14 Conclusion

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This edited collection supports the view that being gay is a personal, social, and cultural phenomenon that has multiple implications in people's lives. The essays featured in this book demonstrate that being gay goes beyond discourses of sexuality and gender and reaches to realms of political, socio-economic, religious, legal, psychological, and global significance. The close-up narratives presented by the contributors show how their/our everyday lives are entangled in powerful structures, regimes, and dynamics that inform and restrict a gay man's existence.

Presenting a gloomy view of gay life was not our intention, and we believe that despite the sometimes-difficult subjects that were addressed throughout the chapters, the collection as a whole presents the reader with a variety of narratives of diverse affective content. Indeed, we hope the reader finds sparks of joy in the kinship and shared experiences expressed in the texts. Either way, we are confident that even when in the middle of forceful dynamics, the contributors have taken a step back to identify restrictive social apparatuses and have shown agency in resisting and challenging them.

The narratives of our now friends, Ken, David, Randall, Panu, Cináed, Tony, Seamus, Willem, Yasin, Julian, Oscar, and Whitney with regards to how we make sense of our everyday lives as gay men emerged from our past and present experiences, but also looked into the future to imagine where our lives are heading. Our written words were generated in a specific socio-historic and personal time, which must be taken into consideration as our writings are contextual and, therefore, are shaped by particular (and some extraordinary) circumstances.

As such, this edited collection does not attempt to generalise gay men's lives. Nor does it attempt a reductionist thematic analysis of the issues raised in the chapters. Instead, the collection aims to evoke the voices and words of other gay men – and individuals from other LGBTQIA+ populations – who feel, experience, describe, and write similar narratives about their experiences. In particular, some stories narrated here might resonate with other LGBTQIA+ people's experiences of feeling, exploring, and struggling for being part of a population that has been discriminated against, disadvantaged, colonised, and often oversimplified and understood only in terms of

our desire. The history of colonisation of gayness by powerful institutions – medical organisations, governments, religious organisations, companies that profit from our identities – is one of the reasons we invited contributors to look deep into, but also beyond, our desire.

Gay life through an everyday prism

Why is it important to think about gayness from an ‘everyday’ perspective? Because the current state of knowledge on LGBTQIA+ studies is at a relatively advanced stage and yet, we know little about intimate aspects of gay life; because looking at gayness through an everyday-ordinary lens shows us that the existing research and public knowledge of gayness is limited to a few aspects of gay existence. As individuals, gay men often find ourselves in the middle of grand narratives that give much attention to certain aspects of life, but ignore entire areas that are important to us. Approaching gayness with an everyday lens required us to pay attention to those people, relationships, activities, feelings, and thoughts that catch our attention and show the disparity between what matters to us gay men and what has been portrayed in public and academic knowledge. A focus on the everyday requires us to see that, in many cases, being gay means to the individual much more than the gender of the person to whom we feel attracted and much more than our sexuality – without denying the importance of our sexuality. Similarly to the question ‘Can work be regarded as queer if it’s not explicitly “about” sexuality?’ posed to contributors of the book ‘After Sex?’ (Halley and Parker, 2011), we wanted to explore what it is like to think about gayness from a personal, everyday perspective, regardless of its subtle or overt relation with sexuality.

The personal nature of the stories that emerged from this writing exercise was a crucial move in response to the work that still needs to be done to reduce systemic inequalities for gay men, wider LGBTQIA+ populations, and other marginalised groups. These first-hand narratives emphasised the need to represent gayness in a fair way. The word ‘fair’ calls out to the numerous times and instances in which gay men have not had a say in matters that concern and affect us directly. These autoethnographies reclaim our authority to talk about our own experiences and recognise the knowledge generated through inhabiting our own skins. In 1972, during the convention of the American Psychiatry Association, an anonymous gay psychiatrist – Dr Anonymous – addressed the audience but concealed his identity by wearing a mask and using a microphone that distorted his voice (Glass, 2018). The reason for his address was to speak against the pathologisation of homosexuality and the biased representation of homosexual individuals as inherently dysfunctional and mentally ill. It was an urge to ‘look carefully at the power which lies in [psychiatrists’] hands to define the health of others around us’ (Scasta, 2003). The anonymous psychiatrist, later identified as John E. Fryer, and his speech at the conference have been deemed

a crucial factor that contributed to the removal of homosexuality from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. John E. Fryer's act of resistance – defined by himself as 'probably the central event in his career' (in Scasta, 2003) – is an example of the great value of personal voice in identifying, communicating, and challenging discourses that still persist due to unchecked power.

Fryer's life circumstances put him in a position in which he took the opportunity to speak at a place where a pivotal shift of power benefitted – and continues to benefit – uncountable numbers of people. While not all of us have the same access to such circles of power, we do not underestimate nor undervalue the value of personal story nor 'the power of the small' (Harris, 2020) to transform and to create new realities. The gay men contributing to this book also took the opportunity to voice those structures, discourses, and dynamics that need to be discussed, critiqued, and changed. We wrote from our respective fronts and disciplines with the skills and power we have. We wrote about specific concerns, but with confidence that some of these are likely to be relevant to your own interests and circumstances, regardless of whether you identify as LGBTQIA+ or not. In a book that has the everyday as its focus, it might be seen as contradictory to finish with a paramount story instead of an ordinary story. However, we want to emphasise that, as the contributors have illustrated, the extraordinary inhabits within the everyday; those paramount moments lurk within the happenings of our ordinary existence.

We are aware of some of the privileges we have by writing this. For example, we did not have to wear a mask – like Fryer had – to write about our gay lives: we live in socio-historic contexts in which we have certain protections to address the issues we still face as a population, and we benefit from specific opportunities that many fellow gay men do not have. We are also aware that there are aspects of LGBTQIA+ lives in urgent need of address, and this book might have not touched upon them; we are aware that there is still much essential work to do. However, we believe that the book pivots us in that direction. We continue reflecting on our own lives as a way to identify the beliefs we live by and continue examining their provenance, their validity, and their role in our existence. We continue examining our own circumstances, including our biases, prejudices, and privileges.

A sense of an ending and a desire to continue: Suggestions for further research

This book aims to speak to different readerships. We invite you to think of the forms in which you can use its contents to take action in whatever capacity that feels generative. Whether its contents speak to you from a methodological perspective and inspire you to explore uses of personal story and autoethnography; a professional interest in LGBTQIA+ lives or perhaps you identify as LGBTQIA+, and some of the narrated experiences in this

book resonate/contrast with yours; or perhaps it is ‘the everyday’ and ‘the ordinary’ that has caught your attention; perhaps it is something else that motivated you to read this collection; in whatever way, we hope that you found it stimulating. As a way of an ending and also as a way of continuing the ‘conversation’, we want to ask you: What does your everyday say about *you*? What are the grand narratives *you* live by? And do they need revising?

This book was intended as a counterbalance to the research that has centred on the colonial approach that powerful forces, such as the state and medical and religious organisations, have taken in defining and regulating our lives. The contents presented here were heterogeneous in terms of the disciplines and socio-historical and political contexts of the individuals that featured in them. That heterogeneity responds to the multiple angles from which gay lives can be seen, but overall, the essays presented and discussed them from two overlapping angles: gay men’s lives from an interpersonal, relational perspective and from a macroscopic, cultural perspective. The issues that affect gay life are many; the fragile state of marriage equality in some states and the decriminalisation of same-sex relationships in others are only two of the most researched and well-known challenges. However, we know less about the individual challenges we face in our quotidian lives in the different cultural contexts we inhabit. What some gay men may consider ordinary, others might consider as an extraordinary occurrence. As demonstrated by the different chapters of this collection, the challenges and opportunities we face are associated with our age, cultural backgrounds, geographical locations, our mobility and trajectories, religious backgrounds, relationships with partners, friends, and family; our education, and our occupation. Some of us face individual problems associated with health, relationships, finances and even the concept of time itself. On the surface, these issues could be seen as personal issues. However, some of our personal issues *are* social and political issues.

The intertwining of personal and social dimensions of everyday life shown through the narrated experiences of the authors in this book illuminate some useful directions for future research. It is clear that we still experience significant challenges rooted in prejudice, discrimination, inequality, and misrepresentation of gay men’s lives. In his chapter, Oscar Pantoja described how he witnessed and experienced discrimination in the workplace in different settings, which has led him to question: ‘What should I do? Should I express my gayness overtly? Should I let people assume what they want to assume? How far can I go in expressing my gayness? To what extent is it “right” to do so?’ In trying to understand what he can do with the love he feels, his chapter suggests a future line of inquiry could be the experiences of LGBTQIA+ people, and furthermore, LGBTQIA+ people of underrepresented groups at work. With the advancement in the pursuit of equality, there might be a false impression that we have achieved an acceptable level of equality, and Oscar’s essay clearly shows what is written in an organisation’s equality policy may not be reflected in the thoughts and

actions of its employees. This narrative shows with great detail how society continues to discriminate against LGBTQIA+ people in subtle, yet brutal, ways and how this identity intersects with aspects of ethnicity, class, and culture.

Showing us another possible avenue of inquiry, Tony Adams, Panu Sahassanon, and Cináed Thomas, questioned how we respond to the pre-established narratives of human development that we are presented with over our lifetimes. Tony asked: ‘What do gays (and straights) do if these narratives don’t fit?’ This question suggests that, despite decades of academic and non-academic work, we still know very little about the trajectories of human development amongst gay men and LGBTQIA+ populations in general. While we carry on with our everyday lives, and through narrating our experiences of the unexpected and the unknown, we try to make sense of different events in our lives and create our own meanings around them – we create our own life story. As editors, we see these narrative acts as an opportunity to document significant events, analyse the circumstances in which these happen, and interrogate whether there are needs and opportunities for change. Some of these interrogations can only be made if we have an insider’s perspective to engage with the dynamics that sustain those happenings. Besides questioning the status quo, these narratives implicitly suggest the need for a specialist understanding of the development of gay men and other LGBTQIA+ lives. The scripts that LGBTQIA+ people live their stories by can be fertile soil for further research as these scripts – or lack of – may spark the curiosity of researchers who search for answers to their whys. Whys that attempt to understand those Selves that act and feel; Selves that look for sex; Selves that want to feel ontologically secure; Selves that want to love and be loved; those Selves that, after being misplaced, misled, and misconstrued, just want to experience the feeling of truly being.

In this book, some of the disciplines that are prominent in the study of gay life bring our attention to the area of mental and physical ill health – see, for instance, the essays by Yasin Koc, Willem J. Stander, Cináed Thomas, and Seamus Prior. These works were valuable because they voice important mental and physical health challenges faced by gay men and those who support them. These corroborate that there is a myriad of aspects that account for the uneven social field that contributes to perpetuate challenges for gay men and LGBTQIA+ populations in general. The need for studies that do substantial work to identify specific issues in a more nuanced way becomes apparent when we read about the ‘lack of ordinary privileges’ – chapter by Yasin – who highlights aspects of geography, multiculturalism, and intersectionality.

In terms of the region, the chapters are contextualised around aspects that might be particular of certain geographical areas, which is indicative of how different the social realities gay people experience in different countries can be. It is also important to note that the chapters are written in a context in which, although challenging, it is still legal to be gay (although we

do acknowledge that at the time of writing, not every contributor's country of birth legally recognises gay partnerships). This poses the question of how LGBTQIA+ peoples experience their everyday lives when living in areas of the world where there is no rule of law that protects them. The book 'Gay Life Stories, Same-Sex Desires in Post-Revolutionary Iran', by Jón Ingvar Kjarran (2019) is a good example of how much we ignore about how LGBTQIA+ people live their lives in contexts in which the historic, legal, and social challenges threaten what in other contexts we have learnt to consider our individual rights.

One of the most important points we can draw from this collection is that although we share certain commonalities, the everyday lives of gay men vary significantly, and there is no single trajectory or course of development of gay life. Studies that used to see gay life as a progression of stages with particular milestones and used those models to explain and predict gay men's sexual behaviour are now finding in qualitative studies – particularly in autoethnographies – voices from the inside; voices from the native experts who might not find themselves represented in those studies. Autoethnographic research has added nuances to the understanding of gay identities and has even given an 'anti-rhetoric', namely 'a rhetoric that always simultaneously promotes and disavows itself renouncing its intent even as it amuses audiences and advances agendas' (Gilbert, 2004, cited in Fox, 2010, p. 137).

Relational life, intimate relationships, and the pursuit of intimacy, as addressed in the essays by Julian Triandafyllou, Edgar Rodríguez-Dorans, and Randall C. Lopez suggest that our relational life is one of the most important issues in research into gay men's lives. Relationships seem to be central to the understanding of how gay men make sense of who they are and how these identities are represented at a collective level. In his book on gay male identities, Andrew Cooper (2013) discusses how the vast majority of participants emphasised the significance of their partners and relationships in general as important part of their lives. His work showed that participants found in their relationships a 'safe space' and a source of confidence within a homophobic environment. He asserts that for gay men, relationships are an important part of their lives. His findings highlight how gay men look for love, intimacy, and commitment. His work is relevant to this collection because we observe in it the suggestion that those relationships and encounters, those civil unions, romantic dates, and sexual partners – those 'safe spaces' – play a part not only in how gay men negotiate their relationship agreements but also in how those relationships 'shape' the way in which gay men make sense of themselves and highlight the need for further study on the relational life of gay men.

Finally, we want to draw the reader's attention to some not-so-obvious suggestions for future research. Whitney Bauman's queering of time and his experiences of farming life could speak to those interested in artificial intelligence and agricultural studies. Cináed Thomas' refusal of treatment should

he become terminally ill and Randall C. Lopez' experiences surrounding his father's death could resonate with those involved in cancer and palliative care. Furthermore, David Lowbridge-Ellis' painful experiences in a card shop that could connect with to people involved in the retail sector, and Tony Adams' yearning for close gay friends to be located nearby as they age, could be of interest to those involved in housing. The possibilities for broader LGBTQIA+ research ideas are boundless, and we urge the reader to take whatever sparks their interest and run with it.

In conclusion, the chapters included in this collection constitute a diverse body of work. We hope this body of work will serve as an opening to future studies that spotlight the insider/expert voices of gay men and other LGBTQIA+ people who explain what being LGBTQIA+ means to them and, when dealing with the experiences of others, researchers need to offer transparency about our interpretive voices.

We finish with a proposal – possibly even a demand – to shift the focus from being gay as an identity that is conceptualised around desire and sexuality to an identity that is conceptualised around the larger aspects of an ordinary, everyday life. And we humbly ask you to consider that a whole world of meanings and stories is contained in the voice of someone who shyly, proudly, firmly, utters: 'I'm gay'.

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