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Gay men coming out later in life: A hermeneutic analysis of acknowledging sexual orientation to oneself

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ABSTRACT: Given the residual homonegativity in evidence throughout our diverse communities, and given the large numbers of gay people who remain “in the closet”, it is critical that we seek to understand in greater depth the complexities of the coming-out process with a view to dispelling some of the confusion relating to sexual identity. Internalised homophobia is more widespread than generally acknowledged, and it manifests in a variety of ways, including the sociological phenomenon of gay men remaining closeted until well into middle age. This article applies a hermeneutic phenomenological lens to examine the process of realisation, where an individual gradually becomes aware of his sexual orientation, and eventually acknowledges to himself that he is gay. This process can take decades. For this research project, twelve participants (gay men who have come out after the age of 40) from Aotearoa New Zealand willingly shared intensely personal accounts of their lived experiences. The findings indicate that individuals experience clarity about same-sex attraction in strikingly different ways. This study helps us to understand the difficulties faced by men who have lived the majority of their lives as “straight”, then in middle age find themselves having to negotiate the tortuous terrain between heterosexuality and a new gay identity.

Keywords: awareness, hermeneutic phenomenology, homonegativity, homophobia, homosexual men, sexual identity disclosure

Introduction

For most of the 20th century, societal attitudes in Aotearoa New Zealand were strikingly homonegative (Pearson, 1952; Phillips, 1999; Brickell, 2008; Owen, 2016). In the 21st century, despite the multiple advances on many fronts – including the passing of legislation and the concomitant softening of negative attitudes – there remains, nevertheless, evidence of persistent homonegativity (Fenaughty, 2019; Fenaughty et al., 2021). Homonegativity impacts people throughout their life course, and has serious implications for gay people of all ages. The consequences include the phenomenon of internalised homonegativity (Herek, 2009), often manifesting as denial of one's sexual orientation. This helps to explain why gay people remain closeted. For example, only 34.9% of the 2 269 male and female respondents to a nation-wide survey in Aotearoa New Zealand indicated that they had disclosed their sexual orientation to everyone in their lives (Henrickson et al., 2007). Of interest are the 65.1% who self-identified as gay but, for whatever reason, did not feel comfortable about disclosing their sexual orientation. Recent doctoral research (Allan, 2017) has shed light on manifestations of internalised homonegativity, as well as the experiences of gay men who have successfully come out later in life, after the age of 40.

The use of the term “gay” here relates to sexual identity, and invites us to consider the extent to which sexual orientation may be due to genetic inheritance (essentialism) as opposed

to environmental influences (social constructionism). One intellectually persuasive approach to the development of sexual identity, particularly in later life, is Hammack's (2005) “life course” model; Hammack observes that an essentialist perspective provides a more convincing “fit” with the experience of male homosexuals. While acknowledging the complexity and fluidity of human sexuality (DeLamater & Hyde, 1998; Plummer, 2017; Jones, 2020; Galbraith, 2022), I adopt an essentialist perspective for this research, as this approach resonates resoundingly with participants' testimony.

The literature relating to same-sex issues is voluminous, but unbalanced. For example, not only is their relatively little research data about older people coming out, but much of the output relating to the actual coming-out process is characterised by theories and conceptual frameworks (e.g. Cass, 1979; Troiden, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Lipkin, 1999). Much of this theorising is from a social constructionist or psychological perspective. Speaking of psychological research, van Manen (2014, p. 67) speaks respectfully of the “abundance of fascinating and influential theories that have contributed to human understanding”; however, he goes on to observe that “these theories may actually leave their central concepts impoverished of experiential and phenomenological meaning”. A clear example of this can be seen with the influential coming-out model proposed by Cass (1979), and subsequently refined and finessed through almost four decades of clinical practice and observation (Cass, 1984; 1990; 1996; 1999; 2004; 2015). Indeed, Cass (1999,

p. 108) herself appears to recognise this complementary role for phenomenology in observing that "a sociologically driven version of constructionist thinking is inadequate when one is attempting to understand and explain all the complexities of what we call sexual orientation". Cass goes on to argue for the role of "clutch-at-the heart" experiences in filling out the wider picture of sexual orientation. Accordingly, it is argued that the phenomenological findings of the present study serve to add flesh to the bones of an idealised, academic coming-out model such as Cass' (1979).

Theoretical framework

Drawing on Heidegger ([1953] 2010), Gadamer ([1975] 2013), and van Manen (2007; 2014), this research seeks to understand how the myriad experiences associated with coming out later in life are meaningful to the participants. In adopting a hermeneutic phenomenological attitude to explore this phenomenon, Crowther and Thomson (2023, p. 5) remind us that this methodology "attunes us to a wonder and questioning about what matters most; it speaks to the human yearning to understand the world we live and use tools and ideas (from our unique cosmological, sociocultural and spiritual worldviews) to inform our approaches". Having identified and articulated a phenomenon of interest, the research objective is to uncover those aspects which have been ignored, disguised, or forgotten, and through careful engagement with language, bring the phenomenon to life in such a way that a reader may understand – and empathise with – the experience under consideration. The researcher's role is to dwell with the research data of the participant interview transcripts, seeking to understand and interpret the meanings of the lived experience through crafting and recrafting salient stories.

Method

Given the critical agenda which lies behind this research – to challenge the heteronormative and homonegative status quo – it is necessary to provide first-person, substantive accounts of the phenomenon under consideration. Data collection involved semi-structured interviews with 12 research participants throughout 2015. Participants shared broadly similar characteristics:

- New Zealand residents for most of their life;
- Pākehā (of European ancestry);
- Self-identifying as gay;
- Men who have come out after the age of 40;
- Men who have lived most of their life as ostensibly heterosexual; and
- Brought up with familiarity of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

The eligibility criteria were carefully considered, taking into account my personal experience of coming out as a gay man, and the desirability of establishing epistemological solidarity with the participants. Of the twelve participants, nine were born in Aotearoa New Zealand, and three overseas (one in England, one in Ireland, one in Holland). Their ages at the time of the interviews ranged from 55 to 76 years old. Eleven of these participants came out publicly after the age of 40; one participant (Grant) started the process of coming out in his late

twenties, but returned to the closet until his early 40s. In terms of coming out to themselves, one was aware at the age of five, three were aware during adolescence, three in their twenties, one in his thirties, three in their forties, and one in his early fifties.

Having established a bond of trust with the primary researcher, each participant willingly shared intensely personal accounts of their everyday lived experience, of living "in the closet", of gradually becoming aware of their sexual orientation, and of ultimately heeding Heidegger's ([1953] 2010) "call of conscience". Bearing in mind the caveats relating to sensitive topics (Hyden, 2008), for the research to have credibility it was essential that these narratives include intimate thoughts, confessions and personal feelings relating to aspects of life which most people prefer to remain hidden. Without this generosity of spirit and willingness to share, the study would not have yielded such rich phenomenological data for interpretation. Having adopted a reflective and reflexive attitude from the outset, I was determined to approach the interviews in such a way that would more likely encourage rich experiential narratives, as encouraged by van Manen (2014).

The study was granted ethical clearance by AUT's Ethics Committee on 12 May 2014. Participants were provided with the opportunity to read their transcripts, and each participant approved their transcript. None of the participants withdrew from the project.

Hermeneutic phenomenological analysis: Dwelling with the data

When working from the interview transcripts, my task, as guided by phenomenological experts such as Caelli (2001) and Smythe et al. (2008) was to attune to potential stories and observations – details which convey the essence of the lived experience of the participant. When appropriate, I provide an interpretation, or phenomenological reflection about the nature of the incident, noting that an anecdote would frequently assume greater poignancy in retrospect, given that the person to whom the events happened may not have been aware of the significance at the actual time. One challenge which I encountered during the analysis phase was drilling down and isolating a discrete incident. Why does this episode appear to be so important? What is this story really about? What unexpected meanings are beginning to emerge as I ponder this narrative? Van Manen (2014, p. 256) observes that the anecdote "can make the singular knowable". "[T]he phenomenological example is a philological device that holds in a certain tension the intelligibility of the singular...the example mediates our intuitive grasp of a singularity, which is exactly the project of phenomenology" (van Manen, 2014, p. 260). It helps to remember that a central objective of phenomenology is to identify and understand the essence of an experience, bearing in mind the tension and dynamic between the particular and the universal.

Throughout the research, I remained mindful of the importance of establishing a trustworthy rapport with my intended readers, consciously and constantly maintaining a reflexive approach to the data, and my interpretations, which I acknowledge are partial, subjective and forever open to re-interpretation by others: "Meaning is everywhere, in all our experiences, and these experiences always have multiple layers of significance which are constantly emerging" (Crowther & Thomson, 2023, p. 13). And in interpreting the stories, and exploring the meanings, I

was conscious of Smythe and Spence's (2019) advice to show rather than tell, and to leave space for the reader to explore their own interpretations. Throughout, I remained clearly oriented to the research question, bearing in mind Gadamer's ([1975] 2013, p. 310) observation that "[t]he essence of the question is to open up possibilities and keep them open". Even years after completing the fieldwork for this research, I find myself returning to this intriguing question of awareness, and in revisiting the stories I gain new insights, more nuanced interpretations and a deeper understanding, which I share here with the reader.

Participants' reflections

Each individual experienced clarity about his same-sex attraction in different ways. Some participants had a clear sense of their sexual interest from an early age; for example, as a young boy, Graham was excited by the sexual possibilities suggested by virile, hypermasculine motorcyclists:

My first awareness of sexual attraction, I was 11 or 12 when I remember being very excited by seeing a young man in boots astride his motorcycle – I was aware that I found him attractive.

Grant, even at the age of five, was aware of his attraction to other males:

I remember at the breakfast table one morning, and Dad was talking about his dreams and he said, "What dreams do you have?" and I was thinking of the dream that I had about being very close and intimate and snuggling with the man across the road.

This attraction was a constant feature of his childhood. Grant described another incident some years later when his aunt and uncle were visiting, and they had with them a good-looking youth:

He must have been about 16 and I would have been about 10, or 12. We were sitting at the table at lunchtime and I just kept looking at the guy. I couldn't stop staring, and eventually, Dad got concerned – he asked me, "What's wrong, Grant?" and I replied, "No, I'm fine". I didn't realise that what I was doing was so obvious, but I did have this feeling: I thought this boy was just like me. So there was a strong sense of attraction at that age and a growing sense of awareness which got stronger and stronger.

For both Graham and Grant, their sense of same-sex attraction was tempered with a sense of caution. As Grant explained: "I have known since I was a little boy that I was gay, but until the age of 28 I lived in denial. I knew that I had to appear straight in order to survive". The other participants in this study indicated quite different degrees of awareness, impacted variously by ignorance and confusion. For some participants, this awareness emerged gradually over a period of decades. Until they came out in later life, all participants were in some sort of denial. Different forms of denial can be seen as falling along a continuum ranging from naivety, genuine ignorance and lack of awareness at one end, through to deliberate strategies to avoid acknowledging to one's self at the other extreme.

Bevan observed that the barriers to coming out to himself would have been primarily psychological, deriving partly from a

conservative boarding school education and the strict teachings of the Catholic Church. Other barriers included invisibility and lack of exposure to the counterculture. When awareness came, it was gradual rather than sudden: "I would struggle to identify a moment – I say it wasn't an epiphany, it was a slow unveiling – and the fog started to lift around the age of 27".

Chris observed that growing up he had felt "quite mixed up" and "confused". He recollected that he had a preference for looking at men rather than women; however, this behaviour could be rationalised: "I would have lots of explanations for that, and thought, 'Oh well, that's what happens, that's not an unusual thing'". Both Gordon and Peter were unable to articulate any awareness of same-sex attraction to themselves. Gordon explained:

Until I was in my forties, I had no concept of "gay" at all. I don't think I even knew the word. I had never thought about the meaning of the word "homosexual" or "gay". I wasn't conscious of homosexuality, that it existed even, that there was a term for same-sex attraction.

To understand what this lack of awareness might have looked like, we can explore their recollections and consider the strategies which they employed to prevent themselves from acknowledging the import of their attraction to other males. When asked about his first awareness of his sexual orientation, Peter replied: "**That** bit I struggle with. I think I played a psychological game in my own head". A key strategy for Peter in denying his sexual orientation was to distance himself from the concept of homosexuality by deliberately "losing" the language. Another successful strategy for Peter was to occupy himself with numerous projects which ensured that he was so busy, he would simply not have time to dwell on matters of a psycho-sexual nature:

This was almost a self-deception that enabled me to gain my significance from keeping busy in other contexts, so I didn't have to deal with my sexuality. And it was as simple as that I think: a simple matter of not dealing with something.

In retrospect, Peter acknowledged the role of diversionary activities as contributing to his self-delusion. These avoidance techniques, combined with his deliberate suppression of sexual desires, enabled him to remain not only closeted but essentially unaware of his sexual orientation until he came out in his early fifties.

Likewise, Gordon reflected that growing up, he had no awareness of his sexual orientation, despite numerous indicators which pointed in this direction. These signs were obvious to other people, but steadfastly ignored by Gordon, who, for a number of reasons, was unable to accept the possibility that he was gay. Until the time he came out, he disregarded these "hints" and "clues": "I didn't entertain them. They felt awkward, uncomfortable, so I just dismissed them from my mind".

Edward became increasingly aware throughout his adolescence that it was men to whom he was attracted. However, this attraction did not mesh with his ideal of the person he wanted to be, and so he was conscious of an ongoing need to manage this: "I was always trying to suppress that and maximise any sense that I found women attractive as well".

For some participants, the fact of being in a heterosexual relationship automatically precluded the possibility of identifying

as gay. For example, Gordon expressed surprise that one of his students might be confused on this point: "Ah, I remember a child in my class asking me if I was gay, and I said, 'Of *course* not, I've got a girlfriend!'" Gordon's continuing confusion rested partly in the pleasure he derived from these heterosexual relationships, including the sexual component: "The sex was fun so we had it".

When reflecting on his own awareness of his sexual orientation, John observed that growing up he felt "different"; however, in his own mind, he knew he wasn't gay, because he "didn't do things". He did not feel attracted to other men so he was not tempted to explore gay sex. Furthermore, he was married, and he loved his wife: "We had a perfectly normal life. It was a happy life: we had a normal sexual relationship, and my wife was also involved in the theatre".

One contributing factor to the confusion was the silence and ignorance associated with same-sex issues in Aotearoa New Zealand. Gay role models were not apparent and information about sexual orientation was lacking. Growing up in the 1940s and the early 1950s, Mark noted the repressive and rigid self-censorship of unpalatable subjects:

Homosexuality wasn't talked about; if it ever occurred it would be a horror story; it was the kind of thing that people talked about in hushed voices and, although I was aware of it, it was almost like something from another planet. It simply was beyond my comprehension.

Some participants did not acknowledge their sexual orientation because of the discrepancy between their self-image and the negative stereotypical images of homosexuals which were promulgated formally and informally (especially in popular culture) throughout the 20th century. One popular misconception equated homosexuals as sexual predators. As Bevan explained: "The negative concepts didn't tend to be framed as in gay: they were always framed as paedophilia, which was just the way it seemed to be".

Another popular misconception characterised homosexuals as effeminate. As Edward noted:

The only real awareness of gay people was very effeminate comedians on television, like John Inman. So that was what gay was: to be gay meant you had to be outrageously, flamboyantly camp. I didn't want to be part of that, which meant I could safely assume I wasn't gay because I wasn't like that, and didn't want to be. I suppose it dawned remarkably slowly on me.

Edward's distorted understanding of homosexuality and ignorance of any viable counterculture was a contributing factor to his confused sexual identity.

It was not until the time of increased visibility associated with the homosexual law reform debates of 1985/86 that Berend was able to examine and challenge the misconceptions associated with same-sex relations:

I was finally hearing the other side of the gay story, that they weren't all cross-dressers or child molesters; they were ordinary people like myself. And that, of course put things in a quite different light so that was a real catalyst for my own coming out.

From the media coverage, Berend was able to observe gay activists, to listen to pro-reform spokespeople, to read cogent critiques of pseudo-science and misinformation and to reconsider for himself the actual reality of gay lives. From around this time Berend gradually developed an awareness that gay people were not automatically transvestites, paedophiles, sissies or sex maniacs. For Berend, this dawning understanding of possibilities was an important factor leading to his self-acceptance.

Other participants responded quite differently to the intense media focus on the possibility of homosexual law reform; for example, Gordon felt that the discussion had no special relevance for him: "During this time, I observed the media, but it was just another piece of news, and had no particular significance to me".

Likewise for Alan, despite having a curious mind and a keen appreciation of current affairs, he "switched off", both literally and figuratively. For Alan, the news was inherently interesting, but potentially dangerous, so his disengagement was a consciously made strategic decision. Chris was determined to consider himself as a heterosexual, and a strategy toward that end involved distancing himself from thinking about homosexuality, so he effectively ignored the debate.

The transitional process from not knowing one is gay through gradual dawning awareness of same-sex attraction, to eventual acceptance of a gay identity, is one of the more interesting aspects of this research. Each participant experienced the process differently. However, for many of the participants, a key catalyst was experiencing a relationship with another gay man. For some, this relationship was the result of a careful search for some such experience, while for others, it was an unexpected, but life-changing encounter, which typically (but not necessarily) involved sex.

For Chris, the process of self-awareness was gradual, but in retrospect, the turning point can be traced back to the mid-1990s when he was retiring from farming, and moving away from the familiar home environment to a large, anonymous city: "I guess I came out to myself when I formed a relationship".

In John's case, the turning point was a chance encounter in the street. At the age of 52, on an otherwise unremarkable day at work, John was walking between branches on an errand:

*I glanced up and saw an extremely handsome business man. Our eyes met, and it was quite amazing – absolutely – like that! [snaps fingers]. He was **extremely** handsome – as Latinos are – and he approached me with this lovely American wide smile; and he said in an accent: "Hello, my name's Ron", and I said, "Oh yes?", and he said, "Would you like to come back to my hotel with me?" And I did [laughs].*

In John's case, eye contact was enough to spark a passionate, illicit love affair, the end of which elicited an unprecedented emotional and psychological response. This experience marked a decision point; as John put it, "I opened Pandora's box, and once that was opened, that was it".

For Mark, given his strict self-discipline, underpinned by a rigid Catholic upbringing and the confused sense of his own sexuality, the arrival of same-sex love in his early fifties was unexpectedly gratifying, undeniably powerful, and fundamentally "life-changing":

*I fell in love with a man called Peter: he was tall, very beautiful, and quite lovable. This was the real thing. It was **incredibly** marvellous. I was on cloud nine nonstop, and I could feel it in my entire being.*

Gordon, at the age of 43, carefully considered the possibilities raised by two professionals (a counsellor and a prostitute) who had each expressed an opinion regarding his sexual orientation. As he explained:

I should have been more aware from the many clues growing up, but I think that's how I resolved it at any moment when I experienced any gay inclinations – they are scary – I put them aside. They didn't fit in with life around me so I put them aside and just got on with being heterosexual.

Yet, despite the evidence to the contrary, he resisted acknowledging what was obvious to most others. Even when he experienced gay sex for the first time,

I was reluctant to jump to any conclusions. And I was so naïve. I received an invitation from a friend from a musical we were both in. I didn't know that being invited home for coffee meant sex. We were sitting on a couch, and he started the thigh stroke, which excited me; I was very excitable at the time sexually, and my response led to him telling me that I was gay. He knew I was gay; no question about it: "Of course you're gay, Gordon!". He was so nice about it, so accepting and so definite. And that was scary because I hadn't accepted it yet.

Despite insights from his early childhood, growing up, Grant denied to himself that he was gay. He explained that a "turning point" for him occurred through a chance encounter in the late 1970s when he was travelling in the USA, and needed accommodation in a remote wilderness location. A kindly park ranger offered him a bed for the night, and they unexpectedly ended up sharing a double bed:

*And then, through just his touching me, it was enough. Anyway, we won't worry about the details of that, but it kind of blew me sideways: being there with someone who was interested in me, and who was very attractive. It just felt right. Ah, it felt amazing! And again, it's like that first time you fall in love, and here was someone that I fell in love with. We were together for about three or four days, then, because I was a visitor I had to move on. So I left, but I felt quite **completed**. I knew that I was actually gay, and this is what it feels like when you fall in love with someone: you absolutely, passionately love them, and something inside just makes you so **different**. I don't know what it is. It's because I was being real with myself, that moment. I was in love with this guy, and you can't hide it when you're in love; I just felt like I was walking on balloons [laughs], and suddenly it felt like I was real, 'cause up to that point I didn't feel like I knew fully.*

It was not until he had his first sexual encounter with another man, and experienced strong feelings of love that he realised what it was to be a gay man.

For Peter, after many years of abnegation and procrastination, the turning point involved experiencing the reality of sex with another man. This confirmed his sense that the only logical and honest course of action was to accept the reality of his sexual orientation:

*Having done that, having explored, I thought, "Of course, this all clicks into shape now; this is a part of me". The other part clicked in, and you can call it overdeveloped guilt, but I'd say it was overdeveloped, a **very strongly** developed sense of integrity.*

For Peter, the next step was to come out, irrespective of the consequences; as he explained: "I did not hesitate to do that; it was like I made a kind of life-changing decision at that point". He also conveyed an awareness that many people in that situation would have experimented sexually, "taken that step, and then carried on with two lives". However, for Peter, that would have not been true to himself.

Discussion

Heidegger draws our attention to "twofold" dualisms such as concealed/revealed, sheltering/clearing and shadow/visibility (Heidegger, 1977; [1953] 2010). Harman (2007, p. 180) points to the significance of this insight, observing that for Heidegger "the world is an ambiguous duality. Visible surfaces conceal a hidden depth that can be brought to light only gradually, and never completely". This sense of interplay between knowledge and ignorance provides a useful way of exploring the phenomenon where some of the participants were able to avoid acknowledging their sexual orientation for so many years. This knowledge was hidden from themselves as much as from others; at times, each participant would catch a glimpse of the horrifying possibility, but this was quickly covered over, to remain hidden for prolonged periods. Gordon, for example disregarded any "hints" or "clues" as soon as they appeared: "They felt awkward, uncomfortable, so I just dismissed them from my mind". For these participants, it felt safer to remain ignorant about their sexuality, this ignorance providing a form of psychological protection. However, this protective ignorance had to be cultivated and maintained through various mechanisms of avoidance, referred to as "foreclosure" in Cass (1979).

Although not having anything to say about sexual orientation, a unifying theme involved early hints of something amiss, which in retrospect could be interpreted as an augury of issues to surface in later life. For some participants, this was an inkling that their way of seeing the world differed from those around them. For others, a suspicion lingered that creative and artistic sensibilities were in some way exceptional; this was coupled with an uneasy foreboding that there might be social consequences for this difference. Heidegger's ([1953] 2010) notion of the "they" helps to elucidate the awareness of an individual feeling in some way distinguished from the comfortable conformity of the people around them. Reflecting on their early years from the vantage point of middle age, many of these participants indicated that they had felt "different" from other children – a sense of not quite fitting in.

While some participants had clear insights into their attraction, for most participants, their reflections indicate a degree of confusion, a certain naïveté, a limited understanding of even the concept of homosexuality, let alone their own

sexuality. In considering the historical and generational context of participants' lives, we observe that this lack of awareness was due in large part to the ubiquitous and seemingly tacit agreement that homosexuality was a taboo so great that it could not be spoken of in conservative Western society; hence, the silence and concomitant ignorance associated with the subject. Given the 20th century's heteronormative hegemony, together with multiple homonegative discourses, and obloquy meted out to known homosexuals, positive role models were virtually non-existent during the decades in which these men were growing up. Over the life course, as participants became aware of their sexual orientation, to a greater or lesser degree, they also became increasingly attuned to the one unmistakably hostile message communicated by the world around them: homosexuality is bad. Traditionally, this communication has been transmitted in a myriad of subtle and unsubtle ways, mediated through formal institutions of education, religion, law and media, and through informal networks of influence and association – especially the family. And, as with most taboos, the widespread avoidance of the topic had sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic consequences. At the heart of phenomenology is the sense that language brings (and constrains) meaning; as Gadamer ([1975] 2013, p. 569) observes, "language influences our thought". In linguistics, the concept of "linguistic determinism", also associated with the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis as outlined by Crystal (1997), suggests that the way we think is determined by the language we use. In other words, if we haven't got the language, then our understanding is constrained. From the testimony of these participants, we discern a constant tension between primordial understandings of their essential identity, and the linguistic resources available to understand and articulate their sexual orientation. For example, Grant knew he was attracted to men because his dreams told him so, but he was unable to put that into words in his head. Grant also became aware of the transgressive nature of his looking, an awareness which manifested as the beginning of a guilty realisation that he would need to monitor the direction and duration of his gaze more carefully. From a phenomenological perspective, the gaze has been explored as a means of communication as well as a means of discovery and making sense of the world. "It is through my relation to others...that I know myself" says Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. 383), cited in van Manen (2014, p. 129). Intricately tied up with Grant's gaze was an incipient sense of guilt. Fuchs (2003, p. 240) describes shame and guilt as "the reflexive emotions", and draws attention to their role in the development of self-consciousness and intersubjectivity.

Increasingly, since the homosexual law reform in 1986, gay men have felt enabled to come out earlier, either in adolescence, or in early adulthood. However, for the participants in this study, historical circumstances and their own life trajectories conspired to discourage them from identifying, acknowledging and disclosing their sexual orientation until much later in life. Despite the unprecedented media focus on the debate over homosexual law reform, it is significant that a number of participants reported that they have "no memory", "no recollection" of these events, that they had "no interest" in the topic; the issue was "just another piece of news". This unwillingness to engage with the news can be seen as a form of "protective ignorance". The participants deliberately or subconsciously chose to ignore the issues under debate to protect their fragile sense of self; deliberate ignorance of the issues provided a sense of protection

from having to engage with disturbing thoughts and disquieting possibilities.

The ability of a gay man to navigate the treacherous waters of heterosexism was a significant rite of passage in his journey to self-discovery. In terms of facticity, each of these participants was "thrown" into a world not of their choosing (Heidegger, [1953] 2010, p. 272); this world was one in which hegemonic, heteronormative assumptions of heterosexuality prevailed. From the very earliest age, each participant was aware of the imperative to take an interest in girls, to conceal any sexual or emotional interest in his own gender, to find a girlfriend, and ultimately to get married and ideally raise a family. For some participants, emerging awareness of their lack of sexual interest in females was a clue which clearly pointed towards their underlying sexual orientation. For other participants, sexual attraction in any direction remained a murky, unresolved source of confusion for many years. So, perhaps the most widespread response was default to a heterosexual identity. Heidegger's notion of the "they-self" helps us to understand ways in which our natural mode of being is oriented towards the attitudes, values and behaviours of those closest to us. King (2001, p. 81) reminds us of the comfortable appropriation of everyday discourses such as heteronormativity: "Dasein in advance measures his own self by what the others are and have, by what they have achieved and failed to achieve in the world". So, given the high value accorded to heterosexual marriage, it is not surprising that so many gay men have assumed a heterosexual identity – which some men appropriate more comfortably and convincingly than others. According to Heidegger ([1953] 2010), one means of understanding our way of "being-in-the-world" is through the notion of "comportment". Comportment is concerned with how we "are" in the world, not so much how we see ourselves, but how others see us. For example, Gordon's colleagues and students indicated that they thought he was gay, yet this awareness was not evident to Gordon himself. As Lingis (2017, p. 806) observes, "[t]here is an irreducible difference between one's observations of oneself and the observations others make of one's body and one's mind". So, comportment is associated with our public self, which is clearly visible to others, but not necessarily to our own self. Gordon's inability to recognise his sexual orientation can be seen as a form of "protective" ignorance. For each of these participants, their awareness of their sexual orientation was constantly looming near the surface, but whenever it showed signs of breaking through, it was quickly covered over and permitted to lie undiscovered until a later time.

Heidegger ([1953] 2010) suggests that each of us has an inner voice which "calls" us to be our authentic self. In this study, each participant hearkened to the call of thinking, and was summoned – sooner or later – to question his sexual orientation. For some, the call first manifested as an inkling that something was not right, perhaps in the sense of feeling different from their peers, often by being unusually creative, or blessed with an acute aesthetic sensibility. No matter the source of the call, it led to thinking and the posing of questions, possibilities at first scarcely articulated, perhaps the merest suggestion of a query. But eventually, after many years, as a result of this inner interrogation, each participant eventually became aware of a compulsion to come out, driven by what Heidegger ([1953] 2010, p. 264) terms "[c]onscience as the call of care"; with reference to the inner voice which "calls" forth the authentic self, Heidegger

observes that "[c]onscience calls the self of Dasein forth from its lostness in the they".

Given that so many aspects of the coming-out process are shrouded in mystery, including the uncertain nature of the outcome, we can see that the precious goal of understanding that leads to personal knowledge and self-fulfilment can only be perceived as such in retrospect. For Heidegger ([1953] 2010), "understanding" (Verstehen) was a key concept, and he used the analogy of a traveller emerging from the murky depths of a forest into a "clearing" to provide a striking image of how we might visualise the transition from ignorance to enlightenment. For some participants, their understanding equated to awareness of their sexual orientation; for others, this understanding was already partially in place, but had not yet matured into acceptance and acknowledgement. For some participants, the awareness emerged gradually as "a slow unveiling"; whereas for other participants, the realisation came later in life, and had the force of an epiphany; what Heidegger referred to as Augenblick, a sudden insight or revelation, as in John's moment of truth at the age of 52 in the heart-stopping moment when he made eye contact in the street with a charming Latino visitor.

Suggestions for further research

In observing that "so much research sits on dusty shelves", Singh (2015, p. 124) exhorts phenomenological researchers with an interest in social justice to "connect findings with recommendations for policy change and other systemic-level interventions". This study can be seen as a springboard to new contestations and synergies. Given the provisional nature of any phenomenological interpretation, the additional questions emerging can be seen as an "impetus" to revisit the phenomenon in question, to re-examine the temporal complexities, to shift the focus and change the lens: "the more vantage points from which we view phenomena, the richer and more complex our understanding of that which we observe" (Andrews, 2008, p. 87).

These narratives have value for a variety of individuals: for counsellors who may find themselves working with gay clients (ignorant/confused/closeted/unsure); for gay men currently in the process of making sense of their confusion; for family members who seek to understand how someone ostensibly straight, can "suddenly" become gay (understanding/empathy). In terms of adding to broader understanding within the academy, stories like these are important for other researchers, who may take on board the implications and arrive at their own applications.

In terms of limitations, this study is very narrowly focused, participants being middle-class Pākehā New Zealand men; therefore, the findings suggest the need for complementary research in Aotearoa New Zealand and abroad, adopting an intersectionality lens as outlined by Crenshaw (1993) and Winer (2022). Phenomenological research is needed to understand the lived experiences of a wider range of cohorts such as lesbians, transgender, Māori, Pacific, Asian and other ethnicities. In the interests of inclusivity, the research could be expanded to include men who have experienced same-sex attraction and who have come to identify as bisexual or pansexual. The research also needs to take into consideration a range of urban/rural backgrounds, belief systems and socio-economic status.

Concluding thoughts

The original study examined the lived experience of older gay men who have come out later in life, with a particular focus on the journey itself, and the processes of disclosure. Findings indicate that gay men remain closeted for a variety of reasons, including ignorance and confusion. My objective in this article has been to expand our horizons of understanding vis-à-vis this phenomenon of becoming aware, which works at both an individual level – for the gay man who gradually discovers his sexual orientation – and at a societal level – for members of society who gain better understanding of the processes – given that we are all, as Crowther and Thomson (2023, p. 13) observe, merely "on the way to knowing".

As a society and as individuals, we do need to know more about sexual identity. Given the residual homonegativity in evidence throughout our communities, and given the large numbers of gay people who remain "in the closet", it is critical that we seek to understand in greater depth the complexities of the coming-out process, fleshing out the idealised models and frameworks with experiential detail from the lived experience of gay men. In the words of Mark: "I think what has been lacking up to the present time are the **stories** of people". And so, through stories such as these, ignorance and confusion are gradually supplanted by understanding.

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