



Making sense of ‘barebacking’: Gay men’s narratives, unsafe sex and the ‘resistance habitus’

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Why do some gay men continue to engage in unsafe sexual practices despite the known and widely publicized risks of HIV infection? Dominant models of health promotion have been criticized for reducing this complex psychosocial issue to a question of instrumental technique – ‘use a condom every time’. Accordingly, there has recently been an attempt to develop a deeper understanding of unsafe sexual practices by paying attention to the ‘subjective meaning’ manifest in gay men’s own accounts of their behaviour. However, this paper argues that such studies have failed to develop an adequate understanding of the historical nature of such behaviours and the way in which they are embedded in a ‘cultural psyche’ that the individual gay man may not even be consciously aware of. Accordingly, using published autobiographical and fictional narratives written by gay men over three different periods of gay history (pre-AIDS, during AIDS and ‘post’-AIDS), this paper aims to show that contemporary ‘barebacking’ behaviour may constitute one manifestation of a ‘resistance’ or ‘transgressional’ ‘habitus’ that has remained a consistent feature of gay men’s individual and social psyche since the early days of gay liberation. The paper discusses the potentially health-damaging implications of this ‘habitus’ and the possibility and desirability of facilitating change.

‘An organisation which was slave to the pleasure principle and neglected the reality of the external world could not maintain itself alive for the shortest time...’ (Freud, 1958; p. 37).

Background: Gay men, unsafe sex and ‘resistance’

Within the contemporary HIV/AIDS field, there is a wide debate as to why, despite over 15 years of health education and health promotion directed specifically at gay men, some continue to have unprotected anal intercourse (UAI) – sometimes colloquially referred to as ‘barebacking’. A recent study in the UK, for instance, reported an increase in UAI, especially amongst younger gay men (Dodds, Nardone, Mercey, & Johnson, 2000). More locally, in Manchester, a city in the north-west of the UK, a recent outbreak of syphilis suggests there may be similar increases in unsafe sexual activities (Clark, Cook, Qutub, Ashton, & Bellis, 2001). Numerous studies have reported significant associations between recreational drug and alcohol use and gay

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mens' engagement in unsafe sexual practices (Bellis, Cook, Clark, Syed, & Hoskins, 2002; Clutterbuck, Gorman, McMillan, Lewis, & McIntyre, 2001; Mattison, Ross, Wolfson, & Franklin, 2002; Ross, *et al.*, 2002). This all invites the question: What has gone wrong with safer sex health promotion and education? Is it true, as Odets (1995) suggests, that it seems to have had 'little or no value at all in motivating change in the behaviour that all gay men, and their grandmothers, know to be the most dangerous for transmitting HIV' (Odets, 1995, p. 185)?

As the recent emergence of critical health psychology has pointed out (Crossley, 2000, 2001a), the vast majority of health promotion and educational interventions tend to espouse information and education as the foundation of behaviour change. Such assumptions produce an image of the individual that is overly rational and fails to take sufficient account of the complex interrelations between psychology, health issues and the sociocultural and moral environment in which people live (see also Calnan, 1987; Nettleton, 1996).

Numerous researchers have developed a parallel argument in relation to health promotion for gay men. For instance, Odets (1995) has argued that such health promotion has tended to rely on informing and educating men on instrumental sexual techniques and 'ridiculously simple solutions' such as 'how to use a condom', and exhorting people to 'use a condom every time' (Odets, 1995; p. 132). Likewise, unsafe sexual practices are largely accounted for in terms of 'addiction' models of behaviour, apparent in the fact that they are referred to as 'slip-ups' or 'relapses'. As Odets argues, 'If we were to believe much of our AIDS education, the gay man who simply 'plays it safe' can carry on with a 'normal' life without a care in the world' (p. 186).

It has been argued that such efforts at health promotion not only ignore, but deny, the complex psychological, interpersonal and psychosocial issues that have arisen as a result of the AIDS epidemic and are manifested in various forms of sexual behaviour (Odets, 1995; Rofes, 1998). They support the vision that gay sex is without human meaning, thereby overdetermining gay men as sexual beings and undermining the complexity of sexual behaviour. Such meanings must be understood if health promotion is to have any impact on such behaviours.

It is in the light of such critiques that research over the last few years has attempted to pay more attention to issues of 'subjective meaning' and to how gay men themselves perceive and account for their own and other gay men's unsafe sexual practices. On the basis of interview-based research, this has resulted in the identification of a number of 'lay narratives' or 'lay explanations' (see Crossley, 2001a). These include: (1) the emergence of the protease inhibitor - the notion that the threat of AIDS is no longer perceived as life-threatening, but more as a chronic, manageable illness; (2) young men's 'complacency' - the notion that younger gay men are especially likely to engage in unsafe sex because they do not connect with the concerns of older gay men and have not witnessed AIDS suffering 'first-hand' and; (3) unsafe sex as an expression of love and intimacy - this is the idea that gay men may be more likely to engage in unsafe sex when they are in a longer term relationship. In this sense, unsafe sex is being used to mark the transition to a more serious relationship and to symbolize 'love' (Smith, Flowers, & Osbourn, 1997).

During my own interview-based and ethnographic research with gay men (M. Crossley, 2001c), these 'lay narratives' were repeated time and time again. At first, this seemed reasonably convincing and corroborative but, after a while, it became clear that many of these explanations seemed to be produced in a rather 'pat' and easy manner - almost as if they were part of a cultural repertoire that people unthinkingly

drew upon when asked to account for their behaviour. This led to a questioning of whether interviewing gay men was the most appropriate way of getting to the root of this problem. In simply taking people's accounts at face value, did one not fall into the same trap at traditional health psychology, assuming that behaviour is determined by conscious perceptions, beliefs and knowledge? Hollway & Jefferson (2000) make a similar point when they criticize qualitative research for its assumption that people have access to a 'transparent self'. Developing their concept of the 'defended subject', they highlight that people 'often do not know why they experience or feel things in the way they do' (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000, p. 26).

It was partly on the basis of such interviews and ethnographic research relating to the evaluation of a health promotion project for gay men, that I began to detect an increasingly hostile and skeptical stance towards the continuing and relentless efforts of health promoters (M. Crossley, 2001c). This gradually led to the development of an understanding of gay men's unsafe sexual practices as a kind of symbolic act of rebellion and transgression which they are not *necessarily* consciously aware of (see M. Crossley, 2001d). Hence, an idea began to develop that one of the main reasons why some gay men feel drawn to 'risky' sexual practices is because they provide a psychological feeling of rebellion against dominant social values, which, in turn, creates a sense of freedom, independence and protest. By engaging in particular 'unhealthy' practices, the body of the gay man comes to be used as a vehicle through which he can 'embody resistance to cultural norms' (Bordo, 1993, p. 203).

In theoretical terms, the concept of 'psychological reactance' first developed by Brehm (Brehm, 1966, Brehm & Brehm, 1981), helped to make further sense of these rudimentary ideas. According to this theory, when an individual's freedom to engage in a particular behaviour is threatened or eliminated, the individual will experience 'psychological reactance', defined as an unpleasant motivational state that consists of pressures to re-establish the threatened or lost freedom. The more important the freedom is to the individual, the greater is the reactance when the freedom is threatened or eliminated. One method of re-establishing the freedom is to engage in the proscribed behaviour. Accordingly, social influence attempts such as health promotion can backfire, in that the pressure towards change created by the health promotion intervention may induce the person to move in the direction opposite to the influence effort, sometimes called a 'boomerang effect'. Hence, if health promotion attempts are perceived as an attempt at censorship, reactance theory would predict that health promotion messages will actually increase the motivation to engage in 'unhealthy' or 'risky' behaviours.

Although the theoretical concept of psychological reactance was initially quite useful, however, it seemed to lead to a far more 'individualistic' and possibly 'pathological' understanding of gay men's 'resistant' behaviour than originally intended. This may have been because of a reliance on Dowd, Milne, and Wise's (1991) work which had attempted to develop Brehm's concept of psychological reactance in the health arena. One of the main ways in which Dowd *et al.* did this was by developing a scale capable of measuring individual 'reactance potential' (the Therapeutic Reactance Scale, TRS). On the basis of numerous applications of this scale, Dowd (2002) recently characterized his understanding of reactance as a 'consistent individual difference variable with a normal distribution and significantly related to theoretically expected personality dimensions' (p. 6). In particular, Dowd specified that 'reactant individuals':

...tend to be autonomous, dominant, not especially tolerant, lacking in self-control and socialisation ... dissatisfied with themselves but nevertheless have a good self-image ... less

concerned with making a good impression ... do not seek to care for, or be cared for, by others ... Essentially, in reactant people autonomy and identity were elevated over trust and intimacy... (Dowd, 2002, pp. 8–10).

Such definitions of 'individual reactance' potential were actually a long way from the original sense of 'resistance' being articulated on the basis of my research with gay men. Rather than the product of individual personality differences, I was trying to capture the way in which gay men's sexual behaviour could be understood as 'inscribed' within the accumulated history and sociocultural context of gay male cultures. It is possibly the reliance on 'individualistic' data-gathering techniques (such as interviews and personality scales) that led to insufficient attention being paid to the socio-historical dimension of this 'conflict'.

It was in the process of trying to gain a greater appreciation of how 'resistance' had manifested itself within gay male cultures that I began to read autobiographical and fictional narratives published by gay male writers over the past 50 years. Using contemporary sources such as Goves' (2000) *Cruising culture: Promiscuity, desire and American gay literature*, I worked back over the publications of gay male writers who had been characterized as influential within gay culture. Also important to this task were a number of recently published novels and autobiographies by gay men, which provided a reflective exploration of life (and particularly attitudes towards sexual practices), charting their own personal histories through the AIDS crisis. Most notably, these include publications in the 1990s such as Edmund White's *The farewell symphony* (1997), Andrew Holleran's *The beauty of men* (1997), the memoirs of David Wojnarowicz (1992a, 1992b), and Eric Rofes' (1998) *Dry bones breathe*.

These fictional and autobiographical sources provide an essential source of in-depth insight into how gay men have thought, felt and behaved (sexually) in the context of varying social conditions, and how they have reflexively oriented to the rapid changes occurring in their communities in the context of HIV/AIDS. The explicit aim of my analysis of these texts was to try and gain further insight into the 'cultural psyche' of gay men by paying specific attention to issues of 'resistance' and 'transgression'. Of particular importance in this respect was the analysis of themes relating to sexual behaviour, health, disease, liberation, death, and issues of responsibility and morality. To this end, the analysis that follows draws upon selected texts as a means of illustrating the way in which contemporary 'unsafe' sexual practices (such as 'barebacking') constitute a continuation and repetition of psychological conflicts and responses which have prevailed over three different historical periods: (1) pre-AIDS; (2) during AIDS; and (3) 'post'-AIDS.

Obviously, the claims made by such an analysis are limited. Those texts selected in this paper have been chosen specifically to illustrate the issue of gay men's 'resistance'. This does not mean that all gay cultures or all gay men necessarily exhibit or manifest such resistance. It simply uses certain texts in order to gain further depth in relation to the concept of resistance when considering sexual behaviours. Perhaps this kind of analysis might best be characterized as a preliminary methodological step - a way of developing theoretical ideas that may be developed at a later date using other methods of data collection and analysis. Finally, the paper moves on to explore further some of the theoretical resources available in social psychology for making further sense of the 'barebacking' phenomena and relatedly, for unpacking the concept of 'cultural psyche', posing some critical questions in the light of this discussion.

Analysis

Pre-AIDS: From repression to liberation

It is probably inconceivable to most people today that up until 1967, in Britain, conviction for the act of sodomy carried a sentence of life imprisonment (Coppa, 1999, p. 89). Throughout the 1950s and 1960s the prevailing opinion of the medical establishment, especially within the field of psychoanalysis (influential in the study of homosexuality), was that homosexuality was a maladjustment or illness. Accordingly, the American Psychiatric Association listed homosexuality as a character disorder and neurosis. As White writes, 'homosexuality was considered a perversion, oral aggressive, possibly sadomasochistic, definitely infantile...' (White, 1998, p. 42). Perhaps not surprisingly, autobiographical accounts written by gay men reflecting on that period, are replete with feelings of self-loathing, deficiency and pathology, with parents trying to 'cure' their sons by sending them to psychiatrists, hoping they would eventually 'recover', marry and settle down (e.g. Duberman, 1992, White, 1998).

It was out of this climate of repression that the Gay Liberation movement emerged at the end of the 1960s, the US Stonewall riots of June 1969 proving a 'material and symbolic catalyst' for a more radicalized gay and lesbian movement to develop in urban areas (Goves, 2000, p. 27). Thus followed what novelist Andrew Holleran dubbed the 'age of promiscuity'¹, spanning roughly from the early 1970s to the mid 1980s. Characteristic of this period was gay men claiming the right to sexual pleasure, and the perceived psychological and social benefits of multiple forms of sexual pleasure with multiple, often unknown, partners (Holleran, 1992, p. 1997). As Preston argued, explicit erotic material and practices assumed massive importance during this period because 'we were all in open rebellion over the way our sexuality had been repressed. We were breaking out in our lives...' (Preston, 1993, p. 13).

In his recently published autobiographical account, *The farewell symphony* (1998), Edmund White provides illuminating insight into the way in which gay men thought about sex and sexual practices during that era. 'We now had a slogan', he writes, 'that said "Gay is good" [and] ... we'd stopped seeing shrinks...' (White, 1998, p. 299). 'We thought we had a right to express ourselves sexually wherever, whenever and with whomever we chose' (p. 77); 'We thought having sex was a positive good, the more the better' (p. 298); 'We were intent on dismantling all the old marital values and the worst thing one could be accused of by one of our own was aping the heterosexual model' (p. 299); 'We were free. We didn't fall for any of that morality bullshit' (p. 298); 'We equated sexual freedom with freedom itself. Hadn't the Stonewall uprising itself been the defence of a cruising place? ... the only right we wanted to protect was the right to suck as many cocks as possible...' (p. 299). As in the novels of John Rechy, considered by many to be the male gay icon of promiscuity (see Goves, 2000), the promiscuous gay man was idealized as a 'sexual revolutionary' (Rechy, 1978).

The limits of liberation?

The 'reality' of such sexual liberation may have been a little different, both physically and psychologically. Physically, for instance, as Goves, (2000, p. 88) points out, the perennial trip to the clap clinic is a standard trope in fictional and factual accounts of urban gay life during this period. Again, however, White (1998) provides some insight into how gay men thought about such 'problems'. There was, he writes, 'No shame

¹Although as White (1998, p. 299) makes clear: "Promiscuity" was a word we objected to because it suggested 'libertinage' and that we wanted to replace with the neutral word, 'adventuring'.

attached to these frequent medical visits; they were Aphrodite's spoils'. White recalls getting the 'clap' so often that his doctor suggested going on a daily diet of Bactrim as a prophylactic. 'Just as the Pill freed women to do with their bodies what they wished', he tells us, 'so antibiotics made us invulnerable to the puritanical menace of disease' (White, 1998, p. 78). 'The only fear we had,' he somewhat apocalyptically continues, 'was that one day a strain of syphilis or gonorrhea would evolve that would be resistant to all available drugs' (p. 77).

Equally problematic, were the latent psychological and social problems associated with gay men's sexual 'liberation'. These relate to what Goves, (2000) characterizes as the 'masculinisation of promiscuity' and the 'normalisation of masculinity' during this era. Basically, what this means is that the whole culture, particularly apparent in fictional gay works of the time, such as John Rechy's, exuded a 'brittle sexual machismo' in which there is a reproduction of the cultural image of the aggressive, promiscuous 'stud-like' male who aspires to sexual dominance by shunning the 'feminine' desire for intimacy, reciprocity or vulnerability. This, for instance, is manifest in the distinction in Rechy's work between 'tops' and 'bottoms', and the gay male stud's contempt for the 'bottom' who is penetrated. As White also makes clear: 'I enjoyed impersonating a cock because topping someone was the role everyone admired; in the old Mediterranean world the active partner wasn't even considered to be gay' (White, 1998, p. 315)

Related to the reproduction of traditional images of masculinity, is the disturbing element of objectification often found in depictions of sexual acts and encounters within gay male fiction and autobiography. For instance, a typical example is found in the following quote when White describes how his favourite 'cruising' venue was a place called the 'Slot'. Here, he recalls:

... there was nothing but a rabbit warren of booths with doors that locked. Each of the three walls in each stall had a glory hole pierced through it. I'd crouch in my room, four feet square, and turn from one cock to another ... if a neighbour invited me into his booth I hesitated. Would his whole body be as romantic as these frustrating glimpses, his presence as magic as my fantasies? (p. 400)

It was in relation to images such as these that the infamous Larry Kramer, a gay writer critical of the gay community's 'promiscuity' since the 1970s, criticized gay men for 'making f^{***}ing around... [their] be-all and end-all' (cited in Goves, 2000, p. 90). In his first influential novel, *Faggots* (1978), Kramer posed some very important and critical questions for gay culture. For instance, in this novel, one of the central characters, Fred, voices Kramer's concerns as he despairs against 'using my body as a faceless thing to lure another faceless thing, I want to love a Person!' - why do 'faggots have to f^{***} so f^{***}ing much?' (Kramer, 1986, p. 335). As Kramer made clear in his various writings, his concern was that the ethos of promiscuous sex was 'emotionally unhealthy' because 'having so much sex made finding love impossible' (cited in Goves, 2000, p. 90).

White also describes another sex-club known as 'The Mineshaft', set in the meat-packing district, where 'the pavement was gummy with dried blood and the air thick with the rich, gamy smell of fresh blood' (White, 1998, p. 399). 'As in Hell', he recalls 'the punishments became more severe the lower one descended. Upstairs men were being fisted in slings; downstairs they were naked in a tub being pissed on...' (p. 399). In these comments, White illustrates another disturbing element of the sexual objectification so rife within gay culture during this period of 'liberation' - its

connection with punishment. Indeed, although Rechy's fictional works reinscribe myths of masculine sexual virility, simultaneously they 'ruthlessly expose the contradictions, anxieties and self doubts' of the gay male protagonists (Goves, 2000, p. 50). For instance, in one such fictional account, the central protagonist visits the 'MeatRack', a place similar to the 'Mineshaft' described by White. He concludes:

...the Rack is permeated by the punishment for sex. He sees this clearly and with anger: This is what they have done to us! ... And this is what we do to ourselves in ritual re-enactment of their hatred, and we masquerade it all as masculine strength' (Rechy, 1981, p. 218).

In a similar vein, Rechy repeatedly draws attention to his macho protagonists' depressive and suicidal sense of alienation and self doubt amidst their public display of sexual bravado (Goves, 2000, p. 57). And in his autobiographical work, *The sexual outlaw* (1978), Rechy wrote of the 'psychic danger of constant loneliness in anonymous sex' (p. 156), admitting that he sometimes felt isolated and self-destructive as he engaged in cruising and promiscuous sex: '...sometimes...after a night of hustling and dark cruising alleys, I think of suicide' (Rechy, 1978, p. 71).

Similar comments are made by other gay writers such as David Wojnarowicz, who wrote the following in his pre-AIDS journals *Close to the knives* (1992a):

I step away from myself for a moment and watch myself climbing around and I wonder what keeps me going? Why is it these motions continue over and over, animal sexual energy? The smell of shit and piss is overwhelming; everybody uses this place as an outdoor toilet, getting fucked in the ass and then letting loose in some spare corner ... Deep in the back of my head I wish it would all burn down, explode in some screaming torrent of wind and flame, pier walls collapsing and hissing into the waters. It might set us free from our past histories (1992a, p. 187).

And again with similar imagery, a character in Rechy's *Rushes* asks:

Why, after the bursts of 'liberation' – why, now, the courtship of filth? ... Within the safe, enclosed bars and orgy rooms, why the imitation of the dank tenebrous places into which others had been shoved by oppression – toilets, crumbling buildings, prison cells? (1981, p. 93).

In these comments, the widespread use of 'deathly metaphors' – the anonymity and solitude, the darkness and decay of the cruising ground, reveal the latent psychological conflicts and self-destructiveness experienced, and possibly exacerbated, by the objectification and punishment associated with the ideology of 'promiscuous' sexual freedom.

The era of AIDS: From 'liberation' to death

As the above comments illustrate, doubts and punitive and hostile beliefs about gay sexual practices were internalized by some gay men, even in the face of open and affirmative conceptions of those practices during the early gay liberation era. Not surprisingly, these doubts took on renewed force with the advent of AIDS. Probably the most vocal advocate of these ideas was Kramer who, in *Faggots* (1978), first put forward the view that promiscuity constituted a central problem in gay culture, perpetuating communal disruption and estrangement amongst gay men. However, as he said in an interview later in his life '...when I wrote *Faggots*, I didn't think what I was screaming about was going to lead to death' (cited in Goves, 2000, p. 116).

In 1985 Kramer published *The normal heart*, a play which documented the emerging AIDS crisis. Like *Faggots*, this play aimed to reveal the problems associated

with gay men's promiscuous sexual attitudes and practices. It centres around 'Ned', a character who is trying to set up an organization to warn gay men about the dangers of their practices in the light of a mysterious disease (GRID – gay related immune deficiency) that seems to be afflicting gay men. The doctor tells Ned that in order to stop the spread of this disease, gay men must be encouraged to stop having sex. Ned answers: 'Do you realize that you are talking about millions of men who have singled out promiscuity to be their principal political agenda, the one they'd die before abandoning?' The doctor then replies, 'but surely ... if having sex can kill you, doesn't anybody with half a brain stop f**ing? But perhaps you never lost anything' (Kramer, 1985, pp. 9–10).

Subsequently, Ned battles against his friends and lover to convince them of the seriousness of the situation and of the need for gay men to change their behaviour in order to prevent catastrophe. 'What do you want me to say? Do you ever take a vacation?', says one of the characters in response to Ned's attempts to convince him of the need to limit sex. 'A vacation. I forgot', answers Ned. 'That's the great goal isn't it? A constant Fire Island vacation. Party, party; f***, f***. Maybe you can give me a few trendy pointers on what to wear' (p. 21). Eventually, Ned is voted out of the organization by his friends, because his message remains unacceptable to them. 'I warned you,' he tells the doctor, 'this is not a community that has its best interests at heart'. 'But this is death', she responds (p. 44).

A typical response to Kramer's message in the gay community is provided by the character Mickey in *The normal heart*. Mickey is a committed advocate of the ideology of the 'promiscuous years'. He argues with Ned as follows:

I've spent fifteen years of my life fighting for our right to be free and make love whenever, wherever... And you're telling me that all those years of what being gay stood for is wrong ... and I'm a murderer. We have been so oppressed! Don't you remember how it was? Can't you see how important it is for us to love openly, without hiding and without guilt? We were a bunch of funny-looking fellows who grew up in sheer misery and one day we fell into orgy rooms and we thought we'd found heaven. And we would teach the world how wonderful heaven can be. We would lead the way. We would be good for something new. Can't you see that? Can't you? (Kramer, 1985, p. 67).

Mickey's response highlights the sense of disbelief that must have been felt at the time by an oppressed group of people who believed they had found the 'right' way. The play also reveals how gay men easily slipped into a 'victim' or 'scapegoat' mentality in which they continuously failed to face reality in order to preserve their own group version of events. Reflecting on this era, White (1998) provides another example of this kind of thinking when he recounts an evening he spent with Michel Foucault and the writer Gilles Barbadette in 1982/3. When White mentioned AIDS, he remembers Foucault laughing at him. 'Don't you realize how puritanical you're being?' he said. 'You've invented a disease aimed just at gays to punish them for having unnatural sex'. 'Yes,' Gilles chimed in, 'that's a very American idea' (White 1998, p. 461). Foucault died of AIDS in 1984.

Death, death, death

Marshall, (1990, p. 21) argued that 'via the relay of AIDS ... Death and homosexuality are now inseparably linked in the public consciousness'. But as has already been suggested, even prior to AIDS, it was clear that gay men such as Rechy often experienced a disturbing sense of connection between sex, cruising, decay and death. This

was obviously exacerbated by AIDS, which created an 'inextricable psychological overlap between sexual pleasure, illness and death, especially for gay men' (Goves, 2000, p. 121). As Bronski argued 13 years ago, 'it is impossible to be a gay male today and not think of AIDS all the time' (Bronski, 1987, p. 60)

The fact that promiscuous sex did result in death for so many gay men, caused many, even former advocates of 'promiscuity', to publicly revise their beliefs. For instance, in 1986, John Rechy, the male gay icon of promiscuity, signalled his own abandonment of the erotic practices and politics of the gay liberation movement. In an interview with the *New York Times* he said:

I miss ... [the whole life] as much as anyone else. But we can't fall into the f---ing trap of revisionist thinking, man. A new factor has come into being, an enormous one – death. I haven't revised my ideas. They've changed ... Sex was once a daily part of my life. It took me and many other intelligent people a while to believe that this was really happening. Believe it. There are so many dangers present. The spectrum of no sex is healthy (cited in Goves, 2000, p. 81).

Numerous other gay writers who had previously been advocates of promiscuity also revised their beliefs and opinions in later years. For instance, in 1997, Andrew Holleran published *The beauty of men*. The vision in this book contrasts starkly with Holleran's earlier novel, *The dancer from the dance* (1978) (considered by many as the quintessential gay male novel of the 1970s), in its negative characterization of promiscuity. For instance, Lark, the central character, remembers a conversation between himself and a previous gay lover (who, inevitably, is now dead):

"You're a pessimist, dear", said Sutcliffe... "You think the future is provided by kids, and we didn't have any. No kids, no future. For you it's that simple".
"But then what am I supposed to do? Cruise for the rest of my life?"
"Yes," he said, "that's exactly what you have to do. Cruise for the rest of your life" (Holleran, 1997, p. 225)

But Lark, now 47 years old, 'can no longer pretend that brief ecstasy is adequate. Because I grow old' (pp. 222–223). Ageing brings him closer to the bleaker aspects of gay promiscuity, and exacerbates what he used to feel even when he was younger: '...the sense, sitting in the park at 3 a.m, that you were wasting your life...' (p. 78). He used to go to the baths '...because it cut through all the games and affectations, the pretence'. But now he goes 'because he has no place else to go' (p. 213). 'After twenty years, meaningless sex becomes, well, meaningless' (p. 186).

Initially, White's *The farewell symphony* (1998) seems to retain a celebration of promiscuity that is absent in Holleran's later work. This is implicit in the narrational preoccupations and structure of the memoir in that it consists of a repetitive re-telling of memories of brief sexual encounters (see Goves, 2000, p. 181). In doing so, White pays homage to the pleasures of 1970s and 1980s gay promiscuity, defending the beneficial psychical effects accompanying transitory sexual satisfaction. For instance, White explains:

For those who never lived through that period (and most of those who did are dead), the phrase 'anonymous sex' might suggest unfeeling sex, devoid of emotion. And yet, as I can attest, to hole up in a room at the baths with a body after having opened it up and wrung it dry, to lie, head propped on a guy's stomach ... smoke a cigarette and talk to him late into the night and early into the morning ... well, nothing is more personal, more emotional. The best thing of all were the random, floating thoughts we shared (White, 1998, p. 300).

The most romantic night of his life, he claims, was 'spent with an older man on the dunes of Fire Island...' (White, 1998, p. 300).

Despite such celebration, however, White's account is infused with death and sadness, and perhaps despite his intentions, forces the reader to rethink the benefits of such a way of life. Reflecting back on the 1980s and the early days of AIDS, for instance, White recalls how 'every time I spoke to someone in New York, I heard of another death' (p. 483):

... the lawyers, the fellows at the gym, the men I'd shared houses with on Fire Island – they were all dying ... I heard of men who spent all their money on having their 'chakras' tuned by a charlatan with a flute, of those who ate apricot pits in Mexico, cucumbers in China, macrobiotic food in Japan. They all died' (p. 471).

And now, in his early 50s, White lives on memories. His fantasies 'are memories as accurate as I can make them of past lovers and what they did to me'. But, he admits, 'these days I find myself f^{***}ing the dead most of the time' (p. 52), and he recalls an incident where he committed 'the worst crime' of his life:

I f^{***}ed – no, raped – Stanley without a rubber and came in his ass, the surest way of communicating the virus ... At the time I wasn't even aware I was raping him ... and as I was doing it I thought, This is the last time I'll ever f^{***} someone, and it was. Corrupted by a life of pleasure-seeking, coarsened by an anarchic indifference to other people's welfare, I'd been unable to restrain myself (White, 1998, p. 483).

Towards the end of the memoir, White is reduced to an anonymous man phoning him every night at midnight, talking him through an orgasm, 'my demon lover, a heartbeat in my ear, the drying liquid in my fist' (p. 48). The reader is left with the poignant image of White going for long jogs in the park, 'weeping and running, weeping and running', remembering how one of his past lovers used to say jokingly how things were 'grotesque' and 'past belief'. 'Now,' he tells the reader, 'my life seemed to be both' (p. 499):

I keep thinking of Haydn's *Farewell Symphony*. In the last movement more and more of the musicians get up and leave the stage, blowing out the candles as they go. In the end, just one violinist is playing (White, 1998, p. 494).

Perhaps it is not surprising that in this death-fused, depressing environment, many gay men, whether HIV positive, HIV negative, or unaware of antibody status, have, throughout the 1990s, experienced 'confusion, dysfunction, impotency, and deep ambivalence about intimacy and sexuality between men' (Rofes, 1998, p. 98).

The 'backlash': From repression to 'liberation' again ... or ... repetition?

This paper opened with a documentation of increasing rates of unprotected anal intercourse amongst gay men in the late 1990s. How has the pain and suffering been so quickly forgotten? Or has it?

As Clum (1993, p. 201) has argued, a crucial issue for gay writers in the mass context of death, dying and bereavement, has been how to 'recollect the pleasure principle that allowed urban gay communities to become a breeding ground for the AIDS virus' (Clum, 1993, p. 201). Of course, as with any work of art, this is not just about recollection, but also recreation – a manifestation of the 'gay spirit' – a refusal to concede desire altogether in the face of disease' (Jones, 1993, p. 231).

A good example of the recovery of the 'pleasure principle' is Rofes' (1998) book *Dry bones breathe*. Rofes argues that for much of the last two decades, 'gay men of all antibody statuses were reduced physically to dry bones, languishing in the hot sun, awaiting destruction or revival' (p. 28). Today, however, in the late 1990s and early 21st century, 'emerging cultures' are being created by gay men, cultures which rise 'out of the ruins of a painful past but offer hopeful visions of a community beyond crisis' (p. 28). But in what way 'beyond' crisis?

The first chapter of Rofes' book is provocatively entitled 'Now that it's over? 'This is a strange and special time for many gay men in America', Rofes claims. 'Whispered conversations among friends and lovers tiptoe up to the question all of us want to ask but none of us feel prepared to address: Is the AIDS epidemic coming to an end?' (Rofes, 1998, p. 3). A number of changes in urban gay life such as decreasing obituaries, closure of AIDS hospices, the rebirth of sexual cultures in hard-hit cities (e.g. the re-opening of bathhouses and sex-clubs) and combination therapies for HIV-infected gay men (enabling many to resume work), have coalesced to confirm gay men's sense that the AIDS epidemic is coming to an end.

Rofes argues, *contra* the HIV prevention/ health promotion perspective, that the current increase in 'risky' sexual behaviours such as unprotected anal intercourse and the rise in club culture (involving drug use and multiple sexual contacts, often with anonymous sexual partners), are not necessarily a 'disaster for prevention or safe sex culture' (p. 25). Instead, he prefers to view such practices as evidence of 'emerging cultures' which document rational, 'healthy, adaptive, and sometimes highly imaginative responses to the way AIDS manifests itself in our lives at this particular epidemic moment' (p. 76). Indeed, in some circles, 'barebacking' is depicted in precisely this way - as a conscious decision by gay men, some HIV positive, some HIV negative, to have unsafe sex as an act of 'self expression', 'enlightenment' and 'empowerment'. In this act, the person doing the 'barebacking' 'prides' himself on the performance of *conscious*, premeditated unprotected anal intercourse.

A good example of this is evident in Rofes' work, where he reflects on why unsafe sex and fantasies of unsafe sex seem to have become increasingly important to him over the last few years. He argues that the attempt by health promoters and educators to continue to induce a sense of 'crisis' in gay men and to insist on 100% safe sex and use of condoms in the light of decreasing deaths from AIDS, is not only unrealistic and oppressive, but also potentially harmful. 'I wonder,' he argues, 'whether such tactics do not actually bring out a rebellious streak in many gay men and make them determined to enjoy precisely what they are being urged to give up' (Rofes, 1998, p. 245). Does telling gay men to use a condom every time they have sex actually increase their desire to have sex without a condom? Rofes explores this notion of rebellion or 'transgression' in the context of the oppressive history of homosexuality. Transgression is doing what one is told not to do. Historically, where a rule has been laid down forbidding men from living their sexuality openly, homosexuals have always found ways to circumvent that prohibition. Indeed:

Among homosexuals, transgressions range from the maintenance of another man's gaze to signal a personal interest, to overt defiance of prohibitions by gathering in known cruising areas or holding gay parties while bribing the infiltrated police. Transgression is present at a more intimate sexual level, as violation of cultural taboos with its ensuing pleasures (Carballo-Diequez, cited in Rofes, 1998, pp. 245-246).

It is in the context of this 'transgressive history' that Rofes suggests 'gay men as a class may develop cultural coping mechanisms that might complicate prevention work' (Rofes, 1998, pp. 245–246).

Consciously reflecting on his own personal sexual behaviour, Rofes provides a graphic example of this process as illustrated in the following quote:

Anal sex crept into my fantasy life slowly during the 1980s. Repeated cultural messages telling me to 'Wear a rubber every time' and 'Use condoms – 100 percent' may have heightened my interest in f^{ucking} and created powerful new meanings of anal sex for me. As f^{ucking} and getting f^{ucked} asserted themselves in my daydreams, I wondered whether my own desires emerged from transgression? Was the now-forbidden nature of anal sex sparking new desires within me? Did I want to f^{uck} guys now because it was dangerous? Was there something about illness, death and prohibition that got me hard? (Rofes, 1998, p. 298)

And sure enough, in 1996, he started 'f^{ucking} guys', something he had not done for the last dozen years or so. This is because, he continues:

...f^{ucking} has taken on new meanings for me derived specifically from AIDS prevention discourse. Thus I find I channel a range of power issues into my f^{ucking} activities. My interest in f^{ucking} is often about pretending I'm forcing a man to do something he either does not want to do, or feels he should not be doing. This verges on rape fantasies and sometimes explicitly enters that arena ... I am well aware I step into 'edge' territory here, but I do not believe my interests, fantasies, or practices are uncommon. I have found that the idea of anal sex without a condom is a great turn-on for me, and have brought this fantasy into my sex life while refusing to engage in unprotected anal sex. To make the matter a bit more heretical, I have had sex with men who are uninfected, yet who enjoy the fantasy that I am HIV positive and about to f^{uck} them without a condom...' (p. 302)

One of the central messages of Rofes book, epitomized in the title of one of its chapters, is 'Don't f^{uck} with gay culture' (Rofes, 1998, p. 123). He argues that gay men 'value the enactment of our desires and will not always give them up in a grand gesture of sacrifice to the epidemic' (p. 225). Echoing the younger Edmund White, he celebrates the brief and the transitory, in contrast to the 'value-system of middle-class America' which encourages 'long-life and safety' which are 'supposed to be motivation enough to throw a cold blanket over our smouldering desires' (p. 225). But 'many gay men will not give up meaningful sexual acts uncritically or forever' (p. 225). As Goves clarifies, gay men promulgating barebacking have decided to embrace the risks and anxieties of AIDS 'because sex is the primary priority in their lives' (Goves, 2000, p. 187). Indeed, it is the increasing and revitalized 'freedom' to perform such meaningful sexual acts that Rofes perceives as central to the 'creative' rebirth and regeneration of gay communities and cultures.

Déjà vu? Reflecting on the 1970s, the novelist Michael Callen wrote that 'unwittingly, and with the best of revolutionary intentions, a small subset of gay men managed to create disease settings equivalent to those of poor Third-World nations in one of the richest nations on earth' (cited in Clum, 1993, p. 221). Do the 'revolutionary intentions' of 1990s activists such as Rofes pose the same danger?

Discussion

'Resistance habitus'

The above analysis has illustrated how the theme of gay male sexual practices as 'transgression' and 'resistance' remains constant, though conflicted, since the advent

of gay liberation to the present day. This paper proposes that such a transgressional element is pivotal in making sense of and understanding the reported rise in unsafe sexual practices amongst gay men today (whether or not individual gay men are consciously aware of this motivation). Returning to the starting point of this paper, it is important to reiterate that simply locating resistance 'within' an individual, as a product of individual personality differences (as Dowd's development of Brehm's psychological reactance theory does), fails to take sufficient account of the crucial cultural history required to understand such behaviours.

But this still leaves the question of how it is possible to make further sense of such a culturally inscribed concept of 'transgression' or 'resistance'. Goves, (2000) makes explicit use of Freud, invoking the concept of the unconscious as a way of appreciating the force of gay men's 'non-normative', powerful and libidinal desires. He argues, for instance, that examples such as those cited above illustrate '...the inexorable lure of the illicit and unknown ... the persistent psychical rupture and movement between consciously structured sexuality and the *deformative* effects of desire'. Accordingly, Goves argues, we must learn to accept that 'desire always persists as an *unsocialisable* promiscuous sway, within the always contrary and unresolvable realms of the subconscious and unconscious' (Goves, 2000, p. 123).

There are, however, a number of problems with invoking psychoanalytic conceptions of the 'unconscious' in this way. In the first instance, historically, psychoanalytic understandings of homosexuality as a pathological condition drew heavily on such ideas; for instance, gay men were typically construed as 'immature' and 'regressive', having insufficiently separated from the mother, and thus failed to develop the 'super-ego' or moral conscience capable of keeping the wayward forces of the libidinal unconscious at bay (see Lewes, 1989). But relatedly, and perhaps more problematically, is the way in which the depiction of gay men's behaviour as the result of uncontrollable libidinal 'drives' serves to undermine an essential feature of human reality - the role of human agency, the capacity for reflection, and of particular importance for this paper, the related capacity for changing one's behaviour.

Billig (1999) has put forward a similar argument against traditional Freudian conceptions of the 'unconscious' and 'repression' as essentially biological and asocial 'drives' forcing people to behave in particular ways. His concepts of the 'dialogical unconscious' and processes of repression as being 'dialogical rather than biological' are of essential importance to the question of how gay men's 'transgressive behaviour' can be understood, as not necessarily the result of *consciously* motivated behaviours, but at the same time, not reducible to uncontrollable biological drives.

Challenging Freud's conceptualization of desire as the result of asocial, innate, biological forces, Billig argues instead that desire (and our related 'objects' of repression), are actually formed through processes of social interaction. Desire is formed within particular human societies, through implicit socialization practices in which the very youngest members are, from day one, being taught what it is permissible or impermissible to say and do and, later, to think. According to Billig, it is through the very process of forging such social rules, and the production of beings capable and motivated towards their adherence, that the possibility of 'shameful desire' arises. Social rules do not exist to curtail 'inborn temptations'. Instead, they create their own restrictions, their own temptations. Billig argues that it is that which is 'forbidden' that becomes an object of desire and pleasure' (Billig, 1999, p. 96). Prohibitions create their own desires. It is in this sense that he redefines the unconscious as a 'dialogic

unconscious' – a phenomena based not in biological impulses, but in processes of social interaction.

Billig affords a central role to ritual and habitual activities in the process of repression. Drawing on Freud's work on religious rituals and obsessional behaviours, he argues that rituals and habits often begin as 'defensive actions' to 'renounce impulses' – but the origins of such renunciation are forgotten as the business of conducting rituals takes over. The actual ritual itself then becomes a means of repressing: the more absorbing the ritual, the more successful the repression.

This concept of 'defensive actions' also connects with Hollway and Jefferson's (2000) recent development of the idea of the 'defended subject'. Drawing on psychoanalytic theory, they argue that anxiety constitutes an inherent feature of the human condition and that such anxiety precipitates largely unconscious defences against the threats it poses to the self (p. 19). It is these defences against anxiety which affect people's actions and the stories they tell about themselves (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000, p. 4). Hollway and Jefferson draw particularly on Melanie Klein's concept of 'splitting' which derived from object relations theory. Basically, this refers to the notion that our perception of the world is split into exaggeratedly 'good' or 'bad' aspects. Klein traced this back to the earliest stages of the infant's development when s/he is feeding from the breast. When food is available and the mother at the beck and call of the infant, everything is 'good' from the latter's perspective; the mother represents the 'good breast'. But when the mother does not offer food and fails to attend to the infant's immediate demands, s/he flies into a rage and, with his/her rudimentary perceptual capacities, 'sees' the mother as wholly bad – the 'bad breast'. Klein dubbed this the 'paranoid-schizoid' position, a tendency to see events as 'all good' or 'all bad', and a tendency which persists throughout life. We resort to this 'paranoid-schizoid' position in the face of events or situations that pose a threat to self. It permits us to continue to believe in a 'good' object, on which we can rely and feel safe, uncontaminated by 'bad' threats which are split off and located elsewhere (Hollway & Jefferson 2000, p. 20). In contrast to the 'paranoid-schizoid' position is the more 'mature' and stable 'depressive position' which acknowledges that good and bad can be contained in the same 'object' and events. Hollway and Jefferson point out that although we all move between these two 'defensive' positions (paranoid-schizoid and depressive), with some dominating at different points in life, nonetheless, 'different people will be characterised by a pre-dominance of one or other of the defensive organisation positions as their typical form of response' (p. 21). Perhaps more important, for the purposes of this paper, is the way in which, as Frosh, Phoenix, and Pattman (2003) highlight in a recent paper, such defences against anxiety can be re-formulated as 'intersubjective' – as emerging in the context of particular relationships and cultures, rather than as a product of innate personality characteristics.

Such an intersubjective conception of defensive organization is consistent with Billig's concept of 'habitual repression'. Billig argues that repression may become 'sedimented into habits of life so that repression becomes a repeated, habitual, dialogic activity' (Billig, 1999, p. 56). Billig pays particular attention to the way in which repression is inculcated through routine verbal and conversational habits. For the purposes of this paper, however, the way in which repression (and relatedly, transgression), is reproduced through routine 'bodily' and sexual habits (such as safe/unsafe sexual practices) is of crucial importance. The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's work on the 'habitus' (1984; see Crossley, 2001), which refers to 'embodied dispositions' (functioning below the threshold of consciousness) and shaping how

people, generations and cultures, perceive and understand the world around them, is useful in this respect. This concept of the 'habitus' is important to this paper because it shows, like Billig's work, that routine behaviour is the product, not simply of biological or psychological motivation, but of social and historical forces. In doing so, it shows how individual behaviours relate to social rules and morality.

The morally infused nature of sexual practices and identity has been demonstrated over the course of this paper. As White's (1998) comments make clear, for gay men in the 1970s, 'promiscuous' sex was an individual 'right' pursued in the manner of a 'moral crusade'. And as Mickey says in Kramer's *The normal heart*: '...we thought we'd found heaven. And we would teach the world how wonderful heaven can be. We would lead the way. We would be good for something new' (Kramer, 1985, p. 67). In accordance with Billig's theory, it was the prohibition of homosexuality in the first place which created the need for this radical re-statement, this radical revision, of desire. The embodied sexual activities associated with male gay cultures are also testimony to the rebellion and 'transgression' of 'polite' sexual activity. Multiple sexual partners, cruising, anonymous sex in dark, dirty places, 'intentional' acts of risky 'barebacking', Rofes' 'don't fuck with gay culture!'. All of this bears the hallmark of resistance to dominant heterosexual norms and mores. The 'rudeness' of these 'unacceptable' acts is being used (not necessarily intentionally, but habitually), to spit in the eye of 'dominant' culture. It may be the case that such embodied 'rituals of rudeness' (cruising, 'barebacking', sex in 'dark holes'), originally the result of gay men's defensive actions to renounce their rejection and stigmatization, have become a historically inculcated feature of the 'habitus' of contemporary male gay cultures.

It could also be argued that engaging in acts such as 'barebacking', is consistent with Hollway and Jefferson's (2000) and Frosh *et al.*'s (2003) intersubjective conception of the 'defended subject'. As Hollway and Jefferson argue, we tend to resort to the 'paranoid-schizoid' position (seeing things as 'all good' or 'all bad') when faced with anxiety-provoking situations which pose a threat to self. The historical analysis of gay men's autobiographical and fictional accounts presented in this paper lends some support to this theory. For instance, during the 'pre-AIDS' era, responding to threats imposed by dominant prejudices relating to homosexuality, 'promiscuous sex and sexuality' were advocated in a manner characteristic of the 'paranoid-schizoid' position – as 'all good' with no space for criticism. During the AIDS era, existing in death-infused environments, many gay men swung to the other side of the pendulum, experiencing a devastating lack of safety and loss of a sense of identity, the contrasting 'all bad' of the paranoid-schizoid position. And then, 'post-AIDS', as a response to the depression and internalized stigmatization of the AIDS era, a renewed vigour is experienced, as activists such as Rofes serve to reinvoke a commitment to the 'pleasure principle' and the valued 'good' of a previous era. Here, it is possible to see the paranoid-schizoid pendulum swinging back once more.

Problems of the 'resistance habitus': 'Forgetting' material reality and moral responsibility

Billig shows how the defensive origins of ritualized behaviours are quickly forgotten as the ritual itself becomes a means of repressing. This throws up an important question in relation to contemporary male gay culture. Have certain embodied rituals (such as 'barebacking') become a means of repressing other important issues facing gay men in today's world? Is male gay culture's commitment to the 'pleasure principle' – what

Rofes characterizes as a 'refusal to concede desire in the face of danger or disease' - leaving certain things unsaid?

Asking such questions relates to Billig's suggestion that 'we must seek to understand the repression that we practice' in contemporary life (Billig, 1999, p. 261). Unlike in Freud's day, the repression that we practice in contemporary Western societies is not largely sexual. We are not encouraged to live by an ethic of sexual abstinence and moderation - and this could be said to be particularly the case within gay cultures. In contrast, Billig argues, drawing on the work of Bauman, today's society could more accurately be characterized as one in which there is an 'insatiable drive to enjoyment', an 'imperative' to consume, purchase and enjoy. In its present consumer phase, Billig argues, the 'capitalist system deploys the pleasure principle for its own perpetuation' (p. 256); 'Seduction rather than repression is demanded' (p. 256). But premising life on the seeking of such pleasure, is something else forgotten/repressed? What does contemporary repression consist of? Billig argues that we are 'habitually' encouraged to 'forget' the production side of the consumption/production equation. The work of production must be 'pushed from consciousness', lest it spoils the 'all consuming party' (p. 257). This comment is reminiscent of Ned, the central character in Kramer's *The normal heart*, who is trying to set up an organization in the early 1980s to warn gay men about the dangers of their behaviour in the light of the mysterious new disease 'GRID'. Everyone laughs at Ned - they tell him to take 'a vacation'. 'A vacation,' Ned responds, 'I forgot ... That's the great goal isn't it? A constant Fire Island vacation. Party, party; f***, f***...' (Kramer, 1985, p. 21).

Billig's comments on the repression of issues of production are entirely pertinent to 'the unsaid' within contemporary gay male cultures. As I have previously argued (M. Crossley, 2000), health-related behaviours are inextricably connected to the social and economic structure of society insofar as contradictions between 'production' and 'consumption' are inscribed on our individual bodies, and more generally, on the 'social body' of which we form a part. Attachment and commitment to 'risky' health behaviours (such as 'barebacking'), represent an 'an extreme capacity to capitulate to desire (consumerism in control)' (M. Crossley, 2000). This is often premised on a repression of the 'productive' dimension - which, historically connected to the 'work ethic' - involves maintaining a sense of self-control, individual responsibility, delaying gratification, orienting towards the future and engaging with moral and ethical questions (Giddens, 1992). These are all 'lost' or 'forgotten' in the life dedicated to the sole pursuit of pleasure. More generally, certain 'material realities' relating to the HIV/AIDS crisis remain repressed.

For instance, reflecting on the way in which gay men refused to take on board the reality of HIV/AIDS at the height of the AIDS crisis, in his memoirs, *Memories that smell like gasoline* (1992b), David Wojnarowicz narrated an episode in which he had just visited a porn theatre. He wrote:

I once came to this place fresh from visiting a friend in the hospital who was within a day or two of death and you wouldn't know there was an epidemic. At least forty people were exploring every possible invention of sexual gesture and not a condom in sight. I had an idea that I would make a three minute super-8 film of my dying friend's face with all its lesions and sightlessness and then take a super-8 projector ... and walk back in here and project the film onto the dark walls above their heads. *I didn't want to ruin their evening, just wanted to maybe keep their temporary worlds from narrowing down too far* (1992, p. 48, my emphasis).

Another example relates to the continuing romanticization of gay culture and the failure to address the reality of what Goves, (2000) calls the perpetuation of the

'masculinization of promiscuity' and the 'normalization of masculinity'. Earlier in this paper, it was shown how such images related to sexual objectification, punishment and death in literature produced in the 1970s.² But such images remain dominant in the work of contemporary gay male writers such as Rofes and White where the almost obsessive recounting of acts of 'f***ing' call to mind pornographic images of 'penile prowess' and the 'all powerful, ever-ready, male sex drive, located in the activities of the male sex organ' (Segal, 1997, p. 193). In the words of Kramer, who criticised White's *The farewell symphony* for being 'boring' and 'irresponsible' because it 'parades before the reader every trick [White has] ever sucked, f***ed, rimmed, tied up, pissed on, or been sucked by, f***ed by, rimmed up by, tied up by...':

After all our history, after all these deaths, we still don't ... have a gay culture ... We have our sexuality and we have made a culture out of our sexuality, and that culture has killed us. I want to say this again: We have made sex the cornerstone of gay liberation and gay culture, and it has killed us (Kramer, cited in Rofes, 1998, p. 133).

What Kramer is actually pointing toward in quotes such as the above is the failure of gay culture to address important questions of moral choice and responsibility with regard to sexual behaviour. Kramer first publicized his concerns in his early work, *The normal heart*, again through the voice of his central character, Ned. 'Soon,' Ned said:

...we're going to be blamed for not doing anything to help ourselves. When are we going to admit that we might be spreading this? We have simply f***ed ourselves silly for years and years, and sometimes we've done it in the filthiest places...(Kramer, 1995, p. 65).

And again:

Ned: Gay is good to that crowd, no matter what. There's no room for criticism, looking at ourselves critically.

Emma: What's your main criticism?

Ned: I hate how we play victim, when many of us don't have to (pp. 8–9).

In this work, Kramer is pointing towards the 'victim culture' of gay culture. His critique still remains pertinent, as can be seen when reading some of Rofes' contemporary work in which he vociferously attacks 'social critics' who highlight the dangers of 'barebacking'. These critics, he claims, '... frequently project a range of cultural anxieties ... onto one narrow group. This is a dangerous practice that must be called by its proper name: scapegoating' (Rofes, 1998, p. 131). But, one might ask, is it not simply disingenuous on the part of activists such as Rofes to, in Kramer's terms, 'play victim' and fail to address the real dangers and risks presented by behaviours such as 'barebacking'? Second time round, armed with knowledge of the devastating consequences of 'promiscuous' sex amongst Western gay men, is it not *morally irresponsible* to disclaim such knowledge and potentially re-create the conditions that led to the first AIDS crisis?

Such questions of moral responsibility really are quite taboo in this area – especially in the arena of health psychology and health promotion – in which it is far more acceptable to talk behaviouristically about 'slip-ups' or 'relapses', or more psycho-analytically about 'forces' or 'drives' – than to actually admit that it is a *person* who is

²On a slightly different track, Watson (2000) has recently examined how living up to a 'macho' image is intrinsically damaging to heterosexual men's health.

engaging in particular types of behaviour. This paper has attempted to use Billig's work on dialogical repression to suggest that certain aspects of contemporary gay life, with their emphasis on 'pleasure' and 'resistance', inculcate a culture which represses the material reality of HIV/AIDS and shies away from the question of individual morality and responsibility. The act of 'barebacking' is just one contemporary manifestation of such 'habitual embodied' resistance. Historically, it is possible to construe such acts as a perpetuation of the 'resistance habitus' which derives from the Gay Liberation Movement of the 1970s.

Concluding comments

As a health psychologist, in previous publications (Crossley, 2000, 2001a), I have argued that health psychology desperately requires a perspective which encourages people to reflexively consider and debate the inextricably moral nature of the choices they are making in relation to various different kinds of health-related behaviours. This requires a reduction in health promotion schemes which present an image of health behaviours as simplistic, amoral, behavioural or cognitive phenomena. As Odets (1995) has cogently argued in relation to gay men's sexual practices, it is no good relying on instrumental sexual techniques or presenting unsafe sexual practices as 'relapse' or 'slip-ups'. Instead, what is needed is more in the way of making clear to people the nature of the choices they are making, and providing opportunities for them to discuss and achieve greater understanding of why they are behaving as they are doing.

In this paper, it has been suggested that a greater understanding of 'transgression' and 'resistance' as part of the 'cultural habitus' of gay men's history, may facilitate a more in-depth understanding of 'risky' sexual practices such as 'barebacking'. Some of the materials presented in this paper highlight the value of encouraging people to reflect back on their own personal histories and to see how they connect with the social and historical context of gay history, to learn why gay men have behaved as they have done, and how to change their behaviours in order to progress in the future. The paper has attempted to show that although there is a need to appreciate the value of resistant and transgressive behaviour, there is also a converse need to appreciate when such behaviour may become self-defeating, damaging and even suicidal. It has been argued that 'repressed' issues of the material reality of HIV/AIDS, morality and individual responsibility need to be allowed into the 'resistant habitus' of gay culture if gay men are to fully realize their potential and take control over their own lives.

This paper has been written in the firm belief that it is only by providing opportunities for discussion and exploration that people will be able to develop a sense of sustaining meaning, and lives that are possible of expressing such meaning. As envisaged in this paper, a more critical and thoughtful approach to health psychology and the cultures of gay men can aid in this process, rather than perpetuating, as mainstream approaches have done, a perception of health promotion as a matter of technical management and control.

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