

Violence, Cultural Display and the Suspension of Sexual Prejudice

Stephen Tomsen · Kevin Markwell

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Abstract Prejudice and violence directed against gay men, lesbians and other sexual groups have been viewed as ubiquitous and relatively fixed phenomena in contemporary societies. This perspective must be reconciled with the increased depiction of marginal sexualities and commercial ‘queering’ of mainstream media and popular culture. This paper presents and discusses data from two sources. Firstly, interviews conducted with self-identifying heterosexuals at the annual Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras (SGLMG) parade suggest attendance and participation can occur through a widely enjoyed public display and the temporary suspension of sexual prejudice in such specific carnivalesque occasions. Secondly, gay and lesbian responses to an internet-based questionnaire concerning perceptions and experiences of safety and hostility at this and similar other public events, suggest an undercurrent of threat and incivility, especially in the post-event context. These data sources are not directly compared but analysed in a complementary way to throw new light on how different groups view and experience this event. Our findings reflect how sexual prejudice is a shifting and contradictory collective social practice.

Keywords Sexuality · Violence · Homophobia · Queer

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S. Tomsen (✉)
School of Social Sciences, University of Western Sydney, Locked Bag 1797,
Penrith South DC, NSW 1797, Australia
e-mail: s.tomsen@uws.edu.au

K. Markwell
School of Tourism and Hospitality Management, South Cross University,
Lismore, NSW, Australia

Introduction: Queer(Ed) Culture, Violence and Prejudice

The media and popular cultures of contemporary Western and other nations have been progressively characterized by an increased level of open depiction of 'queer' or non-heteronormative sexualities. In the United States, this triggered controversies about public representations of sex associated with the religious Right (Bull and Gallagher 2001). Similarly, the possible spread of information about such sexual identities and practice has alarmed clerics and politicians in a range of traditional societies concerned with the effects of globalization in the forms of sexual tourism, access to graphic television, films and internet sites (Altman 2001). In contemporary liberal democracies these depictions may take positive, negative or ambiguous forms. Yet overall, cultural commentators have noted an international trend towards the commercial 'queering' of popular culture with a greater use or marketing of non-hegemonic images of gender and sexual identity (Doty 1993; Burston and Richardson 1995; Leap 1999; Peele 2007).

Running alongside contemporary comment about this cultural shift, there has been a major growth of research that suggests prejudice-driven violence directed against gay men, lesbians and other non-heteronormative groups is widespread (Van den Boogaard 1987; Herek and Berrill 1992; Mason and Palmer 1996; Jenness and Broad 1997; Tomsen and Mason 2001; Tomsen 2002; Moran et al. 2003). Among some researchers, these attacks are viewed as having grown in number and severity and as reflecting a deep-seated cultural hostility towards victims (Comstock 1991; Mott 1996; Janoff 2005). Despite problems with the individualistic-psychological origins of the term, this research has reinforced the widening use of 'homophobia' to mean a collective form of social bias or dislike of homosexuals that is believed to be characteristic of modern societies (Weinberg 1972; Kantor 1998).

The social movement stress on countering homophobic 'hate crime' has united the activism against sexual prejudice, allowed the petitioning of state and police agencies for group recognition and resources, and bolstered efforts for further political recognition in such nations as the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom (Jenness and Broad 1997; Tomsen 2001; Moran et al. 2003). And other research reflects the fluid nature of human sexual identity with the gathering of widespread evidence of same-sex practice and desire across a range of historical and social settings (Greenberg 1988; Murray 2000; Herdt 2006; Parker and Aggleton 2007). Yet any emphasis on a general risk from heterosexuals inclined towards quick violence can encourage a static view of sexual prejudice that downplays the contradictions of hostility. Furthermore, an appreciation of the 'everyday' qualities of this violence and its perpetrators, may also serve to exacerbate unnecessary fears regarding a broad range of people and social locations as potential assailants or danger spots outside of a narrow range of inner-urban 'queer' locations that offer an uncertain guarantee of safety.¹

¹ Gay and lesbian neighbourhoods have often been perceived as safe though they can be deliberately targeted by people looking to commit hate crimes with the result that '...safety [is] the freedom to be openly gay, to challenge the norming of public space as straight, rather than freedom from violence.' (Rushbrook 2002 p. 195).

Studies of attitudes towards sexuality suggest that anti-homosexual perspectives remain common, but such views are also inconsistent among most people and they need not escalate into a significant threat or actual physical attacks on others (Herek and Capitano 1996; Kite 2002). Prejudice may be contradictory, left concealed or suspended. Standard explanations for this usually concern the concealment of sexual identity and positive levels of friendship emerging in social interactions (Herek and Capitano 1996). These factors must play an important role in determining individual levels of prejudice, but there has been a general research neglect of situational variation and collective cultural experiences that can suspend sexual prejudice as well as detailed analysis of this phenomenon.

Public Gay and Lesbian Events

Large gay and lesbian celebrations offer a unique opportunity to learn about contemporary views of sexuality. These are public occasions that in a spectacular way celebrate homosexual and 'queer' sexualities and non-hegemonic gender identities with visible, explicit and unconventional showing of sexuality that in most other social circumstances are stigmatized and could draw hostile or violent reactions (Jagose 1996; Connell 1995; Johnston 2005). Despite national histories of legal and cultural censure of overt homosexuality (for example, see Willett 1997) such events have become more public and are expanding in number. The idea of 'gay pride' made manifest through street marches and other public events arose in the United States as a means of commemorating the Stonewall Riots of 1969 which have come to occupy an important, if somewhat romanticized, place in the symbolic landscape of Gay Liberation.

Initially an American metropolitan concept, the Pride March and its variations have been adopted in a number of European cities (which actually have narratives of the liberation of sexual minorities that predate Stonewall) and to Australia, Aotearoa/New Zealand and some South American and South-East Asian nations (Waitt and Markwell 2006). According to the International Association of Lesbian, Gay and Transgendered Pride Coordinators Inc (Interpride), more than 148 separate Pride events were scheduled in 2005, involving nineteen nations. Pride events are thus emblematic of special events that are based on the collective, public celebration of particular expressions of gay and lesbian identity and community.

The Pride March idea transposed from the United States metropolitan context has helped give shape to the various gay and lesbian festivals that have emerged in Australia. But as argued by Johnston (2001, 2005), discourses of protest and resistance that characterize the North American examples are reconfigured somewhat in the Australian (and Aotearoa/New Zealand) context, whereby some events, notably Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, Perth Pride and the HERO Parade in Auckland, New Zealand are more 'constructed around ideas of performance and entertainment, as well as protest' (Johnston 2001 p. 190).

Gay and lesbian celebrations are a form of collective public celebration with many elements associated with 'carnival' including spectacle, parody, transgression and grotesque bodies (Johnston 2005; Waitt and Markwell 2006). In social theory,

ritualistic carnivals are marked by temporary disorder and suspension of normative values and practices among crowds. These occasions of group festive pleasure are often characterized by criticism and mocking of authority and creative images that may give voice to marginalized groups and their ideas via ‘dialogic’ exchange (Bakhtin 1985).

A critical tradition among historians and social thinkers rejects mainstream fears of collective social disorder and sees disorder (e.g., in union pickets, political rallies and even more spontaneous episodes of riot and urban revolt) as reflecting meaningful protest against unequal social structures (see Presdee 2000). These can dovetail with positive or even romantic accounts of the suspension of restrictive bourgeois norms and the breakdown of social divisions inside carnivalesque events and traditions. An underlying dilemma in this positive understanding of collective disorder and disruption is the difficulty of finding convincing historical and contemporary examples of genuine episodes of carnival characterized by an attainment of a deeper empathy for others. Furthermore, much disorder that echoes aspects of class-consciousness and protest is masculinist and violent and it threatens a range of already disempowered non-participant groups in public space (Free and Hughson 2003).

These parades and related street parties can have the ingredients of a serious public order problem including large crowds with young heterosexual men who may be aggressive to any participants, a wide consumption of alcohol and illicit drugs, and a rule-breaking atmosphere of exceptional social license. Accordingly, the intricate planning and management of such large events now comprise major local police and security initiatives. They have been conducted against a backdrop of official and media support, indifference or hostility. But the observable widening long-term heterosexual participation at these beyond their older form as non-heterosexual events is a major example of the contemporary ‘queering’ of popular culture and the contradictory aspects of sexual prejudice.

This paper analyses information from two different sources. These were interviews conducted with self-identifying heterosexuals at the annual Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras (SGLMG) parade, and the responses to survey questionnaire regarding gay and lesbian experiences of attendance at such events. Despite the limitations of directly comparing these two differently produced data sources, this gave useful information for a comparison between heterosexual and non-heterosexual views of events.

Audience Interviews

Site, Objectives, Sampling and Method

Despite the objections of conservative media and politicians, in recent decades the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras (SGLMG) has been promoted as a cosmopolitan attraction for both local and foreign tourists (Markwell 2002). The night-time parade is a major international example of a gay and lesbian public event that attracts a very large number of heterosexually-identified people as supporters and onlookers. Since

evolving from a street demonstration in the 1970s, this event has grown substantially (Carbery 1995). It comprises hundreds of decorated, noisy and brightly-lit floats and thousands of parade participants in fancy-dress costumes. These take several hours to pass through key city streets closed off in readiness for the occasion. Crowds have been estimated by organizers to be between 400,000 and 600,000 in the early-to-mid 1990s (Carbery 1995), 450,000 in 2005 (Gould 2005 p. 3) and 300,000 in 2009 (Bennett and Morello 2009). Unlike the Pride marches of North America and Europe and more in line with South American events, this takes place at night and reconfigures the traditional street parade with its flamboyant, subversive theatricality and performance within the tradition of carnival.

Participants include queer businesses, community and counseling services, HIV services and support groups, police liaison officers, as well as political, legal, health, religious, parent's, ethnic, sporting and regional organizations. More provocatively, the parade features Leather/BD and other fetishists, sex workers, transsexuals and drag performers, troops of semi-clothed marching men and women, nudists, 'radical faeries' and protesters with messages against war, police harassment, discrimination, violence and in favor of cannabis law reform. Overall, there is a mix of overtly political statements, community group representation, and some visual gags and entries without any obvious gay or lesbian link.

Among onlookers, the most appreciated entries have been the largest, visually impressive and most sexualized of all such as hundreds of bare-breasted, kissing and fondling Dykes on Bikes and gym-toned Marching Boys in revealing clothing. Typically, there is minimal overt tension with a shared audience purpose of appreciating the display. The excited responses from thousands of onlookers include waving, yelling encouragement, dancing, and frequent laughter. Many people record the event with their own video-cams or cameras, and some are particularly keen for photographs of themselves with such entrants as the most elaborately dressed drag queens.

The large crowd of spectators includes large numbers of GLBTQ people. These are much outnumbered by heterosexual people who come to show their support or to simply enjoy the vision that is created. Such a mix of people in large numbers watching nocturnal performances of transgressive sexualities would appear to encourage public disorder and expressions of homophobia. The mix of spectacle, color, parody and mocking of authority that characterizes this parade takes place against a backdrop of crowding, drinking and rowdiness among thousands of people. Nevertheless, few conflicts and acts of hostility at this event are officially reported by either the mainstream or gay and lesbian media.

In order to understand the actual levels of hostility and its expression at this event research on the annual street parade was conducted by the authors between 2004 and 2007. This had a particular focus on heterosexual attendance at this event and the ways in which it accommodates the tension of visible homosexuality with ideals of celebration and carnival. Three pairs of interviewers (comprising two heterosexual females, a heterosexual female and male, and two gay males) conducted short interviews among the crowds that gather before and during each parade. They approached individuals and groups at sections of the parade route where heterosexuals heavily and almost exclusively gather each year. They did not

disclose their own personal sexuality, stated they were from a University-based research team, and then asked people if they identified as heterosexual and would also voluntarily answer interview questions.

The management of the interview process presented some challenges. Considerable effort was placed on training each of the interviewers to ensure that variations in interview style and sampling technique was minimized. We also realized that some crowd participants might find the process intrusive and ensured that each interviewer articulated the reasons for the interview and made it clear that there were no problems if that person declined. A balance was sought between the kind and depth of information obtained within the available time and in line with what could be reasonably expected from people engaged in a celebratory public event. The interviews were conducted in a conversational style to encourage a more discursive and holistic response to questioning. People who were judged as significantly intoxicated or drugged were not interviewed.

One hundred and five taped interviews were conducted with 157 participants (solo, couples or in small groups). The interview schedule was formatted in an open-ended way and general questions concerned attendance and knowledge of the event, the importance of its gay and lesbian character, other gay and lesbian community links, and commitment to sexual rights. Interviewees were further asked about the particular attractions of the event and its enjoyment, their reactions to sexual display and whether such behavior was appropriate for public viewing and would be acceptable in other social circumstances. The names of those interviewed were not recorded and each participant consented to being interviewed on the understanding that their interview would remain anonymous. The transcripts of these interviews were later coded and analyzed for the recurrence, links and significance of key discursive themes (Potter and Wetherell 1994; Wooffitt 2005) relating to the research questions.

In designing the study, we had judged that these on-site interviews were the easiest way to elicit views about this and similar events from a substantial number of heterosexuals. Only a very small number of people refused to be interviewed and when asked about their identity almost all interviewees (97%) stated they were heterosexual.² Just over half (54%) were female. Most were aged in their twenties (57%) or thirties (13%), though 15% were estimated as over 50 years old. 36% of interviewees were solo and most others in couples (40%) or small groups. A mix of city locals, visitors from outside the city and international tourists was evident, and most onlookers were groups of heterosexual young men and women who travelled from suburban or regional locations to witness the event. Care was taken to interview a wide spread of people that reflected crowd diversity. Consequently, interviewees were drawn from different social classes, groups and localities. Therefore these included many people from blue collar/working class and ethnic groups that have been regarded as potentially more intolerant of sexual diversity but

² With our deliberate targeting of heterosexually-identified people as interviewees, this was a much higher proportion of the overall sample than in the results of a study of attendance at a Brazilian gay event (Junge 2008 p. 122).

it cannot be claimed that the sample was statistically representative of the overall crowd (Kelley 2001; Davies 2004).

Results

Knowledge, Support and Ambivalence

Among the interviewees 26% had never been to the parade before and had a limited knowledge of gay and lesbian events or venues and 59% were non-city, interstate or international visitors from a range of regions (South-East Asia/Pacific, Middle-East, Europe and North America). Seven people mentioned they had been to other parades that were overtly gay and lesbian (e.g., the New York, Amsterdam, London and Auckland Pride parades) or which attracted many such participants (e.g., the Berlin Love Parade and New Orleans Mardi Gras) and two others explained their knowledge as formed from reports and programs in the media and the experience of living in a city with a large gay and lesbian community:

There was quite a documentary on in England called *Queer as Folk* [sic] that caused a bit of a problem but it didn't really bother me and I've been to a couple of the clubs in London that were more Uni art things and were always really good fun. (female from United Kingdom, early 20s, 2004)

The local interviewees included people from inner-city, suburban, smaller regional city and rural locations. A few were passionate event supporters who returned annually from these locations. These participants were often well informed about the nature of the event and some had a personal link to it in the form of a family member or close friend in the parade. Nevertheless, most of the international and local interviewees had little knowledge about the occasion. Three people had heard about it immediately beforehand and walked to the occasion as a matter of chance.

In all, 65% of interviewees made comments or gestures that indicated they were gay-friendly or tolerant. This majority did not raise objections to the parade, saw an educative purpose to it or suggested that it was 'a bit startling' but acceptable. Tolerance often grew from views of innate sexuality identities that should be excused:

It's just expressing who they are...it's their life. (female, 40s, 2005)

It's human nature. It's perfectly natural. (teenage girl, 2005)

In recorded statements, this essentialism often ran parallel with a reference to liberal discourse regarding sexual rights that stressed such terms as freedom, choice and diversity. This was most evident from the more articulate and middle class interviewees. Sexual rights were usually conceived as minority rights. Nevertheless, a few viewed these and the importance of the event in relation to the whole society, a wider promotion of tolerance and a general opposition to censorship and regulation of sexuality and public speech by authorities.

Only four interviewees made statements to interviewers that were highly negative about homosexuality as an abhorrent phenomenon and conceived of the event in

extreme terms. Two religious protesters annually denounced the parade as depraved and contrary to Biblical teachings but they attracted very little interest from crowd members. Curiously, two teenage males openly told interviewers that they were ‘hoping to see some gay bashings’ (2005 interviews). Although it indicated a measure of real hostility, this view was then moderated by comments that suggested some enjoyment in watching a large exhibition.

Whereas a closed questionnaire study of event attendance found heterosexual attendees to be ‘slightly less gay-positive’ than others (Junge 2008 p. 116), our more open form of interviewing especially drew out contradictory aspects of attitudes towards the parade. Just over a quarter (24%) of all participants made comments that could be classified as ambivalent about aspects of the event. They variously objected to overt displays of homosexuality or even the specific gay and lesbian nature of the event:

I don’t see why they have to celebrate their gayness we don’t have a parade to celebrate our straightness. (male, early 20s, 2004)

It was hard for the researchers to isolate opposition to homosexuality from reservations about a public sexual display of any sort. Yet these findings provided important evidence that a regular number of crowd members with mixed sentiments about the event were still keen to attend and enjoy it. Members of this group also felt that the characteristics of the event challenged everyday norms of decency, decorum or ‘privacy’ and should only be allowed as exceptional. In this way, the social setting was viewed as belonging to an unusual occasion or locality:

I think it should be, you know, left at home... My partner and I hold hands in public, I suppose they can too, but apart from that I think they should leave it at home. (female, 40, 2005)

Similarly, these interviewees often objected to children viewing the homosexual elements of the parade including same-sex kissing with a concern about exposing young people to sexual suggestiveness.

Carnival, Pleasure and Desire

It appears that the carnivalesque atmosphere of events such as the SGLMG parade does allow many gay men and lesbians to collectively show their sexuality in contexts that would be likely to attract public condemnation, ridicule or abuse if done in an ad hoc or individual way. The paradox of the social context of the parade is that the norm of open intolerance is generally suspended for a collective appreciation of a transgressive sexual display. A juxtaposition of carnival and suspension of sexual intolerance is also evident at such large public festivities as the annual Carnival in Rio de Janeiro and Mardi Gras in New Orleans (Green 1999), though the overt gay and lesbian and sexually transgressive character of the SGLMG parade makes this suspension more remarkable.

Given the wide extent of ambivalent views about the parade and its gay and lesbian character among the large crowd that gather to watch it, the annual attraction that this event offers to onlookers needs further explanation. A large number of

interviewees stressed that their attendance was shaped around the expectation to have a pleasurable experience and witness an unusual, 'crazy' and entertaining sight with 'a lot of crazy people, a lot of good music' (female from Germany, 20, 2005)

This emphasis on public fun and shared rule-breaking was the most frequently given explanation for participation among the ambivalent group, and it often overrode a belief in the gay and lesbian nature of the event. This stress on the general nature of the event as a form of entertainment also downplayed the significance of any political themes or the political origins of the event as a street protest:

No, I say it doesn't matter whether it's gay or not, it's just a parade and it shows that people have the right to do whatever they like. So it doesn't matter who is in the parade and who's not. (female student from China, 20s, 2005)

Among some participants this attraction to the sensory spectacle of the event meant an open admission to the sexual pleasure that heterosexuals could find in attendance. Several commented that they were present both to witness the sexual behavior of gay men and lesbians in the event, and for the chance of meeting up and making sexual contacts with other crowd members. Furthermore, as a sexual display the participant exhibitionism and audience voyeurism in this parade also signals the artificial and fragile nature of the cultural boundaries drawn between heterosexual and homosexual identities and the unconscious tensions about this among many people (Chodorow 1994). Indeed, if 'eroticism lies in the consumption of difference' (Bell and Binnie 2004: 1812) then much of the crowd can be considered full participants in the act of sexual affirmation that defines such occasions as this parade.

The varied homo and hetero-erotic pleasures of this event are both feared and desired by observers. The proximity of sexual anxiety alongside its psychic attractions, were suggested in some comments from people enjoying the sexual show but wary of the possibility of gay or lesbian advances and an associated threat to sexual identity:

It can be as long as they keep it to themselves. Meaning, they don't touch the straight people who are uncomfortable... it's fine as long as they don't try it on me. (female from country town, 30–40s, 2005)

Just lots of color. Lots of everyone being really happy. Everyone a bit naughty. It's going to be good. So long as no gay guys grab me I'm happy. I mean I can take a few slaps on the arse, but you know, try and kiss me and [they] could be in trouble. (male from interstate, 30s, 2004)

The Safety Questionnaire

Objectives, Sampling and Method

It appears that the general success of policing and management at this gay and lesbian celebration are significantly dependent on the extent to which homophobic

cultural outlooks can shift at particular points in time and space. Although some accounts of violence may misleadingly suggest that very negative attitudes towards homosexuality are ubiquitous, it does not seem possible that such attitudes are wholly non-existent among a crowd of thousands. Certainly, a broad range of situational and social factors may contribute to aggression and conflict at any large public event. An elaborate level of shared planning and supervision between event volunteers and hundreds of watchful police at the centre of this event restricts the likelihood of open violence and serious public acts of intolerance.

Urban 'special events' are also often perceived as safe because they are generally organized and policed, but increases in opportunistic criminal activity and incidents of violence can occur at these (Barker et al. 2003). It is therefore important to compare the results of the authors' interview study with the outcomes of a nationwide internet-based survey questionnaire conducted by the authors between 2004 and 2006 (Tomsen and Markwell 2008). This was conducted to complement the results of the interview study and in order to obtain information about the possible real level of suspension of prejudice at these events. The questionnaire gathered information from 332 respondents with open and closed questions concerning gay, lesbian and queer participants' perceptions and experiences of hostility, threats and violence on the basis on their sexuality before, during and after these events. It was piloted using a sample of 25 and adjustments were made to improve readability and to remove levels of ambiguity that were detected.

Respondents were 56% male and 41% female and 3% classified themselves as transgender or intersex (Tomsen and Markwell 2008 p. 11). Overall, 51% identified as gay (male or female), 30% as lesbians, 8% as bisexuals, 5% as queer. The 4% recorded as heterosexuals and 2% as 'other' were excluded from analysis (Tomsen and Markwell 2008 p. 12). Nearly all (97%) identified as Australian citizens and the group was largely comprised by young, educated professionals with 59% aged between 26 and 45 years, and 39% hold a first tertiary degree or higher educational qualification (Tomsen and Markwell 2008 p. 12).

In gathering the sample for the survey, a non-probability, convenience strategy was employed. While it is not possible to measure exact prevalence of hostility and violence via a non-random sample, the purpose of the questionnaire was to garner a broad overview of these phenomena at the events studied. The authors also acknowledge the known sampling limitations of online surveys (see Fricker and Schonlau 2002).

Nevertheless, this was advertised in wide-ranging gay and lesbian media and web outlets and mainstream media. GLBTQ organisations, online chat groups and email lists were contacted and given information to pass on to their members.³ The questionnaire was designed to be user-friendly with a simple layout in order to maximize the rate and proportion of usable questionnaires returned. A media release resulted in several radio interviews and a small amount of editorial coverage in the gay and lesbian press. Considerable effort was made to promote the survey

³ Our contacts included gay and lesbian event-based organisations such as Feast/SA, Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras/NSW, Pride/WA and Pride/Qld; papers and magazines such as Blaze/SA and LOTL/NSW; and dozens of online groups. Additional contact was made with relevant government agencies including Victoria Police and the NSW Attorney General's Department.

throughout Australia in order to obtain a nation-wide sample, but ultimately 50% of the sample were resident in NSW, and of those 50% were based in Sydney. The prominence of comments about the SGLMG in our results also reflected the nationwide popularity of the Sydney event among gay men and lesbians. The questionnaire results were analyzed for basic statistical information regarding the demographic characteristics of respondents, attendance patterns, attitudes to events and incidents of hostility.

Results

Event organizers and public officials involved in planning and regulation emphasize the order and goodwill of these occasions. Nevertheless, questionnaire responses reflected that participants from these sexual minorities feel unsafe in relation to significant aspects of attendance at large scale night-time events with a wide heterosexual participation. Although event planning and policing have done much to minimize serious violence in the immediate event context, survey participants felt especially unsafe or threatened in relation to post-event social interactions.

The total number of hostile incidents witnessed by respondents at these events vastly outweighs the acts of harassment and violence monitored or recorded by community groups, the media and police agencies.⁴ Forty per cent of the questionnaire sample had witnessed some form of hostile incident or behavior at an event, and they gave a combined estimate of at least 545 witnessed incidents, with police intervention referred to in only four of the more detailed accounts of incidents discussed (Tomsen and Markwell 2008 pp: 28–36).

It cannot be assumed that all of the many different hostile incidents recalled by questionnaire respondents have a 'homophobic' motive, yet respondents suggested that 89% of incidents involved abuse or attacks on gay men, lesbians and transsexuals/transgenders by perpetrators they believed were heterosexual (Tomsen and Markwell 2008 p. 27). This questionnaire uncovered an undercurrent of hostility and forms of incivility and physical attacks that occur in the aftermath of these special events, and particularly following the SGLMG parade, that can elude official notice but generate considerable anxiety among gay and lesbian participants. A volatile mix of large numbers of often intoxicated people moving around in all directions and the sudden rupture of the barricades that had formed a boundary between parade participants and spectators is created immediately after the Mardi Gras Parade has ended. In this atmosphere a number of people feel threatened and at risk, or have experienced some form of unwanted attention or abuse. The important role of private volunteers acting as parade marshals and police officers in crowd protection must be acknowledged, but safety became a preoccupation of respondents when the parade was over and the crowd dispersed. Just less than 40% of survey respondents attending the SGLMG parade felt unsafe immediately after the

⁴ Local reports of violence are available for five parades between 1996 and 2002. These recorded a total of 14 incidents occurring while people were watching or leaving the event, and 7 incidents while arriving at or leaving the post-parade party (NSW Gay and Lesbian Anti-Violence Project Reports, 1996–2002).

event had taken place (Tomsen and Markwell 2008 p. 24). Forty per cent of the entire sample of people attending events had witnessed some form of hostile incident or incidents (Tomsen and Markwell 2008 p. 28).

Previous research on homophobic violence has found higher levels of abuse and harassment for lesbians, and higher levels of physical assault directed at gay men (Tomsen and Mason 2001). These gender differences arose in the detailed accounts of closely witnessed incidents. More males than females (11 to 8%) gave accounts of direct physical assaults that were carried out either with or without weapons. Gay men related the detail of hands-on street violence and how they were threatened, punched and bashed by apparently heterosexual males in the streets nearby or after this event. More females than males (34 to 31%) recounted their victimization in incidents of abuse, harassment and threats. A number of lesbians recorded that heterosexual men approached them suggesting some form of sexual activity and were verbally abusive when their overtures were rejected. Several different kinds of behavior that could draw anti-homosexual hostility or sexual harassment from men were avoided. In particular, strategies reflected a view that the body and its presentation were vital aspects of personal safety and risk (Mason 2001) including not wearing costumes and 'acting straight' while traveling to and from an event.

The difficulties of comparing the results of face to face interviews conducted during the social process of a public event with the results of the online survey are conceded here. It seems likely that an online respondent could more easily focus on the fearful and dangerous aspects of past attendance when away from the celebratory atmosphere of an actual event. It would also be misleading to assume from these reports that fear alone permeates the situation that gay men and lesbians typically find themselves in at these events, but it is a critical factor in the juxtaposition of joy, pleasure and wariness and danger that shapes the experience of attending.

Most of the open questionnaire comments concerning the marked shift in atmosphere following the cessation of an event were related to the SGLMG Parade. A common observation was that once the parade had ended, a chaotic and unstructured time was created providing opportunities for various forms of abuse to take place:

...parade and party [are] getting too mainstream and with that brings homophobes, especially at the end of the parade, I don't feel safe sticking around so you leave quickly. (male, aged 26–35)

...parade seems to be getting more and more aggressive after the glitter settles. [With] Drunk people (in my experience, young men), who are interested in provoking lesbians and gay men for sport. (female, aged 26–35)

Whereas respondents found a level of informal protection against verbal abuse from the crowd, as the crowd dispersed at the end of the parade, policing became much more difficult because the physical boundaries containing the event had diminished. The following comment by a lesbian recalling an incident is particularly revealing:

A group of young guys followed us up the street yelling homophobic abuse. [We] Felt very threatened and everyone just ignored what was happening.

After Mardi Gras everyone forgets what they've just seen and become homophobic again. (female, aged 36–45)

The Return to Normal?

This view proposes that homophobia is to some extent suspended during the actual performance of the parade, but that a 'return to normal' occurs soon after the parade comes to an end. Though its explanation is not clear, an abrupt shift in atmosphere, mood and behavior was described by many respondents. It could be that the state of chaos and confusion that occurs once the parade has ended facilitates the open expression of aggression and violence. Heavy alcohol consumption may play a part, but it is evident that members of the crowd feel ambivalent by the visible displays of queer sexualities on show during the parade and may only be given freedom to fully vent these feelings once the event has finished.

How can this evidence about the apparent suspension of prejudice during the SGLMG parade and post-event harassment and violence be reconciled? During the parade, a relaxed collective attitude towards the breaking of conventional sexual and gender norms reflects shared celebration and pleasure. A key element of this carnival is sexual transgression and a general atmosphere of ribaldry and pleasure triggered by homosexual/queer display. This exceeds ready classification within the binary homo/hetero categories. In this way, the temporary suspension of sexual prejudice in the annual performance also suggests some attainment of what has been called a 'liminal' phase of social ritual involving uncertain status differences and communitarian sentiments among participants (Turner 1987).

The lower occurrence of overt hostile acts during the parade can be attributed to a number of factors, some of which are structural and some of which are performative. The high level of organization and vigilance created an atmosphere of legitimacy that deterred the transgression of social norms, in this case of homophobic hostility and violence. Spectators and participants comprise social groups that are bound together by a shared purpose and the general recognition that parades are 'carnavalesque inversions of the everyday' (Ravenscroft and Matteucci 2003 p. 1) leads to an acceptance of the transgression of social norms. The carnival is tolerated because it fulfils a social need for entertainment and it will not alter the existing social order. Once the parade ends, the liminality and social license created by the occasion have different consequences and the social order reverts to its everyday mode of heterosexual hegemony. As crowds disperse, their shared purpose disintegrates, and it is more the case that at this stage overt hostility and violence begin to reappear. In such circumstances, the enjoyment of violence and abuse as forms of entertainment that mark situations of collective public drinking and social license (Tomsen 1997; Presdee 2000) can then come to the fore.

Conclusion

The authors' study suggests that although researchers have gathered an expanding body of evidence regarding homophobic prejudice and related harassment and

violence in contemporary societies, prejudice is not a fixed and static phenomenon. Like sexual desire itself, this is fluid and situationally variable and this is exemplified by the popularity of some gay and lesbian events, even among many heterosexual people with ambivalent views about such occasions. It is ironic that the actual success of these events signals the same tense 'proximity' between heterosexual and homosexual identities that underlies much anti-homosexual sentiment and violence (Dollimore 1991).

The fluid nature of human sexuality is even reflected in serious incidents of violence intended to shore up unstable sexual and gender boundaries with an enactment of traditional prejudice (Tomsen 2006), as well as occasions of liminality where those same boundaries are momentarily disavowed. This lies at the root of the apparent contradiction between everyday prejudice and the success of positive or even mixed representations of minority sexualities in much popular culture. The full significance of such occasions and their popularity in societies that have been broadly characterized as 'homophobic' must now be acknowledged and explained. The temporary suspension of disgust and prejudice observed at public events is a trade-off for a pleasurable sexual exhibition. This event voyeurism also constitutes a measure of the mass displacement of desire on to gay men, lesbians and transsexuals and the ambiguity of the heterosexual gaze that is referred to in accounts of the queering of contemporary popular cultures (see Burston and Richardson 1995).

Debates regarding the wider cultural impact of public gay and lesbian celebrations are ongoing. Anti-violence activists and commentators discuss whether participation or televised viewing can substantially reduce levels of community homophobia (Haire 2001). Whether the suspension of overt intolerance at large-scale gay and lesbian events makes everyday life safer for GLBTQ people is highly contentious. On the one hand, the fragile safety created through carnival breaks down once the main event is over. Yet one could argue that the outrageous scenes depicted in street parades lead to a perception of everyday gay and lesbian life as mundane, thereby normalizing social difference.

Holding the interest of a large and diverse audience is not always certain for these events and similar queer representations as these crystallize wider and mixed social trends in regard to sexuality and gender. The 30 years of history of SGLMG suggests that the most popular events are grounded in the right pitch of supportive contemporary sexual liberalism and an image of sexual daring and transgression that challenges traditional constraint. The mixed fascination that accompanies a suspension of prejudice need not result in any ongoing collective shift towards more tolerant views. It appears that the suspension of disgust and prejudice observed here is a trade-off for a pleasurable sexual show and a measure of the displacement of desire onto gay men, lesbians and transsexuals. Furthermore, tolerance as mere indifference to minority groups will not enhance cultural understanding and it can turn on a new configuration of the public/private dichotomy in which any public sexual deviance is quietly endured but still resented.

When SGLMG protesters first marched in 1978 they were not welcome in the streets of Sydney and they have had to make their place. They have since become part of the city's identity, and indeed the event has been criticized for becoming too commercial at the expense of real political power (Markwell 2002). This event now

projects both oppositional and mainstream cultural meanings to its participants, onlookers and wider audience (Kates 2003). Moreover, gay men and lesbians in a growing number of cities have been described as the ‘model citizens of the urban renaissance’ (Bell and Binnie 2004 p. 1815) because they have inhabited previously undesirable spaces and transformed them into tourist sites of consumption, leisure and spectacle (see Knopp 1998). These spaces and their related events, lend cities ‘cosmopolitan’ credibility in much the same way that Chinatown districts and other ethnic enclaves can create an aura of diversity and difference (Rushbrook 2002). In this very modest way, there is a sense in which the place of sexual minorities has indeed changed the social order with the assistance of large-scale gay and lesbian events. At the same time the distinct views and experiences of such events that our research illuminates signal the uneven but ongoing significance of sexual prejudice in non-heteronormative lives.

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