

## **Work that Body: Distinguishing an Authentic Middle-Aged Gay Self.**

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### **Abstract**

Gay men's sartorial tastes have been understood as a way of distinguishing themselves from heterosexual men. But, study of how *midlife/older* gay men differentiate themselves through self-presentation from *other gay men* has been neglected. Also, attention to fashion and appearance as prominent in gay male culture has overshadowed consideration of middle-aged/older men's responses to ageing and gay ageism. Based on interviews with 27 men (aged 39-61) living in Manchester and 20 observation sessions in its 'gay village,' I examine what midlife gay men's body management practices say about: how ageing is understood and how ageism works in local gay culture; and how discourses of ageing affect middle-aged gay men's self-expression/ways of relating. I focus mainly on *moral* claims to bodily authenticity, which differentiate midlife gay men from younger, (some) peer aged and older gay men and indicate the multidirectional operation of gay ageism. Claims to authentic midlife self-presentation/sexual citizenship work in three ways. First, in claiming value for an ageing self subjects capitulate to and reinforce reverse gay ageism, which limits their self-expression. Second, men negotiate with the ambivalences of ageing/gay ageism. Third, 'ageing capital' (and age-related 'technologies of the self') can be used to: critique conventional meanings of age/ageing; challenge gay ageism; reclaim the value of the midlife/ageing gay body-self thus claiming inclusion within sexual citizenship.

**Keywords:** ageing/ageism, ageing capital, authenticity, body management, differentiation, gay men, middle-age, sexual citizenship, 'technologies of the self.'

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Gay men are thought of as trendsetters and style gurus. Studies have indicated that they attach greater importance than their heterosexual peers to fashion/appearance (Clarke and Turner 2007: 273; Cole 2000; Sanchez et al 2009; Tiggemann et al 2007). Several reasons account for this. First, sartorial tastes are used to distinguish selves sexually and politically from heterosexual men (Kates 2002), which creates a sense of belonging. They have found need to signal to each other sexually and otherwise during times of heightened oppression (Cole 2000: 2-4). Second, remaining on the dating scene much longer than heterosexuals (Simpson forthcoming) prolongs the requirement to preserve youth/attractiveness (Cole 2000: 5-8). But, attention to the heightened significance of fashion/appearance in gay culture *per se* has obscured how gay men differentiate themselves through self-presentation practices from *other* gay men, specifically along the lines of age. This focus has also overshadowed concern with men's varied responses to discourses of age/ageing, sexual marketability and gay ageism. The literature on gay ageing itself indicates that men either capitulate to or resist gay ageing/ageism (see Berger 1982), which obscures ambivalent responses to these social processes that involve complex forms of negotiation. One consequence of missing this ambivalent moment is that reverse ageism and thus multidirectional flows of ageism in gay male culture become occluded.

Based on interviews with 27 men and 20 observation sessions conducted in Manchester's 'gay village,' this article, (drawn from narratives generated with a sample of mainly white gay men), addresses the above-mentioned gaps in scholarship. It examines what midlife gay men's work on the body (thought/practice concerning dress, grooming, diet and exercise) tell us about: subjects' understandings of ageing; how ageism works in Manchester's gay culture; and how discourses of ageing influence the expression of middle-aged gay relational selves. Specifically, I focus on the *moral*, gendered, and at times class-influenced claims to

sartorial/bodily authenticity that midlife gay men make to differentiate themselves from younger, (some) peer aged and old gay men. Authenticity (my term for ideas expressed by informants) is integral to age-inflected cultural capital – what I call ‘ageing capital’ - that enables/predisposes men to narrate/perform a legitimate, ‘age-appropriate’ midlife gay male sexual citizenship. Further, I explore how ageing capital/‘authenticity’ are mobilized in three ways that involve: capitulation to/reproduction of gay ageism, including reverse ageism; negotiation with the ambivalences of ageing/gay ageism; and critique of conventional meanings of age/ageing and challenge to gay ageism. Also, though to a lesser extent, respondent narratives indicated the working of ‘technologies of the self’ (Foucault 1979: 10-11), which were age-inflected. Such technologies represent forms of thinking on the self that enable individuals to avoid compliance with dominant discourse. The critical resources of capitals/technologies help recuperate the midlife gay body-self and represent claims for inclusion within sexual citizenship. The three responses just outlined constitute a multiform cultural politics concerned with how men are defined and treated and resonate with a ‘politics of the minor’ concerned with reworkings of immediate spaces of interaction rather than transformation of thought/practice and social and political structures (Rose 1999: 279–80).

### **The historicity of Manchester’s gay culture**

Situated in the Northwest of England, Manchester is the third largest city in the United Kingdom with a population of 2.5 million (en.wikipedia 2011). Its highly developed gay facilities, especially its ‘gay village’, are a magnet for men living in the region. The village’s centrepiece, *Canal Street*, is shown in figure 1 below. The historically shaped character of the village was evident in informant accounts that charted its growth from four bars (in a rundown area) to its present regenerated state comprising 36 bars and other gay-targeted

services. But, one informant Leo (61) supplied a vivid pre-history of a vibrant, partly integrated 'gay scene' that operated prior to decriminalisation of male homosexuality in 1967. Several pubs in marginalised space - working class districts on the edge of the city – would put on drag shows that 'welcomed a sizeable gay clientele'; events that involved 'good-natured banter between the gays and the straights.'

Whilst informants are old enough to remember gay liberation discourse of the 1970s, the historicity of gay life took a turn for the worst in the 1980s. This era involved reckoning with the resurgence of anti-gay prejudice expressed via 'Section 28' of the Local Government Act 1988 (that forbade local authorities to promote gayness as an equally valid lifestyle/relational choice) and through hysterical media responses, public hostility and government cautiousness concerning HIV/AIDS (Watney 1987). At this time, Greater Manchester Police was headed by fundamentalist Christian, James Anderton who encouraged his officers to harass 'sexual deviants.' At the height of the AIDS crisis, he condemned lesbian and gay people for 'swimming in a cesspit of their own making' (Campbell 2004). The present generation of middle-aged/older gay men would have felt the backlash against their sexual difference when they were constructed as *the* representatives of the deadly experiment with promiscuity and threat to heterosexual existence (Watney 1987).

However, the 'Beacon of Hope' HIV/AIDS monument installed in a public garden in the village district in 1997 symbolised growing official and public tolerance of sexual difference and acts as a reminder of the (now more muted) impact of HIV/AIDS on the physical and symbolic landscape. Since the late 1990s, the village has been popular with heterosexuals and marketed by Manchester City Council as a symbol of tolerance, regeneration, modernisation and a tourist attraction (Hughes 2006: 250). It is now the largest night-time leisure zone in

Manchester and popular with heterosexuals (Binnie and Skeggs 2004), attracting 20,000 visitors every weekend ([en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greater\\_Manchester](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greater_Manchester)). Informants who remembered the village prior to its current state gave accounts of it as more cohesive space where men were obliged to negotiate their differences in a handful of bars. Suggestive of the notion of ‘adventurous safety’ (Sapir 1985: 374), being part of a group of fellow dissenters may at that time have emboldened men to adopt forms of self-display recognisable as ‘gay.’ The village’s present differentiated character of was thought to represent fragmentation of gay community. Nowadays, bars are associated with different ‘types’ of people such as ‘bears’ (older, fatter, hairier men), middle-aged men, younger men, lesbians, trans and cross-dressers. The canalside bars are generally understood as ‘trendy,’ ‘smart’ spaces that attract a younger/mixed clientele by age and sexuality and two backstreet bars are understood as more ‘rough and ready,’ attracting a middle-aged/older gay male clientele read as ‘more working class’ (Bill 55). Although the village is the most visible aspect of Manchester’s gay culture, this culture also comprises an online scene (websites/chatrooms), social/support groups, spaces for recreational sex (saunas/‘cruising’ locales) and domestically-staged forms of friendship-based kinship, all of which were spoken of as increasingly important with age.

**Figure 1. Canal Street**



'Europride' celebration, August 2003 (by Norbert Blech).

Since the mid-1990s, the village has served as a mini-laboratory for research on relations of sexual difference. Most studies have framed these relations in terms of conflict and commodification. Moran et al's interdisciplinary study (2004) concluded that queer experiences of public space just beyond the periphery of the village are dominated by symbolic and actual violence. Binnie and Skeggs (2004) have pointed up how self-entitled users of putatively cosmopolitan space express symbolic violence towards working class heterosexual women ('hen'/'bachelorette' parties) marked as bodies out of place on account of an 'excessive' sexuality thought to represent a lack of requisite cultural capital (embodied and classed knowledge/tastes). Whittle (1994) has portrayed the village as thoroughly ageist

space where younger men are dupes of consumerist gay culture and older men are rendered abject. In contrast, Haslop et al (1998) have shown how gay men's uses of village bars reflect 'communitas, individualism and diversity... identity and mood.' But, interviewees' involvement in the village scene was changeable for various reasons: changes in employment status; and ideas of 'maturity' that encouraged concern with careers and developing interests/relationships away from the gay scene. Although a structuring presence in informants' lives, use of the village was narrated as increasingly pragmatic with age, being fitted around other occasions/activities - going to concerts/films/shows or gay group meetings.

### **Theoretical framework**

I want to avoid the dualism established in previous research that portrays the village as either a space of constraint/commodification or of agency/choice. Whilst these accounts are important, my overarching theoretical framework was designed to avoid binary views of (inter-)subjectivity. As intimated, binary thinking suffuses the literature on gay male ageing. When middle-aged men's experiences of ageing are not blighted by loneliness because of gay ageism (Hostetler 2004), men are depicted as well-connected and possessing the emotional and cognitive resources to 'carry on cruising' (see Berger 1982). As will be seen, accounts of exclusion/'mastery over [the] stigma' of gay ageing overlook the ambivalences involved in negotiating 'the gay scene' as a midlife/ageing body-self and, in consequence, obscure the multidirectional character of gay ageism. In order to address the above problems, I adopted a 'pick and mix' analytical framework, as elaborated by Thomson (2009), which uses tools from constructionism and (critical) realism. Specifically, 'ageing capital' (as expressed through accounts of increasing self-esteem with age), and to a lesser extent, Foucauldian

‘technologies of the self,’ (forms of thinking on the self that enable subjects to avoid certain constraints on expression of identity/relating) are grounded in Bourdieusian ‘fields of existence’ (Thomson 2009: 23) with their own distinct but mutable norms. Allowing that autonomy arises from these age-inflected resources sidesteps the notion of habitus, referring to deeply enculturated practice (see also below), as fated to repeat itself and locating these resources in ‘fields’ avoids thinking of discourse as merely ‘free-floating.’ Such a framework reflects that no single methodology is equal to illuminating relations across different (sub-)fields and that different tools are required to illuminate a multi-sited, temporally differentiated, heterogeneous social reality or ‘scene.’ It also enables consideration of how (inter-)subjectivity results from ‘the dialectic between constraint and choice’ (Thomson 2009: 2). Such a move avoids analysis of midlife gay men’s responses to ageing/ageism as either conformist or voluntarist thus opening up examination of ambivalent experiences of these processes.

In the gay specific literature, middle-age is often taken for granted or else collapsed into an amorphous ‘later life’ or ‘fifty plus’ (see Cronin and King 2010), which risks obscuring what is distinctive about gay middle-age compared to gay old age. The few definitions of midlife available within social gerontology also obliterate the distinctiveness of gay ageing/midlife. If ‘prime of life’ accounts stress midlife as freedom from the demands of childrearing (O’Rand 1990: 140), ‘crisis’ accounts portray midlife as reckoning with loss and mortality but involving the possibility of regaining an inner, ‘authentic Self’ (Biggs 1993: 28-32). The rational actors presumed in these accounts of recuperation/salvation are either thoroughly heteronormative, originary or set on a path towards self-acceptance, which understates that (productive) conflict with self and others are normal conditions of existence. Further, interviewees’ claims to personal growth could be contradictory, marking limits to use of



ageing capital and questioning the idea of ‘maturity’ as tidy, linear evolution of the self. As corrective to the above definitions, I distinguish gay male midlife as a period with relatively porous boundaries between when interviewees started to confront the ‘loss’ of youth in their late thirties but before statutory retirement age when the term ‘pensioner’ constructs individuals as dependent and approaching death (Gilleard and Higgs 2000: 135). This definition connects with the more fluid notion of the ‘lifecourse’ and avoids fixed, heteronormative ‘life stages’ or ‘life cycles.’ It also accommodates differences in when individual gay men might apply the term ‘middle-aged’ to themselves. Moreover, following Bytheway (1995: 6-14), I define ageism as a configuration of embedded though dynamic relations, (that have structural and discursive constituents), operating at individual, institutional and societal levels. It is commonly expressed through stereotypes reflecting the anxieties of an age-negative culture about the differences associated with ageing, which result mainly in ‘othering’ of older people.

Gay ageism was not overwhelming. It could be countered with ‘ageing capital,’ which is central to my theoretical approach. I define ageing capital is a form of age-related ‘cultural capital’ (Bourdieu 1984) or knowledge about/ability to negotiate different fields of existence. But, whilst ageing capital is shaped by influences of social class and reputation (‘symbolic capital’), insights and esteem gained through life experience can ‘compensate for’ deficits in formal education and status (Simpson forthcoming). More specifically, ageing capital is a multivalent, context-dependent concept representing a family of emotional, cognitive and political resources that surfaced in varying responses to gay ageing/ageism. In more concrete terms, it indicated accumulated emotional strength, self-acceptance, ‘age-appropriate’ bodily display/performance and growing awareness of/competence in managing the relations constitutive of gay culture and wider society. Ageing capital is also implicated in construction

of (midlife) sexual citizenship, which itself has been theorised in various ways (all reflected in this article). Sexual citizenship is relational rather than individualised, involving moral and economic dimensions (Evans 1993). Relating to sexual difference, it has been used by ‘minorities’ to advance claims for recognition, respect and equality through civil rights (Plummer 2003: 39). It also articulates with consumerism as represented by the ‘pink pound’ (Bell and Binnie 2000), key to self-production as an appropriate gay sexual citizen and which has also enabled ‘gay villages to be recast as spaces of citizenship’ occupied by appropriately presented ‘good gays’ rather than ‘bad queers.’ In more critical, empowering register, ageing capital was implicated in an authentic midlife sexual citizenship that men could deploy to distinguish themselves from the fashionable self-presentation of younger men and their younger selves. This productive mix of essentialism and humanism was commonly expressed in the idea of a more ‘natural,’ less sculpted/elaborated body, indicating a holistic self where appearance is a faithful reflection of a more ‘real’ inner self consisting of knowledge, values and personality (prioritised over individual projects of the body). Ageing capital could then be used to resignify, re-aestheticise and legitimate the midlife/ageing body-self as desirable, creative. Such thinking suggests something valuable about the ageing process and that middle-aged gay men might be freed from the discursive pressures of gay/consumer cultures whilst contradicting stereotypes of them as obsessed with preserving youth and sexual marketability. In more constraining register, differentiation through the above means could result in limits on self-expression/relating and was implicated in a reverse ageism that constructs younger men as ‘superficial’ and insubstantial. It is also noteworthy that whilst ageing capital is available to middle-aged heterosexuals, fewer of them appear to venture into the more sexualised spaces of youth-oriented straight bars/clubs. The minority living out queer temporalities are more likely to be involved in retro/alternative music scenes (Taylor 2010) and probably child free.

Whether empowering, constraining or ambivalent, men's age-related claims to distinction indicate the workings of a 'generational habitus' that is more than just an age cohort in the population structure where individuals move together through time. It is constituted by a 'collective consciousness,' informed by shared historical experience (Edmunds and Turner 2002: 16). As intimated, for the 'baby boomer' generation of midlife gay men, this consciousness was shaped by contradictory experiences of liberation/rights discourses in the 1970s (which provided resources to convert stigma into pride) and the 1980s backlash, though informants will also have benefitted from gay/queer AIDS activism that preceded the current more 'tolerant' era.

## **Methods**

Accounts of self-production and relational practices were generated through in-depth interviews with 27 men aged 39–61 and 20 participant observation sessions in a selection of bars, clubs and streets. The interview sampling strategy was designed to accommodate key dimensions of variation and avoid a homogeneous sample of 'conscience constituents' - white, middle class men. Project publicity was disseminated among personal networks, gay social/support groups and various village bars/venues (barbershop, 'sex shop' and sauna). The actual sample consisted of 13 men (48%) aged 39-48 and 14 men (52%) aged 50-61. Seventeen respondents (63%) described themselves as single and the remainder was partnered. In terms of ethnicity, twenty four respondents (89%) described themselves as 'white British' with others self-defining as 'mixed race,' 'oriental' and 'Irish *and* European.' Non-white ethnic communities accounted for nearly a fifth of the population in the Manchester local authority area as compared with 9% of the population in England

(Manchester City Council 2004). In addition, following Bourdieu (1984), I define class in terms of inter-related economic and cultural criteria. To allocate informants to a socio-economic class, I referred to income-related data they provided, which ran along the lines of: whether men were un/employed; in full/part-time employment; and level of skill required for present/principal occupation. I also attended to the 'cultural capital' men could draw on, which represents the embodied knowledge required to mobilise certain forms of taste and fulfil certain cultural pursuits (and occupations). Economically, the sample was evenly spread between middle and working class men but culturally was more middle class (n = 22) given that most informants described accessing an 'omnivorous' range of tastes/activities. Nine of these 22 men, however, reported originating from working class backgrounds.

The above sampling strategy (central to my representational strategy) was more successful in achieving relationship diversity and a balance of social class but not ethnicity. Disproportionately fewer non-white men use the village for reasons largely connected with how ethnic difference is mis/understood there and the partial, contingent acceptance of the racial other. Despite being able to mobilise the cultural capital of a middle class man, Vince (48) spoke of comments that exoticised him or considered that he 'speaks good English for a Chinese.' (See, below for accounts of how men compensated for disadvantage). Alec (46) who self-defined as 'mixed race,' experienced the village as 'white European space' where skinhead regalia and the semiotics of 'white laces in Dr Marten boots' could connote either an eroticised, generationally significant image or else empathy with white supremacy. Problems of accessing non-white informants might be compounded by: cultural prohibitions on homosexuality and consumption of alcohol; cultural differences that prioritise racial identity/allegiances (Carrabine and Munro 2004) or different understandings of sexual difference that 'queer' gayness (Manalansan 2003) all of which could entail avoidance of

‘gay space.’ My efforts could also have been hampered by distrust of white researchers given the framing of non-white people as outsiders by the populace, government and media (Gilroy 2004: 21). To minimise these problems, a local group for black gay/bisexual men was contacted but its members were all under 40. Significantly, the three non-white/non-British men who took part in the study were contacted through gay social/support groups concerned either with men aged over 40 or sexual health (HIV) spaces where I had become known as a group user and volunteer respectively. Because of the marginalisation of ‘minority’ ethnic gay individuals/groups, research on gay men that aims to take into account ethnic difference needs to build relationships with and ‘snowball’ through appropriate social/support groups.

Moreover, whilst it has been argued that interviews remove behaviour out of the everyday context in which it is produced (Lawler 2002), they can be ‘recontextualised’ (Thomson and Holland 2005: 212-216). To this end, photo-elicitation was used to encourage ten informants who supplied photographs of themselves in their twenties and thirties to relocate their experiences of identity and relational change with age in personal, historical and social context. The 17 interviewees unwilling/unable supply photographs were presented with images of gay men of different ages in various gay contexts taken from a local gay magazine. Accounts co-generated using the photographs/images referred to events and relationships beyond interviewees’ present selves (Kuhn 2002: 13–14) and facilitated exploration of differentiation from younger selves.

If interviews elicited detailed, spoken narratives (Patton 2002: 341) hard to tell/hear in bars/clubs, observations were used to generate accounts of *embodied* display and interaction *in situ*. Observation helped illuminate more agentic forms of bodily performance and, in particular, those which contest views of Manchester’s gay village as unrelentingly

commodified space that excludes age. The role adopted was covert – overtness in the village being largely unfeasible. The sensory/sensual events occurring in the village as multi-sited, multiform cultural space (Brewer 2000: 4) required an observation schedule with some minimal structure. The tripartite schedule developed consisted of space to record interactions flanked with one column for recording my feelings in relation to people/events and another column to note possible concepts/theories to explain interaction. In line with the research questions, observations focused on: dress and grooming; peer aged interaction; intergenerational interaction; interaction as lone presences, in pairs and smaller groups. Rough jottings and personal mnemonics were later elaborated into detailed *description* away from the field. Participant observation was used to identify the salience of events and distinctiveness of cultural practices (Brewer 2000: 41). Observation strategy also recognised temporal and spatial contingencies. To reflect the dynamic yet roughly zoned character of the village, observations were conducted at varying times of the day/night/week and involved purposive sampling of 12 venues, streets and the local park. Rather than aiming for unobtainable representativeness, my intention was to sample key dimensions of variation in terms of self-expression/relating. Five venues were selected for their association with midlife/older gay men (two of these attracting largely working class gay men) and another six because they attract clienteles mixed variously by age, gender, class and sexuality. The sole venue sampled associated with younger gay men was a nightclub but this had a 1980s ‘retro night.’ This venue was chosen to provide insight into relations with younger men but the few older men who ventured there tended to inhabit its peripheral spaces rather than the dance floor. The layout, clientele and ambience of venues shaped performances and how these were recorded. Their availability depended on whether venues were: noisy, crowded, dimly lit and obscured by dry ice; and their spatial arrangements. This refers not just to any furniture but also to whether venues: comprised single/various or l-shaped rooms; were small, medium or

large cavernous spaces; provided (various) zones for ‘chilling out,’ dancing, drag or karaoke performances; or self-consciously styled as quieter space for conversation, which applied to three bars associated with older men. Although internal environmental factors may have obscured certain activities and produced/legitimated certain behaviours, they did not prevent recording of a range of interactions from the spectacular to more mundane, muted performances. Additionally, middle-aged gay men appeared well represented in the thoroughfares, sex shop, smarter restaurants and, reputedly, the sauna, which suggests that the village is not uniformly hostile to ‘ageing’ body-selves. If anything, socio-economic class and race were arguably more influential in restricting patronage of these particular spaces.

Inevitably, interview accounts and observation recordings/notes were affected by my changing positioning as a middle-aged gay man (aged 49 at the time of fieldwork). This provided the motive for the study, helped frame the questions asked, influenced what stories were told and their interpretation. However, I deployed a strategy of ‘retroduction’ (Coffey and Atkinson 1996: 156), involving a dialogue between theory to interrogate off-the-shelf narratives of ageing and using ‘data’/informant narratives to question the analytical fitness for purpose of sociological concepts/theory. Dialogue between my knowledge and that of participants’ involved some feedback on my interpretation of men’s stories. Whilst critical feedback led me to refine/extend research questions, the narratives that emerged were neither entirely participants’ ‘own stories’ nor mine. Rather, they were produced through institutionalised patterns of interaction shaped by the mutable power relations of the research context and shaped by public discourses/events that were temporally and spatially beyond the research context (Gubrium and Holstein 2009: 2).

## **Distinction through authenticity**

Appearance is an immediately visible way in which people are differentiated. But, through what means are selves/social groups distinguished from others? Bourdieu's concept of 'distinction,' (1984) can be used to explain how midlife gay men become differentiated from heterosexual people and from each other. Central to Bourdieu's thinking on how we inhabit, manage and display the body-self, is the concept of 'habitus.' This represents deeply ingrained practices, themselves the results of long, imperceptible processes of enculturation through social structures/institutions (the class system, kinship, the 'gay scene'). Habitus is constituted by interrelated 'capitals': economic (income/wealth); cultural (knowledge of society/social relations); social (connections/interpersonal networks); and symbolic (reputation/status). It is largely experienced unconsciously as 'second nature' involving 'spontaneity without consciousness' (Bourdieu 1990: 53). Combinations of the above capitals might predispose actors towards certain ways of knowing, doing and being in the world as expressed in competencies and tastes that become embodied and involve varying degrees of consonance/dissonance with the 'rules of the game' in different fields of existence. Habitus is discernible in gay men's reputed facility for bodily display via dress and grooming (Frith and Gleason 2004: 40). Further, whilst some men might mobilize competencies required for self-discovery through gay support groups, others might mobilize the economic, cognitive and emotional resources that predispose them towards self-expression on the dance floor. Such differences in habitus intimate that social actors are distinguished from each other through cultural tastes/practices that both constitute and reflect social hierarchies and actors' locations within them (Bourdieu 1984: 467-468).



Central to interviewees' stories of midlife distinction through self-presentation, and representing part of 'generational habitus,' was the idea of authenticity – as expressed in 'a more natural,' less adorned body-self where the exterior should be a true reflection of a more 'real' interior midlife self, consisting of feelings, values and 'personality' developed over time. Typically, 'authentic' midlife gay male appearance and masculinity were materialized through a politics of 'dressing for comfort' (Holliday 1999), which marks limits to the assumption that, to remain sexually marketable, gay men become fixated on their looks, body and self-display (Hewitt and Moore 2002). Generally, authenticity involved a holistic self and interior subjectivity that was less amenable to change by volition. Such thinking frequently registered in upbeat tropes such as 'being happy in me own skin' and 'the real me.' These statements not only recall a productive if 'necessary essentialism' (Weeks 2003) and growing self-worth but also indicate something valuable about the ageing process and that desirability exceeds fashion or bodily surface/display. As Pete (52) declared, 'Your body is only one aspect of you... There's your mind, your emotions and relationships, which are much more important.' Being 'authentic' then is inherently relational and involves ethical prioritisation of human relationships over individualized body projects.

However, authenticity was put to work in ways that contrasted it with the artificiality of 'being a 'muscle Mary' who spends hours in the gym' (Keir 42). 'Excessive' work on the body was not understood as valuable for pointing up the socially constructed nature of gendered sexuality and ageing. Rather, such projects were derogated by informants in two ways. First, in Keir's gendered account of authenticity, the term 'muscle Mary' represents a feminised level of attention to the body, connoting slippage from age-appropriate (gay) masculinity. Second, it suggests internalisation of middle class discourse that expresses moral differentiation from younger and peer aged gay men considered self-obsessed and prone to

unthinking conformity to requirements of gay culture/the fashion industry. Men's judgements about the over-production of midlife appearance are indicative of norms that require moderation in care/display of the self as evidence of moral character (Rose 1999: 73). Invoking symbols like 'the Muscle Mary' and the young gay cultural dupe represent appropriation of the ability to speak about what constitutes a legitimate form of subjectivity (Rose 1999: 29–30). But, Keir's equation of growing older with a more natural form of self-presentation/embodiment is also reminiscent of Chen's theorisation (1999) of how men from marginalised groups (Chinese-Americans) draw on classed resources to 'bargain with' 'hegemonic masculinity' and thus compensate for deficits in (masculine) status.

### **Ageing: capitulating; negotiating; challenging**

Accounts invoking authenticity were implicated in varying responses to ageing/gay ageism. First, authenticity could operate as constraining self-governance. Second, it figured in accounts involving negotiation with ageist discourse where subjects would only go so far in their efforts to 'pass' as *credibly* younger – which suggests denial of an authentic midlife self. Responses to ageing/ageism could also be contradictory; informants showed awareness of shadow narratives where anxieties about ageing were deflected/denied through the institutionalised story of age as 'just a number.' But, this was undercut by asides about dyeing one's hair 'just to tone down the grey a bit... to look more real' (Sam 45). Third, authenticity could be mobilized in more critical ways that involved use of ageing capital or 'technologies of the self' that challenged gay ageism.

### *Self-governance: the hidden injuries of ageism*

Most self-labour on appearance is conducted in the ‘private’ space of the home. But, habits of dress and grooming are shaped by public discourse. Participants conducted body management practices with regard to how they might be read by other men on the gay scene. Stories of bodily ageing as involving loss of youthful looks (physical and sexual capital) and shame concerning the ageing body featured in every interview:

‘I see bright coloured, patterned underwear... the kind of stuff they sell in gay and designer shops... just does *not* apply. It’s comfort for me now... from *Primark*... Not designer-label clothes because I just refuse to do the whole superficial *Calvin Klein* thing... I know I shouldn’t say it... but, quite frankly... I’m better than that... I’m more self-aware. (Daniel 46).

Daniel’s claim for taste may have been shaped by experience of being raised in a ‘reserved’ middle class family and experience of ‘coming out’ relatively later in life (in his early thirties). This was attributed largely to upbringing and the climate of fear that prevailed in the 1980s but was also narrated as enabling liberation from imperatives to produce appearance in a gay approved way. His claim might also be typical among middle-aged, middle class gay men who have established a measure of financial security. But, his statement about an authentic (age-appropriate) gay masculinity was the most common form of distinction through clothing style that informants made. Like Keir’s comment above suggests, such thinking was articulated by *middle-aged*, working class informants as a way of claiming respectability - kudos attaching to those savvy enough to avoid being duped by gay culture/the fashion industry. Daniel’s account of differentiation offers further evidence of a

midlife speaking position from which classed moral and epistemic claims are made. Showy and expensive styles of self-presentation - including underwear - are contrasted with an age-appropriate taste for 'comfort' and economy. Clearly, youth and money are considered no guarantee of taste. Daniel's statement does not just indicate the power of gay ageist discourse to limit self-expression/relating limits on self-expression. It also shows, paradoxically, that reversing the discourse through use of ageing and classed resources to compensate for loss of status and physical/sexual capital are implicated in reverse ageism towards *younger* gay men. Such accounts undermine informants' generational claims: that maturity involves linear progress to enhanced self-awareness and empathy for the different other; and to superior knowledge and authentic representation of gay subjectivity and culture. Also, reading off the moral character of younger men – their 'superficiality' - from appearance contradicts the more holistic notion of authenticity that informants applied to themselves. As a corollary, younger gay men appear little more than their surface selves and are thus incapable of being authentic. But, although claims to authenticity can rely on stereotypes of younger gay men, Daniel's statement simultaneously troubles the stereotype that midlife gay men, assumed to inhabit a highly sexualised, promiscuous culture (Pugh 2002: 164), obsess about maintaining youthful appearance and sexual marketability. Such narratives constitute a claim by middle-aged men to have a say not just in who/what is attractive/desirable but how gay culture is represented and serves as a reminder that younger men's hegemony in that culture is far from guaranteed.

However, greater criticism was reserved for peer-aged gay men thought to be dressing 'too young'. Typically, Daniel interpreted this as, 'a sign of immaturity, lack of awareness... going along with the crowd, being a sheep... It looks ridiculous on them.' Crossing the lines of age in this way might be considered almost as consequential as crossing the sartorial lines

of gender. The moral character of midlife gay men considered culpable of such 'cross-dressing' was seriously questioned. They might be deemed inauthentic for trying too hard to hang on to a quality they no longer have any right to claim. In allowing themselves to be duped by image-makers and pressures from within gay culture, 'age-inappropriate' forms of self-presentation were thought to represent a lack of individuality and moral fibre. These putatively age- and self-denying actions and the lapse in aesthetics they are considered to represent were thought to betray a lack of ethics by men who have failed or refused to develop the requisite ageing capital.

Further, an interest in youth-coded fashion and dressing 'age-inappropriately' might render middle-aged gay men fraudulent and beyond the pale sexually and socially. Although several men invoked the liberal individualist right to self-expression through appearance, this was eclipsed by references to how dressing too young/fashionably might have the reverse effect of accentuating even 'outing' one's real age to risk exposure as a risible, self-denying 'old queen.' The combined influences of biography, ageing and gay culture were evident in highly gendered interpretations of overly 'fussy' forms of appearance by middle-aged gay men. For Jamie (55), who was raised in a working class family, an appearance that is 'too youthful' could feminize an older man thus rendering any culprit beyond legitimate sexual citizenship. Like Keir's statement about 'muscle Marys,' this suggests that discourse of proper masculinity has been appropriated into gay male culture (Taywaditep 2002). Vince who was middle class and self-defined as 'Oriental' went further declaring that: 'Anyone refusing to accept the fact of growing older... hanging on to the last semblance of their youth... is somebody not worth knowing.' This is a palpable reminder that indulging in such body projects is to deserve ostracism if not social death. It also indicates further evidence in support of the view that men who represent racially subordinated masculinities can use

resources of class and, in this instance seniority in years, to recoup (age-appropriate, gay) masculine status (Chen 1999) but here at the expense of others.

Middle-aged gay men also differentiated themselves from men thought of as old (usually 65 plus or 'pension age'). In observations of the village scene, very few men appeared older than early sixties and only two interviewees spoke of sexual experience or friendship with men over 65. Such differentiation was also reflected in throwaway comments about tastes that rejected 'older men's shops' (Martin 52) named as exemplars of a 'dressing for comfort,' which symbolized social withdrawal and lack of sexual citizenship associated where appearance no longer matters. But, more fundamentally, old gay men could embody threats to the vitality and well-being of middle-aged men and fears about morbidity and mortality. As Alec asked, 'What if they [older men] have problems, if he collapses, has a heart attack?' The kind of anxieties Alec invokes through bodily distinction from old gay men could be an understandable response to the precariousness of life (Heaphy 2007: 155-6) from a position where mortality now seems increasingly possible. Such worries recall that fear of ageing can result in social and psychological distancing from age-related morbidity and those adjudged nearer to death (Elias 1985: 75). Equating old age with morbidity might allow Alec some emotional distance from norms that construct (gay) old age as desexualized, decrepit and asocial whilst reminding him of his relative bodily viability and continuing sexual citizenship. But, in many cases, empathy was expressed towards old (gay) men in terms of the difficulties they might face in securing appropriate care (if needed) and isolation. These concerns resonated with informants' own anxieties about the future though, significantly, it was working class and/or non-white men like Alec, Vince and Keir who expressed greater openness to and had in the recent past been in a relationship with a man in his sixties/seventies. Each informant thought older men 'more caring' and more solicitous as

lovers. It might be speculated that, given their biographical and cultural experiences, working class and 'ethnically different' men are more predisposed to draw on their own experiences of marginalisation in gay society (and beyond) to express empathy towards old gay men. Such compassion partly counterbalances the pathologisation of old gay men and suggests less the rejection of old men *per se* than a desire to *deflect* fears attached to ageing and thus protect the self from an ideology that constructs old age as being 'superfluous, poor, needy and close to death' (Gilleard and Higgs 2000: 135).

### ***The signs of age: self-surveillance***

Midlife gay men's ideas of (in)authenticity are not restricted to the aesthetic/ethical lapses of *others* with regard to body management/presentation. Despite rejection of styles considered overly youthful, ageist discourse informed men's microlevel grooming practices, which were designed to disguise/conceal the finer, giveaway signs of ageing e.g. monitoring and trimming of ear and nose hair. This contradicted the notion of the authentic, more 'natural,' untreated body. Such practices were motivated by the sexual economy of the village where men are encouraged to feel their age/ageing more acutely (Heaphy et al 2004: 884-885). Anxieties about ageing signified particularly in concerns about the appearance of greying body/pubes hair:

'I notice it more in my pubes and beard. It embarrasses me... You may be used to seeing the hair on your head turning grey... but your pubes? Your private parts? It reminds me I'm ageing quicker than I feel.' (Alec).

Grey body hair does not just de-aestheticize but also accelerates the *perception* and feeling of ageing, which might remind subjects of their advance towards mortality. Whilst greying hair atop could be stoically accepted as ‘part of life’s pattern,’ Chris, (48 and highly educated), described appearance of greying chest hair as ‘mortifying.’ Self-governance also figured in accounts of bodily practices indicating pressures to desire, attain or maintain the gay male ideal of the youthful-looking, ‘well-toned body.’ In tandem with other signs, putting on weight was understood as an incriminating mark of ageing and could result in feelings of exclusion from sexual citizenship (Giles 1996: 355-357). Generally, participants spoke of the gay bar scene as no place to be middle-aged and fat. For example, Jamie (55) described feeling ‘self-conscious’ when in the village. A concerted effort to lose weight (through exercise and diet) on aesthetic rather than health grounds had enabled him to regain some ‘confidence’ and feel more youthful and ‘attractive.’ Despite there being several spaces for ‘bears’ where older, fatter, hairier men proclaimed validity, informants generally expressed shame in presenting as a fatter (and perhaps uncontrolled and feminised) body-self in the village.

The experiences just described were typical of men’s ‘battles with the ageing body’ (Phillipson 1998: 19). They index disciplinary aesthetics circulating within consumer society but thought to be operating more harshly within gay male culture. These registered in regulation of dietary practices (involving restriction and/or modification of the amount and kind of food consumed) and exercise regimes that were often pragmatic if not endured. But, what might motivate anyone to engage in ‘yo-yo’ dieting’ was not questioned. None of the interview informants questioned sizeism, as part of a gay ageist or ‘looksist’ agenda, the disciplinary notion of being ‘overweight’ or why the bigger, older body was a source of anxiety and adjudged less desirable. Indeed, perceiving oneself/being perceived as fat could



constrain men into a taste for wearing black, baggy, dowdy clothes. 'Dressing for comfort' and adopting anti-fashion stances were then implicated in constraint on expression of middle-aged gay identity. Daniel spoke of darker-coloured, looser-fitting clothes as a tactic for 'hiding' his less desirable, fatter, older body-self 'not worth spending a lot of money on...' as he was (constantly) 'planning to lose weight.' Rather than expressing an empowering indifference towards or repudiation of ageist 'sizeism,' dressing for comfort involved disowning or disciplining a bigger body.

***Getting ready: how do I look?***

Given the risks of exclusion attached to failure to live up to bodily norms/aesthetics in youth-oriented gay male culture, it is not surprising that midlife gay men succumb to close self-surveillance. The above-mentioned practices imply forms of self-governance that involve critical scrutiny of the self but also scrutiny of/by others. This was typified in many statements that reflected the habitual self-surveillance considered increasingly necessary with age prior to entry into the 'public' (gay) domain. The majority of informants indexed the bar scene's discursive power in terms of the additional care and attention to appearance beyond dressing for comfort. For instance Jed (39) spoke of increasing use of moisturiser and 'fade-out cream for pigmentation marks,' indicating that middle-aged gay men are required to try harder to gain recognition as sexual citizens. His self-labour indicates the kind of extra knowledge and 'feminised' care of the body and its presentation required of midlife gay men if they are to be seen as ageing 'well' or 'successfully.' Close monitoring of the quality of facial skin for the signs of ageing was conducted perhaps because this is *the* barometer of how well/badly men might be adjudged at managing ageing. Anxiety is also visible in Jed's efforts to disguise incriminating, de-aestheticising 'age spots'; corporeal signs that presage

the misery, decline and loneliness associated with gay ageing/later life. As such, these practices lend support to the view that avoidance of ageing within gay male culture has taken on the force of a 'moral imperative' (Pugh 2002: 170).

The need for socio-sexual recognition on 'the scene' and thus the requirement to distance oneself from 'looking old' (Kiley 1996: 328) was so powerful for one informant who resorted to more invasive, expensive measures to look younger:

I don't want to look young; it's just that I like not to look old... just look... young-ish, okay for my age, to look sort of my age but don't look haggard, look healthier... younger... It's not gonna... turn the clock back but... *delay*... the look of the ageing process.... On the gay scene, people want you to look younger... If I delay it a little bit... not too much, it means that I could go in *Essentials* [nightclub] and they wouldn't scream, 'old man.' I wouldn't exactly be one of them but I'd be able to merge in a bit more... But, equally, I could go in the *Classic* [older man's bar] and they'd go, 'Oh, here's a bit of totty...' It's ensuring that I can expand the net a bit more... Botox keeps things so people don't notice so much. (Sam).

Sam's prevarication suggests a note of confession and apology, as if aware that he might be judged self-obsessed, feminised and thus inauthentic. But, although confessing to 'botox' is difficult, this story is interesting because botox is justified as a response to the pressures facing middle-aged gay men to look as *credibly* young for as long as possible. In Sam's account, ageism is a problem generated by a generalized, younger gay male, scene-oriented other but it also suggests the use of botox as a form of *negotiation* with ageing/gay ageism. It serves as a strategy to maintain the appearance of freshness, healthy vigour and desirability.

Sam also justified botox as stopping short of the outright fraudulence of a facelift. His story represents a claim for continuing inclusion within socio-sexual citizenship, especially among the middle-aged gay men who frequent a bar for older men where he might still be considered desirable, ‘a bit of totty.’ Submitting the self to such treatment indexes the normative force of gay ageism where the appearance of youth is thought to be prized by middle-aged gay men themselves. Again, it suggests discursive limits on capacities to deploy the resources of ageing – capital or technology. But, Sam’s statement is also ambivalent insofar as it can be read as implicit critique of the village bar scene as a sexual marketplace that places excessive importance on the youthful appearance considered necessary for validation.

### ***Ambivalences: negotiating ageing and gay ageism***

Interviewees’ responses to ageing/gay ageism were not fully compliant with pressures to produce the body-self in homonormative ways. Some forms of thought/practice involved authenticity working in ambivalent mode, involving negotiation with the signs of ageing/gay ageism. Although the stories examined in this section go beyond ‘dressing for comfort’/‘no fuss’ grooming, they are generally less likely to risk loss of masculine status and function in less disciplinary ways than the accounts already analysed. The moment of negotiation/ambivalence occupies a space between complicity and resistance, which co-exist uneasily (Lovell 2003: 9–13) if not dialectically. The conflicted nature of some of these stories suggests *potential* for critical thought and agency, though these are by no means often realised. Typically, negotiations with age discourses were expressed in stories of ‘making the most’ of a midlife/ageing body-self that is still worthy of investment. This was encapsulated in Sam’s advice to, ‘Look as good as you can for as long as you can but without making it

your life's quest.' Observation accounts also indicated limits on efforts to look younger/desirable:

*Late forties, gym-toned biceps. The outline of pectoral muscles were visible but his potbelly was visible through his t-shirt. Reddened, blotchy skin around the nose indicated breakage of fine blood vessels – the sign of a frequent drinker and long-term smoker?* (Field notes, canal front mixed age bar, weekday, mid evening).

The vignette above indicates the protagonist might have developed, accentuated or shaped body parts that are more on view. Biceps and pectoral muscles register significantly in the gay male erotic imaginary but the potbelly suggests that the man in question has drawn the line at spending so much time at the gym in pursuit of the idealized 'six pack.' The decision to indulge in pleasures thought injurious to bodily health and appearance indicate that the participant might be leaving certain parts of the body, including the face, which registers as the most attractive feature within gay male culture, to chance or nature. Negotiation between (injurious) pleasures and body management regimes suggests then that informants consider that there are aspects of their ageing appearance over which they have more or *less* control.

Moreover, negotiation with ageing was facilitated by pragmatic acceptance of the signs of ageing. Here, ageing capital could be used to put physical ageing into perspective and was discernible in statements that recognised genetic inevitability. As Clive (45) jested:

'Things aren't as... tight as they used to be... Everything heads off to the Isle of Wight... (Laughs). It's not something I've given a whole load of thought to... I only

worry about things I can have control over. Getting old, I have no control over... I've already got lines but it's a bit too late to worry about that.'

Clive's account registers the physical changes of ageing – things not being as 'tight' and heading off [downwards] 'to the Isle of Wight' - a small island off the south central coast of England that commonly serves as a spatial, ironic-comedic metaphor for prolapse or self-dereliction. But, ageing capital is discernible in prioritisation of concerns over which Clive has more scope for agency. Indeed, he spoke about plans to switch careers and hopes of meeting a significant other/partner. In comparison to these achievable goals, anxiety about bodily ageing was considered a waste of time and energy. For Clive, (born into a working class family), ageing provided opportunities for social mobility and specifically to accumulate cultural capital in ways that might compensate for presumed loss and enhance his status as an ageing subject – as expressed in ability to appreciate 'a decent bottle of *Barolo*.' He attributed this acquisition of taste to the relationships he had formed when younger with older gay men.

This kind of story could also involve other forms of stylistic distinction - finding a balance between forms of self-presentation that were 'not too old-fashioned or too modern' (Sam). Ageing capital was central to an authentically presented middle-aged self in terms of men's creative appropriation of what the fashion industry makes available whilst withstanding pressures to conform to what gay men are supposed to wear. Almost every informant reported concessions to dressing 'a bit more modern' (Ben 50) but this kind of story led men to question the meaning of age, ageing and age-appropriate self-presentation, 'I always dress a bit younger... But, *how should you dress when you're 55?*' (Tommy). For seven (culturally middle class) informants, reflexivity was evident in gains in knowledge with age concerning

the kinds of clothing that suit the older body-self. Ben (50), who originated from a working class family, spoke of choosing clothes to compliment the ageing body-self in a way that indicated the use of ageing capital to negotiate an ‘authentic’ midlife gay appearance. He recognised the influence of social class in some men’s strategies designed ‘to get away with’ a more fashionable, youthful and suitably masculine appearance given the right economic and cultural resources, which, again, shows how class can compensate for the loss of age. Such an account also suggests a gay midlife habitus capable of social criticism concerning exclusions from the ‘pink economy’ (Bell and Binnie 2000). But, accounts that registered the gains of ageing could also be ambivalent. For instance, Rob (50) declared. ‘I don’t dwell much on the limitations. I focus on the opposite of age. I don’t focus on what you can’t do bodily anymore but on what I can still do.’ At first blush, this suggests a claim for healthy psychological adaptation to the physical changes that accompany growing older. But, Rob’s claim to midlife authenticity and masculine self-control of his ageing offers little challenge to the assumption of ageing as pathology. Although the informant welcomed the psychological gains in maturity, his ‘focus on the opposite of age’ suggests, contradictorily, that ageing capital can be used in ways that reinforce the idea that ageing is to be avoided rather than embraced.

### **Reclaiming the middle-aged body-self**

Some accounts in interviews and more commonly in those generated through observation suggested that age-related critical capacities could function in more genuinely self-recuperative ways that repudiated and disrupted the assumption of youth as the benchmark of desirability/gay subjectivity. An ‘authentic’ self looms large here, indicating uses of ageing

capital and ‘technologies of the self’ to avoid constraints on expression of midlife subjectivity.

Midlife gay men’s stories of agency were couched within changes in body management practices that signalled a form of authenticity in the guise of resistance to pressures of exercise regimes and youthful self-presentation. The knowledges and self-labour required to stay trim, toned and younger looking could be rejected as unworthy of sustained effort or, pragmatically, as less important than maintaining a healthy, mobile self in the face of chronic illness. Stories of bodily agency and claims for differentiation from younger and peer aged ‘gym bunnies’ had moral dimensions that were at times class-inflected in the ways highlighted above. But, ageing capital could be used to recuperate the midlife body-self in ways that did not aggrandise age and derogate the other:

I used to feel a bit second-rate in terms of body... but this characterizes my earlier life when I just never felt attractive full stop... But nowadays, if my tits are a bit saggier or I don’t go to the gym that’s okay... (Bill 55).

*Man of ‘bearish’ proportions, shaved head, late fifties/early 60s, wearing a bright blue t-shirt that hugged the contours of his fat, solid body and sporting a long, shaped grey goatee. His style of cruising for sex was direct, utterly confident, and unapologetic. He communicated the right to look and be looked at. (Field note, mixed age bar midweek, mid-evening).*

In the interview segment above, thinking on the self results in reclamation of the middle-aged body as *more* attractive. Bill, contrasts his younger and middle-aged selves, indicating

freedom for the latter from the grip of the punitive aesthetics that characterized his formative years on the gay scene. Again, this shows how the resources of ageing combined with cultural capital can be used to resist discursive pressure emanating from gay culture. The protagonist identified in the fieldnote above displays a proud stylisation of the older, fatter body beyond ‘comfort’ and proclaims the right to exercise and receive the gay sexual gaze. But, his implicit claim to sexual citizenship is also redolent of a situated ‘politics of the minor’ that is, ‘pragmatic, experimental... tentative... concerned with the here and now... the everyday not transcendental’ and which seeks to bring about ‘a small reworking of their own spaces of action’ (Rose 1999: 279–80). This micro-politics is the antithesis of a more conventional, rationalist politics that aims to transform social structures and their related ideologies through conscious collective action. Similarly, a ‘politics of the minor’ was implicated in the recuperation of the ageing gay body-self and with decidedly erotic overtones:

‘The lines on the face tell a story... Nobody’s perfect and it’s more honest.... People who look a bit lived-in are usually more interesting... (Laughs)... And part of that *phwoar* thing is that rugged, unpolished look’ (Davie 44).

Davie’s words are significant because they index the use of ageing capital to recast the meaning of age lines, which for him *authenticate* an ageing gay masculine body. Indeed, such thinking is comparable to the strategy of ‘repudiation’ deployed by one Chinese-American participant in Chen’s study (1999) who used life experience to question the racist assumptions that devalue the masculine status of men of South East Asian background. In the present case though, Davie reads the signs of ageing counter-discursively as clues to an interesting past, a biography replete with picaresque adventure, knowledge and experience



that suggest sexual skill. Wrinkles are reclaimed as sexy both viscerally, given the use of ‘phwoar’ [a colloquial, comic and onomatopoeic expression of lust] and aesthetically. Ageist discourse, which casts age lines as pathological, is consciously and counter-culturally reversed to reclaim the signs of ageing as something to be embraced and symbolize a holistic form of attractiveness where the interior and exterior aspects of the self are congruent. Age lines can index a more honest, self-accepting, ‘authentic’ midlife/ageing gay masculinity; one that is all the more alluring for being imperfect or ‘unpolished.’

Moreover, age-inflected technology of the self was visible in an account that questions the very category of ‘impotence’ (thought to affect 40% of men aged over 40 (40over40.com/)). In a reversal of discourse that reclaims socio-sexual citizenship against the odds of nature, Bill described his experience of ‘erectile dysfunction’:

Erm, it probably means that I can’t fuck much... And if you can’t do one thing, well, we can do something else... I went down the route of... accepting it and adapting my sex life accordingly... What you’re up against is the stereotype of what sex should be... Well, I’m not too bothered about that... I think I used to be but that’s something I associate with being much younger... It has forced me to think about sexual satisfaction in much broader terms... Nowadays, I’ll just take it as it comes (laughs at pun). It’s about discovering what is pleasing between people... I’m not a performing seal. I’m not a machine. I’m a real, flesh and blood human being... with real feelings... So, it’s about... putting the humanity back into the sexual situation.

Bill’s account indicates how age- (and class-related) technology of the self can be used to negotiate sex that does not involve penetration or orgasm as defining endpoints. Indeed, the

informant challenges the sexological default position that ‘real’ sex is penetrative and should involve a literal pay-off (Hawkes 1996: 29). Suggesting that he has unravelled age-inflected discourse that sanctions what ‘real’ gay sex should consist of, Bill adverts to sexual practices and pleasures he finds intrinsically satisfying. This tragedy into triumph narrative is significant then for a sexual ethics that treat the whole body as a field of erotic possibilities, enjoin mutual pleasure and re-establish the informant as a sexual citizen whilst roundly challenging the very notion of ‘impotence.’ Bill’s resistance to homonormative youthful athleticism and machine-like, ‘porn star’ sexual efficiency involves the claim that his experience of sex in midlife has been characterized by attempts to make it a more convivial.

## **Conclusion**

This article has focussed on the organisation of age-related/ageist discourse in Manchester’s largely white gay male culture. I have indicated how aspects of biography negotiate or work with/against these discourses. More specifically, I have addressed how midlife gay men differentiate and express ageing selves through forms of situated moral, gendered, age- and class-inflected claims-making (concerning style, the body and personal ethics) from: younger gay men especially; peer-aged gay men (considered ‘ageing badly’); and old/er gay men. These forms of distinction were mobilized through narratives suggestive of ageing capital central to which is a multivalent authenticity (or lack thereof) in which ‘dressing for comfort’/‘no fuss’ grooming practices loom large. In general, authenticity provides a notional, practical moral framework through which the changes and continuities of gay male ageing can be understood. It refers to a more ‘natural’ ageing body-self where exterior/surface should faithfully reflect a more ‘real’ interior self. Attempts to recoup an age-appropriate gay masculinity are implicated in reverse ageism though accounts of

authenticity challenge assumptions that midlife gay men over-invest in youthful appearance and perennial sexual marketability.

I have also elaborated how midlife gay men's notion of authenticity through self-presentation can operate in three ways that affect expression of midlife gay identity and how men relate (or not) to differently aged gay others. Men's stories of ageing enjoin capitulation to/reproduction of, negotiation with and resistance to gay ageism. Midlife gay men's strategies to compensate for losses associated with gay ageing and reinstate an age-appropriate gay masculinity are at times implicated in derogation of their younger counterparts. But, claims about the moral character of younger gay men as fashion victims (cultural dupes) is both disciplinary of those who mobilize this critique and expressive of ageism towards the latter. Although rejection of forms of appearance associated with younger gay men were understood as a marker of maturity rather than loss, informants' critiques of such forms of self-presentation imposed limits on men's freedoms of self-expression and reinforced age divisions. Further, midlife gay men adjudged dressing in overly youthful ways were held responsible for having chosen an inauthentic, *age-denying* form of embodiment equated with ageing 'unsuccessfully.' Consequently, they are thought to render themselves beyond a legitimate gay midlife, masculine sexual citizenship. These midlife 'cross-dressers,' who breach the boundaries of age-appropriate self-presentation, are considered culpable of refusing to develop the ageing capital required to face up to threats and opportunities that accompany gay ageing. Ageism was also expressed towards the desexualized embodiment of old gay men whose association with morbidity and closeness to death (social and actual) risks excluding the latter from socio-sexual citizenship, though stories of empathy were possible. These kinds of narrative also undermine informants' assumptions about ageing as linear path

towards maturity involving acceptance of self and other and their claims to represent an authentic gay subjectivity/relationality.

Ageing capital is also implicated in expressions of authenticity that involve negotiation with ageism. This could entail mediation between self-governing, appetitive and agentic dimensions of the self. Negotiation with ageing and ageism also involved pragmatic acceptance of ageing as natural – another expression of an appropriately manly, gay, midlife authenticity. In more resistant mode, informants referred to body management practices that signalled relative freedom from the pressure of exercise regimes, weight management and youthful/fashionable self-presentation. Here authenticity could be used to recuperate and re-aestheticize the midlife/ageing, gay male body-self as desirable and creative. Similarly, age- and class-related technologies of the self could trouble the very concept of ‘impotence’ and reconfigure it as opportunity for mutual sexual exploration freed from the exigencies of youthful sexual athleticism. The three expressions of authenticity described above are indicative of a dynamic gay male midlife cultural politics of ageing - a ‘politics of the minor.’ This politics can involve reversal or subversion of the usual hierarchies of value where men - provided they are not too old – can recuperate socio-sexual citizenship.

Finally, since ageism operates in multidirectional ways in the village/local gay culture and younger gay men’s hegemony therein is contested even non-existent at certain times and in certain spaces, it would appear that the symbolic relations of domination and subordination at work there are fluid and contextual. From the evidence presented, power relations are certainly dynamic and complex and we might ask who could claim dominance when the village/gay male culture remain divided along the lines of age, class and race? But, overall, the narrative of exclusion and capitulation to ageism was dominant in interview accounts.

Whilst self-recuperative narratives might bolster the self-esteem of middle-aged men at certain times and in a few age-friendlier spaces, the social distance between younger and older men, witnessed in interviews and observations, means that everyday dialogue between the generations is rare indeed. The more challenging counter-discourses remain interstitial, localised and rarely significantly reshape a field/sub-field. This reflects a limitation of the ‘politics of the minor’ referred to above. In the longer-term, there is a huge amount of difficult cross-generational/cultural dialoguing that needs to happen before we are anywhere near inclusive gay society and erotic democracy *between* gay men let alone between ‘queers’ and heterosexuals.

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