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### **The love stories of, and the impact of HIV/AIDS upon, generations of gay men in Urban Australia and New Zealand**

In this paper the love stories of gay men in contemporary Sydney, Melbourne and Auckland are examined in the context of the participants' attitudes and experiences with HIV/AIDS. The participants were asked to reflect upon a common text, a well-known and loved real account of the lives and deaths of two men, sometimes partners, sometimes not, in the contexts of Sydney and Melbourne in the 70s and 80s. The participants themselves were gay men who lived in Sydney, Melbourne and Auckland over the same period. Ages of the participants ranged from 28 to 55 at the time of interviewing. The choice of the common text, *Holding the Man* by Timothy Conigrave, was intended to provide a common foundation across generations upon which the participants could frame their thoughts in relation to their own love stories and their experiences with HIV/AIDS. The examination of the responses of the participants focused on inter- and intragenerational differences and similarities, both in the ways these men described their love stories and their experiences of HIV/AIDS. The key feature of all of these narratives is that despite ageing processes, resonances of the Conigrave text could be traced. It could be argued that recency effects, for example, produced the commonality of narrative thread. I argue however, more than this, the commonalities in love stories may point to a commonality of experience of love across generations, the spectre and aftermath of an HIV/AIDS crisis notwithstanding. Additionally, the participants' responses may indicate the capacity for written stories, both fictional and non-fictional, to inform the readers' understandings of their own love stories, and in the case of attitudes regarding HIV/AIDS, drive towards larger ideographic understanding.

**Key word:** love stories; HIV/AIDS; narrative threads; ideographic understanding.

**A brief, less formal introduction:**

*When I first started writing my PhD, from which this paper comes in part, I thought that I would find that there would be large differences between the narratives younger gay men constructed about their own experiences of love and the ever-hovering issue of HIV/AIDS and those narratives of more chronologically senior gay men. I was interested to listen to the stories of the people who had fought for acceptance and recognition through such events as the 1978 Sydney Mardi Gras, and reflect upon the stories of men who had come out in a much different world of the early to mid 1990s. My initial feeling was that in many ways, the older participants in the study would think and speak about their narratives of love in the context of a battle against great external forces that sought to criminalise their understandings of what it was to be in love, and in particular, during the 1980s, criticise and marginalise their narratives as a warning against the spread of a virus and disease scarcely understood. In contrast, my feeling was that among the participants who were my contemporaries, narratives would arise that included love stories as a necessary and accepted part of the experience of being a gay man.*

*It turned out that my intuition did not actually take account of the way the participants' narratives of love, loss and the HIV/AIDS phenomenon change over time. A discussion of the rationale for the selection of what I have described as the set-text follows in more depth, but for now, it is enough to say that I wanted to introduce a framework, familiar to all participants, in which they could reflect upon their narratives of love both intra- and intergenerationally. What became apparent is that there are both differences and similarities across and within generations, partly attributable to the way in which these narratives change over time, and that these narratives make strong connections with a text that has had strong significance across several generations. My conclusion is that narratives of love in the face of HIV/AIDS and influenced by the text, can point to larger ideographic understandings of HIV/AIDS and love across time.*

## **The Set Text: auto/biographical narratives of the author written into the lives of the participants**

The larger dissertation presents the lives of the participants as auto/biographical constructions in the same way that the lives within the set-text are presented. This point is further discussed in another part of the larger dissertation. For now, I want to focus on the responses to a 'set text'. The set text was *Holding the Man* (1995) by Timothy Conigrave. This text is approximately three hundred pages long, and is an auto/biographical work. The author details his relationship with his male partner, from first falling in love in secondary school to their separate lives in Sydney and Melbourne and finally the death of his partner from AIDS-related illnesses. The text spans fifteen years, from the mid 1970s until the early 1990s. The text has also been adapted for the stage, and had two sold out seasons in Sydney between December 2006 and March 2007, and returned to the stage with the same cast for another season at a much larger theatre later in 2007. *Holding the Man* is one of Australia's Favourite 100 Books (2003 Australian Society of Authors 40th Anniversary list), and won the Human Rights Award for Non-fiction in 1995 (United Nations). This text was selected because many parallels can be made between the lives of the central characters and the lives of the participants.

The interview process itself progressed through the following stages in succession:

1. Once the individual participants had completed the preliminary procedure of providing consent, they were asked to participate in a non-standardised interview, the duration of which was approximately one hour.
2. After the initial interview, the participants were given a copy of *Holding the Man* (Conigrave, 1995) and asked to read it, or – if they had already read it – to reserve their responses to the text until a second interview.
3. At the second interview, participants were asked to consider in depth their response to the set text. A detailed discussion of the questions asked of the participants follows in a later chapter of the larger dissertation. For the purposes of the current paper, I will tease what I consider to be the most salient parts of the narratives relating to love, HIV/AIDS and the life-course produced by two of the participants.

4. A third follow up interview was conducted between two and three years after the participants initially consented to participate in the project. While unstructured in nature, this interview was designed to bring some reflective thought to the original narratives the participants had produced and how these had changed, or remained constant, over time.

The larger dissertation aims to illustrate how, within the context of same-sex attracted males in highly developed societies, the fiction an individual reads, and the popular media an individual sees, has a transformative effect on the way an individual develops their own narratives about themselves and about society more generally. As Brenneis states: “stories both draw upon experience and engender it” (1996: 42). The rationale for the introduction of the set text comprises its familiarity, in terms of time, place and content for the participants. This text was also chosen to provide a common frame of reference for the participants in answering the more structured questions in the second round of interviews. The larger dissertation aimed to illustrate that Brenneis’ (1996) assertion that stories are reflective of, and influence, personal narratives, accurately reflects the process through which an individual engages with auto/biography and indeed fiction and popular media, and uses them to shape his own life. As the set text is an auto/biography, it was typically easy for the participants to see how “such texts create ‘real’ persons about whom truthful statements are presumably made” (Denzin, 1993: 26). It is argued, therefore, that there is a lot more to autobiographical work than simply ‘real persons’. The larger dissertation illustrates the ways in which “lives and the (auto) biographical methods that construct them are literary productions...these texts are narrative fictions, cut from the same cloth as they lives they tell about” (Denzin, 1993: 26; Bertaux, 1981b; Plummer, 1983). Strong emotions and complex considerations are given to the intimate relationships in the set text. The text was used to illustrate that the “deep, inner life of the person can be captured in an autobiographical or biographical document” (Denzin, 1993: 29). The set text was also used to encourage the participants to think about their “deep inner worlds” in relation to the “deep inner worlds” of the characters in the text, for example, the tensions brought by dishonesty within an intimate relationship. From this standpoint, the material provided in the interviews effectively became a form of auto/biography: the stories that the participants told about themselves. The responses of the participants were compared in order to uncover common links between the narrative of the set text and the narratives the participants produced as their autobiography. In this way it was possible to illustrate the way in which the narrative of

the set text had become part of the narrative of the participants. The texts, or narratives, had become interwoven, “this interweaving... is the *text* produced only in the transformation of another text” (Derrida, 1972/1981: 26). Auto/biography as fiction is illustrated in this way to be an effective “literary and sociological form that creates particular images of subjects in particular historical moments” (Denzin, 1993). Most importantly, as the set text is a compassionate and eminently empathetic look at love, HIV/AIDS and the changing narratives surrounding these over the life-course, it seemed the perfect framework within which to investigate the same narratives of the participants.

### **Some biographical detail of two of the participants:**

The two following participants in particular were chosen for several reasons. The first is that these two participants represent “worlds apart” in age, life-experiences, socio-economic and educational experiences and current life-opportunities. My rationale was that this would be a brilliant place to start to draw both differences and similarities across and within societal and personal differences, and in particular, generationality. To this end, I will give a brief biography of these two participants, before reflecting on the similarities and differences of their narratives across time and social place.

For the purposes of de-identifying the two participants, we shall know them as Dave and Phillip. Dave grew up in what has traditionally been a financially and educationally disadvantaged community in Sydney's outer suburbs. The housing estate in which Dave had his early life-experiences was often characterised by relatively high-levels of unemployment and generalised social disadvantage. Dave stills shares a somewhat fraught relationship with his parents and some of the many siblings with whom he grew up. A key theme that emerged from the interviews was the ongoing relationship Dave has with the abuse he experienced as a child. Dave's narrative regarding this experience is often contextualised within the narratives of “self-help”, and is often problematised by his adolescent experiences of his emerging sexuality. By the age of seventeen, Dave had come out to his family. The contiguous issues that this coming out may have produced do not largely form an isolated narrative for Dave, but are melded with the experiences he had with his first enduring partner and the broader social events that were taking place at the time. Most significantly, Dave contextualises this coming out within the far-reaching consequences of the first Sydney Mardi Gras in 1978, and the vibrant, if somewhat

dangerous and underground gay scene of Sydney in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Dave has lost many friends to AIDS-related illnesses. Dave has a very supportive and vital friendship network from many different social places. At present, Dave is the full-time carer for a former partner who is currently experiencing complications from HIV-related illnesses. It was extremely difficult to locate this devotion within a traditionally-accepted narrative of love, but this narrative to me seems incipient, if not overtly stated.

Phillip by contrast, grew up in a financially and educationally advantaged social place in the relatively affluent inner suburbs of Sydney. At quite an early age, Phillip was sent to boarding school outside of Sydney, a boarding school of considerable prestige. It was here Phillip recalls, that he first felt a feeling of love develop between he and another student, the son of a diplomat. When the relationship was discovered by the school and parents, the other young man was promptly returned to school in the United Kingdom. Phillip contextualises this with some resignation, within an inflexible schooling system more specifically, and within a more inflexible society more broadly. The love narrative within is obfuscated by Phillip's resignation, but attention needs to be given also to the legal framework within which these inflexible systems are operating. Is it possible here to make comparisons between Dave's experience in 1978, when homosexuality was illegal in New South Wales, and the early 1990s, when age of consent is strictly legally determined? Phillip, like me, grew up in a time when the human immunodeficient virus was little understood, and highly feared. Phillip was presented with highly graphic, and for me confusing, images of men, women and children being bowled over as if pins in a bowling alley by a scythe-wielding grim reaper meant to represent HIV. While HIV/AIDS prevention approaches have largely been successful in Australia, and the spread of the virus never conflated with male homosexuality at an official level, much of the objection to cultural events such as the Sydney Mardi Gras was levelled by conservative groups on the basis that they promoted the transmission of HIV. It was important therefore that Phillip shared his narrative of love in the wake of HIV prevention education at the critical time at which he was exploring his sexuality. Phillip is currently and has been in a relationship for some time now, one which can be characterised by elements of a traditional love narrative.

The stories of these two men represent almost polar social spaces. Yet, at the same time, similarities can be drawn between their narratives regarding love and HIV/AIDS over their individual life-courses.

## The narratives of Dave and Phillip:

When asked about their current relationships an extreme counterpoint can be drawn between the narratives of Dave and Phillip. In describing his current relationship, Dave says:

We were friends for 14 years and then we sort of became partners five years' ago but that was a bit of a mistake on my behalf, but yeah it's only ever been a friendship on my behalf to this day but he seems to believe it's still a partnership and that's what he wants to believe and I'm not going to change that for him at this ... stage of his illness.

Phillip by contrast, describes his current relationship with his partner of six years in a curious way: "I don't need to have acceptance from other heterosexual couples although I have a normal relationship like them". When asked further about that which characterises and constitutes a *normal* relationship, Phillip's response aligns quite closely with what would generally be considered a loving partnership:

So I think that's [a loving partnership] important for happiness, I think also just people being in love, how do you describe that, it's really difficult, but love is, I'm not going to start describing it but I think love is really important for all gay men and even intimacy and I've a whole range of different things about gay men and intimacy and issues with being intimate with another guy.

Implicitly, Phillip identifies *being in love* and intimacy as constituent parts of his current relationship as well as for partnerships for gay men in general. Is this so different, however, from Dave's narrative about his ex-partner, a man with whom he shared a relationship for more than twenty years, and who had recently died of complications from alcohol-related illnesses:

I suppose my ex-partner was alcoholic and he died this year so that was sort of like ... that was difficult for him I suppose, not so much for me because it's been 10 years since I've tried to sort of help him, he just couldn't socially cope in this world with anything really, he just didn't have the capacity emotionally to cope with anything so he just used to drink it away?

Incredibly, after twenty or more years of being the partner of a sometimes abusive alcoholic, Dave refers to the alcoholism as difficult for his partner, and not for him. Implicit too, is that Dave had tried to help his ex-partner emotionally, but in the end had not been able to. This kind of devotion speaks of love and at some point, intimacy, not dissimilar to Phillip's account of his current relationship. At some point, too, one could assume that Dave's ex-partner had been a source of happiness for Dave, however wilted by the issues around alcohol.

The personal narratives of Phillip and Dave are really disparate when asked to comment on the capacity and willingness of gay men to mobilise around issues such as homophobia and HIV/AIDS. Dave describes his experiences at the first Mardi Gras in Sydney, particularly in relation to the ways in which that form of activism is viewed by younger people today:

I suppose back in 79 [Dave later assents that it was actually 1978] when you know ...I came out and it was quite active that night when people were arrested and you know I was there on front line with people and they'd turned you know a car on the street upside down, Volkswagen and it was quite violent and abusive in those days... Yeah they [younger people] don't want to ... they don't see HIV as a ... as an issue because they're young, it's not going to touch them, they think that they have this barrier up.

When asked about the contemporary state of equality for the queer community within the dominant system in Australia, Phillip's seeming complacency possibly belies the reality that he has not experienced violent protest and arrest for merely being gay:

I ...just sit there as an individual because I can't relate to something and say, well that's not important, I would just say, no that's unimportant for me but I acknowledge that that's an issue for this individual and therefore I wouldn't stand in the way of ... of that happening if that was important for a group of individuals. You don't know, I guess is my point. I tend to only engage in issues that excite me or interest me directly but on other issues that, on other agendas that people are pushing, if I don't have a viewpoint, 'cause it doesn't affect me, if it doesn't affect me, therefore I haven't formed a viewpoint, where the impact on me is so minimal ... I .... simply not engaged in it.

Dave, on the other hand, has a very different view of what it means to be gay today in Sydney, despite the transitions he has seen over the past thirty years:

....but homophobia seems to be coming back now and it seems to be like a I don't know, 20 year cycle where 30 years ago you had to break down the barriers to say it's who I am and now you're fighting down the barriers of we're still here you know, but we're not going anywhere but there are people out there that have a problem with it socially and physically.

In some ways, Dave's and Phillip's narratives coalesce and in some ways, their narratives are divergent. Dave has accurately identified how some young people today, such as Phillip, might feel about protests for equality for a large group of individuals. Phillip however, seems to feel that broad-ranging discrimination on the basis of sexual preference and identity is not really an issue that concerns him, a position starkly at odds with Dave's analysis.

One way of drawing together all of these narrative strands to describe some of the aspects of intimate gay male relationships in contemporary Australia and New Zealand is by asking the participants to respond to the set text, and reflect upon their own experiences relative to the characters in the book. Heavily devoted to the stories of two gay men, their love stories and their narratives around HIV/AIDS over their life-courses,  *Holding the Man*  (Conigrave, 1995) inspired in the participants very similar responses. For Phillip, for example, HIV/AIDS prevention, education and research as a cause around which gay men in particular should mobilise was seen as highly estimable, albeit not especially relevant to him personally. For Dave, the same cause was viewed highly personally and extremely emotively given how closely he had been affected by the virus. The flexible and loving relationship of the central characters of the set text was seen deeply personally, and with great relevance to Phillip's current experience, while for Dave it was a reminiscence of something that was once and had been lost.

My conclusion from the responses of these two participants to the set text has three parts. The first is that there are significant points of merging and divergence in the narratives around love and HIV/AIDS of gay men, both intra- and intergenerationally. The second conclusion I have drawn is that, when including as a framework a work of auto/biography, itself a form of fiction, which is of enormous relevance to the participants in this study, important connections can be made between the divergent stories of the participants. In this way, and as the third part of my conclusion, that which is acutely personal, when engaged with responses to the set text, can lead us to greater ideographic understanding of the love stories and narratives of gay men around HIV/AIDS across the life-course.

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