay identity. In fact, in many participants’ stories in this study, coming out as a gay man marked as an important landmark and watershed in their lives.

Therefore, any definition of sexual orientation among older people is difficult and problematic. The analysis in this thesis therefore used a broader concept and included those participants who self-identified as gay or homosexual.

3.6 Who counts as ‘men’?

Even the category ‘man’ was more fluid than I had originally imagined. Although I was aware that gender is fluid and constructed rather than binary, I did not expect a transsexual man would volunteer. I was more than happy to include him, and indeed his interview has shown that his experience of transitioning had an impact on how he experienced singlehood (see Chapter 7).

3.7 Who counts as ‘older’?

Age and ageing are both socially constructed (e.g. Settersten and Mayer 1997, Kohli 1988). Like Herdt, Beeler and Rawls (1997:232), I was concerned about the use of the term ‘older’ when it came to be applied to gay men. In terms of defining ‘older’, I used 50+ as the watershed.

This was a very difficult decision. Mortality rates in all ages have been declining in England, and consequently life expectancy has continued to rise. In particular, healthy life expectancy has been increasing rapidly (see a review by Howse and Harper 2008). It is expected that this trend will continue well into the 21st century as mortality will be shaped by ‘healthy living, disease prevention and cure, regenerative medicine, and age-retardation’ (Harper and Howse 2008: 105).

The concepts of ‘old age’ and ‘later life’ have accordingly changed dramatically. For example, gerontologists have noted the importance of dividing later life into the ‘third age’ (or the ‘young old’) and the ‘fourth age’ (or the ‘old old’). While the ‘fourth age’ or the ‘old old’ ‘entails a level of biocultural incompleteness, vulnerability and unpredictability’, the ‘third age’ or the ‘young old’ is generally

characterized by more positive views, such as enjoyment of life after retirement (see a review by Baltes and Smith 2003).

Hence, this thesis recognizes that to sample older gay men, or indeed any other groups of individuals on the basis of chronological age, can be inherently problematic because any age-based distinctions are ‘dynamic and moving targets and are themselves subject to evolution and variation’ (Baltes and Smith 2003: 124).

However, there are a few theoretical and pragmatic justifications for using 50+ as the marker for this thesis. First, given the discussion on ‘accelerated ageing’ (see Chapter 2), it has been suggested that gay men may feel old earlier than their heterosexual counterparts. Second, including a larger age range in the sample studied allows examination and comparison between participants of different age groups. Third, in practical terms, it was thought that it would be difficult to recruit older gay men for the study, so lowering the age limit was viewed as potentially helping to increase the number of eligible participants.

3.8 Research site

National and local channels were used to recruit participants. The only geographic criteria I set was to confine the research to people who reside in England, but to exclude those who live in Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland, since travelling to these areas would have involved time and travel expenses beyond what the research funding would allow. At the same time, it was perceived that there might

be cultural and religious factors related to being single in these different places that need to be taken into account more systematically than the scope of this research would allow. The participants who lived outside Oxford were asked if they would prefer me to visit them where they lived or if they would like to travel to Oxford for the interview. In the latter case, their travel expenses, agreed before the interview, would be reimbursed. This allowed me to tap into the experiences of older single people both from urban areas, in cities like London, and other more rural areas. This was useful in providing insight into the influences of social surroundings on the experience of being single.

Table 3: Participants' cities of residence at the time of interview

City of residence	Number of participants
London	10
Oxford	4
Guildford	2
Bath	1
Brighton	1
Chorley	1
Dunstable	1
Huddersfield	1
Leeds	1
Milton Keynes	1
Newcastle	1
Watford	1
Total number of participants	25

Figure 1: Map of participants' cities of residence at the time of interview



As shown on the map, the participants' cities of residence concentrated in the South East of England.

3.9 Recruitment and achieved sample

To recruit participants from different backgrounds so that experience over a wide spectrum could be included in the study, an ambitious advertising campaign was launched. A recruitment leaflet, with a brief description of the research and my contact information, was designed (see Appendix 2). It was explicitly stated on the leaflet that the research would welcome men of different sexual orientations,

religions, cultures and beliefs. The leaflet was designed to incorporate tear-off slips with my contact information so that anyone interested who came across the leaflet could have my contact details to hand. As discussed earlier in Chapter 1, the research originally set out to collect both gay and straight men's stories but now focuses on the gay men's stories. Different channels were used to distribute the leaflet:

1. Notice boards in the city of Oxford
2. Print media: *University of Oxford Gazette*
3. Online media:
 - 3.1 General classified websites such as Dailyinfo, Gumtree, Locanto, and Chaosads 'volunteering' and 'dating' sections

The target areas included Oxford, Reading, London and Birmingham as they were areas with relatively easy and affordable transport from Oxford.
 - 3.2 Dating-related chatrooms and webpages – UK Chatterbox, Friends over Fifty, Sagazone
 - 3.3 Email lists, e.g. Anthropology Matters
4. Specific targeted groups:
 - 4.1 Organizations and social groups that work with older people, e.g. local universities of the third age (U3A), local branches of Age Concern (now Age UK)
 - 4.2 Organizations that work with men, e.g. Men's Health Forum
 - 4.3 Groups that work with gay men (or LGBT people), e.g. Oxford Lesbian Gay Bisexual and Transgender Academics group, Metro 50+ group, Kairos, Terrence Higgins Trust Direct and Courage, among many others.

5. Referral

5.1 Word of mouth (researchers' personal contacts, such as friends and colleagues)

5.2 Snowballing

In terms of negotiating access, there were two responses from the organizations listed in 4.1 that were worth noting. Chester U3A replied that they were sorry as they were unable to assist the project further, because they 'do not ask our members to become involved in the sort of project you have in mind'. Another example was the reply from an operations administrator of Rotary International in Great Britain and Ireland, who said 'No one at my Rotary Club comes under this category you are researching'. It was a bit surprising that the administrator assumed knowledge of members' intimate life and partnership history. Such responses shed light on how singlehood is still somewhat seen as a taboo subject, being described as 'the sort of project the researcher has in mind'.

The organizations approached in 4.3 were generally happy to offer help, with only one exception unable to offer assistance. Somali Gay Community was one of the first projects in the UK set up to deal specifically with the issue of homosexuality within the Somali culture. They replied that:

'There are a lot of issues that make it difficult to engage with the group we work with. Thus people are not comfortable with the whole issue and it's even harder for the over fifties.'

Table 4: Channels through which participants were recruited

	Recruitment channels	Number of participants recruited
1	Notice boards in the city of Oxford	0
2	Print media: <i>University of Oxford Gazette</i>	0
3.1	General classified websites	1
3.2	Dating-related chatrooms and webpages	0
3.3	Email lists	0
4.1	Organizations and social groups that work with older people	0
4.2	Organizations that work with men	1
4.3	Groups that work with gay men (or LGBT people)	20
5.1	Word of mouth	1
5.2	Snowballing	2
	Total number of participants recruited	25

Of the 25 participants, an overwhelming majority, 20 (80 per cent) of them were recruited through social groups that work with either gay men or LGBT people. Two were recruited through snowballing, one was recruited through posting on a general classified website, one was recruited through an organization that work with men, and another through word of mouth.

It can be argued that as 80 per cent of the participants were recruited through social groups, the participants may be more active and socially connected than average. However, as it will be demonstrated in the thesis, the participants still showed a wide spectrum in terms of satisfaction with their social life.

It may, however, indeed be the case that those older gay men who were more closeted or felt less strongly about their gay identity would not have been connected through the social groups and therefore did not take part in the research. For example, an older gay man contacted me to ask for more information about the research but finally decided not to participate. Although I had explicitly let him know that the research welcomed gay men, he did not feel comfortable enough to share his experience. The reason he gave was his sexual orientation: ‘If I was straight, it would not be so difficult but as I am gay I have to be careful who I share confidences with. There are still many judgemental people in this world, unfortunately.’

The participants who volunteered to take part may also have felt especially strongly about the topic. Hence it needs to be reiterated that the participants’ experience in this research is not intended to, and cannot be, generalized to all men over the age of 50 who have spent most of their life time not in a relationship.

In the achieved sample, the youngest was 52, the oldest 73. Twelve of the participants were in their 50s, 11 in their 60s, and one in his 70s. Of course, this can be perceived as a rather wide age range. I will point out age-based differences

among the participants throughout the thesis when it is applicable (such as issues around health in Chapter 10). Also, I admit what I am lacking in this thesis are those who are those older gay men who are in their ‘fourth age’ (discussed earlier in this chapter).

It should be reiterated that as discussed in Chapter 2, the participants in this study could be suggested to belong to a certain kind of transitional ‘cohort’: they were a teenager at a time when homosexuality was still criminalized and are growing old at a time when society has changed a great deal in that respect. More recent cohorts of gay men are likely to age differently, and therefore the study results should not be taken as generalizeable to older gay men of later generations until further research is conducted.

The participants were all White, and although effort had been put into advertising through varied channels (as discussed earlier in this chapter), none of the research participants were from ethnic minority groups.

More than half of the participants (n=15) had received education up to at least undergraduate level.

Only a few of the participants had participated in gay rights movements, and when applicable, were highlighted in the participants’ stories given in Appendix 1.

3.10 Interview guide

The interviews made use of the funnelling approach of ‘grand tours and mini tours’ (Plummer 2001: 145), sequencing the questions to start deliberately broadly at the beginning. This allowed me to gain a contextual understanding of the participants’ lives without focusing too narrowly only on singlehood at this stage. The technique was useful because it allowed me to understand the participants’ experience of singlehood in relation to other broader areas in life, such as family and work. It also served as a way of building relationship and rapport between me and the participant before discussing the more intimate and personal topics that followed.

The first part invited the participants to share their life story with an open-ended question: ‘Would you mind telling me a bit about your life story?’. In the second part, I began to introduce questions on singlehood by following up what the participants said in the first part. The questions included relationship history, aspects of singlehood the participants had or had not enjoyed, and the meanings they attached to being single. The third part of the interview focused on investigating life course changes in the participants’ experience of being single with the help of a life chart, which has been suggested to be especially useful for triggering discussions (Giele and Elder 1998: 200). The participants were asked to take some time to reflect on how they perceived their experience of being single at different points of their lifetimes, and to label their ‘low’ and ‘high’ points in terms of being single on the chart (see Appendix 3).

Consistent with the ontological and epistemological stances of this research, the rating the participants gave for their experience was not taken as ‘hard’ figures to be analysed, but instead served as triggers for starting more in-depth conversations on the life course changes of their experience. The fourth part served as closure and reflection for the interview. I followed up with any final questions, and asked the participants if there were any significant people, events or aspects in their lives that they thought were relevant but had not been discussed previously. This was meant to capture, like the first part, the participants’ viewpoints so that my influence did not overdominate. The final part of the interview also asked the participants to reflect on their experience of being interviewed – whether the experience differed or was similar to what was expected – their subjective feelings towards their interactions with me, especially in relation to talking about a sensitive and personal topic, and their perceived possible influences of my attributes, such as age, gender, sexuality and ethnicity, on the research encounter (see discussion later in this chapter).

The idea of planned flexibility in qualitative research was borne in mind from the outset in drawing up the interview guide. The interview guide was used to provide signposts and follow-up prompts to consider rather than to be followed as the gold standard without modifications during the interviews. I followed Mason’s suggestion of ‘using the research design actively (rather than following it passively) to allow both the researcher and participant to develop unexpected themes’ (Mason 2002:25). Plenty of follow-up questions were asked in relation to what the participants said. Nonetheless, the interview guide provided a useful framework of topics for discussion during the interviews.

3.11 Setting up interviews

When contacted by the potential participants, I replied to their emails and text messages by explaining the background of the project and its academic purposes. The reassurance of anonymity and confidentiality was made clear to the participants to gain their trust in taking part in the research project for which they were expected to share a very personal sphere of their life. I followed up with phone calls to introduce myself to the research participants to begin building rapport. The conversations over the phone gave me the chance to assess whether the interested participant met the criteria.

Participants who lived outside Oxford were asked if they would prefer me to visit them where they lived or if they were willing to travel to Oxford for the interview. In the latter case, their travel expenses, agreed before the interview, would be reimbursed. In any event no one was paid to take part in the study. Some participants who lived outside Oxford decided to come to the city for the interview and viewed a day trip away from their home cities almost as an incentive.

The interviews were always intended to be conducted in private enclosed areas in the hope that participants would be encouraged to feel safe to open up to talk about their very personal experience of singlehood. The majority of the interviews were held at the researcher's office and the research participants' homes. In only one exceptional case the interview was conducted in a quiet corner in a pub at a train station in London.

Table 5: Where the interviews were held

Location	Number
Researcher's office	12
Participants' homes	11
Meeting room in participant's office	1
Quiet corner in a pub	1
Total number of interviews	25

The choice of site for interview influences the dynamics, direction and content of the interview (Sin 2003, Herzog 2005). For example, it has been discussed that the use of the interviewer's workplace privileges the interviewer and his or her project.

If the participants were travelling to Oxford by train, I almost always greeted them at the train station and walked or took a bus or taxi with them to the interview venue. This provided a good opportunity for me to introduce myself and the research, and to break the ice and begin to build the rapport between me and the research participant.

When I went to the participants' homes for the project, I was aware of the potential danger of conducting interviews in a 'stranger's place' (Plummer 2001: 144), but still considered it a useful option. This was because interviewing at home allowed the interviewer to witness the class and social status of the

interviewee through the location and kind of housing and its contents, and to obtain clues to identify history from personal artefacts, such as photographs. Arendell (1997), for example, found that interviewing divorced fathers in their homes allowed her to assess the visible presence or absence of children and generally, to be subjected to fewer interruptions or distractions.

In this study, home provided an environment in which the participants generally felt comfortable, and I believed that it was useful to make them feel relaxed when dealing with the sensitive topic. It was also a practical choice. It would have been very difficult and costly to find quiet indoor places for interviews if I had to travel to different cities for interviews. Talking to the research participants on their home ground also allowed me to understand more about their day to day living environment. It made me aware of some factors that could make a difference to the participants' experience of being single, including living arrangement and rural or urban location. As a precautionary measure, I kept my mobile phone turned on and switched to silent mode, in the unlikely event of a dangerous situation arising.

If the interview took place at the participant's home, I was sometimes greeted as a guest. For example, in a preliminary email exchange, one participant asked what I would like for lunch. In this way, some of the participants tried to transform the interview encounter into a meeting with a guest or a friend:

'If you have any food preferences/dislikes let me know... otherwise I'll guess. Whatever, I'll try to ensure there's some food available but stuff that would keep if it's not suitable [or] you would rather look around this wonderful town.' (Norman)

The discussion above alludes to what Mason (2002: 52) argued: that the process of interviewing could better be described as ‘data generation’ rather than ‘collection’, and taking this view, I do not believe that I, or indeed any researcher, can be a completely neutral collector of information.

One interview had to be conducted in a quiet corner in a pub. I considered it a less than ideal choice but there was no alternative. The interview did not seem to have been noticeably affected by the environment because the participant was still happy to open up, even talking about his experience of impotence.

3.12 Interviews

The interviews started with my explaining the research purposes again and obtaining written informed consent from the participant. In general, the interviews took between two to six hours as recorded on tape. Typically within a few days after the interview I would follow up with an email to thank each participant, who was then invited to let me know of any further thoughts or comments they had.

3.13 Reflexivity

It has been increasingly recognized that knowledge generation is necessarily partial (e.g. Letherby 2002), and a completely bias-free or assumption-free researcher or research process is neither possible nor necessarily desirable.

Instead, a researcher has been recognized as ‘a central figure who influences, if not actively constructs, the collection, selection and interpretation of data’ (Finlay

2002: 212). The researcher takes sides, intentionally or unintentionally, at different stages of the research process, including choosing the research topic, soliciting data, and analysis and representations of research results (Mauthner and Doucet 2003). Any generation of understanding of a social phenomenon is understood as contingent on specific interactions (England 1994). This questions the unexamined privilege of the researcher over the participants. It unmask the complex political/ideological agendas hidden in researchers' writings (Richardson 2000). It recognizes that research is co-constituted, a joint product of the participants, researcher and their relationships (Finlay 2002: 212). The development of these ideas has been influenced by post-modernism, poststructuralism, critical theories and feminism, and has led to the call for seeing research as 'an engaged practice' (May 1999). Instead of telling 'realist tales', researchers begin to tell more 'confessional tales', in which researchers describe their decisions and dilemmas of their fieldwork experience (Finlay 2002: 210). Despite being increasingly recognized, reflexivity remains an ambivalent practice – the definition of the term remains unclear. Different researchers differ in their use of the term and refer to different things when they mention it (Haggerty 2003). By and large, reflexivity means 'thinking critically about what you are doing and why, confronting and often challenging your own assumptions, and recognizing to what extent your thoughts, actions and decisions, shape how you research and what you see' (Mason 2002: 5).

The concept of reflexivity has provoked divided opinions. Some researchers see it as 'more than a methodological tool' (Kingdon 2005), useful in increasing the integrity and trustworthiness and enhancing the rigour (Hall and Callery 2001) of

qualitative research. However, some others see practising reflexivity as inviting even more scepticism towards qualitative research (Salzman 2002, Lynch 2000). Many researchers, who agree with the idea reflexivity, also find it a challenge to practise it. For example, what is the fine balance between ‘excessive navel gazing’ or ‘excessive self analysis’ and reflexivity? Hence, ‘the process of engaging in reflexivity is full of muddy ambiguity and multiple trails as researchers negotiate the swamp of interminable deconstructions, self analysis and self disclosure’ (Finlay 2002: 209).

In this research, it is acknowledged that numerous aspects of my personal attributes could have influenced the interview encounter.

Ethnicity and country of origin: In this research, I recognize that being a Chinese researcher born in Hong Kong may mean that my language skills and understanding of local references could be imperfect. But at the same time the participants expressed that from their perspective they did not see this as too much of an issue:

‘If you had a real difficulty with fluency in English that might have been a problem, but I didn’t feel that at all.’ (Richard)

‘I was testing your vocabulary as you moved through the interview, and you seem to understand every word that I was using so in that sense... [you] passed the test.’ (Terry)

‘Your language ability is very high. That could feel more difficult if the conversation is halted because you are having trouble understanding.’ (Justin)

‘Ethnicity could bother some people because they may wonder whether you share the same kind of understanding of the British way of life. You seem to have coped with all of that.’ (Nic)

Age: In this research, I have been at least 25 years younger than my research participants. As Adam put it, coming from a different generation I may have had less ‘common ground’ with the research participants. However, despite this age difference, a large number of participants said they actually preferred a younger interviewer. They perceived a younger researcher as having a more open mind and more liberal ideas. It can be argued that, implicitly, they were ageist because it was perceived that older people in general would be more old-fashioned in their thinking:

‘I prefer young doctors rather than a trustworthy older doctor because they are fresh in their training. They are more likely to have an open mind. So I think it’s the same with interviewers.’ (Jason)

‘The fact that you are from a different generation I think probably helps to have this sort of conversation freely, because I think there is more openness among people of your generation than people in the middle age.’ (Philip)

‘If you had been 40, 50 years of age I don’t think you would have had the same take on these things. My experience has been that as we progress in life, as we get older, we become much more set in our thinking. Whereas I find that you, in common with a lot of well educated young people of your sort, are open to new ideas. There isn’t that sort of fixed thinking...’ (Robert)

Gender and sexuality: Most participants expressed that they found it easier to share their stories with me as a male researcher. The participants said they would in particular find it more difficult to discuss sex in front of female researchers, believing that they would be more judgemental about casual sex. Norman, for example, said that he had a negative experience going to a sexual health clinic because he felt a female doctor was moralizing during the consultation. He recalled that when he talked about his habit of going to saunas, this doctor said:

‘[She said] “You know we can only tell you safe sex...” I felt a very female attitude. Because she was a woman I felt she just doesn’t understand the urges men have. And the way those urges are relieved. I just didn’t feel any empathy at all. And it put me off going to health check so I didn’t go for quite a while.’ (Norman)

In this study, only a few participants said that it did not make a difference that a gay male researcher conducted the research, whereas a majority saw that as an advantage:

‘You being a gay man is a big help of course.’ (Victor)

‘The fact that you are a gay man helps. I think if you were a straight man I might have felt a little bit like an animal in the zoo being examined.’ (Malcolm)

‘I am very glad that you are gay, because it helps when you feel the person you are speaking to understands what you are talking about. If you had been a straight man, I don’t believe you would have understood a lot of these things. It is the empathy which is very important.’ (Robert)

The participants assumed that being a gay man would mean I have a more liberal attitude towards sex and that made them feel less guarded when they talked about their sexual experiences:

‘If you had been a woman the conversation would have gone very differently indeed. I wouldn’t have talked about a whole load of stuff. I probably wouldn’t have mentioned escorts. I would have found it quite difficult to talk about sexual experiences. And I might have been slightly more worried of your reaction if you had not been a gay man. I think gay men in general understand the sexual urge... I think even lesbian woman if you talk with them about what is a sauna... [they’d say] “how can you do it...” but I think gay men understand what’s going on... Most gay men would have sex with any man if it’s on offer.’ (Nic)

‘Had you been straight I probably would have tidied up the way I describe something you know... possibly not so graphic... or use kind of jargon words...’ (Adam)

The discussion suggests that the ways in which I, as a researcher, have influenced the interview encounter need to be acknowledged. It does not mean that the accounts then become invalid. Rather, it acknowledges that I am ‘producing contingent knowledge that is open to contestation’ (Heaphy 2008: 4.7).

3.14 Ethical issues considered

The human sciences need to be made human. The potential harm and damage, the sheer intrusiveness into someone else’s life, the bare-faced cheek to believe that one can simply tell another’s story, the uncritical self-satisfaction of telling another’s story, the frequent arrogance of ‘colonizing’ their world view – all this needs to be reconsidered. (Plummer 2001: 225)

Formal procedures were followed. Research guidelines from Department of Sociology at University of Oxford on conducting empirical research that involves human research subjects, and the Statement of Ethical Practice for the British Sociological Association were used as references for the research. Ethical clearance was also sought from the Social Sciences and Humanities Inter-divisional Research Ethics Committee at the University of Oxford and was approved (REF: SSD/CUREC1/10 – 313) (Appendix 4). Each interview would also start with my obtaining written informed consent (Appendix 5).

In this project I subscribed to the view that doing interviews is a privilege granted to us, not a right that we have (Denzin 2001) as researchers. As Mason (2002: 8) proposed, I saw that ‘qualitative research should be conducted as a *moral practice*’ (original emphasis). I followed the moral debate to consider research ethics as ‘a way of thinking’ and considered research ethical clearance not as

given by authorities but through ‘struggling with the self’ in research design and execution (Plummer 2001: 229). As such, research ethics influenced a few of the decisions made during the research process.

First, there were ethical considerations in ensuring that diverse voices were included in the sample. As discussed in the sampling section, explicit effort was made to recruit older gay men, who have generally been overlooked and described as being hidden both in society and in academic research (Jones and Pugh 2005, Suen 2010), into the project. As all the participants in the sample were over the age of 50, a few of them experienced mobility problems. I travelled to where those who were physically impaired lived to ensure that their stories would not be excluded on the ground of their physical disabilities. If the participant travelled from another city to Oxford for the research, I would also meet and greet him at the Oxford train station. Although the participant would not be paid for participating in the research, travel expenses incurred in relation to the research were reimbursed. That was to ensure that some potential participants, especially those who were retired or on a low income, would not be deterred from taking part in the research because of economic reasons. These considerations made it possible for the research to include older gay men who were living with different forms of disabilities, and with low or a no income, who have generally been marginalized and often silenced in research.

Second, as mentioned, every effort was made to ensure that the information shared by the participants is kept confidential. I am the only person who has access to the recorded interviews. They were stored in the form of digital audio

files, on the hard drive of my personal computer at the Oxford Institute of Population Ageing. Access to my hard drive is password-protected.

Because of the sensitive nature of the topic, I was especially mindful about transcription. This was part of the reason why I transcribed all the interviews myself, taking the view that the participants had agreed to share their very personal stories only with me, and me alone, on condition that identifying information would be removed. Even when the transcripts were shown to my academic supervisor for research-related discussions, they had already been anonymized.

Third, I saw it as a moral responsibility to make sure that the participants were comfortable talking about such a personal sphere of their intimate lives and that they felt that their feelings respected in the interviews. It has been anticipated that the research involves re-telling some difficult episodes in a participant's life. It did turn out that a few of the participants wept during the interviews, when recalling previous relationships, deceased partners and traumatic life events. I always consulted them if they would like to take a break in those instances but the participants all wished to continue. In addition, the debriefing session at the end of each interview was intended not only to obtain information, but also to make sure the participants had been happy about the interview encounter. I had prepared information about other sources of support, such as Age Concern (now Age UK) and mental health organizations that provide counselling services, that I would be provide in case of extreme distress. However, the situation did not arise. In fact, some participants even found it therapeutic to talk about difficult experiences.

Many emailed to say that they had enjoyed the interview and would like to keep in touch.

Fourth, to address the sensitive nature of the topic, participants were constantly reminded and reassured of anonymity regarding all interview contents. I explicitly reiterated that any identifiable names, places and other details would be removed.

Below I discuss two ethical dilemmas I encountered in the field. The first had to do with disclosure of personal information, and the second with researcher-participant relationships.

3.15 Ethical dilemma 1: Disclosure

In this study, because the research participants shared such intimate details of their life, they sometimes wanted to know more about the researcher, me, ‘in return’.

For example, after saying that he was brought up with Christian background, a research participant asked if I held any religious beliefs. That was relatively easy to handle. I struggled when some participants were interested to know about my personal sexual experience. For example, one participant talked about the Gaydar website for setting up casual sexual encounters, and then asked me: ‘Have you tried using that?’ Similarly, when another participant discussed his ambivalent feelings about visiting saunas more regularly than he thought he should, asked me ‘I mean, do *you* go to saunas?’ One participant asked more directly: ‘I mean how

do you manage? Do you find people in Oxford or do you not bother?’ A few participants were interested in my own relationship status:

‘So your research is coming in to fill some gaps in literature... and from personal interest... because I guess you are coming from that place yourself, I guess.’ (Victor)

‘Have you ever been in a long-term relationship had these issues?
[T: I... yes... the topic suddenly turned to me...(laughs)]
Why not? Alright turn it [the recorder] off. We are going to talk about you afterwards. You talk about me. Sorry I am being naughty.
[T: Just a few questions more to ask about you first...]
Your turn would come next...’ (Henry)

‘Are you free? You’ve got a partner?
[T: (laughs)]
(Laughs) You watch out you watch out.’ (Henry)

My experience of being a qualitative researcher and being ‘asked back’ by the research participants is far from unique. Self-disclosure was an area that came up when researchers studied sensitive topics (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen and Liamputtong 2007). For example, Arendell (1997), as a divorced woman studying divorced fathers, constantly received questions from her research participants about her own marital status and history. Beusch (2007), as a gay man studying Nazi fetishist group, was asked about his own sexual fantasies.

To disclose this personal information or not was a difficult question for me as it has been for other researchers (see a discussion in Ryan 2006). If I were to say no, would I be seen as unfriendly and unwelcoming and ultimately destroy the rapport that I had built up with the research participants? On the other hand, does my being a researcher mean I cannot have a personal life? As I signed the confidentiality agreement with the participants to keep them anonymous, would I,

too, be protected by such an agreement? Would they – or should they – keep what a researcher tells them confidential and anonymous?

I did decide in most cases to disclose some personal information about me because I thought it was warranted in return for the research participants' sharing with me such personal spheres of their lives, but I still sometimes felt uneasy doing it.

3.16 Ethical dilemma 2: Researcher-participant relationships

The relationship between the researcher and the participant is complex in any research encounter. As Hertz (1995: 432) noted, 'the interview – from the moment of initial contact – becomes a socially constructed matrix of shifting multiple identities – both the researcher's and the respondents.' Plummer, for example, suggested that such 'shifting multiple identities' perceived by the researcher and the respondents towards each other can include those of stranger, acquaintance, friend, or lover (Plummer 2001).

This is far from being only theoretical imagination. Instead, some researchers' accounts show that these relationships do develop despite not being as frequently acknowledged. Irwin (2006), for example, spoke of her experiences of dating, marrying, and eventually divorcing her key informant. This is perhaps one of the closest relationships a researcher could ever establish with a research participant.

Different perspectives see relationships between the researcher and the participants differently. Some suggest that distance should be kept between the two so that the researcher could maintain ‘professional objectivity’ during the research process. At the other extreme, some anthropologists discussed having sex with their research participants when studying sexual behaviour in Mexico (Carrier 1999), studying gay bath houses (e.g. Styles 1979), studying a fat civil rights organization (Goode 2002), studying gay culture in Japan (McLelland 2002), and studying sexuality in Taiwan (Wiggins 2000). All these can be described to push to the limits the question how ‘the body of the researcher is a contested site of knowledge production’ (Bain and Nash 2006).

In this study, despite not being as extreme as in the examples cited above, I had to confront the question whether I should maintain a distance from the participants. The interviews, as noted, lasted for two to six hours. This is in stark contrast to the conventional stereotype that ‘few men tolerate long interviews and participants often tire of speaking to us after an hour’ as other researchers have often experienced interviewing men (Olliffe and Mroz 2005: 259). The interviewees sometimes talked to me about experiences they had never disclosed to anyone else before:

‘Some of the things I have said today I wouldn’t say to other people...’
(Norman)

Right from the beginning, many participants did not see the dialogue as merely an interview. I have eaten ravioli, a sandwich, and a stir-fry among the many meals offered by my research participants in their homes. Several suggested further meetings:

‘It’s very nice. I hope it initiates contact between us. We have each other’s contact. We should keep in touch.’ (Victor)

One participant said I could stay overnight if I wanted to visit him again. I have also received emails, postcards, Christmas cards, Chinese New Year greetings and even a portrait of myself from the research participants:

‘I don’t know if you’re spending Christmas in the UK or elsewhere, but I send you my warmest seasonal greetings.’ (Terry)

Some asked if I wanted to meet them for a drink or a meal:

‘Do you fancy meeting for a drink one evening?’ (Henry)

‘It was very nice to meet you. Should you be in the area again, please get in touch and we can perhaps share a coffee or a meal.’ (Joseph)

Whether to keep my distance or to become friends with the research participants was a tricky issue. In response to the friendly gestures above, I was often torn between whether to say yes or no, especially as I, as the researcher, was the one who had asked the participants to keep in touch and let me know if they had got any further thoughts on the topic after the interview. I also had in mind the idea of returning to interview some of them later, inspired by the development of longitudinal qualitative research.

If I were to say yes, I was not sure what signals I would be sending the participant. Are we really friends? What is the power dynamic between us as ‘friends’? Do I need to be more ‘grateful’ in the friendship because they have ‘helped’ me out by participating in the research? As the interview setting means

that I want to hear about their experience, would it mean that my voice would be silenced in this new ‘friendship’? With the research experience in mind, can I meet up with any of them again without taking the research topic into account? As we have agreed on confidentiality, does that mean our friendship needs to be kept secret?

If I were to say no, was it ethical? Here I am reminded of the discussion on ethics: Gerrard (1995: 62) noted ‘research abuse’ as ‘researchers parachuting into people’s lives, interfering, raising painful old feelings, and then vanishing, leaving the participants to deal with unresolved feelings alone and isolated’. If I do not keep in touch with the participants, am I to be seen as a selfish researcher who just arrives, collects all the interesting and colourful stories, and then disappears?

I did decide to maintain communication with the participants. I accepted the invitation to coffee but did not feel too comfortable about going to a participant’s home for dinner.

3.17 Data analysis

Analysis should be seen as an on-going process in qualitative research, as Coffey and Atkinson (1996: 10-11) pointed out. I took a similar view that data analysis is not simply ‘one of the later stages’ of research. Instead, it should be a continuing and integral process. For example, throughout the interviewing stage, I engaged with the emerging data and added relevant questions and topics to the interview guide as required. In other words, I followed the advice to ‘analyse your data as

you gather them' (Silverman 2010: 221). This chimes with the observation that qualitative analysis 'begins almost at the outset of generating data' (Schwandt 2007: 7).

As this research aims to show the depth, nuance and complexities of the experience of being single, the interviews conducted were recorded and then transcribed in full rather than only summarized. I made the decision to transcribe all the interviews myself. There are three main reasons for this. First, as discussed, I saw it as an ethical issue to transcribe the data myself. Second, as Atkinson and Heritage (1984) pointed out, the production and use of transcripts are themselves 'research activities'. Close, repeated listening to the recorded interviews helped me to generate ideas during the transcribing process. Third, on a more practical note because of the sheer amount of data, it was not possible for me to afford the costs of hiring a transcriber.

It took approximately six months for all the interviews to be transcribed. This did lend support to Riessman's description that narrative analysis can be a 'slow and painstaking' process (2002: 263). The transcription process took up a significant amount of time but was deemed worthwhile as it allowed me to familiarize myself with the data. The transcription amounted in total to 400,000 words.

Like other researchers working on sensitive topics, I found the transcription process to be 'an emotional experience' because of the details contained in the powerful stories (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen and Liamputtong 2007: 337) and

agree that transcription itself has generally been an overlooked aspect of qualitative research.

When the transcripts were ready, I made use of computer-assisted qualitative data analysis (CAQDAS) and the computer software NVivo 8 for aiding analysis. In this project, I did not use the software as a tool for model building but more as a data management programme so that the vast amount of data could be stored more accurately and systematically, and notes and annotations can be retrieved more easily, a process known as ‘code-and-retrieve’ to many other qualitative researchers (see Fielding 2002).

3.18 Clarifying some possible perceived limitations

Issues concerning bias and ‘narrative truth’

It is obvious that each research method has both its limitations and strengths, and life stories as employed in this research are no exception.

One possible perceived limitation of the project might have to do with ‘quality’ of the data. In sociological research, especially within the quantitative tradition, validity and reliability are the two generally used criteria to measure the ‘quality’ of research and its data. Validity is ‘interpreted as the extent to which an account accurately represents the social phenomena to which it refers’ (Hammersley 1990: 57), while reliability ‘refers to the degree of consistency with which instances are assigned to the same category by different observers or by the same observer on

different occasions’ (Hammersley 1992: 67). Both these issues seem to have been very little discussed in life story research, probably because ‘the problem of reliability is very hard to tap’ (Plummer 2001: 155). In life story research, the possible sources of bias can include: informant, researcher and the interaction between informant and researcher (Plummer 2001: 157):

Table 6: A brief checklist of some dimensions of ‘bias’

Source One	Source Two	Source Three
Life History Informant	The Social Scientist - Researcher	The Interaction
Is misinformation (unintended) given? Has there been evasion? Is there evidence of direct lying and deception? Is a ‘front’ being presented? What may the informant ‘take for granted’ and hence not reveal? How far is the informant ‘pleasing you’? How much has been forgotten? How much may be self-deception?	Could any of the following be shaping the outcome? 1. Attributes of researcher: age, gender, class, race, etc. 2. Demeanour of researcher: dress, speech, body language, etc. 3. Personality of researcher: anxiety, need for approval, hostility, warmth, etc. 4. Attitudes of researcher: religion, politics, tolerance, general assumptions. 5. Scientific role of researcher: theory held etc. (researcher expectancy).	The joint act needs to be examined. Is bias coming from: 1. The physical setting – ‘social space’? 2. The prior interaction? 3. Non-verbal communication? 4. Vocal behaviour?

Source: Reproduced from Plummer (2001: 157)

Because of these possible sources of ‘bias’, it can be argued that life stories can never ever be ‘reliable’ – all of the three sources, ‘life history informant’, ‘the

researcher', and the 'interaction', can never stay exactly the same! Even if the same researcher interviews the same participant again, not only will both of them not be 'the same', but the interaction itself would have been different because of the previous encounter – let alone if different interviewers interview the same participant. In that case, the differences would be even more pronounced.

There may also be questions raised about this study around memory and recall. As it is a retrospective study, can the older men in the sample really 'remember correctly' what they experienced 40 or 60 years ago? This relates to perhaps an especially thorny question, among the possible views of bias listed above, which is about 'narrative truth': how can we know the truth of what a teller says (Riessman 1993: 21). On this subject, different researchers suggested different possible partial 'solutions'. Riessman (1993) suggested looking at persuasiveness, correspondence, coherence and pragmatic use to evaluate the stories, while McAdams (1993) pointed out that coherence, openness, credibility, differentiation, reconciliation, generative integration can be used as criteria for evaluation. But evaluating stories can be as problematic: how and why can a researcher be in a 'superior position' to evaluate? It is difficult indeed for the researcher to establish a claim over epistemological advantage especially if it was the very first time the researcher talked to the participant. As each life lived is different, issues surrounding coherence and persuasiveness are difficult to judge.

Does this mean that life stories are not useful for understanding social life? On the issues around validity and reliability, Plummer contributed a very useful way of thinking:

The problem, however, is really being tackled from the wrong end: validity should come first, reliability second. There is no point in being very precise about nothing! If the subjective story is what the researcher is after, the life story becomes the most valid method... (Plummer 2001: 155)

Similarly, Mason (2002: 187) also pointed out that reliability can sometimes overshadow validity, and lead to a situation of obtaining 'reliable' results that are not 'valid'. For this current research, as discussed earlier, it is the participants' narrative accounts of their subjective experiences that the researcher is after. Subjective experience, as has been acknowledged, is constructed by the participant and again co-constructed in the research encounter. Hence, the researcher is looking at something necessarily subjective and fluid in its nature, and hence whether the results are reliable is not the main concern – because reliability is impossible. As Plummer put it quite rightly:

A close examination of all bias in research could only be possible if researcher and informant were mechanical robots. To purge research of all these 'sources of bias' is to purge research of human life. (Plummer 2001: 156)

There are two responses from this study to the questions of memory and recall. First, a retrospective study seems to be the best, if not only, option available for answering the research questions, given the resources and time available. To study the changes in the experience of being single through the life course, the most ideal option would have been to use a panel study, so that different cohorts of men who are single would be followed and interviewed repeatedly from when they are young to old age. However, a panel study would have required time and resources well beyond what resources of this doctorate project.

Second, the ontological stance of the study needs to be reiterated. If this research were to take the narratives as claims to ‘truth’, issues of memory and recall would indeed seriously affect the study results adversely. However, this research aims to study the experience of being single, and experience is decidedly ‘biased’ if viewed from the conventional understanding. Thus, for the purpose of the study, the issue is not whether everything about the past is remembered, but how it is remembered. Indeed, it may be the case that people select to remember in different ways – and that is a part of their experience. Hence, yet again I am not seeing the narrative accounts as providing an access to the participants’ past as ‘truth’. I do, however, take the view that ‘it is not important whether or not the interpretation is correct – if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences’ (Thomas and Thomas 1928: 572). The narrative accounts in this research are used as a lens for seeing how participants make sense of their experience.

Issues concerning generalizability

A second possible criticism of the research design could have to do with generalizability. It can be argued that a self-selected sample may mean that the experience discussed in this research may be more positive than general. It can indeed be possible that those who really find the experience of being single too negative would not even want to take part in the research at all. In fact, it did happen that some people contacted me and enquired about the project, but then decided not to take part. For example, one person contacted the researcher after reading information about the project on the local Dailyinfo website, and after the

researcher gave him further details, replied: 'Thanks for the outline information on your singlehood research, but I have decided not to pursue this further. Good luck with it.'

The Pensioners' Welfare Officer of the university, who offered to help with recruiting participants, also noted that there were people who fitted the criteria, but who, when approached, said that 'it wasn't for them'. Specifically she mentioned that one who had declined: 'It was because he felt he might be seen as selfish as you get stuck in your ways when you live on your own'.

This may mean that there are issues around generalizability that have a bearing on the research. It can indeed be argued that results in this study are not generalizable to reflect the experience of all men over the age of 50 who have spent most of their life time not in a relationship. However, this does not affect its 'analytical generalizability', which refers to the 'reasoned judgement about the extent to which the findings in one study can be used as a guide to what might occur in another situation' (Kvale 1996: 231-235). The research remains useful in shedding light on the meanings the participants, and those with similar or different characteristics, attach to being single.

At the same time, it was evident in the data that the participants' experience of being single was very diverse, from the most positive to finding the experience 'not natural' and 'miserable', in their own words. This would indicate that a self-selected sample for the project did not mean that they had necessarily always to be giving a decidedly positive account of being single.

In fact, I could even argue that because the participants self-selected to participate in the research, they were more willing and happy to be open about telling their stories, and as such, more complex and taboo subjects could be explored. This helped to generate the rich and colourful narrative accounts in the interviews.

3.19 Summary

This chapter has discussed the research design of the project. As the primary goal of the research is to understand the ways in which older gay men interpret and assign meanings to their lives in later life and how they may have changed over their life courses, qualitative research methodology, and in particular, life story interviews, have been justified on epistemological and ontological grounds to be appropriate for the research purposes. Specific issues about sampling, recruitment and research ethics have also been discussed.

This research aims to be exploratory in nature, because there has been little investigation into the topic of singlehood. It may illustrate the experience of being single only among quite a specific population – individuals who belonged to some specific cohorts and were all currently residing in England at the time of interview and self-selected to participate in the study. It explores the subjective experience of being single as constructed by the research participant, and again co-constructed in the interview encounter by the participant and the researcher. Hence, the version of the experience of being single generated in the interview encounters should be understood as necessarily ‘situated’. It also recognizes that I as the researcher am presenting the results as interpreted by me, as is the case in

most other life story research, or in fact social research. As Norman Denzin noted, this inevitably has impact on claim making (1997: 265-266):

Ethnographers do not have an undisputed warrant to study others; this right has been lost. Self-reflection is no longer an option, nor can it be presumed that objective accounts of another's situation can be easily given. Truth is also always personal and subjective. An evocative and not a representational epistemology is sought.

With carefully considered definitions for sampling and specifically chosen recruitment channels, the research has successfully recruited 25 self-identified gay men over the age of 50 who have spent most of their lifetimes not in a relationship. They lived in different places in England, in both urban and more rural areas. Some generally under-represented groups, such as older gay men living with different forms of disabilities, and participants with a low or no income, were also included in the study. This provides an invaluable chance to enrich the understanding of the under-studied topic of changes in the experience of singlehood over the life course. Life story interviews provided a useful way to solicit vivid and colourful accounts of experiencing singlehood, as will be illustrated in the chapters to come.

Part 3 Findings

Chapter 4: Overall results of data analysis

This chapter introduces the overall results of data analysis. It is a relatively short chapter as it aims only to provide an introductory view. Each component of the analysis will be elaborated in details in Chapters 5 to 10.

The analysis found that the participants often talked about feeling social pressure to partner up. They were constantly asked why they were single and ‘what was wrong with them’. A master narrative that privileges couplehood dominated the social environment in which the participants lived, effectively positioning couplehood as more respectable and desirable than singlehood. The thesis proposes that this master narrative of coupledness influenced the participants’ story- telling, which should better be seen as an identity constructing process. This will be discussed in Chapter 5.

This master narrative informed and provided the frame against which the older single gay men in this study understood and interpreted their lives. In the participants’ stories, there were moments when they adopted this master narrative, when they interpreted their lives following it without questioning or challenging the pre-existing meanings assigned to singlehood in society (Chapter 6).

However, there were also moments when they adapted the master narrative; when they complicated and revised what being single meant (Chapter 7). Further still, there were moments of subverting the master narrative, when the participants

actively and deliberately rejected the privileging of couplehood and substantially rewrote and reassigned new meanings of singlehood (Chapter 8).

It is important to note that this does not mean that individual participants' accounts can be distinguished into adopting, adapting, and subverting stories. This is a departure from previous studies that polarized singles' experience as characterized by being lonely and sad or associated with freedom and independence.

Instead, what differentiated the participants is the relative salience of different responses/strategies in their stories. In every participant's story, there were of varying degrees simultaneously overlapping moments of adopting, adapting and subverting. Even when they were adapting or subverting the master narrative, the master narrative was still there in the background: it would not let go.

At any one given point in time, the combination of the three elements was associated with how they felt about being single. Those participants whose stories contained more adapting and subverting elements, compared with those whose stories contained more adopting elements, were generally more content with singlehood. They were also more able to (re-)claim sexual citizenship, to construct a more positive identity against a societal framework that privileges couplehood and marginalizes singlehood.

The configuration of stories may change in different social spaces and at different timings (Chapter 9). For example, a participant may find it more difficult to adapt the master narrative in social places such as restaurants, cinemas and theatres.

The configuration of stories may also change through the life course (Chapter 10). For example, a participant might have found it more difficult to adapt and subvert the master narrative when he was younger, compared with when he grew older. Adapting and subverting the master narrative required resources, including physical health, social health and psychological health. Consequently, not every participant was able to re-claim sexual citizenship. The participants' meaning-making process was also filled with ambivalence. These will be discussed in Chapter 11.

The next chapter will start by discussing the master narrative privileging couplehood in society, thus setting the background against which Chapters 6 to 8 are to be understood.

Chapter 5: The master narrative of coupledness and its impact on the stories singles tell

Know that many personal troubles cannot be solved merely as troubles, but must be understood in terms of public issues. (Mills 1959: 247-248)

This chapter focuses on the larger social environment in which the participants told their stories. As the quote above from Charles Wright Mills indicated, it requires ‘sociological imagination’ to understand something as ‘private’ and ‘personal’ as singlehood as a ‘public’ and ‘social’ issue. This chapter aims to:

- Suggest that there is a master narrative in the social environment surrounding the participants. This master narrative, heavily influenced by heteronormativity, effectively positions couples as more respectable than singles, and couplehood as more enjoyable than singlehood.
- Discuss how this master narrative informed and provided the frame against which the older single gay men in this study understood and interpreted their lives.
- Suggest that rather than to seek ‘narrative truth’ it would be useful to understand the stories told in this study as an identity construction and meaning making process.

5.1 Straight singles in society

Heteronormativity refers to the pervasive idea in society that heterosexuality is the norm and thus assumes all people to be heterosexual unless stated otherwise. It defines ‘not only a normative sexual practice but also a normal way of life’ (Jackson 2006: 107). Heterosexuality is hence seen to be more respectable than homosexuality or other sexualities.

However, within heterosexuality there are also many variants (Jackson 2006: 105). As Seidman pointed out, even among heterosexuals there are ‘hierarchies of respectability’ (2005: 59–60). There are ‘hegemonic and subordinate forms of heterosexuality’ (Seidman 2005: 40) and the ‘long-term monogamous relationships in which partners share living space’ (Van Every 1996: 41) are seen to be most respectable. Hence, ‘the realm of sexuality also has its own internal politics, inequities, and modes of oppression’ (Rubin 1994: 143).

Of course, the idea that heterosexual romance and marriage is seen as the ‘ultimate success’ (Greer 1999) may be called into question because marriage as an institution is being challenged most notably by increasing incidences of divorce and cohabitation. However, monogamous coupledness, even outside a marriage, is still seen as the ideal. Researchers generally contend that ‘the idealization of marriage and childrearing remains strong, pervasive, and largely unquestioned’ (Sharp and Ganong 2011: 956).

This results in a couple culture which becomes so ingrained that its privileged status is rarely questioned or even recognized. It leads to 'the tendency to privilege the heterosexual, co-resident, usually married, couple and their children as the unit of analysis thus rendering invisible the range of intimacies falling outside this form but which nonetheless are being practised in everyday life' (Budgeon 2008: 302). These ideals result in couples occupying a privileged position that brings with it 'a range of social, economic and symbolic rewards' (Budgeon 2008). For example, tax exemptions are available for couples but not singles.

On the contrary, those who are single become subject to stereotyping. Cargan and Melko (1982: 18-19), for example, summarized the many speculations in society around the reasons why individuals stay single:

People do not marry because they are hostile towards members of the opposite sex, or are homosexual; because they are immature, unwilling to assume responsibility, neurotic, or emotionally fixated on a parent; because they are unattractive or unhealthy; because they failed in the dating game, either because they are socially inadequate or because they became fixated on a lost love; because they were overfocused on economics, either perceiving themselves too poor to marry or perceiving marriage as a threat to their careers; because they were just unluckily isolated by geography, education, or occupation (for instance, illiterate lighthouse keepers); because they were overcome by some sort of 'principled' deviance; or if none of the above, their failure to marry must have been the result of an oversight!

Some authors even went as far as to argue that single adults (in contemporary America) were targets of stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination, a phenomenon the authors referred to as 'singlism' (DePaulo and Morris 2005), 'the twenty-first century problem that has no name' (DePaulo 2006: 1). It was argued

that as society has historically relied on family and marriage as institutional backbone: an ideology of family and marriage prevails and assumes that ‘just about everyone wants to marry, and just about everyone does’ and that ‘sexual partner is the one truly important peer relationship’. Based on a number of surveys and experiments, it was claimed by the authors that married people were more likely to be described as happy, loving and kind, caring, faithful, dependent, while adjectives such as shy, unhappy, insecure, inflexible, lonely were more likely to be used to describe singles. Singles were also seen to be selfish, deviant, immature, irresponsible, lonely, unfulfilled, emotionally challenged, lacking interpersonal ties and strong social bonds (DePaulo and Morris 2005). For example, in an experimental study, when the participants were asked to imagine themselves as landlords and to choose between two or three potential tenants, it was claimed that marital status discrimination was perceived to be legitimate when they expressed preference to lease the place to partnered over single people (Morris, Sinclair, and DePaulo 2007).

Taken the above together, there are many sub-elements within the master narrative:

- about success and failure in the competition for sexual partners (that singles have got ‘something wrong’ that leads them to *fail* to find a partner and such failure carries a kind of stigma);
- a causal link between being in a couple and well-being (coupledom is necessarily more enjoyable); and
- being single attracts social disapproval and requires an explanation.

However, the master narrative also lives in a world of pluralism and difference. It is necessarily plural and is always changing. The ideas around couplehood discussed above are facing increased challenges.

Sociocultural changes in modern Western societies, including the United Kingdom, mean that increasingly different forms of relating, such as rising numbers of cohabitation, living-apart-together, can mean that the 'traditional' master narrative of how intimate life is to be led is losing its grip (Weeks 2007). This means that although coupledness may still be taken as the ideal, its normative force could have become weaker than before, as other ways of living, are at least tolerated, if not fully accepted.

The fluidity and changes in these different 'family forms' can have significant influences on the master narrative of coupledness. Indeed, another 'new-ish' view depicts singles as a lifestyle choice. According to this other more positive view, singles usually possess two characteristics. First, they are seen as being freed from the conventional constraints imposed by relationships. They are seen to be free and independent, and can achieve what they really want to do. Second, they are seen as relatively rich consumers and a potential market segment to be tapped into. Stein (1975, 1976), for example, described singlehood as an even better alternative to marriage. Respondents in his study testified to personal growth, an increase of opportunities and friendships, and a sense of independence that validated their present lifestyles. It was claimed that an emergent ideology of singlehood was identified.

However, despite the master narrative is gradually changing, or at least becoming more nuanced, the hegemonic ideal of couplehood still holds.

The master narrative of coupledness in the wider society discussed above influences both straight and gay people. At the same time, as it is going to be illustrated below, the norms and social expectations have changed with regard to gay men's relationship formation. While it was supposed that gay men 'can't do, won't do' relationships, gradually the narrative changed to one that gay men 'can do, will do' relationships.

5.2 Gay singles in society: change of mind

How about for gay singles? The social situation that gay singles find themselves in has been rapidly transforming. Whereas being gay and single (i.e. without a male partner) was considered to be the 'norm' and expected because of criminalisation of homosexuality and ideas around sexual liberation, the recent debates over civil partnership and gay marriage have intentionally or unintentionally led to the gradual shift to same-sex relationships being privileged. Whereas gay people who are partnered begin to claim partial 'sexual citizenship', it can unintentionally lead to gay singles being 'othered'.

Can't do/won't do relationships

Same-sex relationships can be traced back to the ancient past and although they may have usually been desexualized into mentor relationships and remained relatively invisible, it has been argued that they have 'always been there'. This is especially the case in many non-western cultures that have found a place for same-sex relationships in the overall social organization and reproduction. 'Same-

sex relationships have been an integral part of the kinship system, household economies and iconography of many societies' (Adam 2004: 267). For example, most of the heroes of the Greek mythology have male lovers (Adam 2004). But following the criminalization of homosexuality in many Western societies, being gay and single (without a male partner) began to be considered to be the 'norm' and expected.

First, there was an assumption that gay men 'can't do' relationships. Of course, there was pressure for gay men to partner up, and indeed many gay men of the earlier generations did marry a partner of the opposite sex in order to 'pass as straight' (see Rosenfeld 1999), but forming a relationship with another man was seen to be too impossible an option for gay men. Criminalization of homosexuality meant that many gay men had to remain closeted. This significantly diminished the chance for them to meet other gay men, or at least, it had to be done with extreme sensitivity and attention to anonymity. Even if they had formed relationships, they had to keep them secret. This led to the conventional stereotype that if a man (whose sexuality was unknown or doubted by others) was single beyond a certain age, he would be assumed to be gay.

Second, there was a prevailing assumption that gay men put an overriding emphasis on the body and physical appearance (seen as a so-called 'innate male thing') that made them sexually especially liberal and promiscuous. Moving on from one partner to another was considered to be the expected pattern. Gay men were thus seen to be unable to hold relationships. Gay male relationships were seen to be more akin to 'affairs' (Saghir and Robins 1973 as in Jones and Bates 1978), short-lived and infrequent (Dank 1973 as in Jones and Bates 1978: 217).

Moreover, the lack of institutional pressure promoting homosexual unions was seen to be unhelpful as there was no 'glue' to hold gay couples together (Weinberg 1972 as in Jones and Bates 1978).

Third, it seemed that some gay men 'won't do' relationships. The discourse of gay liberation urged gay men and women to reject the heterosexual norms of marriage and family because of their alliance with patriarchy. This was demonstrated in the *Gay Manifesto* written by Carl Wittman in the early 1970s (Wittman 1971):

Traditional marriage is a rotten, oppressive institution... marriage is a contract which smothers both people, denies needs, and places impossible demands on both people.

Bereznai (2006) is a non-academic author who has examined gay singlehood. He interviewed Larry Kramer, who published a best-selling novel, *Faggots*, back in the 1970s, in which the main character took up the quest to find 'true love'. Larry recalled that 'friends stopped talking with him and would cross the street if they saw him coming'. His ideas were seen as conforming too much to the heterosexual ideals and not radical enough for the audience in the gay community in the 1970s. Similarly, in an interview, Harvey Fierstein, *The Torch Song Trilogy* playwright and actor, recalled that he was attacked by the gay community for wanting to write about monogamy and adopting children (Bereznai 2006).

Of course, some gay men did form relationships with other men during and before the 1970s. The idea that gay men at that time did not want relationships should not be overstated. Many gay men interviewed in the 1970s still indicated that they

would ideally like to share their lives with a partner (Saghir and Robins 1973 and Williams and Weinberg 1974 as in Jones and Bates 1978: 217). Even in 1978, when the gay liberation movement was vibrant and active, when homosexuals were asked how important it was to have a permanent living arrangement with a homosexual partner, 24 per cent of the lesbians and 14 per cent of the gay men said that it was 'the most important thing in life'; 35 per cent of lesbians and 28 per cent of gay men said it was very important (Bell and Weinberg 1978 as in Peplau and Cochran 1990: 331-332). Fewer than 13 per cent of lesbians and 19 per cent of gay men indicated that having a permanent, living-together relationship was 'not important at all'. In the 1970s, academic studies also portrayed gay male couples as less worried about public intolerance of their sexual behaviour, having more self-esteem, and feeling less lonely, guilty or depressed (Williams and Weinberg 1974 as in Jones and Bates 1978: 217).

It was clear that gay men's desire to be partnered did not completely disappear. However, it would at least be fair to say that being single in the gay community at that time was not seen as something out of the ordinary. Whereas partnered gay men may or may not have been seen as symbolically superior, single gay men were not seen as inferior as compared with partnered gay men.

Can do/will do relationships

The social environment then changed rapidly. Gay men's relationships became more and more visible.

It was argued that gay liberation, by lessening social sanctions and increasing gay pride, was beginning to lower relationship costs and increase rewards sufficiently for more and more homosexual couples to live together (Jones and Bates 1978). Whereas before the 1970s ‘most research on homosexuality involved gay men in therapy or in prison’ (Davidson 1982 as in Berger 1990: 32), in the 1980s studies of close homosexual relationships gradually emerged as a recognizable scientific perspective on homosexuality (e.g. Blumstein and Schwartz 1983, Harry 1983, Larson 1982, McWhirter and Mattison 1984, Peplau 1982, Peplau and Amaro 1982, Peplau and Gordon 1983, all as in Peplau and Cochran 1990: 321). Publications such as *Positively Gay* (1979) and *Our Right to Love* (1978) also emerged (both as in Peplau 1982: 3). Gay men were recognized as being able to form relationships relatively easily compared to before (Plummer 1978).

The HIV epidemic was argued by some to instil the conviction in some gay men that ‘the party is over’. Some HIV-positive men may want a relationship to settle down, whereas some HIV-negative men may enter into a relationship with the wish to protect themselves against HIV (Bereznai 2006: 227). Another consequence of the HIV epidemic was that the vast numbers of partners who had taken up the role of caregiver spoke up about their experiences and demanded their rights as partners to be recognized (Bereznai 2006: 38). It made gay couples more visible than before.

Assimilation politics has since then continued to be used by some activists in the fight for gay and lesbian people to be included and accepted as ‘equal’ citizens. A most notable development to follow was the debate over gay marriage and civil

partnership. Since the early 1990s the legal recognition of same-sex relationships has been a key site in the struggle for lesbian and gay legal equality (Harding 2008). Supporters see gay marriage as marking the transition of lesbians and gay men from outsiders to full citizens in society (Josephson 2005), and a 'human rights' issue (Kitzinger and Wilkison 2004). Opponents argue that the development means that heteronormative ideas around marriage and nuclear family, patriarchy and sexual normativity, as portrayed above, become accepted rather than resisted in the gay community (e.g. Auchmuty 2004, Jeffreys 2004). It can also have the effect of increasing regulation of, and reduction in, the social welfare and social security benefits of lesbians and gay men in the lowest income bracket (Young and Boyd 2006). Still, currently, in many Western democracies, with the notable exception of Greece, Ireland, Italy and US, 'some form of marriage-like or 'marriage-lite' union is available to same-sex couples' (Peel and Harding 2008: 659).

Most relevant to gay singles is that gay marriage can continue the privileging of conjugal relationships over other forms of relationships and singlehood (Polikoff 2003). As Richardson (2004: 397) noted:

The normative emphasis is on the loving lesbian/gay couple living together in marital-style relationships, rather than the rights of the individual sexual actor.

The UK government's justification for extending civil rights to same-sex couples rests on the hope that it would:

... send a strong message about the seriousness of such a commitment and, in turn, promote and support stable relationships . . . It would provide for the legal recognition of same-sex partners and give legitimacy to those in, or wishing to enter into, interdependent, same-sex couple relationships that are intended to be permanent . . . Committed same-sex relationships would be recognised and registered partners would gain rights and responsibilities which would reflect the significance of the roles they play in each others lives. This in turn would encourage more stable family life. (DTI, 2003: 13, 17 as in Richardson 2004: 398)

Same-sex marriage was seen as helping to decrease gay male promiscuity and integrate gay men into society (Sullivan 1996). It has been argued that it leads to 'homonormativity' (Duggan 2002) which means that some gay men become 'normal' and accepted if they don't overtly disturb the heteronormative ideals. For example, it has been suggested that the 'normalization' of gay characters in US cinema requires them to be 'gender conventional, committed to romantic-companionate and family values, uncritically patriotic and detached from a subculture' (Seidman 2002: 160). This leads to some gay and lesbian people being accepted and tolerated, as long as they approximate the dominant family values or normative conventions of heterosexuality (Jackson and Scott 2004). This results in some gay men being seen as the 'good gay', 'good homosexual' or 'normal gay' (Smith 1997):

The normal gay is expected to be gender conventional, link sex to love and a marriage-like relationship, defend family values, personify economic individualism, and display national pride. (Seidman 2002: 133)

On the other hand, those who are unwilling to conform to these heterosexual ideals end up as the 'bad gay' or 'dangerous queer' – and they include those who are single, those who have multiple partners and those who are engaged in unsafe sex practices. Single gay men, then, become socially and symbolically less

respectable. This kind of stratification among gay men has been argued to be complicit in the strategic needs of neo-liberalism (see the discussions in Weeks 2007: Chapters 5 and 8).

5.3 Gay singles being othered

For Foucault (1991), governmentality is concerned with the ways in which the exercise of power over the population controls the actions of the population. As such, civil partnerships and same-sex marriage inevitably also bring ‘non-registered, unmarried, low-income same-sex couples under the gaze of regulation’ (Harding 2008: 746), so as they marginalize singles. Bereznai (2006) argued that the stigma associated with single gay men is becoming similar to the stigma applied to homosexuals in the past, and argued that ‘single is the new gay’.

Gay dating websites have been blossoming (Bauermeister, Leslie-Santana, Johns, Pingel and Eisenberg 2011, Gudelunas 2012), now even specializing in different sub-groups of gay men, such as gay Christians and gay Jewish, who are traditionally marginalized. Gaydar, one of the leading gay dating websites in terms of recorded hits, has 3.5 million users globally, and 1 million users in the UK alone. Although some may argue that these websites can tend to be sex-focused, on many of these websites the profiles show that many if not most people still see having a long-term relationship – LTR – as the ultimate goal. It is thus not surprising to see an increasing number of books published focusing on gay men and dating:

- *Husband Hunting Made Easy and Other Miracles for the Modern Gay Man* (1998)

- *The Principles: The Gay Man's Guide to Getting (and Keeping) Mr. Right* (1998)
- *Mr. Right is Out There: The Gay Man's Guide to Finding and Maintaining Love* (2000)
- *Finding a Lover for Life: A Gay Man's Guide to Finding a Lasting Relationship* (2001)
- *Boyfriend 101: A Gay Guy's Guide to Dating, Romance, and Finding True Love* (2003)
- *Love in the Time of HIV: The Gay Man's Guide to Sex, Dating, and Relationships* (2003)
- *Affirmative Gay Relationships: Key Steps in Finding a Life Partner* (2003)
- *102 Tips For Men Dating Men* (2004)
- *The Mandates: 25 Real Rules for Successful Gay Dating* (2004)
- *Keeping Mr. Right: The Gay Man's Guide to Lasting Relationships* (2004)
- *Love Between Men: Enhancing Intimacy and Resolving Conflicts in Gay Relationships* (2005)
- *Get Closer: A Gay Man's Guide to Intimacy* (2006)
- *Man Talk: The Gay Couple's Communication Guide* (2007)
- *M4M: For an Hour or Forever – The Gay Man's Guide to Finding Love Online* (2007)
- *The 7-Day Dating and Relationship Plan for Gay Men: Practical Advice from the Gay Matchmaker* (2008)
- *Dynamic Duos: The Alpha/Beta Key to Unlocking Success in Gay Relationships* (2008)
- *Gay Dating* (2010)
- *Finding True Love in a Man-Eat-Man World: The Intelligent Guide to Gay Dating, Sex, Romance, and Eternal Love* (2011)

That is also why Hostetler and Cohler believed that singlehood would become a non-normative option in a gay man's life course in the near future (1997: 224):

To the extent that partnership becomes an 'expectable transition' in an emerging gay life course, remaining single becomes more developmentally problematic. (1997:213)

5.4 Pressure from parents, friends and acquaintances

These social attitudes towards singles do not only exist 'out there' in society in an abstract way, but 'turned private' and influenced the immediate social

environment in which the participants in this study lived, by influencing the way their peers in the immediate social circle felt about being single. Being single was a topic that was often brought up by people around the participants in this study. They could not escape from the social pressure. Instead, the social pressure to partner up was an integral part of their habitus.

Echoing early findings that singles find family a source of anxiety (Schwartzberg, Berliner and Jacob 1995: Ch3), the participants' parents were concerned with their sons' being single. Malcolm, a gay man from a Jewish family, for example, said ever since he was a teenager his parents and other family members had wanted to know whether he had a girlfriend. He had more female friends than male friends, and whenever he brought a girl home his mother 'began to fantasize she was a girlfriend':

'I brought a girlfriend home, and of course my mother would talk to everybody about it "oh he's got this new girlfriend" sort of thing...' (Malcolm)

Sometimes parents felt particularly concerned about the participants' being single because they were worried that there would be no one to take care of them in later life. For example, Henry said that although he himself was not too concerned about growing older and being single, his mother was actually more worried about it than he was. It was Henry's mother's 92nd birthday the week before the interview. She told Henry:

' "I am going to give you ten thousand pounds" and I said what for? "Oh I just thought you might need it. I want you to have it. I am not going to last much longer... I worry about you who's going to look after you". ' (Henry)

How did he respond?

‘I just laughed it off, “oh shut up mum I am not old”. You know. Just denied it. But she’s very protective of me. Very concerned about me.’
(Henry)

The participants’ friends also somehow saw relationship formation to be more desirable. Patrick lived on an island in New Zealand. After coming out in his late 30s, he began to become more comfortable with his sexuality. He began to set up a lot of casual encounters with other gay men through the internet, primarily with a view to having sex with them. He was quite happy with that. He had had sex with men from 35 different countries at the time of interview but was not interested in forming relationships. He recalled that when he told his friends that he was gay, their first response was to offer to introduce ‘someone’ to him for him to ‘settle down’:

‘It was interesting my friends said “I am so glad you told me. I can introduce you to... and you can settle down.” and I was thinking I don’t want to settle down with someone. People want you to be in a relationship, and it was like good god no.’ (Patrick)

Whereas parents and friends could voice their ‘concerns’ out of care, the participants sometimes felt that acquaintances would just ask them questions because partnership was so taken to be the norm. For example, Ben said he was quite happy to be single. He said many people who did not know that he was gay assumed straight away that he was heterosexual, and that he must have a spouse. Inviting him to parties, his friends said:

‘Would you like to bring your wife along? And I said “I haven’t got a wife”. And they got “you are not married? Perhaps your partner?” And I said “no I haven’t got a partner either”. And this was it. And it’s really

quite surprising seeing their reaction. I find it quite amusing. It doesn't bother me.

[T: Do you get that reaction quite a lot?]

Oh yeah. It's a strange thing that it is conformative. You are expected to do this, by the time you're this age, you should have done that and that.' (Ben)

As Elder (1975: 165) suggested, there is a 'social timetable of life course'.

Different ages come with it certain expected social roles and activities (Neugarten and Datan 1973). If a person acts in any way that is 'off-age', the actions can be sanctioned by formal and informal means. In Ben's case above, a shocked reaction from his friends was to tell him that they thought he was 'not following the norm' as he had not yet married.

How did Ben react? He said he would either not be bothered by their questions, tell them it was none of their business, or say that he was not 'the marrying kind'. But then they automatically assumed once again that he was heterosexual and not into marriage. Do these attitudes and questions annoy him?

'It does sometimes. Particularly when they were trying to dwell with no apparent reasons. They just wanted to, I think, establish how they can get to your level first to talk to you.' (Ben)

Not only would people become curious about the participants' being single, they sometimes assumed that it was something negative. Partnership and relationship were expected to be something everyone would like, and if the participants were single, there must be 'some underlying strange reasons' for their 'deviance'. For example, Patrick said:

‘I mean certainly the society is all about being in a relationship. And it’s very difficult sometimes for people to be single. Because people sort of think he’s not friendly. Something’s wrong with him because nobody wants to live with him.’ (Patrick)

Laurence also said that because he defied the norm to enter into a relationship, people would begin to ask ‘what was going wrong’. This pressure grew especially as he grew older:

‘It’s okay when you are in your 20s because you are playing the field. When you get to your thirties oh it’s because you are giving your life to your career. In your forties they’re beginning to say... there’s something wrong with you. Why don’t you marry? If you are a straight man that’s really what people say. When you are in your fifties as a straight man if you are not married by then, you have some terrible tragic experience in your life that makes you not married.’ (Laurence)

Being single, especially in later life, became associated with having something wrong with him. Malcolm said he was more interested in his own personal development than ‘living through another person’, but this was against societal expectations. He said people around him did not allow or even consider the possibility of ‘choosing’ singlehood by choice. Instead, singles were perceived to be a ‘second-class citizen’ and left behind:

‘In our society people like the cliché of being in a relationship. If you are not in a relationship then you are a second-class citizen. There’s something wrong with you, you’ve been left on the shelf, you are an old maid, all these negative things to describe people not in a relationship. To me what was more important really, as I have said, was my own personal development and not being in a relationship...

[T: Did people ask you about being single?]

Yes because I think what they want to know is: what’s wrong with you? Are you sexual? Do you actually have sex with other people? Why aren’t you in a relationship? People are very interested but of course most people don’t want to ask the straightforward questions like do you have sex, do you have sexual problems, and things like that.’ (Malcolm)

Hence, the participants were surrounded by concerns about their status. Being single, according to Malcolm, could become a 'social stigma' that is deeply discrediting (Goffman 1963). It became larger than the relationship alone – it seemed to suggest something more about a person's value and worth. In some cases, the participants found that being single had disadvantages. For example, Harry felt he was being discriminated against when he applied to become a teacher and was asked if he was married:

'I think increasingly the fact I wasn't married became a disadvantage.
[T: Really?]
Oh yes. I think that's true. You know your headmaster or deputy head, they like the wife to be there. She can contribute, she will entertain when you have staff to tea... this sort of thing. She has a social function in the work ethic in the workplace. And I didn't have one. It's me and you take me for what I am, and there is nothing else but me. I began to think it was a slightly disadvantaging factor.' (Harry)

This quote from Harry indicates that the social pressure to partner up was also associated with preserving the existing patriarchy – for a man to have a female partner was perceived to mean that the female partner would be helping to serve at school parties.

All these questions the participants received accumulated into the social pressure they had to face because they were single.

5.5 Pressure from oneself: internalized messages

These signals sent to the participants from society and the social circle surrounding them can go even deeper – they could become internalized negative messages about being single. For example, Adam studied history when he was younger. Because of all the stories he read that emphasized family and couples, he internalized that getting married is something that everyone should go through:

‘They talked about quite a lot of sexuality in ancient history which is quite nice. I expected I was going to get married when I was young. That was inspired by historical fiction. And I think I projected those things onto potential relationships.’ (Adam)

Similarly, Justin grew up expecting relationship formation in his mind:

‘Well I suppose when I was younger, there was an urge to be in a relationship...
[T: Why?]
I think mainly because of sex, certainly. And also because that’s kind of expected...and also romantic movie type things. The romance of it. I suppose I felt we were supposed to be in a relationship. That’s how things were supposed to be. So I suppose there was in that sense, pressure from... well not pressure but just a norm to be aspired to... just something that I kind of long for.’ (Justin)

This could turn into an internalized privileging of partnerships over singlehood:

‘I mean one thing I realized long long time ago, there’s partnership envy there. It’s partnership envy. I remember being on the tube and I saw a man and a woman together and I thought they were husband and wife. And then he or she got up, got off the train and it was quite obvious they had nothing to do with one another. They didn’t say goodbye, they didn’t look at one another. They were just sitting next to one another. And I think that happens a lot with people who are not in a relationship, or in unhappy relationship, or between relationships. They will assume that other people

are in a relationship and then of course the next stage is they will assume that's a happy relationship.' (Malcolm)

5.6 Implications

As Foucault (1978) pointed out, some ways of interpreting reality are privileged while some other coexisting ways are marginalized. These 'social and cultural frameworks of interpretation' (Mishler 1999:18) become canonical stories, culturally dominant stories, or, as I prefer to call them in this thesis, a master narrative. There is a master narrative (or dominant narrative, plotlines, master plots, dominant discourses, story lines or cultural texts) (Bamberg 1997: 339) covering almost every area of life. It serves as a form of social control and constrains alternative ways of understanding. It can maintain the *status quo*, leaving the pre-existing power structure untouched and unchallenged.

This chapter has indicated that the pre-existent sociocultural forms of interpretation with regard to relationships privileges 'the cult of the couple' (DePaulo and Morris 2005: 75) and 'the marriage and family ideology' (DePaulo and Morris 2005: 77). Although the meanings of singlehood have changed throughout the 19th and 20th century (Koropecj-Cox 2005:92-93, Schwartzberg, Berliner and Jacob 1995: Chapter 2), stigma is still being attached to being single (Byrne and Carr 2005). Being single became a 'spoiled identity', 'an attribute that is deeply discrediting' and reduces the bearer 'from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one' (Goffman 1963: 3). The master narrative in turn became the interpretive resources available for singles' self construction.

I argue that it is clear that the older gay men in this study felt social pressure to partner up from people around them and even from themselves. However, I argue that the older gay men, like the singles in earlier research as reviewed in Chapter 2, also exercised their agency to understand their singlehood in a variety of ways. I see the participants' narrative as bridging agency and structure. They interpreted their lives against the dominant ideology and hegemonic narrative around them as outlined in this chapter.

This is supported by the reasons that the participants themselves gave for participating in the study. First, for some, having the chance to talk about themselves was seen as an intrinsically enjoyable experience. They saw it as a social occasion. For example, Henry said that he was interested in talking about himself but there were generally not many people who were prepared to listen. As such, being allowed to talk about oneself, especially for an unrestricted amount of time during the interview, was experienced as enjoyable. Many participants also felt that whenever they talked about their feelings about being single, they would be judged by others. Having a perceived non-judgemental setting in which to talk freely about themselves was seen as comparatively relaxing. This was helped by my promise of confidentiality and anonymity, which helped to gain their trust. Some participants also mentioned that as they were single, they were quite flexible with their timetable. They found it comparatively easy to find a free time slot to meet me. For others, being single meant that they did not have as many opportunities to meet people. Having a chance to talk to me was seen as a welcome social occasion.

Second, some saw the opportunity to contribute to research as meaningful. Many participants were motivated to participate in order to help me as a research student working towards a degree. They were motivated by an altruistic motive to help. They also thought that they were contributing to the accumulation of social scientific knowledge.

Third, and most importantly, many participants highlighted the desire to use the interview as a chance to ‘make sense of their lives’, and to ‘put things into perspective’. For example, Dan discussed how being born as a female, the confusion around gender identity in his earlier life may have had an impact on him being single. Later in the interview, he admitted that he was trying to use the interview as a chance to make sense of his life:

‘I was quite interested in talking to you just to see whether it makes better sense to me as well, by having somebody else asking questions.’ (Dan)

Similarly, talking about being single was seen by Laurence as a chance to clarify his own feelings:

‘I am happy to have done this. Because, I think, I contacted you because I knew that I was actually thinking about issues, about being single and relationships and partnerships. I am at a point where I need to sort of think seriously about whether I make a major effort to stop being single and to do something about, not, say, loneliness, but being alone. I accepted this opportunity because I knew that it would give me a chance to sort of talk through things and perhaps make it clear about what I want to do. You don’t often get the opportunity to talk about yourself. Now for how many hours? (laughs)

[T: Nearly two-and-a-half hours.]

Yes. That’s probably the longest I have explained myself... putting you asleep. So it’s nice to have the audience really.’ (Laurence)

As a result, my reading of the stories changed. I saw the participants' story telling as a process and an action. They were actively creating and constructing what being single meant to them. In other words, the participants were social world makers though they do not make their social worlds of their own choosing (Plummer 2001: 20). This meant that instead of seeing the interview as a means for me to investigate singlehood, I began to understand the interview as a process of the participant's assigning meanings to their situation and therefore creating their experience of singlehood. This was especially evident when Simon was asked how he thought about the interview he said:

‘It just helped me to put some of the thoughts in order. Because you will realize, when you listen through it again, you will realize some of my thoughts actually changed from first said to the end... because then I thought it through...’ (Simon)

The interviews were not only a means to investigate the experience of singlehood.

The telling process was in fact creating the experience of singlehood:

‘I am very glad that it happened. I am very glad you came here today and we had the opportunity talking. Because it has helped me crystallize my thoughts and feelings. And that has to be a good thing.’ (Robert)

This points to the issue of ‘narrative truth’ – in this study, because singlehood is such a value-laden concept as demonstrated in the social pressure the participants received, it may be the case that some participants would then be portraying their stories in a more positive light or ‘rewriting their story’ to make their status of singlehood more comprehensible.

This does not mean that the stories in this study are necessarily ‘unreal’ or ‘false’. It only means that stories told are about both ‘what really happened in the past’ and ‘what is really going on right now’, and about ‘personal meanings rather than objective facts (McAdams 2006: 85-86). The stories they told should better be understood as a self-making and identity-creating process. The stories in this study should thus be understood as a process of identity construction in a culture against singlehood.

Understanding the data in this way therefore necessarily privileges the agency of the participants. This fits with the research aim to understand how the participants actively re-interpret and re-create their experience of singlehood. Like Bamberg (1997: 363), I focus this thesis on how the older single gay men’s stories could be ‘hearable both as complicit with and countering’ the master narrative of coupledness in society. I see them as narrators who can resist, expand, and complicate the master narrative. I focus on ‘what the speakers aim to achieve in the act of narrating’ by ‘granting more centrality to the speaker’s active engagement in the construction process of narratives’ (Bamberg 1997: 335).

Chapter 6: How the master narrative is *adopted*

The previous chapter has suggested that a master narrative that governs respectability among personal relationships in society can be detected. It largely privileges couples and marginalizes singles.

This chapter focuses on the moments when traces of the master narrative could be detected in the participants' stories. The master narrative undoubtedly informed and at times overshadowed the ways in which the older gay men understood their lives. These moments occurred when the participants:

1. Internalized the reasons for singlehood.
2. Focused on the negative implications of being single and discounted the positive aspects of being single.
3. Overgeneralized all partnerships as satisfying.
4. Showed discontentment with being single.
5. Perceived a low possibility for change.
6. Felt unable to find alternative sources of satisfaction.
7. Felt trapped and unable to change an undesirable situation.

6.1 Internalizing the reasons for singlehood

When the master narrative was adopted, the participants internalized the reasons for being single. To different degrees they suggested that they were single because there was 'something wrong' or 'something deviant' about their personality or their upbringing. They attributed their singlehood to do with their own personal

characteristics or upbringing: that they had always been a loner, having been to a single-sex school, and having been bullied at school. They also argued that they had been an only child, or that their relationships with their parents or their parent's relationship with each other was not loving, similar to the reasons suggested by previous research as reviewed in Chapter 2. The participants who cited these reasons for their singlehood argued that they 'lacked the skills' to form a satisfying relationship.

6.2 Focusing on the negative implications and downside of being single

Master narratives provide the frame within which people evaluate their lives. It has been argued that social groups that have been marginalized, stereotyped or stigmatized, for example Asian gay men (Poon and Ho 2008), overweight persons (Rogge, Greenwald and Golden 2004), those living with HIV (Siegel, Lune and Meyer 1998), among many others, can be led to feel negative about themselves or even other members of their own social groups.

The master narrative privileges couples and links singles with stereotypes, and as a consequence leads some participants to focus selectively only on the negative implications of being single and its downside. Accordingly, the participants at times described certain domains of their lives in negative ways. They said that being single meant too much freedom, a lack of fulfilment for their emotional needs and intimacy, difficulty in taking care of themselves, a reduced social life and a lack of a regular sex partner.

For example, some participants said that they found too much freedom and independence difficult to bear. For them, being single meant a lack of attachment and gave them a feeling of floating around without an anchor. For example, Laurence said he sometimes felt almost ‘too free’ being on his own, ‘a bit like a ghost really’. Such a description reflected the master narrative that assumed partners were always going to be there for each other, and that comparatively single people would be alone and lonely. Fromm argued in *The Fear of Freedom* (1942) that the idea of ‘freedom’ needs to be analyzed as consisting of two components: ‘freedom from’ and ‘freedom to’. Applying these ideas to singlehood, ‘freedom from’ can be understood as the freedom of not having to do certain things because of not having a partner, and ‘freedom to’ can mean the freedom to do certain things because of being single. If both aspects were fulfilled, being single could be more satisfying. But in the case of Laurence, as he could only sense the ‘freedom from’ obligations but not the ‘freedom to’ do things as a single person, it brought him feelings of anxiety and emptiness.

Some participants talked about how they felt a lack of fulfilment of their emotional needs and intimacy. This should not be confused with sex *per se*, but should be understood more widely as emotional closeness and connectedness. They thought they were missing out the ‘disclosing’ aspect of relationships, which involves openness, the sharing of thoughts and the expression of feelings (Jamieson 1998) as promised by the master narrative. Cuddling, sharing, watching television together, all could sound very trivial – but were exactly what a lot of the participants said they missed. Some participants stated explicitly that sexual

desires were relatively easier to meet – as Laurence said: ‘If I really want to have sex I can pay for it’ – but the need for intimacy was more difficult to satisfy:

‘What’s important is not having the warmth of a fellow human being besides you, and waking up in the middle of the night, and just cuddling in. I mean you can masturbate if you want a climax. You can masturbate it’s not a big deal. It’s the intimacy and the warmth that’s what I really miss. I mustn’t sound like a grumpy old man.’ (Henry)

‘When you hit a psychological or physical setback, not having someone make you a cup of tea and tell you how good you are... that’s an obvious disadvantage to me.’ (Harry)

The master narrative also suggested that the presence of a partner would be conducive to positive health behaviour (see Chapter 2). This was also adopted by some participants in this study: they found taking care of themselves difficult. First, some participants thought being single brought about practical problems. Being single meant that there was not a pair of helping hands when the car broke down, or when there was a leaky tap, to use the examples the participants themselves cited. Second, some participants felt a lack of incentive to take care of themselves. For example, they believed that in a relationship, partners could ‘police’ each other: ‘one probably has tolerance level that’s lower than the other person’s’. The interview with Norman was conducted at his home. He said that not having a partner lessened his motivation to keep the place in a better state:

‘Look at the state of this house. You know it could be cleaner, it could be more modern ... I don’t know whether this is just me. If I have somebody who I care about, I care for myself more. Whereas I’ll sit here tonight, and if there is nothing on the telly, I won’t sort of dust or Hoover or anything. I’ll just say, sod it I am going off for a drive. Whereas if I have somebody to focus on, who I needed to dust the house for... I can’t do things just for myself. Whether that’s a lack of discipline – I don’t know – I have to have somebody to do it for. You know it’s weird I need somebody to give me a kick on the backside or to offer me to want to do it for you know.’ (Norman)

Laurence also said that he needed a partner's nagging to help him take care of himself better:

'I think it would have helped, because I do need to be nagged. Because if I don't, if I leave myself to myself, I just sort of carry on doing what I want to do... at the moment if I want to eat a big meal I would go and eat a big meal because nobody says I can't do it.' (Laurence)

Third, quite a few participants perceived doing domestic tasks as less enjoyable when there was no partner with whom to share them:

'There are things that compensate by having someone to do the domestic things with, domestic chores can almost be enjoyable doing together. Choosing things for the house or maybe even decorating things or doing grocery shopping... I quite enjoyed doing those in a relationship.' (Justin)

Fourth, some participants described that, as being single meant that there was no one to share the domestic tasks with, it made the tasks seem more daunting and harder. They also had to do the tasks more frequently. For example, Simon described that when he was in a relationship he and his partner took turns to do things like cooking and ironing, whereas he now had to do these more often than before:

'If you are on your own and something needs to be done, you've got to do it or it doesn't get done. There's no look... you do that I'll get on with this. It's half a task done of it... [his previous boyfriend] was very good at ironing clothes for example. And he said you do the washing and I'll do the ironing. And it was great. Instead of having to do all the washing and do all the ironing which I am doing again now, I can say alright I'd wash the clothes, I hang them up, and dry them ... then a couple of days later, he'll iron them. You know and it's that sort of sharing.' (Simon)

Others also thought being single influenced their social life. Some participants found not having a partner made them less inclined to attend social events, and as a result, they became less socially connected. There were several reasons for this. First, some felt a lack of motivation to plan social activities just for themselves. For example, Philip said that he was less inclined to go to the theatre on his own because he needed someone else to act as the incentive for planning the social events and booking tickets. Second, some participants found it difficult to arrive at social situations without a companion. They thought that a couple had at least each other to talk to should they not be able to find anyone else interesting around. For singles, there was 'no one to sort of fall back onto' if they found no one to interact with, they thought. Third, some participants felt that they were being invited to fewer social occasions because of not having a partner. They felt that 'couples thought couples' and 'families thought families', which indirectly meant that singles would be excluded from the guest lists for some events. They sometimes felt that the hosts might ask them to bring someone with them. That could be challenging because if not handled well, they could be sending wrong signals to the person they invite to accompany them as if they were interested in a romantic relationship with them.

Although singles can be socially very well connected, some participants found that friends differed from partners in terms of providing for intimacy and emotional needs. They felt they might not always have the first call on friends for sharing and support, especially if their friends were partnered.

A few participants also found a lack of regular sex a problem:

‘I kind of felt the need, when I wasn’t in a relationship, to be looking for sex. In a relationship I didn’t need to be spending a lot of time going to bars or so on.’ (Justin)

‘Okay the aspect I least enjoy is waking up in the morning when I am in the mood for sex. Other times I can go out and find it (laughs) but it would have been nice in the morning with a hunk body next to me that I could have sex with.’ (Malcolm)

6.3 Overgeneralizing all partnerships as satisfying

When the master narrative was adopted, not only did the participants tend to focus on the negative aspects and discount the positive implications of being single as discussed above, they also overgeneralized all partnerships as satisfying. In such instances the participants described all relationships as fulfilling. They saw a partner as a panacea that would help them to solve problems, especially if they were in need of someone to share their feelings with. For example, when asked what he disliked about being single, Adam said:

‘Lots of things really. Obviously being alone in bed at night... watching other people around you having relationships... in many ways I envy straight people... I envy straight people for the fact that they have got a loving partner most of the time and they have got kids.’ (Adam)

It is obvious that his ideas about relationships were based on a few disputable assumptions set out in the master narrative. First, he assumed that all straight people had partners most of the time. Second, he assumed that if they had partners, their partners would be ‘loving’. Third, he assumed that they would have children. As a result of that, watching straight people with this ‘distorted’ frame in mind, he became envious of all the ‘enjoyment’ they were having. Comparatively,

he did not think very highly of being single. He was creating a perfect image of couples in his mind, drawing inference from the master narrative.

This can also be demonstrated by Henry's and Norman's stories. Among the singles in this study, some had had previous partners whereas others had not had any long-term partner at all. Henry was one of those with a comparatively longer relationship history. He spent the first and a half hour of the interview talking about his previous three boyfriends. He mentioned that he found out his last boyfriend was unfaithful and trying to meet other men through the internet, and that was why they broke up. Despite that, he said he had enjoyed spending time with every one of his previous boyfriends. When asked how he felt about being single, he answered:

‘Right. Miserable, I think, is the answer. I hate being single. Largely because all my experience of being with partners I basically enjoyed. I really want another one. And increasingly I am thinking I’ve got to an age I’d probably not meet another gay man now who wants to share my life with me I find it depressing.’ (Henry)

It was worth noting that despite his last boyfriend's infidelity, he said that he enjoyed all his experience of being with his previous partners – as if his last boyfriend's cheating had not taken place.

Norman's story showed striking resemblances to that of Henry's. He spent the first two hours of the interview recalling the time spent with his previous partners. He said that the interview had been very emotional for him as it brought back memories of people whom he really loved. He would very much have liked to have a partner again. He had been visiting dating websites and he said he almost

became addicted. He became stressed just looking to see whether he had received replies from potential dates. He also began to visit saunas again for sexual satisfaction. At a sauna he met someone who he really liked. He was elated but then turned heart-broken when he found out that this person had already had a partner.

Forgetting and ignoring the fact that their own previous relationships had not been perfect, Henry and Norman reminisced and mourned the loss of their boyfriends. They magnified what had been good about their experiences and forgot what harm and hurt they could bring too.

6.4 Discontentment with being single

When the master narrative was adopted, the participants generally felt discontented about being single. For example, as Henry said above, he felt miserable and depressed about being single. He went on to say that being single made him feel ‘incomplete’: what does that mean?

‘Incomplete in the sense that I am used to sharing my life with a particular person, who I can just relax with in the evening... someone to talk to about work or whatever. At the end of the day someone warm to cuddle up to at night. I mean incomplete is a bit exaggerated. I think life is much richer if you’ve got a partner yes. That’s what it is.’ (Henry)

He did not see much, if any positive, aspect of being single:

‘[T: But about... are there positive things you like about being on your own?]
No. I mean you hear oh well at least I can slump around or put my feet on the chair...

[T: The freedom...]
I can fart in bed and not worry... (laughs)
[T: (Laughs)]
I got great freedom and independence, do what I like... I think that's all bullshit I don't understand. I don't believe in any of that, no. I don't see any great wonderful thing about being alone and independent and able to do my own thing... no.
[T: So that's not your...]
I wish I could grasp onto some positive thoughts... I may be a sad lonely old queen (laughs).' (Henry)

He said he still reserved a 'special place' in his heart for a partner:

'Maybe it's a romantic notion. I can talk to people and I have friends I can speak to and so on. But you know there is always a place for someone special. who you can share with but no one else. And I miss that. Yes.'
(Henry)

He also admitted that if he were to see a couple happy together, it would serve as a trigger and make him think: 'In comparison, I am a miserable, lonely, grumpy old man.' He had been there, done that, got the T-shirt: having been in relationships gave him this 'nice memory'. By adopting the master narrative, Henry was over-romanticizing what relationships can bring.

Norman also said he found having no one to 'offload' his worries and troubles to significantly influenced his mental health. He said partly because of that he had become suicidal the year before the interview:

'Mental health? I would say I am completely mental, screwed up at the moment. Because I do not want to be on my own. There's nobody to offload things to... on two occasions I was seriously suicidal last year. Seriously... but it wouldn't be like that now and I don't think I would ever have the courage to do it.' (Norman)

Being in a relationship was portrayed as a promise in the master narrative. This promise guarantees that Henry's partner will want to relax with him on the sofa in the evening; be willing to talk to him about work or whatever; and be there for him to warm to or cuddle up to at night, and that Norman can offload all his worries to his partner. Both Henry and Norman (rather unrealistically) saw relationships as a panacea that could solve all their troubles.

6.5 Low possibility of change

When the master narrative was adopted, the participants also perceived a low possibility of change. This could result in their feeling powerless and unable to do much about an undesirable situation.

It has been argued that gay men are under the pressure to be 'young and beautiful'. The gay culture has been discussed as centred on body physique, fashion and personal grooming and predominantly aesthetically oriented (Drummond 2006: 60). The archetypal gay male body is 'muscular, athletic, devoid of fat and hairless' (Drummond 2010: 31). This sets an ideal that is difficult to achieve. Some authors argued being gay was a specific risk factor for eating disorders in men (Russell and Keel 2002). As discussed in Chapter 2, this has been thought to lead to the phenomenon of 'accelerated ageing'.

In this study, many participants described their bodies in negative terms. Many felt that because gay men place particular emphasis on the body when they search for a potential partner, the possibility for them as older gay men of finding a

potential partner would be low, because older gay men's bodies, like other gay men's bodies that are considered to be too fat, too thin, too feminine – those that do not 'conform' – are marginalized among gay men (Jones and Pugh 2005). Many participants in this study thought that, given their age, their likelihood of finding a partner would be low. For example, Norman said:

'I just want to be with a partner. But go about it all the wrong way because I do the sauna thing. Because I think sod it I may never meet a partner. I could sit here and wait forever. At 55 your likelihood of meeting a partner? Probably not high... Age thing is mega on the gay scene. I don't know whether it is on the straight scene. But the age thing is absolutely mega.'
(Norman)

Gay men's (in particular older gay men's) preference for younger partners has been widely documented (e.g. Kaufman and Phua 2003, Heaphy 2007: 200). Bartholome, Tewksbury and Bruzzone (2000) found that almost seven times more gay men advertise for younger partners than advertise for older partners. Compared to heterosexual men, heterosexual women and lesbians, gay men were the most likely to state a preference for a younger partner (Hayes 1995). The preference for younger partners intensifies among older advertisers regardless of race and sexual orientation.

Some participants in this study also shared this preference for younger men. They generally perceived this as making it especially difficult for them to find potential partners. They saw themselves as not attractive enough, because of ageism in the gay world. This is in broad agreement with earlier findings that with increasing age gay men found it increasingly difficult to meet a partner, especially a younger

partner (Heaphy, Yip and Thompson 2004: 886-887). For example, Laurence said that he was worried that a younger guy might say to him, 'get lost, granddad':

'You could just be a nuisance, take the clothes off and fear them off.'
(Laurence)

Some participants found themselves in an interesting position: they complained the gay world as focusing overtly on youth, but they were doing the same – using physicality to define their preference for partner. For example, Adam said he was interested in meeting younger people as potential partners. He said he found younger people more attractive physically: 'That's just a given.' Like many older gay men interviewed in this study and previous research, he thought ageism was very pervasive in the 'gay world':

'It's all about how you look. People are judging you immediately on how you look and whether they want to get into bed with you... I kind of thought it was a bit sad because when you get to that age and you are still chasing that dream... Unless you can actually engage somebody to be with you and you are coming to the tail end of your life and you get to your 50s... many young guys probably think you are not going to be around that long. They are probably going to think there's going to come a point he's not that interested in sex. It's not always true.' (Adam)

He said he found it more difficult to attract younger people 'because they don't need to look for you really':

'I am sometimes pessimistic about it because as you get older you become less attractive to some partners in some ways... generally speaking I find people younger than me attractive but then I don't really feel I have much to offer someone who is younger because they would want someone of their own age, which is quite reasonable. Has the gay world got any better? Yes in many ways but usually for the up-and-coming people you know...' (Adam)

Not being a part of this ‘up-and-coming’ group, he thought that the chance of someone being attracted to him was not high. He was interested in meeting a younger man as a potential partner, but he thought it would be difficult:

‘Nowadays I feel crucified a bit. Occasionally you get an old person says prefer younger and I wonder how many responses they get. A friend said to me, out in the scene, there are people who like chubbies or older people, but it’s like playing harder you know (laughs).’ (Adam)

After putting on a bit of weight, he became ‘more embarrassed about wanting to meet people’. The lack of success of forming relationships in his late 30s and 40s gave him ‘less mental positiveness’ for meeting people at the time of the interview in his 50s as he was not confident about the way he looked:

‘There’d be times when I arranged to meet somebody when I decided to go I must have gone through three or four different changes... I stood in front of a whole mirror...and I sort of just ripped it off, just shredded, it... it was just that overwhelming impatience with the whole world out there... setting up an expectation that you can’t meet. But part of that is your own mind you are projecting onto other people... I never like sending photo of myself because I was never happy with the way that I looked. So I always tried to get round that you know.’ (Adam)

These expectations that Adam thought he could not meet could come from a variety of sources. It could be the gay press (Duggan and McCreary 2004), the gay scene (Valentine and Skelton 2003), or it could be just his own construction of the situation – but it didn’t matter, because his own perception was what really influenced how he felt.

Adam’s rather vivid account showed how his dissatisfaction with the body could have negatively affected relationship formation through multiple pathways.

Negative body image has been linked to low self-esteem, which seems to also be the case with Adam. Being ‘never happy with the way he looked’ could make him too nervous and behave unnaturally in a dating situation. Not being comfortable even about sending a photograph can hinder the formation of an honest, trusting relationship. He may also have missed the chances of meeting people who actually like his body type. Research has suggested that although hegemonic images portray gay men as having lean, muscular, tanned and fit bodies, there are a significant number who are interested in ‘bears’ and who identify as ‘chubby chasers’ (Monaghan 2005). The under-evaluation of his own body, rather than the body itself, could be more central to his perceived barrier of meeting people. There may be people who would find Adam attractive, but Adam could have precluded the chance of meeting them in the first place. Overall, this negative evaluation of his body meant that he became very sensitive and perhaps overfocused on physical appearance:

‘As I got older I felt myself getting a bit bigger, I didn’t want to lie about how I look. Many people tend to say I am stocky...
[T: I was going to say that you are stocky not fat...]
You see but it colours your view of yourself and you can actually be sort of... over-sensitive.’ (Adam)

However, it needs to be noted that ageism works both ways. The reason why some older gay men found it difficult to meet a potential younger partner was not always because younger gay men ‘discriminated’ against them. Reverse ageism was also evident in some of the accounts. For example, Richard said:

‘I think in the gay world, you become more invisible as a potential partner to people at a younger age than in the heterosexual world. That’s my feeling. You only have to look at the people on Gaydar which I don’t even

go on now. Nobody really looks for anybody over 40 there. My friend in London does seem to have contact with younger guys from abroad but then I wonder what they are looking for? Sugar-daddy or somebody to help them get a visa or something like that? I don't know.' (Richard)

Without any evidence he was accusing the younger gay men who were interested in older men of 'looking for sugar daddy or somebody to help them get a visa'. He was implying that the younger gay men were interested in older men as 'quasi-prostitutes', trading their youth and beauty for material gain. He was basing his arguments on a stereotype and an ageist assumption towards younger gay men. By holding these views he could have precluded meeting younger gay men who might have been genuinely interested in him as a potential partner.

On top of that, racism was also at work there. When Richard referred to younger gay men, he particularly pinpointed younger gay men from abroad as wanting to obtain a visa or needing help.

The preference for younger partners could bring other challenges. Among the group of older gay men who preferred younger partners, those who had a specific sexual role preference perceived it to be an extra barrier to finding a compatible partner. 'Top', 'bottom' and 'versatile' refer to the main sexual roles that a gay man takes during anal intercourse. Although contestable, it has been suggested that the insertive partner is generally seen as more 'masculine' (Wegesin and Meyer-Bahlburg 2000), and those who are perceived to be more 'powerful' in a relationship (Kippax and Smith 2001), such as the Caucasian partner in a relationship involving a gay White man and a gay Asian man, are more likely to be 'top' than 'bottom' (see e.g. Fung 2005). Quite a few gay men in the study

found it difficult to meet a younger person who would like to be a 'top', as they thought it is likely that the older person in a relationship is assumed to be a 'top' rather than a 'bottom':

'As I get older – and my preferences are younger people, and I am extremely passive – so I want an active top, so that's hard to find. That's a point that some younger guys quite like that. But a lot of younger guys like to be screwed but I am not up to it.' (Adam)

Hector described that he had always enjoyed things like 'body contact, hugging, cuddling, kissing, feeling people, exploring people, wanking and being wanked and sucking and being sucked and all the rest of it' but it was anal sex that made him nervous. He said because of his age it was generally expected that he would be sexually experienced, but he was not, and this yet again made him feel more anxious about meeting people:

'There is a concept amongst most gay people that older gay men are bound to be experienced (laughs) right? So if you want something you go for an older gay man because he's done it all. But it simply isn't true, I haven't done it all... (laughs).' (Hector)

'It was the anal side that made me nervous of meeting people who expected me to be an expert or to be experienced anyway in anal sex... It would be alright if I met somebody who was sympathetic towards my particular position and understood that I was where I was because of the way my life had been... and I would have been quite happy if I had met somebody who was experienced in anal sex and didn't mind the fact that I was not as experienced as them, even if they were younger than me. But yes, it has been an inhibiting factor, yes, in making relationships.' (Hector)

Because of this, it means that Hector had quite specific requirements for a potential partner, who was not that easy to find:

‘You are looking for a younger guy who is first of all interested in older guys. And yes there are younger men interested in older guys but then you are also looking at a younger guy who prefers more top than bottom... I would need to feel comfortable doing that with a partner who understood my lack of experience... and how do I put it, who’s prepared to make allowances for my lack of experience. So in a sense it would be better if I wanted to take that on to have a bottom who is fairly experienced as a bottom. So you are looking for a younger guy, who’s experienced as a bottom who’s quite happy to have a top who isn’t that experienced and then say this is the best way of doing this (laughs), this is what I like. Do this! (pretends to scream.)

[T: It’s difficult to find... tick all these boxes...]

It is, you see.’ (Hector)

He also felt that older gay men were subject to ageist attitudes:

‘It’s one thing being old enough to be their father, it’s another thing being old enough to be their grandfather (laughs). There are people I met from time to time and you get questions like can you still get it up at your age (laughs)...

[T: (laughs) How did you answer?]

Oh I usually turned it round and asked what do you think? The other thing, this is personal to me and to certain people in my situation, one of the effects of being diabetic is difficulty with an erection and I do still get quite strong erections within normal circumstances. But if I am going to meet somebody... the NHS now prescribes Viagra free (laughs) so I take a tablet if I am going to meet somebody so I can guarantee hopefully I would get an erection if we meet. That’s not to say I don’t get erection anyway. But I need to, what’s the word, ensure I suppose, I will at least get hard so they think the question about can you still get it up (laughs) becomes less of an issue. Of course I do I can get it up but it’s nice to get hard and stay hard.’ (Hector)

Because of this combination of factors, he perceived the possibility of relationship formation to be low:

‘I’ve not been lucky enough in life to find someone who was interested in me and I was interested enough in them to form the basis of a relationship... the older you get the more you feel you are not likely to find one or likely to find one now.’ (Hector)

Sometimes the preference for younger men could also bring in other tricky issues in terms of compatibility. For example, Joseph articulated how his preference for a younger body on one hand, and maturity and financial stability on the other, meant that the possibility of finding someone who ‘ticks all these boxes’ very small:

‘I think last few years I’ve got into a situation where if I am gonna have a relationship, they’ve got to be reasonably established. I want them to. You know at least as a minimum to be able to have a car, to be able to have somewhere to live, and for us to be able to get onto holiday to foreign countries together. And if it’s somebody who hasn’t got a thousand or two free to go on a foreign holiday for three weeks, then it’s not going to work for me coz I am not gonna be a sugardaddy kind of person and support somebody else in a relationship. But what conflicts with me now is the kind of person that I’d like to go to bed with is somebody who’s younger and who is in sort of good physical shape... so there is a conflict there that the ideal person I’d be in bed with would probably be somebody in their thirties or something. But somebody in their thirties may well not be established well enough to have their own house and car and spare money for holidays. Not many people would have both requirements that I want and also there’s not many people in their thirties that want to go out with somebody in their fifties so the number of people that would kind of fit what I want for a relationship... I am looking for a very small minority (laughs) people out there that would fit in to that kind of bracket really. And I don’t know how to change myself to broaden my ability to have five per cent of the people in the gay world would be somebody I like rather than you know 0.5 per cent... So the likelihood of relationships coming my way is really small... tick all the boxes...’ (Joseph)

Again, it needs to be noted that he had ageist assumptions about gay men of his own age – he perceived them to be overweight, with grey hair. In a way, he was ‘othering’ gay men of his age who did not physically live up to his standards.

6.6 Lack of alternative sources of satisfaction

When the master narrative was adopted, the participants also perceived a lack of alternative sources of satisfaction. The gay ‘community’ has been criticized as being dominated by young, White (e.g. Ayres 1999), middle-class men (e.g. Barrett and Pollack 2005) and may not seem welcoming to those who find themselves outside of these categories, including older gay men:

Older gay men are excluded from a world in which being old equates to being unattractive and being attractive is a precondition for entry. (Jones and Pugh 2005: 258)

Adam shared similar sentiments and said he did not like going to a gay pub because he would not get served or noticed. He referred to a gay club as a ‘meat market’, which is characterized by shallow, quick, and short lasting encounters:

‘You tend to meet people off the cuff, you know, cruising or through adverts and you tend to do the most intimate things within a very short period of meeting one another so you don’t get to know them so you sleep with a complete stranger struggling to remember their name.’ (Adam)

He was preoccupied with health issues and that resulted in his social life being compromised. He felt lonely and then drank too much, which in turn was not good for his health:

‘Sometimes I find myself sitting at home on a Friday on my own... if I got a drink with me I’d sometimes get quite tearful I get quite lonely. And inevitably I would have half a bottle of what I am drinking usually brandy and I’d go to bed early, 10 or 11... in a way I am contributing to my own isolation, I went to a gay club full of young guys and sometimes you get really tempted... they are all young kids and they are not really interested with this chubby thing sitting in the corner.’ (Adam)

He described himself as ‘this chubby thing sitting in the corner’. He also thought he would look ridiculous if he learned how to dance. He was obviously not happy with his body image. This was exacerbated by operations after he was diagnosed as having cancer the year before the interview and the side-effects of treatment:

‘Because of the number of operations I’ve had I am extremely scarred all over and I became much more of a passive participant in sexual roles. I suffer from erectile function as well. It’s difficult at the moment because I am involved in the chemo once a week and there is an anti-depressant regime that I have been on. At the moment there are too many things going on that prevent me from going, on the medical side...’ (Adam)

As a result of all this, he felt unhappy about being single. He was quite frustrated about his life overall. During the interview he spent a lot of time talking about his sexual fantasy, and also shared with me his sexual experience with his nephew and also his nephew’s friends who would come around to his house. He even said that having sex with one of his nephew’s friends was ‘wonderful’ as he ‘finally got something he wanted’:

‘And one day we were in my room upstairs and he was watching porn... and we were having a drink... and I realized he was getting quite horny watching it... and I asked him fancy getting a blowjob? And he sort of played a bit more with the computer and didn’t answer so I said it again... and he came back with “you promise you won’t say anything to anybody...” I said absolutely you know... so he literally came around and took his jeans off... and it was... it was one of the most beautiful days of my life because I finally got something that I really wanted.’ (Adam)

‘There aren’t too many advantages of being on your own. Because you are constantly thinking about it you know. Sex is very much on my mind. It’s frustration.’ (Adam)

The only way in which he found some outlet for his emotional energy was by keeping pets. He had ten cats and two dogs at the time of the interview. He said they had helped him to live with being single:

‘The cats have saved me a fortune in psychotherapy... (laughs) It’s with the cats the anger goes out of you... and you are enchanted by the unreserved attention you get from animals. Dogs really are your best friends. Because they won’t leave you alone, they demand your attention, and they want something from you. But loneliness has been a big part...’
(Adam)

6.7 Feeling trapped, unable to change

In some cases, feeling unhappy about being single could even lead to a vicious cycle. For example, Norman said that because he was unhappy about being single, he lacked the ‘mental positiveness’ to keep things clean and tidy in his home. This meant that he found it difficult to invite people back and could adversely affect forming relationship:

‘That’s the dilemma. If I found somebody and brought them back, they’d think Christ what is this, and they wouldn’t want to come back.’ (Norman)

Similarly, Laurence had reservations about bringing people back as he had not yet put in the energy to improve his place:

‘I think I should make more effort to get the house into the sort of state that I feel comfortable inviting people. Because it’s a bit of a mess at the moment.

[T: What state is it at the moment?]

I’ve only just managed to throw more away so probably it’s okay to invite people round now... but I just feel it’s not quite there yet. I made good progress recently but it’s not quite as what I would feel comfortable inviting people.’ (Laurence)

As Laurence said, as a result he didn't feel everything was sufficiently 'in place' to have a potential partner:

'I think I would like to have a partner but I don't think I've put everything, I suppose what I am supposed to, if I want to have a partner seriously, I would do things like lose weight, and get my house situation where someone would want to live there... I don't think I've got everything in place to be ready yet.' (Laurence)

This chapter has analyzed the moments when the master narrative was adopted in the participants' story, often without their being conscious of it. They compared their single lives against the master narrative which instructed them what is supposed to be 'normal' or 'successful'. As a result, they felt that they had failed to achieve finding a partner. This was associated with their negative feelings about being single.

However, there were also moments when the participants adapted the master narrative. Chapter 7 discusses the instances when the participants adapted the master narrative.

Chapter 7: How the master narrative is *adapted*

Chapter 6 has discussed the instances when the participants adopted the master narrative. The hegemonic discourse of coupledness showed its power and infiltrated into the stories the participants told. That created instances when the participants understood their singlehood in a largely negative manner. They focused on the negative aspects of being single, and overgeneralized all partnerships as satisfying. As a result, they were rather discontent with being single, which was seen as an undesirable state.

However, where there is power, there is resistance (Foucault 1978: 95-96). The psychology literature has suggested that individuals engage in coping (Lazarus: 1993) and act against adversity in a variety of ways. In this study, the older gay men did not blindly follow the master narrative, but also attempted to use different strategies to resist and complicate the master narrative. This chapter focuses on the moments when the participants adapted to being single and adapted the master narrative by:

1. Focusing on the possibility of change.
2. Accepting and coming to terms with singlehood.
3. Developing alternative sources of satisfaction.
4. Externalizing the reasons for singlehood.
5. Questioning the implicit link between partnership and happiness.

In some instances, they were adapting to the master narrative (1, 2, 3). In other instances (1, 4), they were adapting the master narrative (i.e. modifying the master narrative in some ways) by arguing against singlehood as a personal failure and that couplehood is necessarily more enjoyable than singlehood.

7.1 Focusing on the possibility of change

One way in which the participants adapted to being single was to focus on the possibility of change. They were basically saying ‘yes, being single is still not desirable, but I am not going to be single for ever’. By focusing on the possibility of change, some participants turned being single into something only temporary, or transient, and therefore possible to live with.

Some participants had fond memory of previous relationships, and that made them more inclined to think highly of being with a partner. For example, Simon stressed that the enjoyment of being single waned after having been in relationships and having had a taste of the positive aspects. In a way, he used his previous experience in a partnership as the reference point for evaluating his current state of singlehood.

Simon was at the time of the interview actively seeking a new partner. He had set up a meeting in the week following the interview with a Hong Kong Chinese who he had spoken to over the phone. There was also a fashion designer in his 20s whom he might meet up with. He said he was being proactive because he did not find singlehood so enjoyable, having experienced a loving relationship previously:

‘I shall keep going until I either do find a lifelong partner or I die (laughs). Because if I stop looking I’d die anyway inside. Because being alone is no fun. The enjoyment of being free isn’t quite as strong now. Yes it’s nice that I can sometimes go up in the morning and do what the hell I like... but that enjoyment isn’t as strong... The sharing with [his ex-partner] showed me just how wonderful that can be. When you’ve experienced the companionship... then you think, hey now this is good, and I really do miss that. And I think that’s the thing that I found more difficult this time round.’ (Simon)

It should be noted that there is no real ‘truth’ about previous relationships – the way in which previous relationships, like any other events, are remembered can often change over time. In Simon’s case, although he also mentioned that he had enough of sharing with his ex-partner, in an earlier part of the interview he had in fact said that his partner was not very good at expressing his likes and dislikes due to cultural barriers.

However, although he did not think of singlehood as the desired state of affairs, he was contented with it as he believed that there was hope that the situation would change:

‘It’s that difference between wistful and miserable. Wistful is like... (sigh) it would be nice... miserable is (sigh) I am so unhappy the way I am... I am wistful not miserable, because I always have that hope maybe one day it would change...’ (Simon)

At the same time, because he was actively seeking a new partner and therefore continuously meeting men – although in some situations the meetings did not result in any longer-term relationships – he was satisfied sexually with the casual encounters.

The literature has discussed the importance of hope in coping with adverse life events, such as health issues and bereavement (e.g. Herth 1990). It does seem that seeing the possibility for change was important for those who considered singlehood as an undesirable state they currently found themselves in.

It is however important to note that Simon might be capitalizing on an ethnic advantage which is not available for all older gay men. In a study of dating advertisements posted by gay men, it has been found that at least 20 per cent of gay Asian men prefer older Caucasian partners (Kaufman and Phua 2003: 225). Henry also said that although he felt that younger gay English men might not find him attractive, he was confident that meeting gay men from other cultures would not be too difficult:

‘I have this belief that as you get older, you become less attractive. But at this party my friends threw for me, there was this couple, and the younger, very attractive Brazilian guy, said great, you are looking great... I said I can’t look at my belly, I’ve got a belly. He said it’s gorgeous you could put a bit more weight on. I said you are winding me up. I am getting older, I am getting fatter, I am feeling less attractive. He said better and better. He’s not kidding. I mean there are men in fact in your culture, am I not right, a lot of... let’s say Chinese, a lot of guys in Malaysia or Thailand, China I suppose where seniority is an attraction.’ (Henry)

Hence, being Caucasian may have offered the older single gay men in this study more hope of entering into a relationship.

7.2 Accepting and coming to terms with singlehood

Some participants said that although singlehood was an undesirable state, they simply learned to accept and come to terms with it. For example, Robert said he was not looking for a partner. Instead, he would like more friends:

‘I do miss the intimacy. And I use the word intimacy in its widest sense of a relationship. For instance being able to talk about situations and feelings and things like that. Okay it’s possible to do that with one’s closer friends but not to the same degree that you would with a partner so that’s that I miss...’ (Robert)

He spent the weekend before the interview with two friends who had been together for about 20 years and he said he noticed how close they were:

‘I wouldn’t say that I envied their life but I did feel that what they had was something that I lacked in some ways.’ (Robert)

How did he deal with missing the intimacy? I asked. He dealt with it in two ways, he explained. First, he would try to fill his days with as many activities as possible. He said he would ‘need to make a greater effort socially’:

‘I do it to assuage I suppose aloneness. I don’t want to be sort of sitting here day after day not doing anything.’ (Robert)

Second, he developed internal dialogues with himself:

‘I find that increasingly as the years go by I have more and more internal conversations even to the extent of, sort of what should I say, communicating with myself. And comforting myself. And perhaps telling myself that things are not so bad. And suggesting that I look at the positive

aspects of my life. So that it's quite a sophisticated dialogue that I have.'
(Robert)

The internal conversations were of varying lengths, and were most frequent in the evenings. They could take place quite spontaneously, when he was watching a television programme, for example. When asked what topics the internal conversations touched upon, he said, 'Oh gosh that is hard' and then recalled that they were 'about staying positive about the absurdities of life and also about things like injustice and government and corporation mismanagement things like that'. Do these internal dialogues work? For him, he said they did:

'They are stimulating and comforting. I cannot really say how much they work. That's very hard for me to judge but certainly they resonate within me.' (Robert)

He said that being single even allowed him in this sense to 'create a much richer internal world'. The internal conversations may not work for every single person, but the fact that he thought it worked for him was more important.

As discussed in Chapter 6, Hector perceived the possibility of forming relationships to be low, but he also tried to adapt the master narrative. He felt that no matter how close singles were with their friends, friends were 'not the same' as partners. He described that although he had friends with whom he could talk, the topics of discussion were limited. This was especially the case if the conversations were related to some intimate and personal spheres of life. He began by saying there were times he would like to talk with someone about some everyday matters but could not:

‘Anything. A problem you have got. A person you are dealing with... a difficult piece of research... There are times in life [when I feel] a bit depressed about my medical situation. And there are times when you wish you could have someone to talk with just to talk about sex. I mean there are all kinds of... or being gay... there are times when you wish you had somebody close that you can talk about certain things with, that you don’t otherwise have the opportunity to talk about.’ (Hector)

He said that although he had friends who he had known for more than 30 years, it still did not mean that he could talk to them about everything:

‘ I cannot say to them anything about being gay or my needs being gay or whatever because I don’t think it’s appropriate... that’s not why we were friends. I felt there are some issues sexually I wanted to talk about, I couldn’t do it with him...

[T: And who could you talk with then?]

Nobody. Not about that. I think I would even find it difficult to talk about being gay...about my personal situation about being gay and the things we talked about ... with the vast majority of those at [the social organization that he went to]. They would be bored and not particularly interested, and they think it’s your problem. That’s how it is.’ (Hector)

I was curious to know more about how he dealt with this inability to find someone to talk to. He highlighted that for him, a partner and a friend played different roles:

‘[T: And does that feeling of wanting to talk to people, does that come up quite often?]

(Sighs) I won’t say quite often. It comes up from time to time. It depends on circumstances whether things are doing fine or how you feel or whatever...I mean the majority of people I know socially, I couldn’t meet them in the evening, and say god I have been horny all day... (laughs) It’s not appropriate. You are what you are within different friendships and relationships, and you know what was Shakespeare’s quote? All the people are players and we reflect different persona depending on who we are with.’ (Hector)

So what did he do to make his singlehood more liveable? He said that he led a very busy social life:

‘[T: I mean how would you describe your social life?]
Busy! Because it’s a compensation in a way because I don’t live with anybody... but I am interested in other things... music and industry and mining and the rest of it. I am a member of [a number of organizations] so when they have meetings especially during the winter I go out to meetings. That provides me... that adds to my social life... because obviously I know the other people who are there. I am a member now of the council of [the name of the organization]. I was elected a month ago and from since last Wednesday I became the chairman of [a social group].’ (Hector)

He had learned to accept the situation and live with it. He used an analogy: he had had a heart attack and underwent surgery during which a stent was inserted into his arteries. Before the surgery he was told that there would be a 1-in-500 chance that it would result in a punctured artery which meant he ‘would bleed rather badly and might die’. However, he said he was not too worried. Or more precisely, he was worried but he just simply felt that he had to get on with it:

‘But there’s nothing you can do. So there’s no point... you have to live with the situation that people are going to do something which might work out badly. Okay, there’s no point ringing about it. You get on with it and think that’s it, I put my situation in their hands literally [out of 500] 499 go okay, so it should be one of those and you just got to... accept what has happened like all these other things.’ (Hector)

He mentioned ‘having nothing that he could do’, ‘having to live with the situation’ and ‘having no point ranging about it’ – in a way he also applied these views to how he saw singlehood:

‘In a sense accept sounds like something passive... There are things you can change and there are things you cannot change. You need to know the difference. But when you got to things that you can’t change like you either have the operation or you are dead, then ok, you accept it and you get on with it.’ (Hector)

He said not having a partner could mean that he had no one to talk to about some very private issues and even close friends could not be perfect substitutes. So what would he do if he really needed to offload his worries with someone to a pair of ears prepared to listen? He answered:

‘Nothing, you can’t do... I suppose... if I got really depressed about stuff I suppose I can go to the doctor... I just sort of think things through... and then something else comes up that you are dealing with. You gotta go somewhere there’s something to do... work you’ve got to do... phone calls to make, whatever... the mood passes and you move on... get on with your life...you’ve got used to the fact that there will be difficult time...’ (Hector)

There is still work to be done, phone calls to make. There is a need to move on. Getting used to the fact that there will be difficult times almost prepared Hector for the challenges ahead. His strategy to deal with singlehood was to know the enemy – knowing what to expect and accepting what is there helped him to win half the battle:

‘Life deals certain cards to you. There are things sometimes that you can change, but in the end you are dealt a certain set of cards through life, and you play the cards you are given. I guess that’s the key. You got to adapt to your circumstances and live with it... I think the crucial factor is that you can let the circumstances get you down. You can feel bitter about circumstances. And you hate your life and you hate your circumstances and all the rest of it, situations that have caused it all the rest of it... or you can say this is where I am and look forward and try to be positive. How does that sound? Is that an answer?’ (Hector)

7.3 Developing alternative (external) sources of satisfaction

Those who adapted the story also developed alternative sources of satisfaction other than a relationship in their lives. These included most notably (1) social

connections, (2) living arrangements (living with flatmates) and (3) satisfying sexual needs.

Social connections

As reviewed in Chapter 2, social connection was an important mediating factor in singles' well-being. One way in which the participants adapted the master narrative was to de-centralize relationships and expand their focus beyond getting eggs from only one basket: relationships.

For example, Stanley said that his experience of being single was very positive at the time of interview. He was the chairman of a gay men's social group. He was also the secretary of an outdoor activity group and an active member of a campaign group. He held a season ticket for the theatre and said he usually had someone to go to the theatre with. He said his social life was quite full. He then talked for some time about the lectures that he attended and the speakers' funny titles. In the end, he spent more time talking about the decline of membership in the social group he chaired than about singlehood itself.

Ben also said that he was not interested in finding a partner, and his social circle served as a good alternative source of satisfaction:

'I still go out... I still go out to pubs and gay pubs and straight pubs. And I think now I got gay friends and I got straight friends... it really is friendship, purely friendship... and I like it that way. It's fine. I am very very very happy.' (Ben)

However, it is important to note that not every participant was socially as well connected as Stanley and Ben. Both Stanley and Ben had come out much earlier in their lives. Feeling comfortable about who they were when they were younger allowed them to join different social groups, including groups set up for gay men. Comparatively, those who had come out later in life had had their years of joining social circles hindered.

Living arrangements

The participants' living arrangements also made a difference as to how they experienced being single, especially with regard to taking care of themselves. For example, Justin thought that having flatmates despite not being in a relationship make him feel that he 'needed' to be more tidy:

'I mean if I am not in a relationship and have not got flatmates I become more untidy... all the flatmates I've had are tidier people than I am.

[T: Do you find that when you are not in relationship is that more difficult...?]

More difficult to keep it tidy yes. Yes. I need someone to be encouraging me to tidy up. Well not even for them to be encouraging me but just be there so that I think oh I have to keep it tidy, yeah.' (Justin)

Like some other participants he found that he needed someone to 'encourage him to tidy up' or made him feel that he 'needed to tidy up'. Having flatmates at least made him become less untidy. As he said, having flatmates tidier than him 'gave him some pressure'. The flatmates thus played a role similar to that of a partner's – that of exerting pressure. Similarly, when asked whether he liked to cook, Justin replied:

‘Well I think I generally like it whether in a relationship or with flatmates... if at least for some proportion of time we eat together and so cook together...’ (Justin)

It was interesting that he almost equated ‘being with flatmates’ with ‘being in a relationship’, as they both provided the incentive structure for cooking. He continued by saying:

‘I’ve been very lucky with flatmates (laughs)... probably much luckier than with relationships. I got more out of flatmates than of the relationships really (laughs) It doesn’t tie you down freedom-wise and you get company around, people to help out and they pay you... (laughs)’ (Justin)

He also said his social life was very busy. He took part-time jobs, and had people staying in his house from time to time. He said he was not interested in finding a partner.

Similarly, Joseph said he was ‘definitely not in search of a partner’. He thought that having flatmates very much influenced how he experienced singlehood. He managed and sub-let the five other rooms in the house that he lived in. The interview was conducted in the living room of the house. As it was early in the morning, quite a number of his flatmates were still in the house at the beginning of the interview. Some had just woken up and were walking around in their morning gowns. I was not sure whether he would be happy to discuss personal topics such as relationship history in front of his flatmates. His response was: ‘They all know’. When asked whether having flatmates affected how he experienced singlehood, he answered: ‘yes, very much so yes’:

‘[T: Do you think living with housemates has quite a lot of impact on your experience of being single?]

Yes, yes, yes, yes, very much so yes. I like having the other housemates around. So I reckon I probably charge maybe even 20 per cent below the market rate for the rooms here because I like living with other people... and I think it’s a different compensation, sharing the house and living with other housemates. I am not in a relationship but I am living with other people, and I do have other people around so I don’t get any feeling of loneliness at all.’ (Joseph)

So in his own words, having flatmates around ‘compensated’ for being not in a relationship and the associated loneliness. Availability of flatmates to a certain degree supplied what having a partner would provide. He said he was quite involved with helping out with some of his tenants’ personal difficulties. He was fairly confident that if he developed problems as he grew older, some of them ‘will be here’ and ‘will certainly do what they can to help me out’ in the future:

‘So renting out rooms, my kind of sharing the house, is quite a significant alternative to being involved in a serious relationship. A lot of things people get out of relationship, Seventy-five per cent of what people get from relationship I am getting by sharing my house and having good people I live with. I don’t just advertise the rooms and take somebody based on establishing a rental contract. It is important that people I am living with are friends... we don’t necessarily go out to places together but we can sort of live together as a family, and not live together based on a kind of tenancy contract, you will do this and you will do that. I don’t want to go down that route at all. So that’s the kind of very special friends that I have in life at the moment.’ (Joseph)

In a way, Joseph was gathering a ‘family of choice’ by managing the house and literally carefully ‘choosing’ who he shared residence and spent his time with.

Harry also managed a house with eight rooms, of which four were let at the time of the interview. None of the tenants was gay. He said having people around made him feel not lonely. He said he ‘lived there’, and he was ‘the guy with the

mortgage' and he was 'the screwdriver' and he was 'the guy with rent book'. He had been doing this for the past 25 years.

It is noteworthy that Justin, Joseph and Harry owned the houses they managed. Hence, the living arrangements they described may not be available for all older single gay men.

Satisfying sexual needs

Some participants perceived the lack of regular sex as a downside of being single. However, they were able to find different ways to satisfy their sexual needs. First, perhaps not surprisingly, quite a number of them, including both gay and straight men, mentioned masturbation as a mechanism:

'Well there's something we haven't talked about and I think to be honest, one of the ways that I might kind of offload is through pornography and masturbation.' (Malcolm)

Second, some talked about venturing to different venues, such as saunas, sex clubs and cruising areas for sex. The gay participants had made use of a variety of different urban sexual spaces and some expressed that it was not difficult to find sex in those places.

Third, a few participants developed 'fuck buddies', regular visiting sexual partners whom they met up with from time to time for casual sex. For example, Darren talked about his long-term visiting sexual partner:

‘There’s one guy, who I would call my fuck buddy, but he’s in a partnership and the other partner doesn’t know so...
[T: How often do you see him...?]
Three or four times a year. At the moment. And that’s of necessity at his initiative when his partner’s away. He has never visited my house for a fuck. It’s always [his fuck buddy’s partner]’s away come and stay.
[T: You know his partner as well?]
I knew his partner before I knew him.
[T: So, there must be an interesting...]
I don’t feel that comfortable with it sometimes...
[T: Yeah yeah yeah.]
I say openly that my relationship with his partner probably is far more important than a fuck with him.’ (Harry)

Harry was clear that he did not have much of emotional investment in his sexual partner – he was not a man that he wanted to live with, he also did not seem to particularly like his character, describing his personality as lacking initiative. His sexual partner, likewise, did not seem to have special connection with him. However, this lack of emotional connection did not seem to be an issue for both of them. Similarly, Jason also mentioned that his sexual needs were ‘catered for’ by his sexual partner, and hence this partly lessened the pressure to enter a relationship:

‘I don’t have the physical urges as much as I used to... and they used to be occasionally satisfied with this long-term visiting relationship... my sexual needs catered for, so I didn’t have to have a bond just to have sex and so I actually passed the time pleasantly enough... because the sexual urge was taken off.’ (Jason)

The fourth way of meeting sexual needs was by paying for sex. For example, Laurence, who had never had a long-term relationship, was open to the idea of paying for sex to satisfy his urges. He had paid for sex for around a dozen times, which according to him, was ‘not that often’. He had no moral reservations about paying for sex and thought of it as perfectly acceptable, ‘just like paying for any other service’. He described his reason for paying for sex:

‘When you got to the age that you can’t go to a club or a pub and guarantee you have a reasonable chance of picking somebody up, you think well rather than staying in the bar all night, and getting drunk, and going home alone, it’d be much easier to pay somebody for sex so yes, I was open to the idea of paying for sex...’ (Laurence)

His reasons for paying for sex displayed a complex intersection of sexuality, age and body image. He found that in bars and clubs, the ‘young and beautiful’ occupy the central stage, whereas an older body is marginalized (see Chapter 6). This affected his body image and consequently his perceived likelihood of ‘success’. To avoid the disappointment that ‘going home alone’ after ‘staying in the bar all night’ would bring, paying for sex was seen as a ‘safer’ alternative to finding someone to satisfy his sexual needs. Similarly Nic said he started hiring rent boys because he became fed up with ‘going through the same routine’ to meet people. He said at the time of interview he had two or three escorts that he saw regularly every few weeks. He described his relationship with the rent boys as ‘sort of more than an acquaintanceship but less than a friendship’. He said:

‘I really wasn’t interested in spending my life with somebody any longer. So I wanted to have involvement without commitment. So that’s really the reason why I do it now.’ (Nic)

It is important to note here it is expensive to hire rent boys. In the UK, at the time of writing in general it costs around £150 to £200 to hire a rent boy for an hour. Not every single gay men would be able to afford it, as Laurence and Nic could.

7.4 Externalizing the reasons for singlehood

Previous research has argued that singles said that they were single ‘by choice’ as a way of claiming control and developing a positive identity of singlehood to live with (see Chapters 2 and 5). The only major research into older single gay men to date discussed that a range of reasons were cited by the older single gay men to explain their being single: personal past, collective past, learning from experience, particular tastes, still searching, loner, and aloner (Hostetler 2009: 515-516).

In this study, it was observed that the older gay men frequently externalized the reasons for their singlehood, and thereby distanced themselves from the cause of singlehood, the source of their stigma. They explained their singlehood with reference to: the larger social and historical context; their previous partners; their bodies, and their health, all of which they claimed they had no control over. This was a way of adapting the master narrative as it gave them the opportunity to claim that they had done nothing wrong, that they were not to be blamed for being single.

The larger social and historical context

Almost all the participants linked their singlehood to the legal and social backdrop in the 1950s and 1960s, as discussed in Chapter 2, against which they grew up. This was especially the case for those who were older. Because of the larger societal homophobic environment, almost all participants found it very difficult to

‘give a name’ to being gay, and did not really understand what their sexual desires meant:

‘From when I was maybe 13 or 14 right the way through to my 20s I knew that I enjoyed sexual activities with other guys. But to me that didn’t mean oh I am gay. I never looked up what it meant in dictionary. I just sort of saw various things happening on the television or gay people dressed up in drag being camp or queer or whatever... and you know that just didn’t relate to me I didn’t feel like that.’ (Joseph)

The limited images available in society and the media made it especially confusing for gay men who found that they did not fit into the stereotypical images being portrayed. Joseph was not alone in feeling different from other teenagers, but struggling to articulate his feelings. Hector also felt that he could not put words to his feelings towards the same sex at that time:

‘I didn’t think because I like certain other boys and because I like looking at cocks and because I like feeling cocks I like feeling balls all the rest of it all that didn’t make me think that means that I must be gay. There wasn’t that conclusion to it.

[T: There wasn’t the concept...]

There wasn’t the concept, no. I mean I didn’t know anybody else who was gay... I mean there was no... people didn’t talk about being gay. You didn’t know other people that were gay. There were no gay people on television or on the radio or anywhere.’ (Hector)

Not knowing what the sexual attraction actually meant, and more importantly, not knowing that there were other people in the same position, could lead to isolation and confusion:

‘The only concept you had of other people who were doing the same as you were was on notices on toilet walls... that’s how gay people met... they met in toilets which was highly unsatisfactory. But there were no other ways of meeting other gay people.’ (Hector)

Just as some older gay men and lesbians interviewed in another earlier study described, during teens and adolescence ‘homosexuality as a stigma was not only dominant, but exclusive’ (Rosenfeld 1999: 128) for most gay men in this study. The participants argued that growing up under this homophobic culture affected them in many ways. As some of the quotes above indicated, they became confused and isolated. Being gay became something not to be discussed and not to be acknowledged. From a very early age they found that they were defined by difference, for which they could not even put a name to:

‘I found that sort of projection of “gay” made me very uncomfortable... if I saw or heard on the radio something which was about gay men ... because during the 1950s and the early 60s there were a lot of investigations into the laws of homosexuality in this country, the Wolfenden report for example, actually the lives of gay men became much worse after that.’ (Nic)

A lot of the older gay men then learned from a very early age that they had to keep their sexual orientation secret. That was what a lot of their peers have done: in the US it was estimated that a third of the current cohort of older gay men had married in earlier life (Hostetler 2009). In one of the few studies specifically looking at older LGB people in the UK, 37 per cent of older gay men had always hidden their sexual identity (Heaphy et al. 2004). In this study, it was the rule rather than exception that the older gay men came out to hardly anyone at all until their 40s or even 50s. Many learned to dissociate themselves from homosexuality to ‘stay in the closet’ and use different strategies to ‘pass’ as a heterosexual (Rosenfeld 1999). Some tried to form relationships with women to escape being questioned about their sexual preference.

Coming out was even more difficult for some of the gay men who worked in certain occupations, such as teaching. A few gay men in the sample who had religious beliefs also found it challenging to accept the dual identity of being Christian and being gay. The military was yet another homophobic environment. Working in the army, Adam went to see the psychiatrist to discuss his feelings towards the same sex. The reply he received was:

‘Don’t worry about it. It’s not that we have not come across it before. But the net result was... and being very young at the time I was probably only 19 turning 20 I didn’t realize the implications of the discharge from the army. In the old days it would be called a dishonourable discharge. What they put on your paper is “SNLR” – service no longer required.’ (Adam)

Not coming out became a very difficult but understandable option for many of the participants. However, not coming out means that formation of relationship can be made difficult on different levels. First, staying in the closet made gay people invisible and difficult to locate. It became difficult to ascertain whether another person was gay or not. It made some participants hesitant to make any moves, fearing that they may make a ‘wrong guess’:

‘Because I can’t work out when a man is gay or straight, it’s a bit of a problem there... so I think I always had the view that I wouldn’t take a chance...

[T: Unless you are absolutely...]
Absolutely clear.’ (Harry)

Second, not coming out meant that the gay men had to avoid certain gay-friendly places or where some openly gay men would go (for a discussion of geographies of sexualities, see e.g. Binnie and Valentine 1999), because of the fear of being found out. This restricted the chance of meeting potential partners. For example,

Nic, who was a teacher in the 1970s, found coming out in the teaching profession too much a risk to take at the time:

‘You are talking about the 1970s, being a gay teacher would have been the kiss of death really. Parents would have gone bonkers. Because for most people at that time all paedophiles are gay and all gay men are paedophiles was their view of things. And so it would have caused tremendous problems.’ (Nic)

He described that he was spending a great deal of time reading gay magazines and newspapers, trying to work out where he could meet other gay men, but he perceived that even going to a gay pub was too risky for him:

‘There was one pub in [a nearby city] there was a gay night on Thursday every other week. And in order to go there you had to go through the public bar to reach to the room so... did I want to do that? No.’ (Nic)

Being in the closet clearly hindered his use of social place, and hence affected the possibility of finding potential partners:

‘[T: But you were not out when you were teaching...]
No that was the problem you see. So how was I going to find the one?’
(Nic)

For the closeted participants, meeting up with other gay men then had to be done in the secret. Simon, for example, recalled the experience of using a dating service in his 30s, which was during the Seventies. Only a minimum exchange of information was involved:

‘I found an advert somewhere in the paper and it must be some sort of gay publication. You joined and you gave them a number... and you paid... and every month they sent you a list... no photographs, just a printed list of people with a username, a description of what they look like or their own description, what they want to say about themselves.’ (Simon)

Adam who has used adverts as a way of finding other men also said:

‘That’s something quite exciting but completely demoralizing about adverts because it’s... reaching in the dark... you don’t know what you are getting you don’t even know who you are talking to.’ (Adam)

A lot of the participants talked about cruising as another way of meeting people at that time. The venues included saunas or cruising areas, such as parks or cemeteries, among many others. These were the places where the closeted gay men could be open about and satisfy their same-sex sexual desires, but also keep their anonymity, which was an aspect that was highly valued (see Weinberg and Williams 1975 for a discussion of some typical characteristics of impersonal sex). However, using these channels to meet people also meant a general lack of information exchange involved in the encounters. This made the formation of trusting and sharing relationships difficult. Meeting people in these clandestine ways usually resulted in rather short-term liaison, or even one-off meetings, rather than something that could develop further. The price to pay was that these encounters almost always remained purely sexual, as illustrated in the way Adam talked about his experience of going to a local cruising area:

‘So I went up there...he opened his clothes... I gave him a blowjob and there wasn’t a word spoken between us, not a word.’ (Adam)

The homophobic environment’s impact on gay men’s relationship formation went even deeper. More fundamentally, it lowered the self-esteem of many participants. It has been suggested that growing up in a homophobic environment in which family of origin, media, culture, politics, religious authorities, school and peers mostly portray images of being gay as negative (Hardin 2008), gay men generally suffer minority stress, sexual stigma and sexual prejudice, exacerbated by a

culture of heterosexism or ‘compulsive heterosexuality’ (Rich 1980). A clinical psychologist, for example, argued in *Velvet Rage* (Downs 2006) that gay men who grow up in a straight world needed a lot of work done to come to terms with shame and anger.

Many older gay men had internalized the negative messages in society, and developed ‘internalized homophobia’ or ‘internalized homonegativity’ (e.g. Mayfield 2001: 54; for a discussion of the difference between these two terms, see Herek 2004), and therefore thought they themselves were doing something wrong. Internalized homophobia at different levels, which has been shown to be related lower self-esteem, relationship dissatisfaction, increased psychological distress, increased likelihood of depression and weaker ego strength (see the reviews in Allen and Oleson 1999: 41 and Mayfield 2001: 72), was evident in most of the gay men’s accounts. They grew up in an environment that constantly described gay men in derogatory terms:

‘Homosexuality was talked about in sort of very negative terms... by everybody... including by other gay people really. And you went along with that, because that was the culture.’ (Darren)

‘I think when you are brought up, you are taught by family this is wrong, homosexuality is wrong. And even though intellectually this is nonsense that doesn’t matter. You are brought up to believe in what your family says.’ (Laurence)

‘So yes, the fact that the thing was illegal was a slight disincentive to do it. Because if you got caught, consequences could be quite serious... the illegality of it was a disincentive. I don’t usually like breaking the law if I can get away with it (laughs). That’s not something I like doing. But it’s also the moral code as well. I mean my parents weren’t particularly religious but they were religious. I was brought up as Christian, and the Christian moral code does say it’s something not right in those days. It may have changed but it’s certainly not acceptable behaviour. So that’s how I was brought up. Although I was always liberal in my politics there

was that tension because personally I thought I was breaking sort of the moral code you are brought up with. Although the code may not be right.’ (Laurence)

What was especially interesting was although Laurence claimed to be intellectually conscious that the messages society sent about being gay were ‘nonsense’ and that ‘the code may not be right’, he still could not escape completely from the messages.

Fundamentally, the internalized negative attitudes towards homosexuality became a blockage for the formation of a positive homosexual identity. This can form barriers to forming relationships. Some of the participants with lowered self-esteem and felt insecure, questioned whether they were worthy of being loved and found it difficult to accept a relationship with another man (Chernin 2006). Without even being able to love themselves, loving others became an even bigger challenge. Laurence described that as he didn’t have a very positive self-image, he subconsciously abandoned the thought of being loved:

‘People just accepted I was quite not interested in sex you know (laughs)... but I often wondered why I didn’t lose weight when I was a teenager to look good, and I never succumbed to that pressure. And I wonder whether it was simply that being fat was part of my self-image, or whether it sort of formed a protection against other people, and I was subconsciously happy to have that protection. I never really worked out what the truth is.’ (Laurence)

Similarly Adam, who had struggled with coming to terms with his sexuality, found it difficult even to contemplate forming relationships:

‘I think I built barriers because initially I was unhappy with my sexual orientation. Couldn’t come to terms with it. Initially I was terrified of

people finding out... I went through a stage probably I deliberately spoiled it for myself.' (Adam)

Society's influence could penetrate even further to change how gay men perceived intimacy and relationships. According to script theory, scripts are a form of schema that are used to organize the world around us, a set of stereotypical actions. Scripts allow us to predict the actions of people with whom we interact, as well as decisions about how to act. There are different forms of scripts, including dating and sexual scripts (Gagnon and Simon 1974). However, a public and well-defined cultural script does not exist for same-sex dating as it does for heterosexual relations (Klinkenberg and Rose 1994). It can be more difficult for gay men to find a script which will guide them through dating/courtship. Even when there was some evidence of certain forms of sexual script among gay men, they were more likely to be sexually-oriented than the ones among lesbians and heterosexual males. In one study, nearly 48 per cent of gay men had had sex on their recent first date. It was found that gay men focused to a large extent on sexual and physical attributes in dating advertisements (Thorne and Coupland 1998). In a way, gay men live in a world that values marriage and couplehood but the option is denied for them, and hence they may have ruled out the possibility of partnership right from the beginning. For example, Laurence described that he had been 'taught' that casual affairs with men were acceptable but not something for the longer term:

'We are all products of our society even if we don't admit it. We are all subject to social pressures and if the social pressures are... homosexuality isn't acceptable... I think you then react in a way you kind of hide it. It's okay to have casual affairs, but actually doing anything more than that with somebody gay is difficult. Because the societal pressure it's what you were brought up to be. You never lose that.' (Laurence)

When he first began to meet other gay men at the age of 32, Simon did not have forming a relationship on his mind – it seemed too impossible. He linked men with sex, and women with relationships:

‘At that point I decided I really needed to meet people and it was only for sex... I had nothing else in mind it was just sex.

[T: And there was no desire for forming any relationships or...]

I didn’t think that desire formulated because it was just an impossible dream. How can two gay men live together without causing lots of embarrassment having to come out to everybody, you know the fear of coming out was huge. The fear of telling anybody was huge, even best friends... I always assumed I was going to get married to have children even though I always knew I always wanted to be with a man... The man was for sexual gratification not for life...

[T: While girls were for relationships and...]

Stability... and children... you know.’ (Simon)

This showed that because of society’s message some gay men could have their ideas about forming relationships with other men deformed.

While the above has shown how the criminalization of homosexuality had adversely affected the formation of relationships among the older gay men, there were other events in the decades that followed the 1960s that influenced the formation of relationships.

After the partial decriminalization of homosexuality in 1967 in England, the Campaign for Homosexual Equality was established in 1969. In the same year the Stonewall Revolution in New York led to the creation of Gay Liberation Front, a branch of which was set up in London in 1970. Britain’s first gay pride was held in London in 1972. In 1973, the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders

(DSM-II). In 1974, London Lesbian and Gay switchboard was opened.

Decriminalization of homosexuality took place in Scotland in 1980 and Northern Ireland in 1982. The 1970s to mid-1980s saw the growth of gay businesses – gay travel agents, gay plumbers, gay builders; and most obviously, gay pubs, gay clubs and saunas (David 1997: 245). For example, one of the biggest gay clubs in London, Heaven, was opened in 1979. All these changes produced a more welcoming environment than before for gay people to meet each other. This particularly influenced those participants who were relatively younger in this study, who came of age when the decriminalization took place. Darren joined social groups when he was coming out in the early 1970s, and in fact met his first boyfriend there:

‘Since gay liberation I mean, yes, they changed the law so you don’t get arrested for it any more which is a good thing. Meeting other people, they made that easier for me, because self-help groups operate.’ (Darren)

This more ‘liberal’ environment, however, had mixed influences on the formation of relationships among gay men. Gay liberation, coupled with second-wave feminism in the 1960s and 1970s, began to challenge the notion of coupledness in society. People began to question why relationships were held as the hegemonic ideal to be aspired to. For example, Malcolm mentioned that the gay liberation affected his attitudes towards forming relationships, as the white middle-class heterosexual monogamous relationship as the model was challenged:

‘There was almost this thing about fucking for gay lib that you want to go from one guy to another, just to kind of do it rather than imitating straight people and getting into a relationship. I am sure that there were thousands of gay relationships out there that were kept very quiet. It was two single men sharing a house or a flat together as if they were two buddies from the

army or something. And I do think there was that kind of spirit out there... sleeping around as much as possible just in opposition to being straight.’ (Malcolm)

Similarly, Justin was a teenager at the start of the gay liberation and he felt that lessened the pressure he felt about forming relationships because of the changing social atmosphere:

‘I suppose the other thing is when I was young there’s still gay liberalization politics... it was that we shouldn’t imitate heterosexual relationships. So having open relationships, being single, and having multiple partners was seen by a certain proportion of people as being the way to be. To be in a sort of monogamous, quasi-marriage was seen as selling out.

[T: Was that an idea that influenced you?]

I don’t think they influenced me, no. I think it was good that I didn’t feel that I had to be in a relationship. Now there is a campaign for civil partnerships... you don’t hear much of people saying that copying heterosexual relationships is the wrong thing to do. That doesn’t happen much now.’ (Justin)

So in a way these societal attitudes also influenced the participants’ ideas about whether relationships were supposed to be the ideal to aspire to. At least that planted the seed of being liberated from the conventional monogamous reproductive ideals of a relationship, as Malcolm articulated:

‘We were the big generation that rebelled against marriage and relationships so I do think that has a lot to do with it, because you see it was my generation who would say I am not in a relationship and I am proud of that... I am proud of kind of sleeping around, having lots of partners.

[T: Is that personally for you as well? Is that a view you hold?]

No, not particularly. I am not proud of it, I am not proud of it but I think I was liberated to do that.’ (Malcolm)

When the 1970s seemed to be a period of progress for lesbian and gay rights on many fronts, the Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) epidemic

gloomed the 1980s. On 4 July 1982, a 37-year-old man named Terry Higgins died. Five months later it became generally known that Britain's first case of AIDS had occurred. In 1982, the Terry Higgins Trust (later renamed and now commonly known as 'Terrence Higgins Trust'), the first AIDS charity in the UK, was set up. The AIDS epidemic led to a backlash against the many advances made in terms of public acceptance of lesbian and gay people. According to the British Social Attitudes Survey in 1987, 74 per cent of the respondents were disapproving of homosexual relationships. In the same year, under the leadership of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, the infamous Section 28 became law. This stated that a local authority 'shall not intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality' or 'promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship'. The gains made in the 1970s for lesbian and gay people suffered a 'shuddering setback' (Weeks 2007: 142-162). It has been argued that HIV led to more monogamous relationships as the links between casual sex and risks began to be recognized. However, HIV also could have had an impact on singlehood. As one gay man put it in an earlier historical source, AIDS did put him off getting close to other men that he was interested in:

'We'd be really drunk and get off with each other... but somehow this sixth sense told us when to stop. Nothing serious happened for a number of years: I didn't have sex or intercourse or anything. It was just fondling, groping, kissing, stroking.' (David 1997: 261)

Among the research participants in this study, the HIV/AIDS epidemic also affected the formation of relationships in a few ways. First, like the quote above,

Ben found himself completely turned off sex as HIV/AIDS was ‘always at the back of his mind’:

‘Then there was the AIDS scare... in the 80s and I just went, oh my goodness me, you know. And I thought I just sort of turned off any sexual interest at all.

[T: You mean the... the HIV/AIDS...]

Turned me off completely

[T: Mmm...]

From any sexual activity.’ (Ben)

He went on to say:

‘My goodness what’s going to happen if I have sex with this person and we suddenly have unprotected sex and something like that... and then you become infected with HIV and this sort of thing you know gosh... and you think I am not going to go through relationship because they might happen. That’s an attitude to take and I didn’t take that attitude. But it was something in your thought, always at the back of your thoughts that I am constantly aware of.’ (Ben)

Second, the HIV/AIDS epidemic affected how some of the participants’ potential partners perceived intimacy. Jason’s case may seem an extreme example as he described that in the late 80s he met a ‘nice guy’ but the person ‘was scared of sex’:

‘He was scared of being touched...

[T: Really? To that extent?]

Yes, yeah. So he stands on one side of the bed and me the other side and we both wanked.

[T: Okay.]

It wasn’t sufficient but he was pathologically scared of... because it was... there was scarce going on in those days...’ (Jason)

Third, the HIV/AIDS epidemic indirectly affected the formation of relationships by killing some of the participants’ friends. Not going out to socialize as much as

before lessened the chance of meeting people for some participants, as Malcolm described:

‘I think the reason it might have affected me was because my whole social life changed. My friends stopped going out. They stopped going out so much, they got ill, they died... And so that could have affected my chances of meeting people.’ (Malcolm)

This lends support to the claim that the impact of HIV on gay men’s lives included ‘certain ironies and unexpected turns’ (Adam 1992: 175).

The process of transitions in terms of sexualities and intimacies made between the 1960s and the 1990s in Britain can be described as ‘messy, contradictory and haphazard’ (Weeks 2007: 57). As a whole, the discussion above suggests that many of the older gay men in this study resorted to a narrative of social and historical changes as their reasons for being single. As Harry stated, had the social environment been different, his chance of forming relationships would have been greater:

‘I am fairly certain that if I haven’t had the upbringing – if I am only starting now instead of starting 60 years ago – then I am pretty sure that I am, for a start, I would let it be known that I was gay at school or whatever. And that in itself would increase the probability... And I think I would have been better at that if I had a social environment which was not so homophobic.’ (Harry)

Hector vividly described this cohort effect of growing up in this specific social era outlined above:

‘If my personal circumstances when I was younger had been different... I might have been a lot more proactive in looking for relationship. If I was 20 or 25 now... it would be much easier to be openly gay, and I would be much keener about looking for a relationship. And it would be easier to do

something about it... because there are so many other opportunities for meeting other gay people now in all kinds of ways... and you can therefore do much more about it and be much more proactive about it... and there's far less reason for people to end up living alone.' (Hector)

Similar to earlier findings, the older men attributed their singlehood to their developmental history, a collective history of stigma, discrimination and lack of positive role models (Hostetler 2009: 517). That allowed them to neutralize singlehood, something they saw as undesirable, as a result of something out of their control.

Other people

Besides giving the larger social history as the reason why they had stayed single, the participants also used 'having met the wrong people' as a way of positioning their singlehood as something 'out of their control'. As outlined in the previous section, coming out and acceptance of oneself are crucially important for the development of a gay man's identity. If a gay man finds it difficult to love himself, it can become even more difficult for him to fully love and be loved by another man. A few gay men in the sample faced a situation in which they met potential partners who had ongoing identity development problems. This prevented them from developing a healthy relationship. Robert, for example, met a few men who were much less 'out' and accepting of being gay than he was. One of them was not comfortable about going to gay venues and even having gay sex, and that placed strain on the relationship:

'And I guess that made him, what shall I say, a bit inhibited about things. He would go to sort of gay groups, and gay bars, but he was never that

comfortable... that relationship ended through sort of sexual incompatibility. He found the various sexual acts quite difficult and was quite inhibited about...
[T: Would you mind talking about those sexual acts that he...]
Mainly sort of anal penetration. He always found that uncomfortable and painful... and he knew very little about that. And had almost no experience of it.' (Robert)

This echoes what some research suggested that some gay men with internalized homophobia linked 'having anal sex' with 'shame' (Allen and Oleson 1999). The incompatibility between Robert and his partner could partly be explained by their different stages of identity development, that they found themselves in. While Robert had been open about his sexual preference since his 20s, the person he met had only come out before they met. This person who he met found it more difficult to engage in sexual activities, especially anal activities, but more fundamentally, to be accepting of his gay identity. These discrepancies clearly contributed to the end of the relationship.

As mentioned briefly in Chapter 3 Terry was living with a 'boyfriend' at the time of interview but felt that they were not really compatible, and hence considered himself to be 'single'. He said this had to do his 'boyfriend' not having really developed himself:

'He is 29. But what I would say would be he's a very young 29. Not as mature as some people would be, in terms of their emotion. But having got to know his story more and more, he too was adopted as a young child...'
(Terry)

These narratives allowed Robert and Terry the chance to shift the 'blame' of singlehood from themselves to their partners.

Body and identity

Mismatch of the body and gender identity also set up challenges for relationship formation. Dan was born female and at the time of interview had undergone operations to change his body. Both before and after the transition, he had not had any long term partners. For him, his gender identity was ‘a big part of why I am being single’. He recalled that he started to wear jeans when he was young and spent most of his childhood leisure time riding horses rather than ‘doing girly stuff’. As he was born in the 1950s, discussions and representations of transgender people in society were very limited, if not non-existent. Similar to other gay men in the sample he found it very difficult to understand his feelings at the time:

‘It always felt very strange to me that people saw me as a woman but that’s not what I felt, so that was strange. There was no perception... I had no idea that trans people existed at all. You occasionally saw cross-dressing on television... stuff like that but apart from that there was nothing. It’s so different now for trans people because there are television programmes... but there just wasn’t anything... so never occurred to me. [T: Did you have anyone to talk with or share with at all during...]
No, I don’t think I could even articulate it.’ (Dan)

What yet again emerged was that this lack of media representations of transgender people (e.g. Gamson 1998) made him feel that he was alone in feeling different from others. Growing up, he was confused with his feelings and that rendered him not interested in the idea of forming relationships at all:

‘I was so confused sexually and not attracted to anybody really... that’s something I should do because everybody else is doing it but I am not... and certainly marriage was, certainly, never on the cards, that I just couldn’t envisage myself as a married woman (laughs)...
[T: So you weren’t interested in either men or women?]
No, just wasn’t there. I just didn’t feel sexual at all...’ (Dan)

After a lot of emotional struggle and a long period of counseling, he finally started taking hormones and eventually had the chest surgery. At the time of interview, he had already been living as a man for about five years. Unfortunately he contracted Crohn's disease at about the same time as he received the hormone treatment. That resulted in him having to undergo a number of further operations. This, together with not having a penis, had a significant effect on how he perceived his body. He expected a high possibility of being rejected by other people who may not understand his situation:

'...I now have a lot of scar tissue around down there around my anus and stuff and I still have surgery. I have had about nine lots of surgery down there now. So it's very ironic having finally realized that I am a gay man and like penetrative sex, and now can't use that area. It's too scarred, too difficult... and I think it's kind of knocked my esteem. I think one of the reasons why I am not in a relationship now having realized that I am a gay man, one of them is I feel too many things too many ways to be... rejected... not that not only do I not have a penis, but I also can't have sex in the way that I want and I also have female background it just feels like even if there was a Mr. Right out there, there're too many ways that people could go away. I had some rejections and I guess I just lost... self-confidence.' (Dan)

The body subtly affected his relationship formation in a few different ways. First, his not having a penis and his female background might not be accepted by every man who he was interested in. When asked whether being transgender had made it more difficult to meet potential partners, he answered:

'It must do. Yeah I think it has because if somebody is meeting me as a gay man then at some point I have to reveal to them that I am trans. So it's in my mind. And then it's one of those points of the possibility of rejection. And it happened several times that somebody that I've been getting friendly with, when I said we could go somewhere I needed to tell them... it has meant the end of anything going forward...' (Dan)

Hence, ‘coming out as transgender’ seemed to add another layer to ‘coming out as being gay’ for him, both of which could potentially bring rejection. He recalled quite vividly how once he was rejected on the ground of his body:

‘There’s one chap... he had so little sexual experience himself. He was somebody who came out very late and he had been asexual until then. In between I told him that I was trans but I don’t think he really took it in... I think for the first few times we went to bed together he was able to ignore the fact that I had breasts and it wasn’t until I suggested getting more intimate that was just too much and he kind of realized what was going on. We stopped having sex afterwards...

[T: The intimate was anal...?]

Yeah I think it was seeing me down here that I didn’t have a penis... that was definitely the end of us doing anything else.’ (Dan)

Second, as he articulated, not having a penis affected how he saw his body – and this lowered his self-esteem as he perceived an increased rejection possibility. His self-esteem in turn affected how he behaved when meeting people and the sort of ‘energy’ or ‘vibrations’ that he sent out:

‘I think probably what I realize is my lack of being up for it which sends out a message which people actually pick up and decide that I am not up for it. Because I have with groups of trans friends... we’ve been to gay saunas and hung out together, just to experiment what it was like. Also on the off chance things might happen. And I think other people in my group have gone off with people, and nobody’s ever approached me. I think you need to be up for it enough for it to show.’ (Dan)

Third, and more indirectly, the bodily changes that he underwent had made him become more careful in meeting people. This could also decrease his chance of meeting people as it limited his use of certain social spaces that he perceived as ‘unsafe’ to go to:

‘I suppose because I am quite careful about who I start to get friendly with anyway, I am already screening people. So I just wouldn’t be attracted to somebody who’s quite... who obviously might get a bit physical or angry if... turn out that they are taken by surprise [that I was trans]... I suppose there is still that fear there so I wouldn’t go looking for somebody in the bar or club clubbing kind of thing. Because if alcohol is involved, then it just seems logical to me that they might not be so aware of my difference, and then if it got to sexual situation then they found out, and they being under the influence of alcohol, drugs, it’s more likely for them to get physical so I guess my self-protection mechanism is quite strong.’ (Dan)

Bodily changes associated with health conditions

Health conditions could also bring about some unwelcome bodily changes. For example, since Willis was young, he had always had problem sustaining an erection. He said: ‘It affected my confidence. For a period of time I was too frightened to see anyone. That is probably why I have never had a relationship.’

Adam’s case alludes to this. Owing to excessive drinking, he had to have a liver transplant. As a side-effect he developed diabetes. Unfortunately his health continued to deteriorate and he developed bowel cancer. He received a series of chemotherapy treatments and had a tumour removed:

‘Because of the number of operations I’ve had, I am extremely scarred all over and I became much of a passive participant in sexual roles. I suffer from erectile function as well...and I was even depressed from then on because of the rejection possibility. So I was becoming more nervous because I was not fully protected by immune system.’ (Adam)

These treatments brought about certain bodily changes. After the treatments his sexual ability declined. Before becoming diabetic he had already experienced problems with sexual functioning – he used to ejaculate very quickly due to

nervousness about his sexuality. He was even scared of having an erection. The diabetes made his problem with erection worse. He was able to obtain Viagra from his doctor but he 'ended up giving up'. As his body image was already generally not good, the operations made him even more nervous about meeting people. A chain effect followed after the operations. The scars on his body damaged his body image, and this further heightened his nervousness about his sexual performance, and as a result he became more specific in his sexual preference which may create an extra obstacle to finding a potential partner:

'At the moment somehow my passiveness has got worse because of my chemo or because of my nervousness of meeting people. I haven't gone cruising for a while, and I haven't actively looked for somebody for a while... it's difficult if you go and meet somebody, they would need to know that you are completely passive, they are the top. Quite often you find people who are versatile or bottom themselves you know. And quite often if you find somebody is a top they are finding somebody who is different anyway.' (Adam)

All these contributed to his lowered self esteem because he was afraid of being rejected by potential partners. Hector was a similar example. He had to undergo an operation to remove stones from his bladder. The operation affected his prostate glands, just next to the bladder, but he had not been told about that:

'My cum now doesn't come out from my penis... he didn't think that's a big deal. But it is really. So although I still get hard, and I still get all the feelings about being hard and all the rest of it. And I still get the same feelings when I cum I don't actually produce any cum.' (Hector)

Research has found that gay men attach significant meanings to their semen. Some anthropological research has shown that semen has been perceived as 'gifts' (e.g. Holmes and Warner 2005). Research into 'barebacking' shows that for some

gay men, ejaculating inside a partner's body is considered a sign of showing trust and displaying intimacy and that partly explains why unsafe sex practices persist (e.g. Crossley 2004 and Ridge 2004). However, Hector had been denied this aspect of sexual functioning because of the operation. As a result, he was worried that some people would lose interest in him:

‘And I think gay guys who like that would be put off... by my not being able to do that anymore... There are guys who like to swallow cum, there are guys who like having it on them somewhere. And I can't do that anymore. And when meeting a guy I have to tell him that... and I find myself inhibited by that...
[T: It must be difficult...]
... now I feel disadvantaged I don't know what the word is... due to the fact I can't perform in a way that some people would find enjoyable.’
(Hector)

This echoes some research findings which suggest that gay men can be affected by declined sexual functioning after an operation more than their heterosexual counterparts. In an earlier study one gay man who was diagnosed with prostate cancer was annoyed that his doctors did not understand that. He was angry that he had not been forewarned, because the doctors assumed that not being able to ejaculate would not be a problem for him:

‘Although their silence may simply reflect their assumptions about what patients know, I wonder if it also reflects heterosexual ignorance of gay males' sexual lives. Not ejaculating has different implications for gay men. Most heterosexual men's primary sexual activity is intercourse. Since most prostate cancer patients are over 50 and probably not concerned with child-bearing, not ejaculating has little consequence for straight men. A man ejaculates inside the woman. If he has a dry orgasm (feeling an orgasm but not producing fluid), absence of fluid is irrelevant to sexual satisfaction. For many gay men, however, watching our partners and/or ourselves having an orgasm is an integral part of our sexual experience, especially in this age of safer sex. Not preparing gay patients (and all patients) for this consequence of prostate cancer treatment is a gross disservice.’ (Harris 2005: 111)

Yet again, it is impossible to distinguish whether people Hector met would think about his inability to ejaculate in the same way as his, but his perception of the difficulty was more important in affecting his formation of relationships.

All in all, the four examples above allowed the participants to shift the responsibility/the reasons for staying single from themselves to something beyond their control.

7.5 Questioning the implicit link between partnership and happiness

The participants also adapted the master narrative by questioning the implicit link between partnership and happiness. They questioned the ‘promise’ in the master narrative that couplehood equates happiness by saying to themselves that:

- The promise may not hold true (the master narrative has not told you the negative sides of being partnered).
- The promise may not hold true forever.
- Even if it is true that partnership means happiness, it does not mean that singles cannot be happy.

First, they questioned the notion that relationships were always going to be as beautiful and rosy as imagined. They realized that the promise in the master narrative may not always materialize – but in fact, the master narrative has withheld the negative aspects of being partnered. For example, Laurence recalled hearing how his parents argued over sex and money:

‘Goodness I can remember when I was a child, waking up and hearing my parents arguing about sex and money...and thinking I don’t want to go through that when I get older (laughs) ... I can remember my father wanting to have sex, my mother not wanting to have sex... I was only a child and listening to all this. It all sounded very difficult (laughs).’
(Laurence)

Similarly, Malcolm didn’t think very highly of relationships as he thought they are characterized by chaos:

‘There are so many examples out there. I was almost tempted for a minute to say in the gay world, but I think it’s in the straight world as well – of broken relationships, divorces, serial relationships that people have nowadays. If you were to read the *Sun* or one of the women’s magazines something like that, the kind of letter’s page where people write things... [T: Issues...]
Issues... they are in a relationship, they love their husband but... I am in a relationship but I am bored with my sex life, and things like that... so you know the question about whether I would like to be in a relationship or not is so complex... I like to have that experience if it was a good experience but if it’s gonna be a bad experience I’d rather not have the experience.’
(Malcolm)

He also specifically talked about his gay cousin who entered into a civil partnership and ‘after a number of blissful years of marriage they just split up like that’. He thought it was typical of ‘modern relationships’, something that people give up easily. He said being a cynic he believed that even if people stay in relationships, a lot of them do feel lonely:

‘I just know from people I’ve worked with. I am thinking about one guy in particular who was in a relationship and used to come in all the time and say my partner doesn’t want to do anything. He comes home from work and what he wants to do is watch television and I want to go out and party. They’re always arguing about it... so... I am positive whether I am single or not. I am positive about being single.’ (Malcolm)

Stanley, who had never even been in a long-term relationship before, also did not rate relationships highly:

‘I haven’t experienced being in a relationship so I don’t know how one would have got on. I know for someone looking from the outside it’s not always positive being in a relationship, not always a positive experience.’
(Stanley)

It was interesting, as he himself noted, he had not had any first-hand experience of relationships, but just looking from the outside he questioned the ‘image’ of relationships as necessarily always a positive experience.

So even if Cinderella had finally found the prince, it did not mean that they would not argue in the castle. The participants found that one can be lonely and that there can be conflicts and arguments in relationships. They used the lessons learned from their parents’, their relatives’, their colleagues’, their friends’, and even their own previous relationships as evidence for their attack.

The participants therefore reasoned that yes, although the master narrative said that being partnered may mean happiness, the negative aspects of being partnered may have been hidden in the small print. Realizing that the negative aspects of being partnered were unavoidable and formed part of the package that comes, they were able to question the extent of ‘truth’ contained in the master narrative.

Second, they doubted whether the promise in the master narrative would hold true for ever. Darren said he was rather sceptical whether having a partner would guarantee practical support in later life as usually envisaged. He said that he could be lazy about doing housework and he was in fact worried whether he would be able to continue to do the housework as it could become physically quite demanding as he grew older. However, he thought that it could be a problem that affected singles as well as couples:

‘If I go into my 70s perhaps 80s I have difficulty in moving furniture or whatever...but it's a problem that even affects couples. I think it's probably better to be lonely on your own than lonely with somebody else than in couples. That's how I look at it.’ (Darren)

Similarly, Justin also thought that when the time came when he would need support, his partner may also be requiring it himself:

‘The time when you are most likely to need support when you are old, you know really old, well, your partner may be dead then, they may be more sick than you are.’ (Justin)

Consequently, he noted, a partner may not only be unable to provide care, but instead may be in need of care himself. For example, his mother was very sick at the time of interview and his father had to spend all his time looking after her:

‘You can say, well, if I was in my mother's shoes, then she's got someone to look after her. On the other hand, look at his shoes ... basically a prisoner. Okay, yes, they've got each other to get through that but on the other hand, it also traps them into a situation... having someone gives us security but it's not an absolute security.’ (Justin)

Third, they questioned whether it is the exclusive right of partnered people to be happy. They questioned whether, even though partnered people may be happy, singles could be happy too. Ben said that although he was also happy for his partnered friends, he was ‘a happy little bunny’ despite being single:

‘I am not envious of anybody if you know what I mean. I am happy for them, but I am happy. I am quite happy with my lot. You know my family says to me sometimes or close friends... what are you going to do when you get ill... Look, we'll sort that out when the time comes. At the moment I am okay. I don't look that far ahead to say, who's going to look after me when I am old, or I can't do this, or if I suddenly come down with Alzheimer's or things like that, and your poor old partner is perfectly alright and just sees you slowly decline and everything else. I don't think

people go into relationships with that idea in their mind. Or I hope not anyway.’ (Ben)

Being happy for his partnered friends? It sounds easier said than done. But it seems Ben was able to do it. He said he had been to four or five civil partnership ceremonies, one of which was his ex-boyfriend’s:

‘And one of those was my ex-boyfriend’s (laughs)
[T: And how did it feel in... the...]
I was very happy for them... very happy. You know... you can’t... if people are happy, you are happy for them.’ (Ben)

He said his only regret about being single was not having any children. But he had at the time of the interview he had eight godchildren:

‘And some of my friends, I love some of their kids as if they were my own. I am godfather of eight children. And it’s not something... there’s no envy in it.’ (Ben)

7.6 Feelings associated with being single

When the participants adapted the master narrative, they felt there were both positive and negative aspects to being single, so that being single became something possible to live with. For example, Philip very clearly articulated the contradictions of the ups and downs of being single, in terms of intimacy and emotional needs:

‘I like the fact that you can be quite selfish. Like yesterday I had quite a hard day. I came home and I was exhausted. I didn’t want to talk. So I cooked, I watched a video. That’s what I needed to do... bath and bed... so

I can do that that's the good thing. The downside of that would be or the upside of being in a relationship as I see it: this is the fantasy... it is a fantasy... that I phone so that tea is ready... we just chill out tonight and somebody's there to look after me. I had a tough day, not to say there there there, but he may cook a meal, we share time together, it's a beautiful evening, watch telly, maybe he sort of just rubs my shoulder for me for five minutes – how was your day tell me about your day... and physical contact – I am quite a tactile person. I do like a lot of body contact as well as liking my own space.' (Philip)

Similarly, Darren was also aware that being single brought with it both advantages as well as disadvantages:

'I think there are advantages and disadvantages to whatever lifestyle you happen to be in. It's just a question what advantages and disadvantages you prefer. The positive aspect in my life: I am independent, I can go home, listen to my own music, cook my own food. I can relax, I can do my own thing, go for a walk, get a cider, and I cycle ... I find that it can work for me in a way... you know. Then I think the negative aspects I think are: if you are ill, there's no one to take care of you, or should I suddenly die I might not be found for days... or if I had an accident at home.' (Darren)

This allowed him to view singlehood in a more neutral manner:

'But you see as I say you can be utterly miserable on your own. You can be reasonably happy on your own. You can be very miserable in a relationship ... There's downside and upside to everything... to whatever lifestyle we happen to live in.' (Darren)

Harry said, there were both enjoyable and challenging aspects to being single: 'So I am very much aware that there are pros and cons to both sides (being single and being partnered), and this is the side of the fence that I am currently sitting on'.

So this chapter has discussed how the participants adapted the master narrative by:

1. Focusing on the possibility of change.
2. Accepting and coming to terms with singlehood.

3. Developing alternative sources of satisfaction.
4. Externalizing the reasons for singlehood.
5. Questioning the implicit link between partnership and happiness.

Overall, singlehood was still seen by the participants as an undesirable state of affairs. The ways they dealt with it could be categorized into three types of strategies. First, they distanced themselves from the cause of their singlehood (strategy 4 listed above). Second, they saw that there would be a possibility of change (strategy 1 listed above). Third, they acknowledged being single and ‘worked with’ it (strategies 2, 3, and 5 listed above).

When they ‘worked with’ being single, the first set of mechanisms they developed was to seek external alternative sources of satisfaction (strategy 3). The second set of mechanisms that the participants used to deal with the challenges associated with being single could be described as more emotion-based or cognitive-based (strategies 2 and 5). Rothbaum, Weisz and Snyder (1982) in their article ‘Changing the World and Changing the Self’ argued that there are two types of control that people use: primary control, with which people try to bring the environment into line with their wishes; and secondary control, with which people try to bring themselves into line with environmental forces. Secondary control measures are attempts to fit in with the world and to ‘flow with the current’ (1982: 8).

The participants in this study were exercising interpretive control over their single status, something they could not control. Like the always-single older women

Baumbusch (2004) interviewed who said that there were both benefits and drawbacks to being single at their age, and single women in Lewis and Moon's study (1997: 115) who were aware of both the advantages and drawbacks of being single, the participants in this study engaged in benefit finding and positive reframing. Such processes have been suggested to be pivotal to psychological well-being and lead to less depression and less distress among people who found themselves in situations they had no control over.

Similarly, in this study, it seems those who adapted the master narrative were more content with being single. It allowed them to shift the blame for singlehood away from themselves. It encouraged them to engage in imaging singlehood differently. It allowed them to recast how singlehood was to be understood by them. It absolved them from dissatisfaction with their singlehood.

In a way, instead of solely focusing on only the downsides of being single, the participants were, in more everyday terms, searching for a silver lining. It is difficult to say whether they were engaged in 'delusion' or not. Were they just trying to find silver linings for singlehood because they were denying the 'reality'? It may not be possible for a researcher to answer this question.

However, one can say that the 'reality' they constructed – that singlehood has both its ups and downs – made singlehood more liveable for the participants themselves.

Chapter 8: How the master narrative is *subverted*

This chapter now focuses on the moments when the participants subverted the master narrative. They reclaimed their voices by challenging the very accounts in the master narrative that tried to colonize their views. They attacked the master narrative and experimented with alternative modes of understanding of singlehood.

It is quite difficult to distinguish the efforts discussed in this chapter and the last, but the major difference would be the way that they looked at the master narrative. At the moments that Chapter 7 discussed, the participants adapted the master narrative. In such instances the participants revised and complicated this master narrative, but they did not completely dismiss or overthrow the master narrative. The master narrative was still seen to hold true. For them, singlehood was still something that needed to be accepted. They still wanted the possibility for change. They still saw themselves as coping with and living with something rather negative in itself.

When the participants adapted the master narrative, they used a more defensive approach. But they used a more offensive approach to discredit the master narrative when they tried to subvert it. They reclaimed the role of judge in their own their lives from others to themselves.

8.1 Claiming to be single by choice

When the participants adopted the master narrative, they claimed that there was something wrong with them that made them stay single (Chapter 6.1). When the participants adapted the master narrative, they claimed that their singlehood had to do with the larger social history (Chapter 7.4). When the participants subverted the master narrative, they claimed that they were single by choice, thus, as earlier studies have suggested, adopting a narrative strategy to attack the master narrative that assumes singlehood as something involuntary or failure.

8.2 Attacking the message and the messenger

The strategy the participants used when subverting the master narrative was to re-examine the messages behind the discourses and to do a ‘reality check’ to see if the messages that privilege couplehood were backed by any evidence. What some of them found was that the messages positioning ‘relationships as superior’ were sometimes fraudulent. Moreover, the participants claimed that there were benefits to being single that partnered people were missing out.

Patrick was one such example. He said he had never wanted a long-term relationship. He even resented relationships. He was sceptical about 98 per cent of marriages. He attacked relationships as a social construct:

‘The whole thing about relationships is largely religiously driven. Because obviously if you are Jewish you want more Jews. So basically none of the religions really supported homosexuality... traditionally anyway... and

because if you allow gays in society then you are gonna have less Catholics or Anglicans or... Jews or Muslims or whatever so I think relationship is something invented by the church.’ (Patrick)

He attacked relationships as constructed by religious and ethnic group leaders, with a particular agenda in mind – to make their groups stronger. So in a way he went a step further to attack not only the message, but also the messengers – the church, one of the sources that sent out those messages about coupledness. As these messengers had vested interests, the messages they sent out might not be very reliable.

Patrick also touched upon the so-called ‘health benefits’ of having a partner. In academic literature, it has been suggested that people who are partnered report better health and have longer life expectancy than those who are not (see Chapter 2). However, Patrick argued that there was a price to pay for this:

‘I had a conversation two or three weeks ago with a friend I have known all my life. She was saying it’s proven that married men live longer than single men. Yeah, but who wants to live longer when you are in a prison? (laughs) I said I should send the keys to poor husbands so that they can escape. I do think relationship is very much overstated. Because people who need someone in their life to provide them support or friendship or whatever, I think they haven’t developed themselves...’ (Patrick)

In the quote above, he was positioning those who followed the master narrative as ignorant, misinformed and misguided. He even somehow claimed intellectual and moral superiority as he was able to see things through more clearly.

He also challenged the perception that having a partner would mean guaranteed support in old age. He said that his aunt’s husband had died when she was 61 and

she carried on to live for another 25 years. For him, having a partner did not equate having support.

Hence, taken together, Patrick's strategy was to change the lens of his camera. While other people zoomed in on the joy of being partnered, he focused on the drawbacks of being in a partnership. In his view, he would like to be a free bird rather than living longer but 'having to stay in prison'.

8.3 Assigning new meanings to singlehood by noting its positive aspects

The participants also subverted the master narrative by giving it new meanings. They saw that singlehood could actually bring with it certain advantages.

Many participants perceived being single as meaning that they could go where they like and do what they like, as any decision they made needed to be approved only by themselves. They did not have to negotiate with their partner, and thus avoided the likelihood of having to give up their preferences or make compromises:

'Being your own boss you decide, and certainly when you're retired, you decide what you're going to do.' (Hector)

'I can live my life exactly as I please. In every way. I don't have to consider the opinions, the likes and dislikes of anyone else.' (Robert)

'I like being able to get up in the morning what I am like. I like to go and to be able to get my train and do what I like. Freedom if you know what I mean. Not what will I get today, shall we do this or shall we do that?' (Ben)

The enjoyment of being single came from deciding both what to do and what not to do, as Nic articulated:

‘I do like the notion of being able to decide what am I going to do... what am I not going to do... what I am going to eat... what I am not going to eat. Which television programme I am going to watch or not watch. What radio programme or what music I listen... so if I am here on my own, I can have music playing and it doesn’t matter whoever I am with doesn’t like that. Or if they want to watch a particular television programme and I don’t want to watch it... and if I want to spend an afternoon talking to you... or spend an afternoon with a book.’ (Nic)

Related to freedom and independence, the participants talked about the flexibility of their diary and schedule as a by-product of being single. For them, this meant that they could do things and change their timetable at short notice, even at the last minute. They thought that it was something that people who were partnered, especially those with children, could not afford to do. Vincent, for example, said he had never been envious of couples:

‘I thought they are stuck really. They do not have the freedom that I have. I consider myself very lucky to have the freedom and independence to do what I want to do. I think I am extremely lucky.’ (Vincent)

The participants who enjoyed spontaneity or impulsiveness found it especially appropriate for their lifestyle. For some participants, the independence and freedom also meant that they could focus more on work, as much as they would like to. For example, Jason said that he was able to take up research posts which required focus and concentration, something he probably would not have done had he been married and had children.

It sounds as if single people take into account only their own wishes and preferences. Does that mean they are 'selfish', as they are generally stereotyped to be? This is not necessarily the case; single people interviewed made use of their freedom and independence in a variety of ways. For example, after retirement, Ben took up a part-time job, doing shift work. He found that being single gave him the chance to 'help people out' and 'be supportive to people' because of his flexibility with schedules. He described an experience of covering a shift for a colleague whose wife was not feeling well:

'I am able to do a lot of things for other people that they can't do. Like I am covering a shift on Saturday for a colleague. His wife is not very well. And he's gonna stay with her and I said I would do your shift on Saturday. I have booked off that Saturday but I am going to do it for you. I am able to do that. That's good being able to do that.' (Ben)

While some participants found the lack of intimacy and closeness to be the downside of being single (Chapter 6), some others instead found that being single could mean they were freed from having to deal with their partners' emotional troubles. In other words, they thought that partners could be a part of the solution, but sometimes also a part of the problem. A few participants mentioned that especially when they were tired or stressed, being single allowed them access to a quiet space where they would not have someone else's emotions to deal with:

'When I am tired: a bit of me loves being on my own. Especially when I am knackered from work, when I open the door I know exactly how it's going to be like. There isn't somebody else's emotion to deal with. (laughs).' (Dan)

Some participants also found taking care of just themselves easier. For example, in the case of cooking for one, some found it quite easy as they only had to cater

for their own tastes. One participant said that even if his cooking didn't go well, he was the only one to eat it and there would be no one else to judge him.

Some found that having been single for a long time made them more aware of taking care of themselves. This made self-care in later life easier. This finding echoes earlier research which suggests that long-term singles do not have to undergo desolation and therefore may be especially equipped to age on their own (Chapter 2). While people who were partnered became used to having someone to share the responsibilities with them, a few participants said that they became more used to doing things on their own. As Malcolm said, having been single for a long time 'prepared him for that'. He went on to describe his mother's experience of widowhood. He described that it was devastating for her to be on her own after his father died because for her it was such a big leap from a long-standing relationship, especially as she married young. In comparison, he said he was preparing himself for old age and thought he would be 'more prepared' for being on his own than someone who has been used to being in a relationship. He noted that he was on a very healthy diet and exercised a lot. Although he was not following a weight loss diet, he would go to street markets to buy fresh produce and devise his own recipes. Referring to his health and the need to take care of himself, he said: 'I am very aware of it':

'Well it makes you self-sufficient. It makes you self-sufficient physically... mentally... and emotionally... so emotionally I don't need to be in a relationship and intellectually I don't have to be talking with somebody else ... and then physically being independent and also taking care of my own health.' (Malcolm)

Similarly, Robert said that he had become used to taking care of himself:

‘ I have to do that all my life. It’s like suddenly if your wife dies, and you are left alone, oh men just go into decline don’t they?’ (Robert)

Ben also said having to take care of himself all his life prepared him for continuing to do so in later life:

‘I have to do it all my life... rather than in the old age.
[T: So it’s useful being single...]
Yes yes yeah. It’s happened since my 20s or 30s, 40s and 50s. It’s always that thought at the back of your mind that... there’s nobody there to do it for me so you’ve got to do it yourself. And I think... probably men that have been recently in a single environment, then I think they’d find it more difficult.’ (Ben)

Some participants found being single allowed them more freedom and independence in terms of choosing what social activities to engage in. In some instances their previous partners controlled their social life and wanted all their attention. Being single, for some, meant that they could spend more time with their friends:

‘I find it delightful to have a small circle of close friends that I see as regularly as I can... that’s really important to me... and what I generally experience in my friends is they find a boyfriend and I see far less of them.’ (Victor)

Although some participants saw lack of a regular partner as a downside of being single, many others saw being single as giving them greater freedom for sexual exploration. Patrick, who has been discussed at length earlier above, said being single allowed him to have multiple sex partners. He said he was not interested in having sex with the same man too frequently, no matter how attractive he might be:

‘I remember one particular guy who actually used to be an upmarket rent boy... sort of very much high class... he was extremely good, had a fantastic good body, in his early 30s. But I think after the third time having sex... I wasn’t interested in him any more. I wanted to be his friend.’ (Patrick)

Hence, contrary to some others who missed having regular sex partner because of being single, he saw that as something positive. He was very proud when he announced that he had slept with men from at least 35 countries, which was something that being single enabled him to do:

‘I want to have sex with different people. One of my ambitions is to have sex with men from every country in the world, and I only started doing this when I was 46, I am up to 35 countries...

[T: Really? Wow. So until now you have had sex with men from 35 countries?]

Since 2002 I have slept with men from 35 countries, and bear in mind, Spanish boys seem to for some reasons really like me. So there’s a lot of repetition you know... so it’s not like I have only slept with 35 men.’ (Patrick)

He went on to describe how easy it was to get casual sex because of the increasing usage of the internet to set up sexual encounters. He had mainly used the Gaydar website to find casual sex encounters. He described that for him sex was very much readily available. For example, he recalled his experience of chatting to someone on the website with whom he was trying to set up a meeting. This man replied at 9 o’clock in the morning:

‘ “I just live round the corner and my parents have just gone off to work so just pop by...” (Patrick)

Being single, for him, meant the possibility of having all these different casual sexual encounters. It meant he was released from the pressure to conform to monogamy. He was conveying a message that he did not need relationships to

fulfil his sexual needs. It seems his sexual needs were fulfilled, and without much difficulty. What was afforded him by singlehood was excitement and freedom.

8.4 Transcendence

Some participants acknowledged that there were shortcomings of being single, but they also found that there was something valuable in the ‘suffering’. This was another higher level of subverting the master narrative. Victor, for example, thought that being in a relationship demanded a great deal of time and attention. He found he saw his friends far less when they had a boyfriend. By contrast, he saw being single as giving him the time and energy to see more of his friends. What was more important was that he had the chance to explore self-discovery. He was honest: although for 20 years he had practised Buddhism, which preaches contentment, he was still not always contented about being single:

‘Ask me if I am content... the answer about 95 per cent is yes. Five per cent however I am sitting there, and a grey thundery evening, by myself, alone at home... or going to bed alone... or waking up alone... that leaves room for the other five per cent but it’s not particularly intense.’ (Victor)

Being five per cent discontented with being single was, however, not perceived negatively by him. He thought that his longing came from the very fundamental human need and desire to be embraced. He did not see it as something negative, but rather as an opportunity to understand more about himself. In that sense, he saw a higher purpose in experiencing the challenges associated with singlehood. Longing for companionship gave him the opportunity to ask questions and to understand the sources of his feelings:

‘That gives one opportunities to practise... to ask what is the craving? What is the desire...? What is the neurotic...? One does have the opportunity to come face to face with neurotic longings unworked through or unmet... needs and desires.’ (Victor)

When such feelings came up, he said he would deal with them through spiritual practices:

‘If one can transform that sort of very very real, very natural human longing, contain it, and then take it to meditation practice, allow it to be touched by something a little bit higher, something a little bit more meaningful... always try to be more aware of what is going on... watching the mind, watching the desires, watching the craving... learning, listening to what those messages are, accepting them, giving them space, not trying to suppress them... and that’s the route to setting oneself free.’ (Victor)

Such practices helped Victor to live with those feelings, to recognize them but not be overpowered by them. Singlehood, then, put him in a position to constantly question himself and to understand himself better. By giving the ‘suffering’ of singlehood a new meaning, he was able to see even the downside of being single as productive and meaningful. This process as he mentioned did not come naturally, but was arrived at through sustained effort over time.

This chapter has discussed how the participants subverted the master narrative. The resistance strategy they used against the master narrative was resistant thinking – to covertly redefine a negative image or a negative reaction to give them a more positive meaning (Riessman 2000). The participants told counter-narratives as ‘tools designed to repair the damage inflicted on identities by abusive power systems’ (Nelson 2001: xiii).

This is similar to earlier research which showed that single women did not see singlehood only as a personal deficit and social exclusion, but also in terms of independence and choice, and self-actualization and achievement (Reynolds and Wetherell 2003: 497). A combination of these repertoires allowed singles to develop an identity that it was possible to live with. That allowed a rather unexpected celebratory voice to be heard in the participants' narratives of singlehood.

Although this chapter has presented the participants as subverting the master narrative, it needs to be noted that there are always certain elements of the master narrative that are left intact. Their subversion took place only at the personal and discursive level. It has not translated into collective or political actions.

It is tempting to make a judgement to claim the moments discussed in this chapter as 'progress' and 'success', and the instances discussed in Chapter 6 as 'regressive' and 'failure'. However, this way is somewhat inappropriate and inadequate. Rather, it is more useful to think about how the participants shifted between these moments in different social settings and at different timings, and through their life courses, as Chapters 9 and 10 that follow will demonstrate.

Chapter 9: Dynamics: 1 Changing narratives over time and social spaces

Chapters 6 to 8 have demonstrated how the participants adopted, adapted and subverted the master narrative of couplehood. However, this did not mean that the same participant would have a consistent narrative of either adopting, adapting or subverting the master narrative that stayed with him all the time. This chapter furthers the analysis and highlights how these processes may present differently in different social settings and at various timings, for the very same participant and different participants.

In terms of social spaces, some participants found it especially hard to adapt and subvert the master narrative in restaurants, cinemas and theatres, because they perceived these social settings as ‘not appropriate’ for singles to be on their own. Similarly, they found it difficult to be on their own at certain times of the year, such as Christmas and Valentine’s Day, and resorted to adopting the master narrative on these occasions.

9.1 Social spaces

Some participants found it especially hard to adapt and subvert the master narrative in the cinema, the theatre and in restaurants. They considered these to be social places for people to visit together. As a result, being single and therefore having to go there on their own made them feel self-conscious. They felt out of

place and wondered how other people would judge them. For example, Robert said he would never go to cinema alone, but why?

‘It was like the dirty old man in the cinema.

[T: Yeah yeah.]

Something in the back of my mind says: no I don’t go to the cinema alone... The dirty old man scenario. No. I don’t.’ (Robert)

We learn to put ourselves in the shoes of ‘the generalized other’ and then from that third-person perspective we can look back and observe our own thoughts. The singles in this study, like other people in society, were constantly using an ‘inner wheel’ to anticipate how other people would evaluate them. As older men carry with them certain stereotypes in society, including ‘old-timers’, ‘Pops’ and ‘dirty old men’ (Rubinstein 1986:4), when Robert said he would never go to the cinema alone, he was also anticipating that he would be seen as a ‘dirty old man’, who was stereotyped to show (unrestrained) interest in sex, across generations (children). He wanted to avoid the possibility of being seen in this light in the first place. Although he was implying that he was making a conscious effort of choosing not to go to the cinema, his action was actually controlled by other people’s thoughts, or more accurately, by how he thought other people would perceive him.

In a similar vein, going to restaurants on one’s own, which would be more likely because of being single, was perceived as not enjoyable by many participants. Again, many perceived restaurants as a ‘social’ environment, and being there on their own made them feel they did not ‘fit in’. It has been suggested that ‘the consumption of food, like the satisfying of any appetite, has long since ceased to

be about nutrition and has come instead to contain myriad social, cultural and symbolic meanings'. The sociality of eating out is about 'performative pleasures' (see discussions in Finkelstein 1998). A restaurant is seen by many people as a 'socially symbolic place' (Shelton 1990). Given that is the case, it is not surprising that so many participants felt uncomfortable going to a restaurant on their own. As a result, some participants tried to avoid dining out alone. For example, Patrick said visiting a restaurant and eating on his own was 'the last thing on his mind', because he thought others would think that 'he had got no friends':

[T: And how about say going to restaurants or pubs... does being on your own...]

Only when I am going on business. I never do that socially. I wouldn't do that on my own. No.' (Patrick)

Laurence also said:

'There are times that I thought I'd like to go out and do something, and I think I can't be bothered. Because you feel a bit odd going to a restaurant on your own... you feel if you go to a restaurant on your own or when you go to the theatre or cinema and you are on your own, you feel a bit sort of awkward. And today I went to the pub... it's a very strange experience. There are group of students there, obviously just done their finals, so they are all happy...

[T: Flowers and...]

And you can see all that, you can admire, you feel the atmosphere. You can feel for them, and everyone was having a good time. But at the same time it's as though you are just ghost watching... and not taking part.' (Laurence)

In a way, they felt intimidated by what other people might be thinking and believed they were belittled to go to such public venues on their own. This can lead to 'erasure' of singles from these social places.

Hence, for these concerned participants, adapting and subverting the master narrative became more difficult in such social spaces. Yet despite the difficulty, adapting and subverting the master narrative still happened there. Some participants developed strategies to deal with the discomfort.

First, they chose particular locations. One option was to go somewhere ‘more casual’. For example, Henry said he hated eating on his own in a restaurant. What made him so uncomfortable going to a restaurant on his own? He started by saying that it was an interesting question and then elaborated:

‘It seems the whole world... in the restaurants and bars and so on, everyone is with someone else. Everyone is so happy with a group of friends. Because you are getting a false idea. Not everyone is perpetually out every night. It’s not the whole population. It’s only the people who are out at a party or dinner and having a nice time. But you know it seems I am the only person in the world who’s on his own and that makes me really sad. I feel really miserable. Why am I on my own? And in fact I am often thinking to myself why am I single you know. I am a good person, I am nice person, I am healthy, wealthy and wise... My health is perfectly good... not exactly wealthy but very comfortable, I am a millionaire... I am educated, I am not an idiot, so those things healthy, wealthy and wise I’ve got those to an extent. I should be a good catch! They should be queuing up at the door to go out with me and I often think: Why not? Why not? Why am I on my own?’ (Henry)

It seems the first reason why Henry felt uncomfortable going to a restaurant was that he imagined everyone else was having a good time. Second, it was evident that he was not happy about being single – thinking that he should be a ‘good catch’, that people should be ‘queuing up at the door to go out with him’ made him feel unhappy about being single. This combination made him feel ‘really sad’ and ‘really miserable’.

But Henry also said he had to spend a lot of time on his own when he went abroad.

In the year before the interview, he travelled overseas 12 times. He would tend to go to pub restaurants. When he went out for a meal in the evening, it would be somewhere more casual:

‘It will be the Wetherspoon or somewhere you don't feel too uncomfortable. Not that formal table with napkins laid both sides and an empty place in front of you. You feel very self-conscious you know (laughs). Anywhere you don't have to stare at the cutlery to try to avoid looking at all the other people who are coupled up.’ (Henry)

It was interesting that although he said he was not worried about other people's judgements, he was making a conscious effort to escape the gaze from others who he perceived ‘was having a nice time’.

Besides going somewhere more casual, the participants also chose places where they could play down or disguise themselves and try to ‘pass’ as member of a more respectable group: business people who had to eat on their own. One example was Laurence, who said that he found a social club of a political party of which he was a member more welcoming for single people. It was the ‘sort of place where it's actually okay to be on your own’, he said, because it was quite used to catering for single people, most of whom were there on business. In a way, he could ‘disguise’ himself among other diners there as ‘being on business’, which is more respectable, rather than ‘being single’, which is stigmatizing.

Second, the participants chose some timings that made a difference as to how they felt about eating on their own. For example, Laurence said it was easier for him to eat out on his own at lunchtime as compared to dinner because ‘people at lunchtime are working’. Similarly, Malcolm said on holidays ‘it's not ideal it's

not ideal' to have dinner on his own, but what he would do is to have an 'early dinner':

'So it was a kind of a very late lunch (laughs), lunch about six in the evening. An early dinner... that's how I get around that...
[T: So the get around is to have it early, but why?]
Because it's kind of less social, less festive. If I were to go out say at eight o'clock you are much more likely to be in the middle of couples or groups of people. And I suppose that can seem quite isolating... so I suppose you could see it as a handicap...' (Malcolm)

In a way, dinner was considered by him to be more social and more festive whereas lunch was considered to be more casual. At dinner time, because of more couples and groups of people dining, the lack of companionship when eating on one's own became very visible and can be isolating. By avoiding such a timing, he said that he was also 'avoiding putting himself in a situation where he would feel a bit like a freak':

'[T: I was thinking would I go too far as to say that's avoiding the people who are in...]
I suppose yes. You could say I am avoiding putting myself in that situation where I feel a bit like a freak. Where I feel that people are judging me, it's like oh look at that poor man on his own or he must be a businessman...
[T: Very busy and having to work until late...]
So yes, I think that's true. I wouldn't want to pretend there wasn't that element there, but I suppose what you might say is that, in the life of somebody who through the force of nature lives on his own, he will have sort of avoidance tactics.' (Malcolm)

Third, to tackle the discomfort that being single and eating alone in a restaurant provoked, some participants employed different impression management strategies (Goffman 1959). Some talked about bringing newspapers or 'a big book' to read when they had to go to a restaurant on their own, to give off the impression that although they were on their own, they were still happy and enjoying the occasion:

‘I always have a book with me. So if I go into a restaurant and there is nobody there that I know I would read a book... because I think there is nothing worse than somebody sitting alone at a table staring at your face... There have been occasions I had to eat out somewhere and I hadn’t got a book... and I hadn’t actually enjoyed the meal.’ (Nic)

[T: And how about, say, going out and eating in restaurant?]
Breakfast’s fine. Lunch is fine. Dinner sucks. Always take a big book.
[T: A big book. It’s not only a book, but it is a big book.]
A big book. And don’t look at other diners.
[T: Can you talk a bit more about that?]
Because I will be projecting onto them looking at me, and say poor solitary figure, having to eat out alone, nobody loves him, nobody wants to eat with him.
[T: Have you had that experience before?]
Often. Not directly...
[T: I mean of course...]
This is my mind working.’ (Victor)

Not only did the participants adapt the master narrative, a small number of participants even subverted the master narrative. They thought whether to have a partner to go to these places with someone or not was somewhat irrelevant. For example, Malcolm said he liked to go to the cinema, the opera, the ballet and contemporary dance on his own. He did not feel he needed someone else to go with him. He was focusing on his own feelings rather than how others would think. He asked:

‘Particularly as you are sitting in an auditorium usually in the dark looking at something going on in front of you why do you need somebody next to you?’ (Malcolm)

Some participants even found distinct advantages in going to such places on their own. For example, they felt that if they went alone the pressure of having to converse with others was alleviated, and as such, they could really immerse themselves in the show, give it 100 per cent attention and enjoy it to the fullest. Other participants thought it would even be preferable to go to the theatre or

cinema on their own as it was easier to arrange tickets because they did not have to check take anyone else's schedule into consideration. They found if they had to wait for everyone's availability to be checked, the best tickets would usually have been sold already.

Similarly, there were some participants who felt that going to a restaurant on their own or with someone else did not matter. They felt that they were even afforded more flexibility when they ate out on their own. For example, Malcolm said he liked going out to lunch on his own because he was 'very picky' about where he ate. He said he liked to 'try all sorts of different things', but that other people may not be so adventurous. They may just want to have a jacket potato, a pizza or a sandwich, which Malcolm found rather boring.

9.2 Particular timings

There also emerged two particular types of occasion on which the participants found it especially difficult to adapt and subvert the dominant narrative. The first was when they perceived 'all other people out there' as having a good time with their partner. The second was when 'things go wrong'. There were six examples of the first type:

1. Holidays
2. Valentine's Day
3. Christmas
4. Weekend

5. Birthday
6. Family gathering

Holidays

For some participants companionship was seen as an essential component of travelling. Some thought travelling without a partner meant they would not have practical help when needed. Not being able to have conversations with others while on holidays was also perceived by some as a significant drawback:

‘I’ve done it once in my life, going on holiday on my own. And I hated it. I didn’t enjoy that at all. Because for me I want to talk about what we see, what we do, have conversation about oh look at her, look at him...’
(Philip)

Some participants found that holidays often catered more for couples or families than for singles. They complained about having to pay a single supplement when they went on holiday. That meant they had to pay more than half the price for two people. For example, Laurence said he had just gone on a cruise. Almost every cabin on it was designed for two people. He found that he had to pay double if he was travelling on his own, as the price would not be reduced regardless whether one person or two people occupied the cabin. He decided to take a friend on holiday with him to keep costs down. When they entered the cabin, they noticed a double bed. The very first thing they had to discuss was how to separate the double bed into two single beds.

The social pressure that singles faced when going on holidays on their own was not unlike the experience of singles when they went into a restaurant on their own, as discussed earlier. As Richard articulated, it could make them feel out of place:

‘I was on a holiday about a year and a half ago on my own, slightly out of season. And the hotel was full of middle-aged British couples. When I came down to breakfast on the first day, I could almost see everybody looking at me, and looking past me to see where is the wife... so it’s not just that I am gay but also I am single. Two things together can be difficult I think.’ (Richard)

What Richard sensed was not only a ‘heterosexual gaze’ but also a ‘partnered gaze’ from people around him.

Some participants, however, particularly enjoyed going on holiday on their own. They perceived it as giving them the chance to do things at their own pace. Like the participants who enjoyed going to the theatre and cinema on their own, Malcolm found that going to museums and galleries on his own allowed him to take things in more fully:

‘I don’t want to walk next to somebody else, going oh isn’t that interesting, what do you think of that...’ (Malcolm)

Companionship while travelling was sometimes seen as nuisance by some:

‘I’ve been to places with people and we were wandering the shops or something, I am spending three-quarters of my time either talking to them or establishing are we walking down the street ...’ (Joseph)

Valentine's Day

A second rather obvious example of timing in which some participants found it difficult to escape the master narrative was on Valentine's Day. With this event becoming more commercialized and visibly celebrated, some participants romanticized the occasion and thought 'most other people' would be partnered and enjoying themselves. Some talked about avoiding going out on the day so that they would not compare themselves unfavourably with celebrating couples:

'There are certain days I would never go out. On Valentine's night (laughs)... because the whole place is full of couples. It's always a good night at home.' (Laurence)

Christmas

A third example of potentially problematic occasions was Christmas, which has been seen as an increasingly commercialized festival. Richard said that it was not so much Christmas itself, but the social expectations surrounding it – that he should be celebrating with partners, or significant others – that made him feel uncomfortable about spending Christmas alone:

'I find Christmas a very difficult time, and also even bank holidays, birthdays and even sometimes weekends. But Christmas in particular, because you get so many people asking in a very casual and not-really-interested way what you are doing for Christmas, and wishing you a happy Christmas, when in fact the answer is I'm doing nothing at all. And I would be reasonably okay with that if people didn't keep asking me, and making me feel like I should have family/close friends around me – the cumulative effect of these questions is that rather than just being a neutral day it becomes quite an unhappy day. I love sending and receiving Christmas cards and letters from old friends far away, but apart from that I

would be quite happy to just disappear out of the world from shortly before Christmas until January first.’ (Richard)

Weekends

Similarly, a fourth example of an occasion when being single was perceived to be difficult was weekends, for which some participants had built up an image that other people would be partying and enjoying themselves:

‘Sometimes I find myself sitting at home on a Friday on my own... I’d sometimes get quite tearful. I get quite lonely.’ (Adam)

‘I don’t like Sundays. I think it’s quite a well known fact that most single people hate Sundays, loathe Sundays...’ (Tom)

Birthdays

A fifth example was birthdays:

‘Last week was my birthday and when people at work realized I got the same thing – “What are you doing to celebrate?” Answer – nothing, because there isn’t anyone to celebrate with. Which is an uncomfortable and kind of shameful answer.’ (Richard)

Family gatherings

A sixth example was family gatherings, when the participants suddenly confronted a greater likelihood of meeting partnered people:

‘You see happy families and you are on your own... it’s very nice to be with them and it’s very nice to have the companionship ... but you know you don’t fit... because I was always the single one... I always felt a bit

out of the crowd... I've never been able to join in fully with the crowd.'
(Simon)

The final few sentences in this last quote summarized the feelings that many participants had at the timings described above – holidays, Valentine's Day, Christmas, weekends, birthdays, and family gatherings. They perceived that 'most other people' would be celebrating with their partners or loved ones, and as such, it made them feel a bit 'out of the crowd' or being 'the odd man out'.

'When things go wrong'

A second type of timing when the participants found it especially difficult to escape from the master narrative was 'when things go wrong'. This made them feel vulnerable because they had to face and deal with the issues on their own. Some participants felt that if they had a partner, there would be someone else to provide support. For example, Joseph had a minor cycle accident four years before the interview. He ended up in hospital but with only a minor fracture of his right ankle. He said:

'I've got friends who care about me. But nobody cares about me to the extent of what you get from a relationship ... it would be nice if I could feel as though there was somebody who really cares about me... it would be nice if I was in a relationship I would feel as though there was somebody I could depend upon, if I was to have some drama or be ill.'
(Joseph)

Harry also recalled that he had once got into trouble with the police and was accused of harassment. He ended up in court. Not having a partner meant that he had no one to accompany him there, so he thought. But he said he had 'four gods'

around him, referring to four very good friends who provided him with the vital social support he needed. In fact, one of his ‘four gods’ was willing to accompany him to court:

‘When I told him that I ended up in court, his first thought was I am coming with you to court, and that was very noticeably a great relief to me.’ (Harry)

These times ‘when things go wrong’ were moments of vulnerability when being single became more evident.

This chapter has discussed how the master narrative could become more resistant in certain social spaces and at particular timings.

The findings reported in this chapter add to some recent research findings that begin to highlight the need to understand singles’ experience *in situ*. For example, when Norwegian single women aged 35-55 were interviewed, it was found that they disliked eating out alone on holidays because it made them feel lonely and socially isolated, especially when they saw other couples being ‘happy together’. They found eating out in the afternoons and in cities not so difficult, but eating out at dinner time especially challenging. The author proposed that ‘one answer is perhaps that at lunchtime the restaurant is materially and culturally less constructed and performed as a social space as at night and at dinnertime’ (Heimtum 2010:187). It has also been proposed that timings such as weddings, New Year’s Eve, and family-oriented holidays such as Thanksgiving and Christmas served as triggers for singles (Sharp and Ganong 2011). Some singles

even described Valentines' Day as 'Singles' Awareness Day' as partnership status would be given high visibility on that day (Sharp and Ganong 2011: 971).

This chapter adds a new dimension to the understanding of being single; that it needs to be understood as necessarily situated in social space and in time. It is inadequate to discuss the general experience of being single. The processes of adapting and subverting the master narrative were in flux and dynamic.

This suggests that instead of asking the question: 'How does one feel about being single?' A more useful question to ask would be: 'How does one feel about being single in particular situations and at different timings?' Hence, the findings argue for a more nuanced, contextualized understanding of singlehood.

However, how the participants felt about being single in different social spaces and at different timings also changed through the life course. Terry alluded to this:

'When I was younger I would have been embarrassed to sit in a restaurant or café or whatever by myself. I wouldn't have known where to look. And people staring at me, those kinds of feelings. So the next stage would have been to take a book with me. Now I would sit in a restaurant by myself, and stare back if somebody stares at me... (laughs).

[T: (Laughs)]

And not be particularly bothered about it. I think the latter development has come about from being more comfortable in my own skin as we say. And more comfortable with who I am.' (Terry)

Why did Terry feel differently at different life stages? These changes through the life course will be discussed in Chapter 10, which follows.

Ch 10: Dynamics: 2 Changing narratives through the life course

As discussed in the last chapter, the significance of the master narrative changed in different social spaces and at various timings. This chapter further suggests that:

- The master narrative changed its significance through the participants' life course.
- As stated earlier, the participants' narrative could not be divided into adopting, adapting and subverting stories. Instead, in each participant's stories, there were adopting, adapting and subverting elements. What differentiated the participants was the proportion of these different elements. The mix of the elements showed two directions of change. For some participants, the master narrative became increasingly dominant through their life course, whereas for others the master narrative became less significant, and adapting and subverting processes occurred more noticeably. These two directions reflect the distinct personal and social journeys they have travelled.

10.1 Master narrative increasingly significant

For some participants, the master narrative became increasingly significant through their life course. They were those who showed:

1. An increased desire for entering into a relationship
2. A decreased perception of possibility of change
3. A decreased availability of alternative sources of satisfaction

Increased desire for entering into a relationship

Some participants said that their priorities had changed throughout their lives. When they were younger, they were more in search of excitement, but now, in later life, they were more interested in settling down. This is in line with what some previous research has suggested (e.g. Ward 1979). For example, in his 50s Darren said:

‘I have this thought. Now maybe it would be quite nice to meet someone... perhaps to settle down... but I didn’t want to do this when I was younger. I wanted to have more fun, more sex.
[T: When did that idea begin to come?]
I suppose in the last ten years or so. I think it might just be affected by biology. I think the sex drive just starts to diminish.’ (Darren)

Also, some participants realized that there was some truth in the master narrative:. Although some participants were still in relatively good health, they began to be more worried about taking care of themselves in later life, as they were without a partner and childless², hence disadvantaged in terms of receiving practical support (see e.g. Gray 2009). Of course, old age does not necessarily mean declining health, but it is undeniable that the incidence of falls, heart attacks and dementia, etc. does increase with age. For example, Hector said he believed that the older one became, the more medical conditions one would develop:

² Except one participant, Tom, all participants were childless.

‘There will come a point if I live long enough where I might not be capable of looking after myself living here. I haven’t got anybody around who’s going to do it for me. I don’t have a partner. I don’t have a family. Although I have friends, I don’t think any of them would be keen to come across and care for me and look after me and wash me in the bath or anything if I became incapable of looking after myself... you’ve got to accept the fact that you are gonna live alone.’ (Hector)

Hector’s narrative did not only question whether he would be able to take care of himself, he was also questioning the extent to which ‘families of choice’, which have been argued to be significant in lesbians’ and gay men’s lives (Chapter 2), would be able to provide help when frailty set in later in life. Although it is important to expand our imagination of care beyond the heterosexual model (Roseneil 2004), it is equally important to recognize that there are limits to what friends can do, and what friendship rules or norms are in place (Wiseman 1986).

Many participants were also worried should they get to a point of being seriously ill, not having a partner to take care of them, and many of them had only minimal contact with their families of origin, they may have to enter formal care facilities. At the time of interview, spending cuts in local authorities and social care dominated the news, and this in particular made many participants, if not all, sceptical about the quality of care that they would receive:

‘I have concerns about the future. I wonder what will happen to me as I get older .What if I became ill or old and frail? Who would look after me? That’s really quite a worry. I should have considered sheltered accommodation but I hear very poor reports of such places. So that’s a real worry. I suppose anxiety about whether I would get the care that I would need... Because I am aware that the care of the elderly in this country varies a great deal.’ (Robert)

‘I don’t have any family here so I can’t rely on family to look after me. I don’t have a partner to look after me. I would have to go into old people’s home when I am old. There is no alternative to that. And having seen some

of those, I am not always happy with that because they are not happy places. But that's the future and the future is something I can't predict.' (Laurence)

Some participants were also worried whether they could be open about their sexuality if they were to enter into a care home. The transsexual participant in this study in particular was anxious about his biological and psychological needs being understood and met in a formal care setting. Vincent said he wished there were specific care homes set up for gay men:

'I'd like to see a home specifically for gay men catering for our own needs. I certainly would not want to be in a straight care home run for the elderly.' (Vincent)

Many participants who were single and living alone were particularly worried about the possibility of finding themselves in emergency situations. For example, Robert illustrated what he perceived would happen if he were to have a heart attack at home:

'If I have a heart attack at home, for example, there's nobody there there's nobody to help. You do hear of people just dying at home when they are old and on their own and not being found for weeks or months. So there's a simple safety factor, in case something does happen.' (Robert)

Jason had indeed had a heart attack before the interview; he said the experience made him more precarious about being single and living alone:

'If I don't see my neighbours for a couple of days I can't assume that they have both died (laughs).
[T: (Laughs)]

I do feel very precarious particularly if I am getting a little bit less energetic at times or maybe I am getting a bit diabetic... all these sorts of things that come with age... I feel that I haven't got any support...' (Jason)

This very lengthy quote below from Richard vividly outlined the worries of someone who was single and living alone:

'I tell you what I miss really. Since my mother died, I often think there's nobody in the world who knows who I am or what I am doing so nobody would care... nobody would know if I was in a car crash... I often think if I had a heart attack and died or was helpless here, it would be days before I am found. Because at work, they just assume I had meetings that I forgot to put into my diary, so it would be several days before anybody would phone and then to phone, they wouldn't get an answer. They wouldn't come around straight away. There would be a few days of to and fro. I don't think anybody else has even got a key to get in with... neighbours I am not that close to... neighbours are quite friendly but we don't go into each other's houses. I think probably the woman next door notices the milk piling up on the step... and if the car was there and a bottle of milk was left everyday then she would probably work it out... but then if they found me... they wouldn't know who to ask to take care of the funeral... it's a bit embarrassing to think that if that happens to me they will say oh he kept himself to himself ... he didn't have anybody to look after him and that worries me a bit...

[T: I mean the thought that you just mentioned sounds a little bit scary.] Yeah it is. I mean the thing is it's alright if you are dead. It's if you are lying there helpless because you've had a stroke that's the scary thing (laughs)... but yeah nobody would know who to contact really. I had this trouble when I was competing in an event and I was filling a form in, and it asked for emergency contact. And I really struggled with that you know.' (Richard)

This fear of not having anyone to help to arrange funeral was also expressed by some older single gay men interviewed in an earlier study by Hostetler and Cohler (1997: 222).

Decreased perception of possibility of change

Some participants also felt that the possibility of entering into a relationship decreased as their life course progressed. This made them feel that the hope of changing an undesirable situation was beginning to diminish. This had largely to do with the perceived ageism in the gay world, as discussed in Chapters 2 and 6.

For example, Adam said when he was younger, despite not being in a relationship, he was still hopeful and ‘knew it was out there’. He said he knew that ‘the time would come’ for him. At the time of the interview, at 54, he felt that the possibility of finding a partner was getting smaller as he aged. He had been diagnosed with cancer and at the time of the interview he was receiving chemotherapy once a week and had been on anti-depressant regime. He said this had adversely affected his social life and consequently going out to meet potential partners became more difficult. As he had not developed any longer-term relationships in his 30s and 40s, the earlier confidence he displayed in his 20s also began to diminish.

Laurence’s story showed striking similarities. He did not reveal his sexual orientation to anyone until he was 28. He was unhappy about his sexuality, having received negative messages from family and society. He also perceived his body to be fat, and did not have very high self-esteem. When he was 28 he wanted to head for a change: he lost weight and felt much more self confident. He felt that he looked more physically attractive and started having many sexual partners. At one point he was ‘counting and colouring the map of the world’ to see the range of

his sexual partners' cultural backgrounds. He felt that he experienced a delayed adolescence. He felt quite positive about himself, and expected that a relationship would naturally develop itself:

'I wasn't so bothered about relationship really... I kind of expected that it would happen...' (Laurence)

Now in his 50s, he had only had a short relationship with a man 19 years younger than him whom he had met through advertising on the magazine *Gay Times*. He said he felt a bit 'left on the shelf'. He began to wonder whether he could cope with spending the rest of his life alone, especially when he saw people 'getting very lonely' and becoming reclusive as they get older', which he thought is 'not a very happy prospect'. This relates to the larger narrative of ageing and decline circulating in society. But he also began to lose confidence and question whether he would still be 'capable' of 'doing it':

'I have to ask myself: am I capable of having a partnership having now reached the age of 53(laughs) ... 53? And never had one... I have to ask myself: Am I used to not having partnerships? Would I be able to do it or not?' (Laurence)

He wondered whether people would become 'suspicious' of his 'relationship record':

'I think they would be suspicious with someone like me who has never had a good track record you know...' (Laurence)

It almost sounded as if he was afraid that his relationship history on his CV was not impressive enough. He thought he lacked a good proven track record of relationship and that it would affect how potential partners saw him.

Some participants found that their age brought extra concerns about forming relationships in later life. A few participants expressed the view that they had become more cautious with age. When they were younger they were more open to the idea of 'trial and error' when meeting people, but now as they got older they wanted to make sure that the relationship would have a higher chance of working before even contemplating starting it:

'I think the older you get, the more you want a relationship to work. And you don't see it as a sort of a couple of weeks' business. You're looking into something a bit more longer term than that.' (Hector)

Decreased availability of alternative sources of satisfaction

Some participants found that alternative sources of satisfaction became more difficult to find as their lives progressed. For example, Adam said he could handle drinks better when he was younger. He was fitter and bolder. He would try to go out and cruise, and get sex. He would create adverts and answer adverts. But no longer.

Some participants, who experienced retirement in later life, also found that after retirement being single became a more salient aspect of their lives. They felt their social connections had declined.

10.2 Master narrative increasingly insignificant

On the other hand, some other participants found that they were increasingly able to adapt and subvert the master narrative through the life course. They generally shared certain characteristics:

1. For them, the desire for relationship decreased as they got older, owing to a declining sex drive and feeling freed from social norms and expectations. They also ‘learned’ from their previous relationships that being with a partner may not always be satisfying. As a result, they talked about being single in the 20s and 30s as a not enjoyable experience, but in later life they became more content with being single,
2. As they became more content with being single, the possibility for change (entering into a relationship) also mattered less in later life,
3. At the same time, they were supported by an increased availability of alternative sources of satisfaction.

Decreased desire for entering into a relationship

Among the participants who felt increasingly able to adapt and subvert the master narrative, their desire for relationships decreased through their life course. Some felt that their sex drive dropped in later life. This is contentious as gerontologists have argued against the stereotype that sexuality necessarily declines with age, but

some participants did feel that being single became easier to live with because the difficulty of satisfying sexual needs without a partner was alleviated:

‘As you get older I think the sex drive goes anyway. That’s my experience. I think your sexual needs become less urgent.’ (Darren)

Some participants also said that their desire for entering into a relationship declined in later life because they felt freed from following social norms and expectations. They talked about how they felt more pressure to conform to social norms and expectations when they were younger. They highlighted the 20s and 30s, when they had not yet developed their career and identity, as a particularly difficult period. They found the master narrative dominating in their social surroundings, and the feeling that one had to partner up was immense. This echoes some earlier suggestions that singles felt the most stigma between the ages of 25 and 35 (Koropecky-Cox, Bluck and Pendell 2004 as in Koropecky-Cox 2005) as they found themselves in a ‘twilight zone’ when ‘they watch their married counterparts acquiring the trappings of a settled life’ (Schwartzberg, Berliner and Jacob 1995); and as they found themselves ‘still in that limbo – that you’re not settled’ (Davies 2003: 347). Seeing more friends and co-workers marry (Sharp and Ganong 2011: 966) was a very difficult experience. For example, Joseph said when he was in his 20s:

‘Almost everybody I knew was in their 20s. They were getting involved in relationships. I went to quite a few friends’ weddings. I think my feeling about being single was down here.’ (Joseph)

Malcolm also said in his 20s:

‘People were in sexual relationships by which I mean having a regular partner and living together for that matter... what we are talking about is the very late 60s, early 70s. It was much more usual for young people to have left home. It’s not like now people can’t afford to. So it was much more normal for young people to have left home, and to be living together in a partnership, so that would have been a lot more negative for me that period.’ (Malcolm)

Similarly, when Nic was 20 he was at university thinking he should be in a couple because a lot of his friends ‘met their husbands or wives at university’. He said there was a year in which he went to a wedding every week. He saw many students getting married before finals, and there was a three-week period when ‘all the girls were appearing in lectures with an engagement ring’. By comparison, he did not enjoy being single. After that he worked as a teacher. He felt he had to remain closeted because he perceived the school, especially the parents, to be homophobic. He said because of the work schedule, teachers inevitably tended to go around socializing with other teachers. Among the teachers ‘everybody was always sort of tending to couple up, and I thought that’s what I should be doing as well’. Seeing these other couples around him, in comparison how did it make him feel?

‘Isolated. Because people would quite often ask oh don’t you want to get married, don’t you want to have children? What do you answer to that? (laughs)

[T: And how did you answer then?]

I said oh yes when the time comes... We are talking about 1970s and 80s when it was dinner party heaven. All these parties you were invited to they’d say, well, bring somebody. Who am I going to bring? Of course by the end of the evening everybody couples off and you have not and you are on your own. So yes you do feel very negative about it...’ (Nic)

However, when Nic later moved on and started a new life after moving to the city where he was living at the time of the interview, he said he felt very much more content with being single:

‘So then we sort of moved into a different phase because I have now built up quite a group of gay friends who I see socially but I never have sex with them. But they are much more relaxed and I am much more relaxed about who I am...I think I have now got to the point where I feel very relaxed with being myself.’ (Nic)

Hence, on one hand, as he felt less social pressure from peer groups and he felt happier about himself, his desire for entering into a relationship decreased.

Some participants felt that they had learned from previous relationships and that made them less interested to form a relationship. For example, Justin did not seem to have enjoyed his previous relationships very much from the way he recalled them. One of his boyfriends had a very ‘intense personality’ he said. For example, he was a vegan and thought that the entire world should follow suit. He would accuse people of ‘committing murder’ if they were not vegan or vegetarian. According to Justin, this boyfriend managed to upset one of his friends ‘three times in less than 30 minutes’. Justin’s other boyfriend created a magazine for people who were interested in betting on horses, which was something Justin was not interested in at all. Eventually Justin did contribute some money to the project. The business did not work according to plan, nor did the relationship. After that, the last relationship Justin had was with a young man from Asia. Yet again there were different kinds of issues. His boyfriend did not have a high sex drive so the relationship did not work sexually. Nor did his boyfriend have a good command

of English, so communication was difficult – he would not say what he liked or disliked. Justin concluded his relationship history by remarking:

‘So I’ve been single since then. And I suppose when I’ve been in relationships it’s been nice. Things got into them and then towards the end I may be not be so keen on them because I felt a bit trapped or... restricted with freedom in various ways.’ (Justin)

Justin recognized that he had always been quite independent and came to the realization that he had to compromise in relationships, for example in terms of how to spend his time, which he found quite restrictive. He said he felt lonely when he was single in his 20s, but at the time of the interview, being single in his 40s, he did not feel lonely:

‘I suppose I came to appreciate that I would be just likely to feel lonely when I am in a relationship as I am not. Because relationship isn’t always going to be fulfilling on every level.’ (Justin)

After describing his previous unsatisfying relationships, Justin said although he was not against the idea of developing a relationship, he was not actively searching for one:

‘I just make my life as fulfilling as possible... and have strong and good contacts with people ... but not seeing a relationship as being the way, the ideal sort of scenario to be in... I now feel very happy with myself to be single. Which I didn't earlier.’ (Justin)

At one point he said he would be more careful, or choosy, when thinking about whether to enter into a new relationship or not:

‘[T: You use the word careful?]
Choosy I suppose. I wanted to be really sure particularly before I live with someone again.’ (Justin)

This alteration of relationship beliefs based on previous relationship experience was also displayed in Malcolm's narrative. Starting out on his first serious relationship, Malcolm took it for granted that he had met his boyfriend, only to discover that 'he was having sex with other boys'. When he thought he had met his second lover, he discovered that he was seeing somebody else and he felt 'devastated'. He thought that he was finally third time lucky when he met another man, started seeing more of him, and eventually fell in love with him. As soon as he fell in love, he discovered that, just like all the others, his partner was not faithful. Having been cheated a few times, when asked whether these relationships in anyway changed his feelings towards relationships, he answered:

'[The previous relationships] poisoned my... I think that's inevitable but I would say it was part of my education, my sentimental education, because I was very naïve...' (Malcolm)

Having 'burned his fingers', in his own words, he went on to say that:

'I am sceptical about what love means. If you can tell me what love means, I'd be most grateful to you...' (Malcolm)

The bubbles burst. Entering a relationship did not always end with 'living happily ever after'. That was what some of the participants learned through their earlier relationships. These 'realizations' about the possible downsides of relationships – the possibilities of being cheated, feeling lonely, trapped and restricted – 'taught' the participants that being in a relationship may not be a panacea that promises 'happiness', and thus being single became not necessarily a bad idea. As a result, some participants either became more cautious or less interested to enter new relationships. It can be argued that some of the research participants, having gone

through unsatisfying relationships, believed that ‘history will repeat itself’. For example Victor had the traumatic experience of losing his partners tragically, and had consequently built up defence mechanisms:

‘I think the important point for me was by this time... the two people I had been extremely close to... both had died. That sense of serious loss set up a defence structure with regard to oneself emotionally... and making one feel vulnerable and therefore cautious.

[T: Cautious?]

About future relationships.’ (Victor)

After talking about the relationships he referred to above, he said two latest short-term relationships he had had were markedly different in terms of his own emotional investment:

‘Different times together. The bereavement and pain... sort of emotional protecting oneself, closing down... I imagine. Keeping oneself safe.’
(Victor)

Distancing themselves from relationship involvement, perceived as a possible source of hurt, was seen by some participants as a way to ‘protect oneself’, ‘keep one safe’ or ‘prevent the harm’. This was like what Ben described as preventing himself from getting ‘emotionally smacked’ again after his first two relationships:

‘I just got hurt. It’s not my idea of fun. It’s too horrifying do you know what I mean?’ (Ben)

He described the third person he met as a ‘nice chap’ and said that the sex was fantastic, but emotionally he was not as deeply involved as he was with the two earlier ones:

‘I wasn’t going to let myself get that involved ever again. He was very persistent if you know what I mean. And I was flattered to a certain extent and I didn’t want to hurt his feelings. And I did like the guy but I wasn’t in love with him as deep. Sex was fantastic but the heart wasn’t there... Just let the flow go, and see how it goes. Don’t hurt anybody but don’t... just see how it goes. But didn’t let it get to me... too much. It was very superficial. The heart wasn’t there because I wouldn’t let it.’ (Ben)

For some participants, all these factors led to the decrease in desire to enter into a relationship as their lives progressed.

Possibility of change no longer significant

As the participants felt that the desire to entering into a relationship declined in later life, the possibility of change also became less of an issue. Being single was seen as less of an undesirable state, so there was less incentive to change it.

Increased availability of alternative sources of satisfaction

At the same time, the participants were supported by the availability of alternative sources of satisfaction. Some participants found that it actually became easier for them to find casual sex in later life as an alternative means of satisfaction. Unlike some other participants who highlighted ageism in the gay world, Justin felt that more people found him attractive at 50 at the time of the interview compared to in his 40s:

‘[when you are in your 40s] you’re not old enough for people to see you as a mature guy... (laughs) and there are some guys who like mature guys. It feels like you are invisible in your 40s.’ (Justin)

Nic also said that in his 50s he realized that there was a 'market' for gay men of 'different shapes and sizes':

'I just suddenly, in my early 50s, realized that there are quite a lot of quite young gay men who really liked older men. And were really turned on... and that even in gay films you will see an incredible range of different types... One of the things I discover now getting to this age is in gay world, there is a market for everybody. But I didn't realize that. When I was in my 30s I thought you had to look a particular way. But now I know that there are some men who like older men and it's not just the money, they just like older men. There are some people who like hairy men. There are some people who like smooth men. I didn't realize that but that is the case.' (Nic)

Research has shown that the 'third age' or the 'young old' (discussed in Chapter 3) is a time purportedly characterized by flexible roles and freedom of expression (Laslett 1989). The case studies below show that some participants felt singlehood became easier to live with when they became more content with themselves as a person. This was achieved through developing acceptance of one's sexual identity and through therapy and spiritual practices.

A positive track of identity development through the life course thus seems to be of crucial importance in influencing how the participants' experience of being single changed. This will be illustrated by the case studies presented below.

Developing acceptance of sexual identity: the case of Nic

Nic worked as a teacher. He said he was celibate in his 20s to 30s until one day a pupil came to his house to see him. He gave his student a cup of tea. He said his

student then 'just came on to him'. He said it was 'a bit unfortunate' but he could not resist it because by that time he had not had sex for about 15 years.

In his mid-30s he had a chance to change to a different career. He also moved to live in another city. Being 'a long way away from people he knew', he felt very much liberated. He visited a gay club for the first time, and afterwards spent virtually every night in different clubs. He then embarked on a whole series of one-night stands. He posted personal advertisements in magazines and local newspapers, met up with people, had sex and then never saw them again. In each of the two years 1988 and 1989 he had probably had about 50 different partners, sometimes three or four at the same time. He said he almost became an addict at that point.

After a while he became dissatisfied with going out and 'going through the same routine' meeting people. He said it had reached the point where the same people were answering his advert or he found he was answering an advert posted by someone he had met before. He then started hiring rent boys.

In his 50s he moved to where he lived at the time of the interview. He said he now loved being single and really enjoyed it. He said he was really happy being on his own: 'It's got to that point I don't want to get into that at all'.

He said he was much more self-conscious when he was younger. He said he felt much more self-conscious visiting the places discussed in Chapter 9 on his own

when he was younger, but at the time of the interview it was different – he would even start a conversation with people around him:

‘Now I seem to have developed this ... sometimes I would go to an art exhibition on my own... and I’d be standing... I would start a conversation with somebody... sometimes they look at me a bit startled but most of the time people will respond.’ (Nic)

He also realized that he had a lot to offer other people:

‘I did feel for a long time I didn’t really have much to give... I was very negative about myself... my self image... my abilities. I didn’t feel I was good at my job. I didn’t feel I was good.’ (Nic)

He said his experience of being single was at the time of the interview ‘very very positive’, because he was happy. He used to find Christmas a difficult time to spend on his own, but no longer:

‘Christmas for example was always a problem. Because people would say what he’s doing on Christmas... I said not much and people said oh that’s sad and that would make me sad... and last Christmas I got a lot of invitations. Now I actually quite like staying on my own because I can decide what I am going to do...

[T: So when it was difficult then during Christmas so how did you deal with it?]

Usually pretending that it didn’t happen... so I wouldn’t put up decorations or Christmas tree.

[T: Make it less Christmas like?]

Yeah just like any other day of the year... whereas now I do have a Christmas tree. I do because I am happy. I can cope with it. I think we all go through phases don’t we?’ (Nic)

For Nic, through developing a positive identity of himself, spending Christmas alone was an issue in the past, but no longer. Being single had also been an issue, but not anymore.

Developing acceptance of sexual identity: the case of Simon

In Simon's case, being more comfortable with his own sexual identity throughout his life course meant that he also became more accepting of himself. This in turn meant he was more content with being single.

His journey started with his first sexual experience at the age of ten. His brother, who was three years older than him, according to Simon, 'got a thrill out of letting him see his body'. They 'played around' a bit. From that time he knew he was attracted to other boys, not girls. In his 20s and 30s he was engaged in casual sex with men but never formed a serious relationship. In his 30s he had a few girlfriends but found it a difficult experience, especially sexually. When he was 40, his then girlfriend wrote him a letter saying that she had had 'an awful secret' that she needed to tell him – she was in love with another woman. He wrote back to say that he also had got a confession to make. Subsequently he began to come out to more and more people.

He said that, strangely, when he was 30 he was starting to feel old. He felt the need to knock ten years off his age on his profile when trying to date other men. He thought he was 'running out of time'. He was feeling very desperate: 'Everybody who showed any interest, I immediately thought in terms of being a boyfriend for life'. He then began a journey of soul-searching and eventually reached a stable psychological state:

'I reached a lovely position where I actually I could look at the mirror and say look... just enjoy what the day has in store for you. If you end up

single you end up single... just enjoy it... just be yourself. And my attitude changed over a very short period of time.' (Simon)

He said coming out had helped him to accept himself. Throughout his 20s and 30s he would be very quick to deny that he was gay whenever he was challenged or there was even a slight hint that he might be gay. Not coming out meant that he felt there was something trapped inside him. Before coming out he felt 'a bit like a pervert', 'a bit strange', 'different', 'unaccepted', 'unclean, just like in the middle ages' whereas:

'When you come out within yourself you cleanse yourself. It's a bit spiritual. I suppose it is just spiritual. The spirit has been freed. And then suddenly you don't feel self-conscious about being on your own.' (Simon)

Before coming out, he said he was constantly thinking about how he would be evaluated by other people. He said he felt very self-conscious all the time:

'I'd be walking on the street on my own and thinking everyone is looking at you. Thinking oh he's strange. Nobody's looking at me. Going to restaurant I'd be thinking I mustn't sit here looking miserable and people think I am feeling sad... nobody's looking, nobody's looking.' (Simon)

He also learned how to smile. He said he had not known how to smile before.

Once in his 30s he went with a friend to a gay bar and a rather sexy man looked at him so he smiled back. But the man ran away. His friend told him that he had 'frightened a life out of the sexy guy'. He said at that time his smile was introverted, reserved and almost reluctant. He said the difficulty of smiling probably had to do with his shame about his sexuality:

'It's because if you smile at a male, it's an admission that you are gay... we know that's rubbish but that's what was going on inside me ... I

mustn't show anybody that I am gay. As I became more and more settled as a gay person, now I just smile... so what? And you get some lovely reactions.' (Simon)

He said as a whole, through the process of ageing also came acceptance of his own identity:

'I think the overall picture emerged ... for 40 years a sexuality which is very suppressed or repressed actually ... gradually only a couple of years to be able to proudly say I am gay. Not that I spread it on headlines but quite happy to say I am gay... to a situation now where I feel totally comfortable about my sexuality... I don't care who knows. And I feel totally relaxed about my value as a person. How far have I travelled in the last 20 years? Travelled a long way. Before that a very insecure individual... very insecure... and insecurity can lead to... emotionalism... being a bit emotional... and I am emotional now but I am emotional in a different way... emotional in a different way...' (Simon)

As a result, his life was affected less by being single in later life. He said when he was younger he was much more conscious of how other people thought about him when he went on his own to the social places discussed in Chapter 9:

'[in my] early 30s they had one of the Disney cartoons on... I think it was... 101 Dalmatians, something, was on. It was the last day or something ... I left work early and went to the late afternoon performance and it was in half term which is why it was on... and I sat among all these kids with their mothers and I didn't enjoy the film very much because I could feel these mothers all looking at me thinking I was a dirty old man... that's why I was there. And that's put me off going to the cinema on my own.' (Simon)

However, at the time of the interview in his 50s he said he no longer cared so much:

'I just do it. I don't feel self-conscious on my own anymore... sitting in a restaurant on my own, I don't feel as if everybody was looking at me like I used to.' (Simon)

Through counselling, therapy and spiritual practice: the case of Philip

Philip said that throughout the years he had grown more comfortable with himself through counselling, therapy and developing spiritual practices.

He did not have a very sweet memory of his childhood. He recalled a lot of tension in the family between his father and mother. He also remembered that he had been physically bullied at school. Sometimes other pupils tried to pull his trousers down. At other times he would find his briefcase in the lavatory with his things scattered around. The briefcase his father gave him for passing the 11th grade was broken in that way. An older boy helped him and was almost a hero for him. That was the time when he began to realize he might be gay. However, he did not feel able to come out to anyone at all.

He spent a brief spell teaching, but did not enjoy it. In his late 20s he changed direction to work in other settings. After that he worked for a friend who was engaged in fraudulent financial deals. That turned out to be a disastrous experience and ended with his being imprisoned for seven months:

‘The shock of it was enormous. That was really quite a horrendous experience and as a result of that I decided to find out how I got there, what was my journey...’ (Philip)

He said curiously the experience had done him good:

‘And Tung it was the best thing paradoxically to happen...
[T: Why did you say paradoxically it was ...]’

It was the best thing because basically it was a slap in the face. Take a look at what you are doing to your life.’ (Philip)

After spending time in prison, he decided that he needed to ‘sort his life out’. He underwent three years of counselling and nine years of therapy. He gradually came out in his 40s. After that he began to practise Buddhism. He said learning about the nature of the impermanence of the material world made him abandon hatred and delusion. He said all this had taught him to let go of the past:

‘Again part of the teaching is about letting go. So for me it’s about letting go physical stuff... so I am having physical clearout... letting go emotional stuff... and if you let that go you have the universe fill you. I am letting go. [T: What does that mean?]
Letting go of past feelings and thoughts. I am having a mental and emotional clearout and a physical clearout. Letting stuff go that I don’t want.’ (Philip)

What were the things from the past that he wanted to get rid of? They included a closeted, unhappy and isolated self:

‘Actually I feel quite sad for that person if I am looking back. Me, thinking of me that person then, felt quite sad for him that he had such potential, and he was closed in himself. And there was really no one to help him open out. As the body deteriorates you get more able to live a life... and they always say youth is wasted on the young don’t they.’ (Philip)

Growing older was not seen as something to be resented, but as a process that brought with it useful realisations. I asked how he felt about the change in the experience of being single as he aged:

‘I feel I am growing into my skin when my body is wanting to let go (laughs)... I think it’s acceptance of how things are. I think you can get really angry about things as they are and want to change that. A friend of mine doesn’t want to get old. She’s 65 next year, she wants to be 20... she

hates getting old. I have a sense of this is how it is. This is the way it is. Let's just accept it and work with it, not against it.' (Philip)

He said at the time the interview took place he had started exercising, swimming, walking, doing yoga and 'doing all those sorts of things' again. He was 'starting to get out there and meet people'. He said now that he was getting older he felt that he had permission to be himself, liberated from others' expectations:

'When I was 50, one of my friends said to me do you feel different? I said no and another friend said you will feel different. And I think back that's absolutely true. Because when you turn 50 you have the permission to be yourself. And you realize that you live your life more for yourself than for other people, their expectations of you... When you get to 50, you just say fuck off... I am doing it for me... that's the crudest way I can describe it.' (Philip)

He said that now, in his 50s, he finally felt that he was 'growing into himself':

'I am getting used to hearing my voice, not shut up you stupid idiot and doing all that internal critic's stuff. It's getting a different sense of who I am, and how I value myself. How I see myself in the context rather than having all the internalized depression, being hypercritical, that internalized stuff from my family of origin that's not mine anymore. That I can let it all go. So getting a sense of who I am... And the more I let go, the more I can allow whatever my purpose is.

[T: What is...]

I am here to heal. This is my purpose, to be healing... and I have a very healing presence.' (Philip)

All these were aided by his spiritual practices. At the time of interview he had practised Buddhism for nearly ten years, and had been going to retreats for six years. For the past four years, he had been going to retreats three times a year. At the time of the interview, he had made the decision to not engage in masturbation and he felt his strength was growing enormously. He said a useful percept from one of the nuns in the monastery he went to was about being *hopeless*:

‘The talk was hope is an illusion... isn’t that an interesting title and the crux of the talk was... the best way to live a life is to be consciously hopeless... and live in the moment to whatever life is... So I could frame my life, and I have all sorts of hope about how it might be, but I know that being present here and now is perfect. And that’s how I live my life now.’ (Philip)

To look at Philip’s story as a whole, not only the nun, but also his experience of prison and the many years of soul-searching have taught him important life lessons. Applied to being single, this teaching of being ‘consciously hopeless’ that Philip received was also very useful. Some people who were involuntarily single might see partnership as the ideal, and constantly hope for the chance to connect with ‘the one’. The present could be seen as a state to be resented, or at least, less than ideal. Trying to follow the spiritual teaching, Philip lived in a hopeless state, being open to whatever life presented to him. The focus, instead of the future possibility of finding a partner, was on the present:

‘This is perfect. This is perfect. This is all there is. There is nothing else. When it finishes there is something else as there will be for you as there will be for me. I’ll go and catch the bus you’ll go and do something whatever you are going to be doing and that’s that. At this moment this is perfect so if I live the Dharma teaching then I am content. It’s when I become quite ego driven that’s all about delusion and that’s when suffering occurs.’ (Philip)

The reference point to compare ‘now’ with then vanished. What became apparent was that this psychological resource did not just happen, but needed to be worked at. In a way, all these years throughout his life, getting older actually added more compost to the stock that allowed him grow:

‘Nothing is wasted, Tung. Everything is compost if you like. From which the cherry tree grows. Everything is compost.’ (Philip)

With this mentality he said he did not like my question about whether he felt happy about being single. He said for him ‘happy’ and ‘unhappy’ were not very helpful words:

‘These are not very helpful words though are they? These are words that I don’t use generally speaking. They are very loaded, culturally driven. How about comfortable and uncomfortable? Just a thought.’ (Philip)

He said at the time of interview in his 50s, he felt very much content with being single. He said that if 5 was the full mark, he would rate his current state of being single as 4.5.

Through therapy and spiritual practice: the case of Victor

Victor said that throughout his life course, he had grown more content with himself. This was largely achieved through therapy and spiritual practices.

When he was younger he lost a few partners to different illnesses. Therapeutically he said he ‘had done a huge amount of work’ on the meaning of relationships. He said it allowed him to ‘come to the gratitude and the gifts given’, ‘work through’ and ‘let go of the aspects of negativity’. He said at the time of the interview, when he looked back on his previous relationships, ‘what remains is the contribution of loving and the energy to the heart’. He had practised Buddhist meditation for about 20 years. He described that after the many years of spiritual practice there was now a latent monk living within him:

‘Buddhism speaks of where one goes for ultimate refuge... what we die for... It doesn’t mean you can’t be in relationship and be a Buddhist, but there’s something about the single solitary individual practitioner who’s gradually withdrawing from certain aspects from the world. Who is trying to consume a little less in every possible way and determined to do no harm... and then for the monks themselves of course by definition to withdraw from sexual practice, with good intentions to use that energy more to further their spiritual practice.’ (Victor)

The practice of Buddhism allowed Victor to feel comfortable about getting a bit less, becoming a bit detached and forgoing desires. Wanting to find a partner then became a component of the worldly desires that perhaps should be taken less seriously and be relinquished. Not being with a partner allowed him to channel his energy into other directions:

‘... retaining and redirecting a lot of our energies, particularly sexual energy and applying all those in a more benevolent sort of way... love and kindness in themselves and others they come into contact with... at some level there’s the definition of singleness there but I think in actual fact if anything more potential for connectedness with others I suppose. Deriving more benefit for self and others. If you put all the energy into just one basket, relationship, which is by its nature very unstable and not a safe refuge. One party’s either to go and die first.’ (Victor)

He further said he found it delightful to have a small circle of close friends that he saw as regularly as he could. In that way he said he had the energy and time to derive satisfaction not from one relationship but ‘many relationships spreading around a circle of friends, family and wider’. Also he saw being single as allowing him to give more energy to care for his elderly mother, who was unwell at the time of interview. It also allowed him to cultivate better friendships.

He said he was not opposed to the idea of forming relationships:

‘The joy of that is when you do actually meet somebody one can almost enter directly into a relationship. And there is lovely freedom in that companionship because I am looking after myself and you know that. You are looking after yourself and I know that. Doesn’t mean we don’t help each other from tripping over from time to time. But there’s a lot of freedom and companionship in that... I am blessed that quite a lot of my friendships do feel like that. You don’t go and live in each other’s pockets not texting each other 24 hours per day thank goodness. But there is a connection and it’s a free one... it’s a non-dependent one. And it can be very loving and very supportive and very contributory... to helping ourselves long term.’ (Victor)

Taking all of the above together, I asked whether spiritual practices had made a difference to how he felt about being single. He said:

‘One word answer: absolutely. Huge influence. It’s hard to expand any more.’ (Victor)

This chapter has shown the diverse trajectories through which the participants’ experience changed through their life courses. The findings show again how a heteronormative life course model fails to capture gay men’s lives. For example, coming out plays a significant part in a gay man’s life, and as shown in this chapter some talked about experiencing delayed adolescence in their 40s or 50s. This yet again exposes the inadequacies of a ‘standard life course model’.

The participants’ experience through the life course was moderated by a change in the combination of three factors: desire to enter into a relationship, perceived possibility of change, and availability of alternative sources of satisfaction.

Contrary to previous research, the findings show that not all singles went through similar changes in their experience through the life course. Some participants did feel that the experience of being single became more difficult, whereas others felt

that being single became more positive in later life. They described the benefits of getting older, and in the course of their lives they were able to craft new identities for themselves.

Part 4 Conclusions and futures

Chapter 11: Conclusions

In this final chapter I discuss the research findings and highlight how they contribute to the relevant research literature. I reflect on some limitations of the thesis, propose a list of topics for further research, and suggest the potential for knowledge exchange.

To recap: this thesis set out to add to the sociological understanding of older single gay men, who constitute a research gap in the sociology of ageing and life course and the sociology of sexualities and intimacies. It aims to explore at the discursive level how older gay men subjectively interpret and assign meanings to their lives as singles. A set of interrelated research questions was developed:

1. How do older single gay men interpret and assign meanings to their lives in later life? How do dominant ways of thinking affect these meaning-making processes?
2. What are the mediating factors in such meaning-making processes?
3. How do the meanings that single gay men attach to being single change over the life course?

11.1 Returning to the research questions

Research question 1: How do older single gay men interpret and assign meanings to their lives in later life? How do dominant ways of thinking affect these meaning-making processes?

This thesis found that the master narrative privileging couplehood is powerful and pervasive, as discussed in Chapter 5. This master narrative, heavily influenced by heteronormativity, effectively positions couples as more respectable than singles, and couplehood as more enjoyable than singlehood. It undoubtedly informed and at times overshadowed the ways in which the older single gay men understood their lives.

However, the thesis findings testify to Foucault's notion that 'where there is power, there is resistance' (1978: 95-96). The older gay men in this study did not only conform to (Chapter 6) but also contested the hegemonic taken-for-granted understanding (Ewick and Silbey 1995) about singles (Chapters 7 and 8). This thesis highlights in particular at the discursive level how the participants actively redefined and reinterpreted the meanings of singlehood 'given' in society. They did not only adopt, but also adapted, and even subverted, the master narrative.

As discussed in chapter 7, they adapted to and adapted the master narrative by:

1. Focusing on the possibility of change.
2. Accepting and coming to terms with singlehood.
3. Developing alternative sources of satisfaction.
4. Externalizing the reasons for singlehood.
5. Questioning the implicit link between partnership and happiness.

As discussed in Chapter 8, they subverted the master narrative by:

1. Claiming to be single by choice
2. Attacking the message and the messenger

3. Assigning new meanings to singlehood by carefully noting its positive aspects.

Faced with an ‘identity dilemma’ (Charmaz: 1994), the participants embarked on a narrative quest (Ricoeur 1991). The stories presented in this thesis can be read as narratives of resistance (Engel 1993) or ‘counter narratives’, ‘the little stories of those individuals and groups whose knowledge and histories have been marginalized... or forgotten in the telling of official narratives’ (Peters and Lankshear 1996: 2). The participants’ stories did not only resort to and corroborate, but also resist and subvert, socioculturally dominant master narratives of relationships (Bamberg and Andrews 2004).

The stories displayed in Chapters 7 and 8 are localized resistance and contestations. They are ‘tiny micro-movements of resistance, barely perceptible, even invisible or covert – quiet stealthy masquerades resistant to categorization and definition’ (Piles 1997: 29) given to singles in society. They took place ‘in a myriad of disorganized and spontaneous ways on a daily basis’ (Westwood 2002: 135) at the personal and discursive level. Hence, this thesis argues that singles’ agency which has been understated by some previous research, needs to necessarily be acknowledged.

The stories recorded in this study are not extra-ordinary. But indeed it is the stories’ mundaneness that shows the participants were, in Weeks’ words, making sexual history in their everyday life:

We are the makers of sexual history, in our everyday lives, in our life experiments, in the tangle between desire, responsibility, contingency and opportunity. We may not make it in circumstances entirely of our own choosing, but we have more choice than we often believe or seize. (Weeks 2000: vii)

It might be argued that the agency the participants displayed was nothing more than false consciousness. Indeed the adapting and subverting efforts discussed in this thesis remain at a discursive level. The singles have not organized themselves in any overt political manner to challenge the system that privileges couplehood, and there were no hints that they were going to do anything like that in the near future to overthrow the system. Am I simply romanticizing the agency the participants possess? However, such reading may risk overemphasizing wider social structures of oppression and marginalize the older gay men's subjectivities (Haywood and Mac an Ghaill 2003: 11). I argue that it is important to acknowledge singles' agency but at the same time not to over-romanticize some difficulties they may face.

Indeed, there were often ambivalence, contradictions and uncertainties in the participants' meaning-making processes. Their adapting and subverting efforts were not easily accomplished and indeed may not always 'succeed'. This is similar to earlier research findings that 'moments of ambivalence' prevailed in singles' story-telling (Budgeon 2008: 317). The participants who expressed a desire to leave singlehood and enter into a relationship often showed ambivalence, saying that there were too many things preventing them from doing so. Some said that they did not have the courage to make the move, did not think they would succeed or were fearful of rejection. Some also said that they felt too comfortable

having their own space and were not sure whether they would like to break their routines:

‘I haven’t really met my sort of ideal partner.

[T: Would that be the ideal for you... partnership?]

Obviously it’s sort of ideal. But on the other hand I don’t think that I could be comfortable living in close proximity with someone all the time...

[T: Why?]

Because I get a bit irritated. And always if I got someone around obviously I liked to look best and I’d probably be a bit scared...’ (Jason)

‘I think I am quite solitary by nature. It’s nice to have somebody’s company who I like but it’s also nice when they go away (laughs). There’s sort of tension there isn’t there? There’s a kind of relief I feel when people decide that they are ready to go.’ (Darren)

‘The thing with ageing is that you become set in your way ... and I virtually lost interest.’ (Darren)

‘I think it would be quite hard, I think, now for me to just to have a relationship with somebody who moved in here or vice versa. I mean it’s a small house anyway. But it would be something I’ve never done before and I’d struggle with it I think.’ (Richard)

At the same time the participants were also often unsure whether they had really made up their minds not to welcome anyone into their life at all. For example, Malcolm’s stories contained many elements of adapting and subverting the master narrative (Chapters 7 and 8). But towards the end of the interview he said that he went through a crisis after he had met a younger man at a sauna:

‘I went through a crisis. I went through a crisis. It’s probably about three and a half, three years ago. I got picked up by this young guy and we had sex in the club. And he came on quite strongly to me, and he was talking about relationships, and wanting to settle down that sort of stuff. And I thought, oh god, I don’t want to get into this. And I rejected him and that was fine. And then after about three weeks, I suddenly wanted him. I thought: What had I done? There was this cute young guy, and we had sex, and it was good, and I’ve kind of dumped him. It’s my last chance ever to have a relationship... and so I had this crisis. Having not wanted to be in a relationship but it’s kind of forced in my face and I thought, god, I rejected

him and he's kind of a young lad, and it's gonna be fabulous and everything. And I was really upset about it, and I started going to this club regularly. I hadn't been going there regularly before I met him, but I started going there regularly, hoping that I might see him again, and all that sort of stuff. I tried to track him down. Unfortunately I didn't have a clue I only knew his first name. I kind of really panicked about it.'
(Malcolm)

He continued by saying that this experience made him question himself:

'And that was quite bad. And I began to think: what's going on with you? Because you got to that point in your life where you are happy about being not in a relationship. But I think it's like, it's kind of like, somebody who has said I am not bothered about being rich, I've got enough money to get on with. And then suddenly they find this pot of gold and they think, well, I am not bothered about being rich, chuck it away and then three weeks later, they think: I must be mad, I could have all that money. It corrupted me. And so that was a bad crisis for me.' (Malcolm)

Victor said he was very fortunate that except for a friend or two who would approach the subject very gently out of concern, his family and friends and neighbours and acquaintances did not really exert any pressure on him to form relationships, he said, or 'if they did they did a great job of hiding it'. However, towards the end of the interview he said there was one person who still brought the question up from time to time:

'One obvious person that fairly regularly brings it up and checks it out with me is of course...
[T: You.]
Me. Myself.
[T: Yeah. What does he say?]
Are you sure? Are you sure this is right for you? Are you happy? Is this really what you want?' (Victor)

This showed that the efforts of adapting and subverting the master narrative involved a huge amount of work and were not always an easy task.

Research question 2: What are the mediating factors in such meaning-making processes?

The participants' narratives serve to challenge reductionist views of singles. By showing how different singles 'work with' their being single in a variety of ways, this thesis also highlights the diversity among singles, which has generally been oversimplified by previous research. It rejects any overly-deterministic claims about how singles would feel about their lives. Intersectionality is not an option, but a must, when we come to understand singles' lives.

As Heaphy (2007) argued, differential access to resources leads to 'uneven possibilities of reworking and/or undoing of cultural meanings and social practices'. It was also noted that 'real crisis competence' among older gay men was related to 'good health, social class advantage, and exchange power, often enhanced by alliance with a significant other' (Lee 1987: 60). Here I need to remark that it is important to note that cultural, social and economic resources (Heaphy 2008: 3.5) were influential in the older single gay men's lives in this study. In this study, there were structural constraints in the participants' storytelling. Physical health, social health, and psychological health played the most influential part in what kind of stories they told.

Physical health: Those who had better physical health generally told stories that were more akin to adapting and subverting the master narrative. The independence that being physically fit afforded made a big difference to how they felt. We can contrast these two excerpts below, one from Ben who was 62 and felt

healthy at the time of the interview, and the other from Robert, aged 73, the oldest participant in the sample, who talked about his worry about the future of care:

‘I am happy with living alone, being outside a relationship. As long as my health is good and I can go out for a drink and see people and meet people and have interests and everything else, I am really quite happy.’ (Ben)

‘Now aged 73, it’s absolutely fine. But I have concerns about the future. I wonder what will happen to me as I get older, what if I became ill or old and frail, who would look after me? That’s really quite a worry...’
(Robert)

However, health was structured not only along the line of age. As in Adam’s case discussed before, it could also have to do with self-esteem. As he was not happy about himself, he did not take care of himself well. He had also unexpectedly developed cancer.

Lee (1987) reported that the most powerful indicator of satisfaction in later life for both gay and heterosexual older people was ‘excellent health’. Physical health also affected social health and therefore also psychological health. Again in the case of Adam, receiving treatment for his cancer meant that he could not go out as much as he wanted. This made him feel sad and unhappy about being single. Physical health may not be available for all.

Social health: Pahl (2000) described friendships as the intimate relationships of the 21st century. As discussed in Chapter 2, it has been argued that friends play an especially important role in gay men’s lives. The recognition of families of choice has been an important breakthrough in the research literature to reconceptualize LGBT people’s social networks. Among the older LGBT people Heaphy et al. (2004) interviewed, no fewer than 96 per cent of women and 94 per cent of men

considered friendships ‘important’ or ‘very important’. A large majority (76 per cent of women and 84 per cent of men) also felt that friendships became more important as they got older. Dorfman, Walters, Burke, Hardin, Karanik, Raphael and Silverstein (1995) found that the most significant difference between heterosexuals and non-heterosexuals aged over 60 was that the latter relied more on ‘friendship families’ for support.

Similarly, social connection has been argued to be an important mediating factor in how singles felt (Chapter 2). For example, in Budgeon’s (2008) study of younger singles of different sexual identities, positive single identities were very much constituted through friendships.

In this thesis, the participants who adapted and subverted the master narrative were those who were better socially connected. As discussed in Chapter 7, those who lived with flatmates saw them as providing substitute as an alternative source of satisfaction.

However, social connection may not be available for all older single gay men. Although the sample does not include enough research participants from the rural area for systematic comparison, living in a rural or urban location did seem to suggest differences in terms of how singlehood was experienced, because of the social connections available. The participant who lived in a semi-rural small town, said travelling to the nearest city was just a bit too far for him. He said that this made him feel more ‘single’:

‘I think you feel more lonely here. More single. I think the experience is worse because there are fewer support structures, things like reading groups. In metropolitan areas there are more opportunities to meet other single men... single gay men in a non-sexual environment than there are in towns like this, so I think it is harder here.’ (Richard)

Wealth could also influence the social connections available to the older single gay men. Gathering a family of choice was not as easy or as unbound as some of the research literature has suggested. When Justin, Joseph, Harry said that having flatmates around made a huge difference to their experience of being single, they all owned and managed the houses that they were living in. Economic resources were needed to provide them with such a living arrangement.

As discussed above, physical health could also influence social health. Vincent for example, had had two heart attacks and was suffering from severe arthritis. He said now he did not go out a lot socially.

Psychological health: However, the interesting to note is that while a certain level of physical health and social health (supported by wealth) is needed for a single person to feel contented, merely having health and wealth *per se* does not guarantee a single person’s happiness. This is embodied in the quote we have seen in Chapter 9 from Henry:

‘It seems the whole world... in the restaurants and bars and so on, everyone is with someone else. Everyone is so happy with a group of friends. Because you are getting a false idea. Not everyone is perpetually out every night. It’s not the whole population. It’s only the people who are out at a party or dinner and having a nice time. But you know it seems I am the only person in the world who’s on his own and that makes me

really sad. I feel really miserable. Why am I on my own? And in fact I am often thinking to myself why am I single you know. I am a good person, I am nice person, I am healthy, wealthy and wise... My health is perfectly good... not exactly wealthy but very comfortable, I am a millionaire... I am educated, I am not an idiot, so those things healthy, wealthy and wise I've got those to an extent. I should be a good catch! They should be queuing up at the door to go out with me and I often think: Why not? Why not? Why am I on my own?' (Henry)

This showed that, more important still, was the participants' outlook and self-esteem. That influenced their desire for relationships, confidence that there would be possibility of change and whether they felt able to develop alternative sources of satisfaction. The participants' outlook and self-esteem were in turn structured by earlier life experience, including their identity development (Chapter 6), current social locations, such as age (Chapter 7), and also their life course trajectories (Chapter 10).

Chapter 9 has discussed another mediating factor in the participants' meaning-making processes – that the older single gay men's story-telling changed with reference to different social spaces and timings.

In terms of social spaces, some participants found it especially hard to adapt and subvert the master narrative in restaurants, cinemas and theatres, as they perceived these social settings as 'not appropriate' for singles to go to on their own.

Likewise, they found it difficult to be on their own during certain timings of the year, and resorted to adopting the master narrative. The first such occasion was when they perceived 'all other people out there' were having a good time with their partner, such as holidays, Valentine's Day, Christmas, weekends, birthdays, and family gatherings. The second instance was when 'things go wrong'.

It suggests that instead of asking a general question about how singles feel, it is more useful to understand how singles feel in different social spaces and at different timings. This will generate more meaningful understanding about singles' experiences.

Research question 3: How do the meanings that single gay men attach to being single change over the life course?

Chapter 10 has highlighted how singles' experience changes through their life courses. There were two directions of the change in the significance of master narrative in the participants' life courses. For some participants, the master narrative became increasingly dominant throughout their life courses, whereas for others, the master narrative became less significant, with adapting and subverting taking place more obviously. These two directions reflect the distinct personal and social journeys that they have travelled. The direction of change was mediated by the desire for entering into a relationship, the perceived possibility of change, and the availability of alternative sources of satisfaction.

11.2 Contributions to the research literature on singlehood

This research has successfully recruited 25 older gay men whose experience of singlehood has previously received next to no attention. The participants came from diverse backgrounds and included an older gay man who had undergone sex change operations, older gay men who were disabled and many older gay men who had come out much later in life. They lived in a range of geographical

locations throughout England. Many were less connected to the gay scene than those recruited in earlier studies. This thesis can thus be considered to have achieved its goal to expand the research literature on singlehood by including older single gay men in the discussions.

It has proved worthwhile for the research to focus specifically on older gay men's experience of being single. Although their experience shows similarities with that of single women in earlier studies, substantial differences could also be detected.

Similar to single women, the older single gay men lived in a social environment dominated by the master narrative of coupledness, as discussed in Chapter 5. Older single gay men faced social stigma as single women did (DePaulo and Morris 2005, Byrne and Carr 2005, Reynolds and Taylor 2005). They also faced constant pressure from people around them about why they had stayed single. The pervasiveness of heteronormativity meant that many older gay men were assumed to be heterosexual by their peers, and therefore expected to follow the heterosexual norms of marriage and family (e.g. see the case of Ben in Chapter 5). Even if they had made themselves known to be gay (e.g. in the case of Patrick as discussed in Chapter 5), the participants' friends still wanted to introduce them to other people so that they could 'settle down'.

The negative and positive implications of being single (as discussed in Chapter 6 and 8) that older single gay men narrated did not seem to differ too much from those that single women spoke about in earlier studies. These aspects centred on freedom and independence, taking care of oneself, the need for emotions and

intimacy, and lack of a regular sex partner (although this last one seems to have been more pronounced in the older gay men's narratives). The particular discomfort of being single at different timings and various social locations discussed in Chapter 9 may also well apply to single women, although it needs to be investigated further.

However, older gay men have experienced very different earlier life events, compared with single women. As discussed in Chapters 2 and 7, the older gay men in this study came of age at a time when homosexuality was still criminalized. Many had to stay in the closet and came out only much later in their lives. This had lingering influences on their identity development and affected their relationship formation in a variety of ways. Other historical events such as the gay liberation, the emergence of HIV/AIDS also influenced the ways in which they perceived relationships (Chapter 7). Some older gay men drew on the gay liberation discourse against patriarchy as a way of attacking the master narrative of coupledness in society (Chapter 8).

The older gay men in this study also experienced particular difficulties in finding a partner. Because of the emphasis in the gay culture on youth and beauty, many participants viewed their bodies in negative terms and suffered poor self-esteem because they were not happy with the way they looked. They thought that older gay men's bodies were marginalized in the gay community and considered the possibility of finding a partner to be low. This was especially so among those participants who showed a preference for younger gay men as potential partners.

Being gay seemed simultaneously to allow the participants to have more and fewer alternative sources of satisfaction other than relationships. ‘Families of choice’ were developed in many older single gay men’s lives and many of them described how friends and flatmates played a crucial role in influencing their experience of being single. Compared with single women in earlier studies, the older gay men in this thesis also seemed to talk more readily about satisfying sexual needs by cruising and setting up casual encounters over the internet. Some of them had also developed long-term visiting sexual relationships. However, some of them complained that the gay scene was rather shallow and they perceived it as difficult for them to develop meaningful conversations with other gay men.

Towards intimate citizenship

Rules of normalcy can be subject to change when ‘existing rules fail to operate, when anomalies can no longer be evaded, when the real world of everyday experience challenges accepted causality’ (Janeway 1980: 582). The narratives in this thesis have shown that the ‘accepted causality’ between singlehood and unhappiness may not hold true. They have the potential to serve as a resource for bringing about both personal and social changes (Plummer 2001, Rappaport 1995: 804-805). In Weeks’s words, new stories and new narratives both reflect wider social changes and provide the language that makes change possible (Weeks 1998: 47). Hence, the stories in this study did not only reproduce, but have the potential to reinvent, the contemporary meanings of relationships.

As discussed in Chapter 5, singles have been subject to stereotyping. The participants have constantly been questioned about their single status and asked what was wrong with them. Many participants said that they had not been able to find many 'accurate' stories about singles in society. For example, the first email Justin sent me read, 'It's about time some attention is paid to single people!'. Towards the end of the interview he also said he thought it important to present singles in a 'fairer' way and raise awareness of their lives. Therefore, he wanted to have his story heard:

'The whole campaign is going on for civil partnerships. I can see that people want that and I am happy for them, support what they're doing but I think it's equally important to campaign for single people's rights because actually single people have so much less in a lot of rights areas. It just seems that a lot of policies, governments and so on, seem to be toward people who are in marriages or long-term relationships or civil partnerships. There don't seem to be things for people who are positively single or very happy to go down that route. A study which looks at the positive side of being single could start to push for things in that direction.' (Justin)

Malcolm also said that generally society's understanding of singles has been limited, but people are not willing to listen:

'So I've enjoyed it. It's part of my growth because you ask intelligent questions and they make me think about the way I live. Because of course other people talking about me, being on my own, or talking about being not in a relationship and so on, don't usually ask intelligent questions. You know you get questions like wouldn't you like to be in a relationship? Well the answer is yes, if it's a good relationship, if I could learn from it that sort of stuff. But the questions are usually quite limited. And also I don't think people are particularly interested. They want to hear what they want to hear.' (Malcolm)

When Nic first heard about the topic he immediately became interested because he thought the area had been under-researched:

‘Actually I thought it was interesting because it is something that is rarely researched. There are a lot of studies about single parents, about families, about couples. I think there’s been quite a lot of research into gay men who get married and why they get married, but very little research into both men and women who spend their lives being single.’ (Nic)

Many participants felt that their stories have not been told, and had not been heard of. This motivated them to take part in the research. Harry, for example, said he responded quickly when he saw the research advertised because he saw it as an opportunity to have his experience recorded in history. He said his experience as an older gay man could so easily be marginalized and then forgotten.

Plummer has argued that intimate citizenship is about:

‘...the control (or not) over one’s body, feelings, relationships; access (or not) to representations, relationships, public spaces, etc; and socially grounded choices (or not) about identities, gender experiences, erotic experiences.’ (Plummer 1995: 151)

Weeks has also stated that intimate citizenship is ‘about enfranchisement, about inclusion, about belonging, about equity and justice, about rights balanced by new responsibilities’ (Weeks 1998: 39). It is clear that many singles felt that they have been denied representations in a fair manner, and the stories contained in this thesis may allow some of them to (re-)claim sexual citizenship through ‘a fairer representation’. As Karl Popper says:

What we can do is... make life a little less terrible and a little less unjust in every generation. A good deal can be achieved in this way.

What this thesis can do may be really just that ‘little’: to provide a more nuanced account of singles; to combat some stereotypes; to look at some of the issues they

face. Perhaps then the seeds can grow and – who knows? – maybe a great deal can be achieved in that way.

11.3 Relevance to the research literature on older gay men

This thesis contributes to the understanding of older gay men who have been described as an ‘unseen minority’ (Berger 1982) and ‘minority within minority’ (Jones and Pugh 2005). Overall, it shows how non-heteronormative and critical perspectives (Bernard and Scharf 2007) should be adopted by social gerontology when different issues around ageing and life course are examined (de Vries and Blando 2004). The issues surrounding non-heterosexual ageing are going only to be of increasing relevance as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people of later generations live more open lives (Heaphy et al. 2004: 898).

Recording older gay men’s generation-specific experiences

Chapter 6 has demonstrated that older gay men’s lives need to be understood as socio-historically embedded. The participants’ experience of growing up was generation-specific. Growing up in a homophobic environment where homosexuality was criminalized and having to conceal their sexuality exercised a lingering influence into their later lives. As discussed above, it affected, among other things, their social health, physical health and emotional health.

This study helps to record the older gay men’s generational specific stories which could have been easily forgotten. Their often-forgotten experiences should be remembered.

This thesis also highlights that future studies of gay men's lives will benefit from studying LGBT lives in social and historical contexts (Fredriksen-Goldsen and Muraco 2010) and seeing them as 'timed' (Martin and D'Augelli 2009).

Showcasing gay men's diverse life courses

This thesis highlights the diversity of gay men's life courses. In particular, their identity development processes were very different from one another's. Many concealed their sexuality until their 40s and 50s. When they finally revealed their sexuality and led a more open life, they spoke of experiencing delayed adolescence. They said they felt like a teenager again. For example, Tom recalled his first sexual experience when he met a man through the internet at the age of 62:

'62... have you heard of a 62-year-old virgin before? (laughs)
[T: Because that was the first gay... sexual...experience...]
[Tom and the person he met] We'd come back and see a dvd... (laughs)
Well my life has never been the same since because we went back to his place, didn't see a dvd and the inevitable happened. I took to him like a duck to water. It was like the unleashing of 40 years of sheer frustration. And my life has changed. My life has totally changed. You can't get enough sex. I mean, god, I think one week I met three people. You go mad. I've heard people say, for the first year, you probably go absolutely mad and meet so many people.' (Tom)

Others spoke of how being gay meant that they had their careers destroyed and consequently their life course transitions disrupted. The inadequacies of using any uniform model to describe 'a standard life course' are again exposed by these older gay men's stories.

Older gay men and the body

Many participants spoke of concerns about how other gay men, especially younger gay men, would 'evaluate' their body. Ageism was perceived to be rampantly prevalent in the gay community. The perceived obsession with youth in this community was often cited by the older gay men as the reason why they thought so negatively about their own bodies. Whether these negative feelings could lower their self-esteem and therefore lead to issues around mental health warrants further research.

Reverse ageism

At the same time, as discussed in Chapter 6, reverse ageism was detected. Some older gay men, without much evidence to hand, reduced some younger gay men, especially those from overseas or other ethnicities to being interested in older men, just to look for someone for material gain. These younger gay men were almost always assumed to be looking for a sugar-daddy. This is unfair and positioned such younger gay men's desires as being materialistically determined. Moreover, the stigma associated with age-discrepant relationships seems to have remained strong. More research needs to be carried out to establish why.

Crisis competence

Chapter 10 has shown that for the older gay men in this study, coming out, despite being an extremely drawn-out and emotionally as well as practically difficult

experience, eventually allowed them to develop crisis competence (Friend 1980) or mastery of crisis (Berger 1980). Although older gay men undeniably face challenges in later life, it is important to recognize their resilience.

Further investigations are needed in two areas:

Ageing gay men's social connections and the gay scene

Many participants in this study longed for social connections, because being single meant that they had to spend more time on their own. However, they often expressed a feeling that the gay scene was not offering what they wanted. They frequently positioned the gay scene as rather shallow and superficial, and therefore it was quite difficult for them to find people with whom they could connect on a more personal level to share their worries and feelings about growing older. They appeared to be caught in an ageist culture:

‘The last 15 years I sort of felt that the gay social world was no longer offering me anything that I valued. I was sort of more conscious it was somewhat shallow and superficial.

[T: What would you like that wasn't provided?]

Having meaningful conversations with people in social settings so that, rather than just talking about what was on television last night, or who was sleeping with who, one had sort of real conversations about feelings or important issues in life. The majority of gay social activities, I would say, are geared towards the young or the younger, sort of pubs and clubs, particularly if there is dancing and loud music there (laughs). Not likely to appeal to someone of my age range.’ (Robert)

‘Where do you meet gay men? Nice people like you? Where do you meet people who you can become friends with, not that you want to jump into bed with them... in a more... friendly relaxed environment...? The gay scene I think is predicated on being young and beautiful. Where do people, who are my age, meet people in a way that's not loaded with sex, that's

not judging on somebody's looks? Maybe to have coffee, to have a meal, and see a movie, relax, go for a walk, and just be friends?' (Philip)

The visible and political gay community has been characterized as an increasingly middle-class and white institution (Barrett and Pollack 2005). The feelings expressed above by Robert and Philip echo earlier findings that older gay men felt excluded from the gay community (Heaphy 2007: 206-207) and were conscious how other gay men would 'judge' them (Drummond 2010: 38-39) as the gay scene could become a site of exclusion rather than inclusion.

In this thesis, it appears that the older gay men's wish to 'locate a setting that was not dominated by younger men' seemed difficult to realize (Christian and Keefe 1997: 69). There is thus a need for organizations working with older people and older LGBT people in particular to think about providing a range of social spaces, focusing less on alcohol, in which older LGBT people can feel welcome and comfortable. Intergenerational programmes that bring different generations of gay men together through social activities to promote mutual understanding would be desirable.

Families of choice? Singles' unmet care needs?

As discussed in Chapter 2, it has been argued in the research literature that 'families of choice' play a crucial role in LGBT people's lives. This stems from the mid-1980s when gay men and lesbians had to support their friends and lovers at a time when government, church and public services were withholding support and acting punitively towards gay communities (Adam 2004).

However, this thesis has presented findings that show that families of choice may not be available for all. First, many older gay men remained in the closet until later in life. They did not have an opportunity to build up trusting friendships. Second, as discussed earlier in this chapter, it required physical health, certain level of wealth, and psychological health to develop social health. However, such resources were not available for all. Third, through the participants' life courses, members of their families of choice could have been devastated and lost, for example, by HIV/AIDS (see Chapter 7).

Even if families of choice had been developed, the participants were worried whether their friends would in fact be willing and able to care for them for 24 hours a day and seven days a week. They were not sure whether they were making demands of their friends 'beyond the call of duty'. They were also worried about emergency situations, for instance, if they were to have an accident at home.

For those who had not developed their families of choice, the possibility of having to enter formal care facilities seemed even more daunting. They were generally sceptical about the care quality, and the prospect of being cared for by care home staff, who were generally perceived to be homophobic and ignorant about LGBT issues, seemed even worse.

This echoes earlier findings that older LGB people who lived alone and were not in couple relationships found the prospect of needing care 'particularly frightening' (Heaphy et al. 2004: 891).

11.4 Contributions to qualitative research/research into sensitive topics

Chapter 3 poses some serious questions in qualitative research around the issues of researcher-participant interactions. I argue that instead of leaving these issues under the carpet, they should be acknowledged and confronted. First, before going out into the field for research, investigators should be prepared with at least an understanding of relevant issues. They need to consider the issues that are likely to arise. For example, what kind of answers are they prepared (or not) to give the participants if they are asked about their personal information? Second, during the research process, the researchers should have a chance to share their feelings and they should be supported. Third, when the research is completed, researchers should be encouraged to discuss and debate these issues. All the above would require an academic culture that is supportive in facilitating these discussions.

11.5 Limitations

I recognize that representing experience in itself can impose limitations at all stages. As Riessman put it: ‘We cannot give voices, but we do hear voices that we record and interpret’ (1993: 8). My involvement in the process, therefore, can have crucial influences on the participants’ life stories, before and after the interviews. Researchers’ involvement in attending to experience, a participant telling about experience, transcribing and analyzing experience, and even readers’ reading of experience all involve human influences and judgements. It is inevitable that I am bound up in my own identity and personal history, and this

would have undoubtedly influenced my ways of interpretation. Sometimes the participants themselves already had in mind their own ways of interpreting their lives. For example, Jason said:

‘I am still worrying because as a scientist you both have hypotheses and yet are open minded. You may be having a tentative hypothesis of people who have never had living relationships but you didn’t ask questions about controlling fathers and I thought that wasn’t your hypothesis. My answer to that in a sense was: a window came and went... I made an inappropriate emotional response and that moment has now passed. You know? What do you think? I’ve got this concept of a window. I haven’t formulated it before but I am doing it now.’ (Jason)

It seems the most sensible thing to do would be to accept that there can be multiple valid interpretations, multiple narrative ‘truths’ (Freeman 2002), and the version presented in this thesis is only one of the possible versions. As a further step in the future, I should like to have the research participants to comment on my research findings.

As discussed in Chapter 3, none of the research participants came from ethnic minority groups. More than half of the participants had received education up to at least undergraduate level. Thus, the findings from this thesis cannot be generalized to a general population but this does not affect the research findings’ analytic generalizeability.

11.6 Suggestions for further research

As this is one of the first studies specifically to examine singlehood among older single gay men, it does not aim to provide authoritative answers to all the

questions on the topic. Instead, it raises further questions that remain to be answered. Based on the research findings, there are a few areas that are suggested as warranting further research as an extension of the present investigation.

Singles who are of different socioeconomic statuses: Further research into singles should continue to seek diversity in their samples. The groups to be further researched include singles in rural areas, singles who are living with long-term disabilities, and singles who are transsexual, among many others. In particular, those singles who live alone warrant further study. It may also be useful to compare the lives of gay singles with lesbian, heterosexual singles (Hostetler 2009: 522).

Singles who live in different parts of the world: As population ageing is an increasingly global social phenomenon (Harper 2006a), the topics this thesis examines should be of increasing relevance to different countries and different social groups. In many other parts of the world, such as Asia and Southern Europe, the role of family is still strongly upheld. Being single in such cultures can be especially socially stigmatizing and consequently more difficult to live with. Further research will benefit from understanding how singlehood is viewed and lived in different cultures. This can lead to further insight into how the wider social environment affects the ways in which singles interpret and assign meanings to their lives.

Singles and social change: Social expectations of intimacy and personal life have continued to change rapidly. A question research should ask is: how do different

generations of singles experience their lives, and to what extent are they similar and different? In particular, in the UK we now see a new generation of gay men who are coming of age when civil partnership is already seen as a viable option. Would entering a relationship become an expected life course stage for them, as Hostetler and Cohler (1997) suggested, and if so, would singlehood become even more difficult to live with for gay men in the future? How do ideas about singlehood, and the lived experience, change and persist through time? To answer these questions, some form of longitudinal qualitative research design is required.

Diversity among older gay men: We have begun to understand more about the diversity of life courses among older gay men. However, most research into LGBT ageing has been undertaken in UK, US, and Australia. We need to understand older gay men's lives in different countries. Their lives may be so different that we may need to use different terms to refer to them. For example, instead of the word 'gay', they may prefer the term 'men who have sex with men' (Stall, Hays, Waldo, Ekstrand and McFarland 2000). We may also need specific channels other than relying on an open call as in this study, as there could be extreme sensitivity surrounding anonymity. As a whole, there is a need for studies of older gay men to move away from focusing on 'a small, privileged group of old, White, relatively affluent gay men' (Slevin and Linneman 2010: 502).

Ideal social care arrangements for older LGBT people: This study points to some unmet care needs among older gay men who are single. Some participants have spoken of alternative ways of arranging for social support in later life, for example living with flatmates. How may these options be better supported? Many

also spoke of the fear of the heteronormativity that prevails in social services.

How can that be addressed?

11.7 Potential for knowledge exchange

It is envisaged that the findings of this thesis would be relevant not only to academic audiences, but also to other groups.

Clinical implications: The study findings can provide therapists and counsellors who work with older gay men and/or singles with better informed accounts. The thesis findings highlight the necessity both for therapists and clients to question the dominant messages in society and to realize their impact on the meanings single clients give to their lives (Schwartzberg, Berliner and Jacob 1995: ix-x). Like Lewis and Moon (1997), I believe that therapists need to challenge their single clients' self-blaming statements and remind them how their feelings about being single have been influenced by larger powers at work in society. This study can be useful for counsellors by showing that the reasons for singlehood can be both personal and social, and thus can steer singles away from (unfairly and unjustifiably) overly blaming or criticizing themselves. Counsellors may also alert singles to the fact that the experience of singlehood is complex and multi-dimensional. By communicating this message to their clients it allows them to re-evaluate their perceptions of their experience, and question whether they have 'accurately' looked at all the aspects of their lives. Also, suggesting that the experience of being single is associated with the stories singles tell themselves allows for the possibility of narrative therapy. By changing some of the story

elements and the ways in which the clients connect the story plots together, counsellors may help singles to evaluate their lives in a different light. They will also be able to note the specific challenges that their clients face at different life stages.

Additionally, the thesis has pointed out some specific challenges that older gay single men face, e.g. around body image and perceived ageism. These are also issues counsellors and therapists may want to address specifically.

Implications for service providers and policy makers: The findings challenge them to broaden their thinking when they consider older people and LGBT people. How are they meeting (or not) the diverse needs of older gay men?

Older gay men and singles: They may also find this study relevant as a possible resource from which they can draw to understand and make sense of their lives.

As Jones and Pugh (2005: 254) commented:

It is difficult to grow old gracefully in a society in which ageing is pathologized. Old age is a disease, the symptoms of which are sagging, wrinkling and graying – all of which are stigmatizing in a youth-oriented culture and all of which are symbols of a lack of control, which is unacceptable in contemporary society.

How older gay men could better ‘plan for their future selves’ in ageing societies (Harper 2006b) is a challenge that needs to be met.

The general public: The research findings ask the general public to re-evaluate the stereotypes that have been applied to singles. The findings in particular

question the polarized narratives of singlehood that exist in the media and everyday conversations.

To achieve the above will require the research findings to be publicized more widely in non-academic and accessible language. It would be useful for the research findings to be presented to the general public through the media or other non-academic means so that stereotypes of singles may be combated.

But stories do not end easily. Stories breed stories. The stories presented in this study may become narratives themselves again. Plummer (2001: 41) asked:

What happens to the story once it is told – what roles does it play in the social world, and for how long? Is there ‘an afterlife of a life story’, a life that it takes on of its own with real consequences for those around it – maybe those included in the story, but not the telling of it?

How would the examiners, the participants, other researchers, singles and the general public react to this piece of research? How would the stories be read? How are they consumed? Who has access to these stories? Does the narrative live on? What impact will it have (or not have) on the readers? As Plummer noted, ‘sometimes people hear so lightly what others say intensely, and sometimes people hear so intensely what others say so lightly’ (2001: 43). What would be read and what could be misread? Would there be any social and political roles that these stories can play (Plummer 1995)? Many singles in this study have said that it has been difficult for them to voice their opinions. Not many people are prepared to listen. Will this study encourage more singles to speak out about their experiences?

This conclusion seems to signal yet another beginning.

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Appendix 1: About the participants

Adam (aged 54) did not have a good experience of coming out. When he told a doctor in the army, he was dismissed. At the time of the interview he was still not out to his parents and some of his siblings, or at work. He had had a liver transplant, and was diagnosed as suffering from cancer. The only 'relationship' he had been in was when he shared a house with a younger man for over six years. But his companion married subsequently, and Adam has not had a relationship.

Ben (aged 62) had always known that he was gay. He had no difficulty accepting it and had always been out. He even joined gay rights campaign groups. He had a relationship in his 20s which lasted for two or three months, and another in his 30s for only a couple of months. After that there were people who were interested in forming a relationship with him but he was not interested. He said he was very happy about being single.

Darren (aged 55) was born in Africa. For many years he could not admit even to himself that he was gay. When he moved to London he joined self-help groups. He has not been in any exclusive relationship. At the time of the interview he had been in a sexual relationship for over 20 years. This person did not have a partner, but even so Darren did not consider him close enough to call a relationship.

Dan (aged 52) was born female. He underwent sex change operations from a female to a male body. He started taking hormones around eight to ten years before the interview and had had chest surgery. He said he had not been interested in anybody sexually when he was younger. He has only experienced intermittent sexual relationships but had never been in a longer relationship.

Hector (aged 68) had known that he was gay since his teens. He became a teacher and felt he had to remain closeted. He came out only at 50, after retirement. He had had only one relationship in his 50s, which lasted for a few months. He said he felt deeply hurt.

Harry (aged 60) came out when he entered university as a mature student in his early 30s. He said he had had half a dozen one-night stands in his life. He could not remember them and they were not important to him. He had a casual sexual partner whom he saw three or four times a year.

Henry (aged 62) said he had 'always been completely out to everyone'. He had had three long-term relationships lasting for seven years each. He said he considered he had spent 'the greater part of his adult life single'. At the time of the interview he said he hated being single and did not find it natural.

Jason (aged 69) was born in Kenya where his parents worked. He moved back to the UK. He was a Catholic, and when he realized that he was attracted to the same sex, he told a priest, who was not embarrassed but also did not offer him any advice one way or another. When he was in his 20s he began to feel more comfortable about his sexuality and even set up local campaign groups. He had

only one short-term relationship, in his 30s. Subsequently, a man had visited him regularly for sex. That lasted for around 20 years.

Justin (aged 53) had been out since he was a teenager. In his 20s he had two relationships that lasted for a few weeks and nearly two years respectively. In his 30s he had a boyfriend who lived together with him for about two years. He had another relationship in his 40s, which lasted also for around two years. The next and last long-term relationship he had lasted for two and a half years and ended two years before the interview.

Joseph (aged 56) was discharged from the navy after it was discovered that he had had sex with other men. Later on he developed quite a few lengthy relationships, all of which ended quite traumatically. That included one of his boyfriends' killing himself. He said at the time of the interview that he was 'definitely not in search of somebody'.

Laurence (aged 54) realized that he was gay in his teens. It was only when he was 28 that he started to have sex with women as well as men. He felt that he experienced a 'delayed adolescence' owing which he went through a period of having many sexual partners. He became certain that he was gay. Since then, although he had had a number of encounters and a few affairs, he had had very few relationships, and none of which lasted for more than a year.

Malcolm (aged 64) has always been out since he was a teenager. He had had a few relationships, which ended when he found out that his boyfriends were unfaithful. For the 24 years before the interview he had not formed a relationship. He said, looking back at his earlier life, he did not really consider any of his relationships as being serious, because he never lived with his boyfriends, and there had been a lack of emotional response. He said there had been too much missing.

Nic (aged 59) realized he was gay at about 11 or 12. He was a school teacher and felt that coming out was an impossible option. In his mid-30s he had a chance to change to a completely different career and moved to another city. There he embarked on a whole series of one-night stands. Later on he moved again, and at the time of the interview said he loved being single and really enjoyed it.

Norman (aged 53) had been out as a gay man since his late teens. His five relationships lasted for a few years, 18 months, two years, six-and-a-half years and 18 months respectively. He said he felt miserable about being single and did not like it.

Patrick (aged 54) was born in New Zealand. Until he was 33 he had never mentioned that he was gay. He said he must have slept with 30 women in his 20s and 30s. During that period he also had sex with men on a few occasions. He came out at 33 and he said he had since had sex with men from 35 different countries and was not interesting in a relationship.

Philip (aged 62) realized that he was gay at school. In his 30s he was involved in financial deals that led to his going to the prison. He eventually came out in his

40s. He had been in two relationships, lasting for two years and 18 months respectively.

Richard (aged 56) came from a strict Catholic family. He knew he was gay as a teenager but it was only at 29 that he did something about it: he went to a city close to where he lived to buy a copy of the magazine *Gay Times* so that ‘nobody would see him’. In his 30s he had a relationship for seven years until his boyfriend became ill unexpectedly and died. A few years before the interview he met someone through the internet. He said he fell in love with this man, but that this person was also seeing someone else. Richard was not sure at the time of the interview how matters would turn out.

Robert (aged 73) said he began to realize he was attracted to the same sex in his early 20s. He began to ‘move in the gay circles’ in his mid-20s despite the fact that homosexuality was still criminalized at that time. In his 30s he developed a relationship that lasted for about seven years. He and his boyfriend lived together. Subsequently he was in a few relationships for a couple of years at a time each.

Stanley (aged 63) has known that he was gay since he was a teenager. He did not seem to have encountered too many problems in coming out. He had never been in a relationship, but did not express much negative feeling about that. He was the chairman of a group for gay men and said he was very well connected socially.

Simon (aged 60) said he knew he was gay since he was about six. He had casual sexual encounters with men in his 20s and 30s, but had not thought about developing further relationships with them because he saw it as impossible. At the same time, he was dating girls and had had a few short-term relationships with them, each lasting a few months. He came out at 40. After coming out, he had a five-and-a-half year relationship which ended two-and-a-half years before the interview. He said he was actively looking for a partner.

Tom (aged 66) had known that he was interested in men since his teens. He believed he should do something about his feelings towards the same sex in his mid-20s. He thought going out with a girl would ‘cure’ it. He married in his late 20s and had two children. However, the marriage did not work out and he divorced his wife when he was 40. Until he was 59, he had not come out to anyone, and until 62, he had not had sex with men. In the few years before the interview he had casual sex encounters with some men. Although he would have liked to develop some of these further, none had turned into a more significant relationship.

Terry (aged 66) realized that he was attracted to the same sex when he was a teenager. He worked for a church until his relationship with a member of the congregation, who he said had consented to enter into the relationship, was exposed. He began to come out only ten years before the interview. He had been living with a ‘boyfriend’ for about three years at the time of the interview. However, the relationship was not working out. Terry felt they were not compatible and they had not had sex for ten months. He said in many ways he regarded himself ‘as a single person’.

Victor (aged 54) had been out since his 20s. He had had five relationships throughout his life, totalling nine years. He lost a few partners to different illnesses and accidents. He said it needed a great deal of spiritual practice and therapy to work through these bereavements. At the time of the interview he said he was not actively not looking for a partner, but was also 'not closing the doors'.

Vincent (aged 53) had realized he was gay since he was 12. He had not come out to anyone until his 40s. And he said he had never been involved in what he would class as a 'serious relationship'. He was disabled and had retired on medical grounds. He said he did not go out much and mainly spent his time on the internet and reading.

Willis (aged 62) realized he was gay just before he left university. He said this changed his life as he became more politically oriented. Not long afterwards he came out to his parents. He had always been open with friends and work colleagues and, according to him, experienced no problems.

Table 7: Research participants' socio-economic status

	Age	Education level
Adam	54	Masters
Ben	62	Undergraduate
Darren	55	Undergraduate
Dan	52	PhD
Hector	68	Undergraduate
Harry	60	Undergraduate
Henry	62	Masters
Jason	69	Masters
Justin	53	Undergraduate
Joseph	56	A-level
Laurence	54	Undergraduate
Malcolm	64	Vocational training
Nic	59	Undergraduate
Norman	53	Vocational training
Patrick	54	Undergraduate
Philip	62	Undergraduate
Richard	56	A-level
Robert	73	Left school at 16
Stanley	63	Left school at 18
Simon	60	Undergraduate
Tom	66	Vocational training
Terry	66	Left school at 16
Victor	54	A-levels
Vincent	53	Left school at 16
Willis	62	Undergraduate

Appendix 2: Project poster



**What does being single mean
to YOU now, in the past and
in the future?**

**If you are male, aged over 50
and have spent most of your life
time NOT in a relationship,
you are sincerely invited to take
part in a research project at
the University of Oxford.**

There has been little research on this topic and your
contribution will be important for the project.
The research is solely for academic purposes.

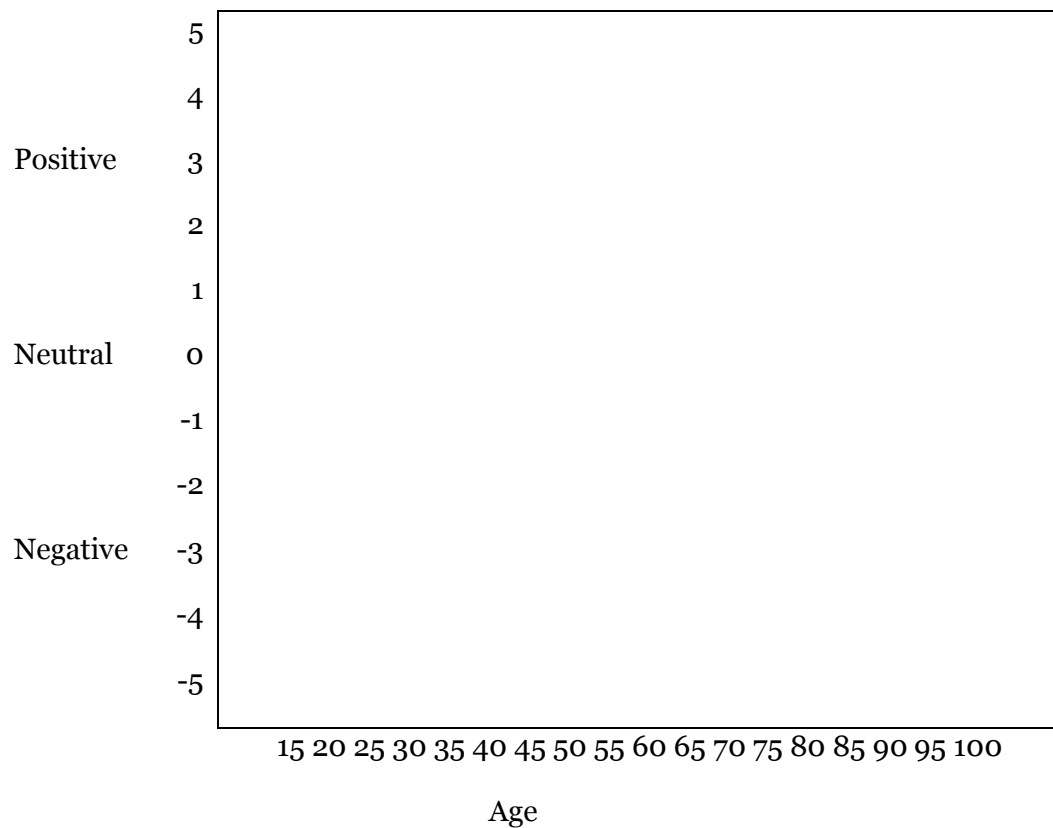
I am interested to listen to your experiences.
Participants of different backgrounds, including
straight and gay men, men of all ethnicities and
beliefs are welcome. All information will be
anonymized and confidential. If you are interested,
please contact me (Yiu-tung Suen) at
07942 582 142 or
YIU.SUEN@SOCIOLOGY.OX.AC.UK.

Yiu-tung Suen 07942 582 142 <u>YIU.SUEN@SOCIOLOGY.OX.AC.UK</u> Research on Singlehood, Oxford	Yiu-tung Suen 07942 582 142 <u>YIU.SUEN@SOCIOLOGY.OX.AC.UK</u> Research on Singlehood, Oxford	Yiu-tung Suen 07942 582 142 <u>YIU.SUEN@SOCIOLOGY.OX.AC.UK</u> Research on Singlehood, Oxford	Yiu-tung Suen 07942 582 142 <u>YIU.SUEN@SOCIOLOGY.OX.AC.UK</u> Research on Singlehood, Oxford	Yiu-tung Suen 07942 582 142 <u>YIU.SUEN@SOCIOLOGY.OX.AC.UK</u> Research on Singlehood, Oxford	Yiu-tung Suen 07942 582 142 <u>YIU.SUEN@SOCIOLOGY.OX.AC.UK</u> Research on Singlehood, Oxford	Yiu-tung Suen 07942 582 142 <u>YIU.SUEN@SOCIOLOGY.OX.AC.UK</u> Research on Singlehood, Oxford	Yiu-tung Suen 07942 582 142 <u>YIU.SUEN@SOCIOLOGY.OX.AC.UK</u> Research on Singlehood, Oxford
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Appendix 3: Life chart used during interviews

Date: _____
Interview Reference: _____

How did you feel about being single at different ages?
Could you please give a rating for your feeling at different
ages, 5 being the most positive, 0 being neutral and -5
being most negative.



Appendix 4: Ethical approval

SOCIAL SCIENCES & HUMANITIES
INTER-DIVISIONAL RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

Hayes House, 75 George Street, Oxford. OX1 2BQ
Tel: +44(0)1865 614871 Fax: +44(0)1865 614855
ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk www.socsci.ox.ac.uk

Co-ordinator of the IDREC
Social Sciences Divisional Office



Ref. SSD/2/3/IDREC

March 12, 2010

Yiu Tung Suen
St Anthony's College

Dear Yiu Tung Suen,

Application for research ethics approval

Ref No.: SSD/CUREC1/10 – 313

Title: 'Lifelong Singlehood: Blessing or Curse? A Sociological Analysis'

The above application has been considered on behalf of the Social Sciences and Humanities Inter-divisional Research Ethics Committee (IDREC) in accordance with the procedures laid down by the University for ethical approval of all research involving human participants.

I am pleased to inform you that, on the basis of the information provided to the IDREC, the proposed research has been judged as meeting appropriate ethical standards, and accordingly approval has been granted.

Should there be any subsequent changes to the project, which raise ethical issues not covered in the original application, you should submit details to the IDREC for consideration.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Chris Ballinger'.

Dr Chris. Ballinger

cc: Dr. George Leeson, Department of Sociology, Oxford Institute of Ageing

HBP / CAJB

Appendix 5: Consent form

Consent Form

This study is a part of my research for a PhD in Sociology at the University of Oxford. From January 2010 for about 18 months, I will be doing life story interviews with older men in Oxfordshire who have spent most of their life time not in a relationship. It is expected that each participant will be interviewed for around one to two hours and for one or two times. Once I have finished my study, I will use the results to write my PhD thesis.

Your participation would be invaluable for the research. If you decide to join the research, please sign and return the declaration below. Potential participants can ask questions about the study before they decide whether to participate. Participants may withdraw from the study without penalty at any time by advising the researchers of this decision.

Thank you very much for your support for the research.

Yiu Tung Suen (Tung)

Doctoral Candidate in Sociology, University of Oxford

Declaration

I declare that I:

- have read the participant information sheet;
- have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study and has received satisfactory answers to questions, and any additional details requested;
- understand that I may withdraw from the study without penalty at any time by advising the researchers of this decision;
- understand that this project has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee;
- understand who will have access to personal data provided, how the data will be stored; and what will happen to the data at the end of the project;
- agree to participate in this study; and
- understand how to raise a concern and make a complaint.

_____(Participant's Signature)

_____(Participant's Name)

_____(Date)