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Sexual citizenship: rhetoric or reality for Rural Gay Men in Ireland and England?

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ABSTRACT

This paper assesses the experiences of gay men living and working in rural areas of Ireland and England. Fieldwork conducted in both countries, finds that gay men who live in the rural space share many similar experiences, concerns and worries. While life outside the cities can bring a number of distinct advantages, such as tranquillity, and a more relaxed pact of life, the men also report numerous challenges which include social isolation, powerful hegemonic narratives around rural masculinity, and a pervasive heteronormative culture. The rural context shapes how the men negotiate their sexual identity, and mediates the nature of their sexual citizenship. In assessing the men as sexual citizens, the paper highlights the tendencies of sexual citizenship to promote a de-sexualised, de-politicised, and de-radicalised gay identity; tendencies which are exacerbated by the context of the nonmetropolitan, small town, and rural spaces. The paper concludes that, while the men may be considered, constitutional sexual citizens, with legal citizenship rights, there remains a legacy of stigmatization, which leads to compromised citizenship on a number of levels.

Introduction

Sexual citizenship as a vehicle for achieving rights, can be mediated by a range of contextual factors, including characteristics such as gender, but also place, nation state, geography, space and rurality (Bell and Binnie 2000; Gormann-Murray, Pini, and Bryant 2013; Richardson 2017).

To date, much of the work documenting the lives of rural gay people has been conducted in North America. In adopting a cross-country perspective involving rural and small town areas of England and Ireland, this paper seeks to redress this imbalance. The fieldwork took place against a background of significant social and political changes in both jurisdictions [in attitudes to sexuality and LGBTQI persons], and advances in legislative rights for sexual minorities.

The paper discusses the nature of sexual citizenship for gay men living and working in rural environments where sexual identity continues to be mediated by shifting spatial, cultural and historical contexts (Hammack 2005). It then concludes by reflecting on the rhetorical promises of sexual citizenship compared to the realities for the rural, gay men, in both countries.

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Conceptualising sexual citizenship

Contemporary academic work on citizenship tends to take its lead from the work of T.H Marshall's classic model of citizenship (1950) whereby citizenship is seen as a concept which includes civil, political, legal, cultural and social rights. The debate centres on notions of who has the right to be seen as 'citizen' with all the protections, rights and privileges that flow from that status (Richardson 2004). Citizenship becomes a prized and esteemed status, conferring rights and duties that secure participation and protection within the framework of the nation-state (Andersen 2011, 121). Citizenship promises much and can be a seductive and appealing concept; with Plummer referring to it, as 'an elegant and influential model' which generously offers people certain rights and the status of belonging (2003, 51–52).

Recent shifts in the nature of debates on citizenship have opened the possibility of embracing same sex intimacy and sexuality as inherently deserving of the promises of citizenship, and ergo the emergence of sexual (minority) citizenship (ibid:52).

In attempting to understand sexuality *in citizenship* then, we are essentially reflecting on the relations between the state, society and its sexualised citizens (Maliepaard 2014) and the need to engage with the state, and within political structures and hierarchies, in order to effect and lobby for substantial changes in how LGBT identities are treated by the state.

Bell and Binnie (2000) emphasise that citizenship rights are multidimensional in nature and the citizen is therefore, not confined to a legal or political category, but is also a sociological category and an economic category. The concept of citizenship therefore is broader than just the legal; for example, when we think of cultural citizenship we can refer to Marshall's definition as 'the capacity to participate effectively, creatively, and successfully within a national culture' (Robson and Kessler 2008, 539) but also as the 'right to be different, to re-value stigmatised identities and embrace hitherto marginalised lifestyles' (Pakulski 1997 in Richardson 2000, 121).

Is there a problem with sexual citizenship?

Whilst acknowledging that the turn to sexual citizenship has contributed to innumerable, and previously unimaginable advances in legislation and politics in many jurisdictions, scholars also urge us to reflect on the limitations and troublesome aspects inherent in the concept of sexual citizenship (Richardson 2004, 2017; Cossman 2002; Stychin 1998; Seidman 2002). They point out that the invitation to citizenship is based on compromise, and that acceptance of this invite requires 'an accommodation to heterosexual standards and the loss of distinctive differences, ways of being, and relational practices' (Taylor. 2011, 583).

Citizenship can be conceived as a negotiation of belonging (Cram 2016, 270) with resultant compromises, often leading to forms of normalisation, which in turn encourages an assimilation that involves 'accepting a condition implicitly imposed upon homo-sexual citizens where sexual subjects are privatized, de-eroticized and depoliticized' (Cossman 2002, 483).

Seidman (2002) reflects on the concept of the desirable 'good gay' and argues that this requires gay identities to be conformist, conservative and reflective of hetero-sexual values linked to family, marriage and politics. The cost, in terms of performing 'good

sexual citizenship', is also identified by Carl Stychin, because 'in attempting to achieve legal victories, lesbians and gays seeking rights embrace an ideal of 'respectability', a construction that then perpetuates a division between 'good gays' and (disreputable) 'bad queers', with the latter excluded from the cultural, and social embrace of citizenship (1998, 200; Richardson 2018).

Importantly, given the increasingly global reach of citizenship debates, there is a need to emphasise the different forms and modes of citizenship that pertain to gay men and lesbians in different environments – for example the gay male citizen is not a universal or global citizen and may have different concerns, priorities and strategies in different national and regional contexts (Bell and Binnie 2000, 33).

The rural intersection

Sexuality may be multi-faceted, but so too is rurality – diverse, in terms of its physical and human geographies (Gorman-Murray et al 2013:2; McGlynn 2018). The open presence of rural and gay identities and/or of rural queerness, creates an intersectional fluidity that challenges the dominant rural narratives around sex and sexuality, gender typologies and notions of hegemonic masculinity and often results in the creation of new types of social spaces where previously none existed (Delamore 2013, 90).

Work by Kazyak (2011) exemplifies the recent turn of focus to the emergence of rural gay identities; which are crucial to notions of sexual citizenship – which relies upon self-identification and 'coming out'.

Kazyak's work in particular emphasises the construction, development and formation of rural gay identities and how rural gays and lesbians are modifying cultural narratives about it what means to be gay in the space of the rural. Her work documents also how characteristics of rural life can produce, and not always hinder, constructions of gay and lesbian identities, identities which are different from urban gay identities.

Much of the literature however, paints a picture where prevailing rural cultures are seen as highly heteronormative (Preston and D'Augelli 2013) making the task of coming out more difficult and traumatic as documented by personal accounts of Irish men and women (see O'Brien 2003). Traditional, socially conservative values which valorise the heterosexual family often remain the norm in the rural space (Bauch 2001), and lingering homophobia among rural, heterosexual men persist (Gottschalk and Newton 2009). As such, rural cultures can often reproduce stereotypical gender roles and interactions (Annes and Redlin 2012) and can dismiss LGBTQI people as others; others who hold the potential to breach and rupture powerful normalizing codes (Watkins and Jacoby 2007).

Rural cultures and spaces can also be doggedly masculinist, where hegemonic conceptions of masculinity dominate, and are influential in setting the tone for how rural men should be, with images of rural masculinity emphasizing ruggedness, physical strength, macho individualism, and emotional independence (Bell 2006; Preston and D'Augelli 2013). Such cultural conceptualisations of masculinities condemn those men that are perceived to be effeminate (Monro and Richardson, 2010, 105).

In such settings, perceived non-masculine behaviours are often discouraged, (Boulden 2001) as they offer the potential to disrupt and reimagine the historically uncontested category of rural men. These powerful cultural forces help create scenarios where rural

and small-town identities interact with hetero-patriarchal norms to further marginalise those subjects perceived to be gay (Monro and Richardson 2010, 105).

Rural gay and bisexual persons develop sophisticated survival and coping strategies, including self-censorship and self-monitoring (Annes and Redlin 2012). Coping strategies include remaining closeted (Preston and D'Augelli 2013) and/or adopting 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' strategies (ibid). Some adopt a lie-low strategy, coming out partially and iteratively, to prove themselves to the community as 'good people first' (Kazyak 2011). This belies the continuance of traditional, essentialist views that has historically viewed one's sexuality as a highly determinative factor in one's true (good or bad) character and nature.

The rural can therefore, be seen as a place of alienation. However, scholars increasingly question prevailing, and powerful presumptions that all rural spaces are sites of anxiety for sexual minorities (Anderson et al. 2015; McGlynn 2018). Rather, it can be argued that lived experiences and rural spatiality actively intersect, mutually moulding and sculpting each other (Gormann-Murray, 2013, 4) creating a unique environment which can also offer some tantalising possibilities for the co-creation of gay and queer identities (Kazyak 2011).

This can be particularly so within the context of liberalising social attitudes in the rural, mirroring wider social acceptance of sexual minorities in specific national contexts (Anderson et al. 2015). However, it is imperative to recognise that such progress around inclusion and rights for sexual minorities has not been universal, and indeed a simple transfer of the term 'rights' from one society to another can be distinctly problematic given its cultural, western, and individualistic bias (Plummer 2003, 143).

Methods

The findings presented in this paper, derive from fieldwork conducted in the Irish counties of Cavan, Donegal, Leitrim, Longford, Roscommon, Galway and Sligo; and the English counties of Norfolk and Suffolk, and some areas adjoining their immediate borders.

A qualitative research design was adopted. Forty-four men were interviewed; twenty-two in Ireland and twenty-two in England. Respondents were recruited with the assistance of rural LGBT networks, through forms of snowball sampling from contacts made within the groups, and through the use of social media. This allowed me to access men who were part of local LGBT groups as well as men outside of such groups.

All men conformed to the requirements of the study, which insisted that the men be eighteen years of age or over, self-identify as gay men, live in the locale (and have done so for at least a year), not be commuters to the big cities, and not reside outside the locale for significant parts of the year. Whilst some of the men were incomers, mostly they were natives of the study regions. Some had never left; others had left, spent some years overseas or in the large cities, but had now returned. The men came from a varied background with regard to occupation, age, class, income, and disability, although sadly, and reflecting a general lack of ethnic diversity in these rural areas, there was, despite efforts made, a distinct lack of visible ethnic minority men among participants interviewed.

The interviews (of one to two hour's duration) were held in local LGBTQI network buildings, respondent's homes, or in local café's. Among the sample of men in England, eleven described themselves as out, seven partially out, with two men describing themselves as not out. In Ireland, ten of the men were out, eight partially out, with two not out. Respondents occupations included self-employed business people, farmers, teachers, labourers, construction workers, health workers, IT professionals, writers, social workers, rural vets, and musicians; and ranged from twenty-three to eighty years of age. They lived on farms, in hamlets, villages, small and medium sized towns within these nonmetropolitan regions of Ireland and England. During the fieldwork, I also attended LGBT network meetings where I observed, asked questions and took notes.

Following Moustakas's (1990) guidance on data collection and analysis, interviews were recorded and later transcribed. In using a form of life history interviews, while they provide rich evidence and documentation of personal experience (Connell in Annes and Redlin 2012, 263), they also produce huge and overwhelming amounts of data with a consequent need for analysis through coding. In this regard, and following the tenets and principles of narrative data analysis (Miles and Huberman 2002), transcribed interview texts were read, re-read, and text was broken down, following thematic categorisation techniques. Such steps, allowed for the themes and sub-themes to emerge, followed by interpretation, subsequent conceptual development, and refinement.

Findings

Constitutional sexual citizens

The period from the mid-1990s has seen transformative legislative gains, for LGBT communities (Weeks 2007, 2016) in the United Kingdom and Ireland. As equal citizens under law, lesbian, gay and bisexual people in Ireland and the United Kingdom, can now marry, inherit property and receive welfare and other benefits on the basis of their state sanctioned relationships, foster and adopt children, and be protected from discrimination in all aspects of life, and in all organisations, whether as employees, as consumers, or as individuals in the wider social context.

The recent constitutional and legal changes have also helped to fracture the long-standing and historical relationship between citizenship and heterosexuality. This relationship views sexual citizenship and heterosexuality as natural bedfellows, a scenario where the sexual citizen is always a heterosexual citizen.

By interrogating the nature, depth, and scope of their sexual citizenship, I argue that the men in this research can be conceptualised as constitutional citizens.

In the early stages of our interview, Cyril, 49 (County Leitrim) provides an example when he asserts his belief that, as an openly gay man living and working in the health-care sector in a rural nursing home, he was treated no differently from others:

> They <u>can't</u> treat us differently now, because of the laws. The laws, are there, and [we] cannot be discriminated against. You know. Absolutely not. All my colleagues know I'm gay. At work, absolutely. I've never heard any derogatory remark. They'd know better, you know. Basically as simple as that.

Cyril's statement perfectly describes his sense of new found confidence and empower-ment as a gay man who is a constitutional sexual citizen of Ireland. He implicitly makes a connection between his equalised legal status as a gay man, and his positive experiences in the workplace and within wider society.

Nonetheless, as Cyril's interview progressed, a more nuanced and accurate assessment of the nature of his sexual citizenship emerged. In common with most of the interviews, in both Ireland and England, a picture develops of a rural sexuality which cuts across the legal, political and the personal, in complex ways.

Rural realities for gay men

Despite a common perception that the rural and small town environment can be a hostile and unwelcoming space for gays and lesbians, some studies do show that there can be positives as well as negatives. Quietness, tranquillity, simplicity, friendliness, lower cost of living and proximity to family and friends are some of the advantages that have been cited by gay people living in the rural (Cody and Welch 1997; Preston and D'Augelli 2013).

In general, respondents had mixed views about life for gay men in their locales. Patrick came to live in rural Donegal for work reasons. He envies the cultural activities, diversity and gay infrastructure and romantic possibilities that metropolitan/city life could offer, but like many, he also acknowledges some of the advantages that rural living can bring:

> I mightn't have Soho but I have Murvagh Strand [Beach] ten minutes from my door to go running on a Saturday morning. (Patrick, 48, County Donegal)

Overall, the most common sentiment among the men about the benefits of rural life as a gay man can be illustrated in this quote:

> Mmm, let me think, hmm, well to be honest, I don't know that there are many advantages for gay men [per se] except for the non-gay advantages of lifestyle, pace, quality of environment, and cost of living that benefit people in general, but being gay, if being gay is a big part of your life, then I feel the disadvantages will outweigh the advantages really. (Gavin, 46, Norfolk)

Conversely, the main challenges experienced by respondents in this research include, the lack of a gay social and cultural infrastructure, difficulties in meeting partners, isolation from other gay people, heteronormative social attitudes, the perceived need to engage in performative masculinity, intense inquisitiveness and curiosity, objectification, lack of anonymity, and the unpredictable repercussions and consequences of coming out in a rural environment. These are important in understanding the nature and possibilities of sexual citizenship in the rural environment.

'It's so difficult to meet other gay people'

For the men in this study, the lack of gay venues accentuates feelings of isolation and invisibility; it reminds them of the heteronormative cultural hegemony which charac-terises the rural space and highlights their marginal status as gay men. The lack of gay

bars and gay venues denies these men and other LGBTQI persons, opportunities to socialise together in public spaces, free from conformist heteronormative pressures.

Heteronormativity can be defined as the institutions, structures, practices, identities, and understanding that legitimize and hierarchize heterosexuality as the normal, natural, and only socially and morally accepted form of sexuality (Rubin 1992). The lack of dedicated gay venues forces respondents to socialise in straight, hetero-dominant and heteronormative spaces which may be safe and accepting only insofar as they conceal outward expressions of same sex affection. To do otherwise is to challenge and unsettle tacit heteronormative norms or codes of behaviour which may well carry social penalties such as ridicule, exclusion, harassment or even violent attack.

Charlie, 48, speaks about his area (North Norfolk) as a gay desert:

> In the city there are little enclaves and corners and stuff . . . but here there are no gay pubs so you have to go to regular pubs . . . .and I can think of a couple of pubs that if you were sitting together with somebody and started to have a typical gay kind of banter . . . you will draw attention to yourself . . . .you just can't fully relax, be yourself and let loose basically, most definitely not.

On a theoretical and ideological level, sexually dissident spaces (Hubbard 2001) are important; acting as ephemeral sites of freedom and control (ibid); spaces which disrupt dominant geographies of heterosexuality by creating transitory sites for sexual freedom and pleasure. The lack of a gay scene impedes and restricts opportunities for meeting other, sexually dissident people, and reduces the possibility of establishing romantic queer and same-sex relationships.

While dedicated gay venues are virtually non-existent in these rural areas, connections between gay people, however fragmented, do exist (Preston& D'Augelli, 2013). Meeting partners through a friend of a friend was not uncommon, and some respondents frequented tourist towns in their regions, during the busy summer season in the hope of meeting visiting men. With the assistance of gay apps and smart phones, they some-times chance upon meetings and encounters. This brings to mind the work of Mowlabocus, which refers to 'digital cruising' (2010, 200) highlighting how digital forms of communication are creating 'hybrid spaces' that can reconfigure the spaces and places gay men move through and encounter one another (ibid).

The rural makes me an object of curiosity

Living in an environment where there are few openly gay men results in a situation where men who are out, become noticed, labelled, and categorised; seen through the prism of their sexuality. They become that rarity, an openly gay man in a rural or small-town space.

Many of the men who were in relationships spoke of, the power of the stare, when they presented as a couple in social settings. For Gavin (44) and Philip (72), even the simple act of going, as a couple, for dinner to a local restaurant on Saint Valentine's Day attracts curious glances and the occasional snigger. Kazyak remarks that, this visibility occurs and is sustained via the interconnected nature of rural life and being seen at various places in the town with the same person. Such visibility is tied to being seen with your partner rather than hanging a rainbow flag outside (Kazyak 2011).

The experiences of the men in this study finds salience in the observations of Preston & D'Augelli's (2013) when they argue that perhaps the most difficult thing a rural gay man can do is set up a household with another gay man in a very public way, letting others know that they are a couple.

The rural does not permit PDA

Many men felt another disadvantage of living in the rural and small town space was social and cultural discouragement of public displays of affection. Gay men and lesbians face particular dilemmas regarding public displays of affection (Boulden 2001; Che et al. 2013; Preston and D'Augelli 2013) and this can be especially problematic in the small town and rural setting. Rural spaces can be highly heteronormative spaces emphasizing nuclear (heterosexual) family lives and stereotypical gender roles and interactions (Annes and Redlin 2012). Cyril feels that the culture of his provincial town inhibits casual PDA (public displays of affection):

> I will occasionally show my partner signs of affection, I'll give him a quick kiss, sitting in the car, even on the street in town without thinking about it. But then again, if Finian puts his hands in my pocket, while we are walking down the street, I'll turn around and say, STOP!!!, do you not know where you are, you're walking along the street in this town, people don't need to know this and they don't want to know this.

In particular, Cyril worries that such displays might affect Finians' barber shop, echoing Preston and D'Augelli (2013) who report that gay men who owned businesses, worried about the impact of social attitudes and reactions on their enterprises.

The perceived inability to simply hold hands in public in their own locales irked many men. In a study of handholding by lesbian couples in North America, Che et al. (2013) label handholding as a political act whether it was explicitly avoided in public spaces (out of fear) or boldly done as a defiant display. Both are indeed political, with Che et al arguing that one is resignation to subjugation and the other a refutation of such fear. Their study shows that while handholding by lesbian couples in public has become more common in the past twenty-five years in North America, it still remains an overtly political act and potentially risky behaviour. In this study, none of the men felt it safe or wise to engage in public handholding in their local areas.

The rural insists on hegemonic masculinity

Masculinity and in particular notions of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995) which limit the possibilities of identity negotiation by gay men, are powerful concepts, and they are apparent in this study. The men feel the need to adopt hetero-centred ideas about masculinity (Annes and Redlin (2012) and strongly believe that their rural and small-town environments place a premium on displays of masculinity and that they have picked this up from an early age. They too strive for and perform masculinity. Many of the men feel that their rural locales may accept them, if they are macho and masculine, but to appear effeminate and gay is problematic. Here we notice the importance of hegemonic notions of masculinity, with images of rural masculinity emphasizing

physical strength, hardiness, and individualism (Bell, 2000; Bell 2006 in Preston and D'Augelli 2013).

The testimonies of the gay men demonstrate that they consider being masculine as a necessary survival strategy and they are, vigilant about their lives – their appearance, their behaviour, and their social networks. Turlough remarks that:

> You can come out but don't come out too far. You know. Or if you're coming out you'd better not wear that pink t-shirt with the blue hat, you know. There's a level you will be accepted at here. In London or even Dublin to an extent they wouldn't care less but do that in the street in Boyle or Elphin . . . and they will say nasty things about you (that queer boy and stuff like that) (Turlough, 51, County Roscommon).

Sedgwick's (1991) term, effeminophobia (the fear of effeminacy) is of relevance here, whereby the effeminate man is either, depending upon the context, a figure of fun or a monster to be feared (Richardson, in Annes and Redlin 2012). Effeminophobia can be particularly pronounced in rural areas where there is an image of rural masculinity emphasizing physical strength, hardiness, and individualism (; Bell, 2006 in Preston and D'Augelli 2013). A consistent them in this research is that men perceived to be effeminate, endured significant bullying growing up. They also experienced feelings of isolation, ostracization and exclusion.

The men accepted that they often engage in self-censorship. Their testimonies reveal their need to negotiate their sexuality; de-sexualise their language, homes, and clothes, sometimes aiming to 'pass as straight' (Hooker 2018) so as to avoid the possibility of unpleasant reactions, marginalisation and exclusion.

The rural makes you reluctant and wary about coming out

Coming out in these small town and rural communities is never seen as a trivial, harmless or private act, instead it is an intensely significant, symbolic and highly political act. Preston and D'Augelli (2013) refer to the impact of rural social culture where everybody's business is everybody's business. Apart from the uncertainty of others' reactions and the ramifications of coming out, becoming known and branded as the local gay weighed heavily on the minds of most of the men in this research.

Men with biological families living in the local area were particularly attuned to the sensitivities around coming out. Some of the gay men who live close to family did not want to cause embarrassment to, or to risk rejection from family and especially parents, by disclosing their sexual orientation. Some of the men had been out in the past, when they lived in cities but went back I the closet when they returned to live in their rural locales.

The men's testimonies display a general wariness of their environment, and many distrust that their locale would offer unconditional support and acceptance to out gay men. Theo, 31, (Suffolk) provides an illustration of this. Speaking of his experience of living in London for a number of years and his recent return to live back in his native town in Suffolk he says:

> In London, you get a sense that even if some people don't like gay people, don't want gay people around them and don't accept gay people - you know that London does; but I'm not so sure Suffolk does.

Many of the men remarked on the lack of other, out gay men, in their locales. They believe that this acts as a further disincentive to men in coming out. As one Irish respondent puts it:

> I think a lot of gay men get out if they can, and those that stay are either deeply closeted and/ or are in straight relationships or married because that's kind of what is expected. There are quite a lot of gay men living in these rural parts but they are often married or have girlfriends. And so damn afraid to come out - that the possibility of them settling down with a boyfriend in a public relationship is slim. (Cyril, 49, County Leitrim)

Discussion

The rhetoric of citizenship proclaims, 'the many protections and respect citizens can expect'; it promises 'a recognition to symbolic presence and visibility' (Kitchin and Lysaght 2004, 83); it speaks of security and safety, and 'the right to be different'" (without rebuke) (ibid: 84); the ability to 'embrace openly and legitimately, hitherto marginalised lifestyles; and to propagate them without hindrance' (Pakulski 1997, 83 cited in Maliepaard 2014, 383).

Despite the rhetorical optimism of sexual citizenship, the rural and small town environment imposes constraints on the men's personal behaviours, conversations, interactions, performances, and political identification. These cultural constraints deprive the men of some of the cultural and emotional privileges implicit within the promises of sexual citizenship.

Richardson argues that the civil rights claim of self-realization – the realization of your chosen sexual identity – may 'include the right to develop diverse sexual identities in an unhindered if not state-assisted manner' (Richardson 2000, 121 cited in Maliepaard 2014, 383). In both the United Kingdom and Ireland, legislative advances have removed state-imposed restrictions on conduct, identity and relationship rights, and have provided for new personal freedoms. However, this study of rural and small town gay men in both jurisdictions, reveals the impact of continuing stigmatization, hegemonic masculinity and heteronormative domination. These can hinder the men's right to express their sexuality, freely, openly and locally. Their sexual citizenship is compromised in a number of ways.

Conspicuous sexual citizens

As sexual citizens, the gay men in this study acknowledge that their sexual citizenship, is a new social and cultural phenomenon and they believe that their *homo*-sexual identity is still seen by many, as non-normative within a society marked by compulsory hetero-sexuality (Whitehead 2002).

Their sexuality interacts with (or plays out in) the local and public realm. They become conspicuous by their very presence (the only gay in the village) or conspicuous by their very absence (there are no gays in these parts). Both have implications, as to how their constitutional citizenship is transfigured into local realities.

Conspicuous by their presence

The respondents who came out, encountered positive reactions, and acts of inclusion and recognition, but also detected an intense interest in them as *homo*-sexual citizens (Moskowitz, Rieger, and Roloff 2008); they are recognizable because of their rarity in the local community; they become objects of curiosity; and are seen through the prism of their sexuality; in other words, as the local gay guy. As such, they can often experience objectification and forms of othering.

This calls to mind the work of Shane Phelan, an American political scientist who uses the term 'stranger' to illustrate the way in which sexual minorities are, she says, seen as neither enemies nor friends, 'they may be neighbours', 'but they're not like us' (Phelan 2001, 29, quoting Beck 1996, 382 in Cossman 2007).

While the reach of sexual citizenship has recently been extended to embrace gay and lesbian sexuality, this historical exclusion, this strangeness hasn't gone away. The homo-sexual stranger remains a cultural 'figure of ambivalence who troubles the border between us and them' (Phelan 2001, 5).

Conspicuous by their absence:

During the interviews, but more especially during participation and observations at local LGBTQI network meetings, I would often hear men muse and ponder out loud, *Where are all the other gay people*? The local groups often had up to one hundred people as online members, but most of this number were anonymous, and had never attended any of the group meetings. The group members who attend the meetings are firm in their opinion that many hundreds if not thousands of gay people, of all genders, are in hiding in their regions, afraid to emerge; they are in effect, submerged sexual citizens; sexual citizens in waiting.

Through the absence of large numbers of out, gay people in the rural and small town context, we see a continuation of the virtual exclusion of lesbians and gay men from local cultural representations, an exclusion which Cossman (2007), and Richardson (2000) saw (while writing more widely) as a denial of cultural citizenship. The lack of a critical mass of out and open gay people, also has implications for those few men who are out; it accentuates their isolation, they can appear and feel like beleaguered sexual *minority* citizens marooned in an ocean of sexual *majority* citizens; conspicuous by their very absence, this completes and reinforces their status as outsiders, strangers and other.

Conformist sexual citizens

A common theme to emerge from this research, are men who increasingly feel compelled to accept and adhere to, established behaviours and norms around masculinity, sexuality and sexual identity; norms which are inherently conservative and traditional.

Richardson (2000, 2004, 2017, 2018), Cossman (2002, 2007), Plummer (2003) among others, caution that modern models of citizenship (such as developed by Marshall in the 1950s) are largely built on around Western notions of individual rights, capitalist and neo-liberal economics, and are also inherently heterosexist, gendered and racialized. Therefore, seductive as the sentiment towards citizenship may be, gay, bisexual and lesbian persons claiming rights based on such models of citizenship may find that they require a certain negotiation of belonging (Cram 2016) which forces potential

compromises around the nature of identity; an accommodation to heterosexual standards; and the loss of distinctive ways of being (Taylor. 2011, 583).

An important aspect of sexual citizenship, wholly welcomed by the men in this study, is the right to state sanctioned relationships. However, a small number of men saw pressures for them to marry and parent, as unwelcome. They did not want to conform to the heterosexual institution of marriage and traditions around parenting. Cossman reflects, that 'lesbians and gay men are being brought into the folds of, and reconstituted, in the discourse of the new familialized (and by implication, respectable) citizen' (2002, 484). Gays and lesbians increasingly recognised as subjects in law *but* only so long as they embrace an ideal of respectability, a construction that perpetuates a division between the good gays who marry, are monogamous, and parent; the bad queers who do not (Stychin 1998; Richardson 2018).

Despite such reservations, other men had embraced this new recognition based right (Richardson 2000) and had become civil partnered or married. The impact of such same-sex ceremonies on local rural communities was seen as ground-breaking and seismic. Eugene, 52 (County Donegal) a member of a local, well-known, business family entered into a civil partnership and then marriage with his long-term partner. For Eugene, the power of his state-sanctioned, state-recognised and state-validated relationship lies in its sheer visibility within the local rural community. He feels that it has helped dispel stereotypes and myths surrounding gay people; counteracts the narrative that gay people don't exist in the rural; or that they are hyper-sexualised creatures; as well as helping to normalize gay lives; and reduce homo-negative discourse:

> I know my marriage definitely, you know, was a huge move to make, locally, because there's a lot of [straight] families here that would have kids and they're saying oh, my God, what's happening . . . but then they're looking at me and they're saying look at him, he's in business and it's not affecting him.

He also feels his partnership demonstrates the possibilities and potentialities of same-sex desire, for other gay or questioning locals. Rather than inhabiting the margins of society, he deliberately inhabits a central place with his partner, he is embedded in the political affairs of the local community; he engages in local conversations, he discusses equal marriage on local radio, and as such, and through his newly recognised status, he educates, and changes the cultural narrative of what it is to be gay in a rural fishing village in County Donegal. The work of sexual historian, Jeffrey Weeks reverberate here, when he reminds us that we should never underestimate the power of being ordinary, it has helped transform LGBT visibility and citizenship (Weeks 2007).

De-sexualised citizens

Increasing integration, and assimilation involves accepting a condition implicitly imposed upon homo-sexual citizens where 'sexual subjects are privatized, de-eroticized and depoliticized' (Cossman 2002, 483).

Many of the men's testimonies show their efforts at de-eroticization of their lives, workplaces and even home spaces. Greater social tolerance and acceptance is conjoined with the need to respect and honour heterosexual sensibilities towards displays of the homo-erotic, and queer. During my interview with Jerome, 42, a secondary school

teacher in rural County Galway, he points out his pride and joy- the Tom of Finland book on his coffee table – but he ensures that:

> any gay books, especially those with graphic art like my Tom of Finland, are put into the drawer when I'm expecting visitors, especially work colleagues, and if I hear the bell unexpectedly, then I hide it under the coffee table or cover it with the Sunday newspapers.

The de-eroticization of home, body and language was entered into as part of their obligations towards conformist sexual citizenship. The fear of criminalisation has been removed, but fears of contravening what they perceive as local, culturally conservative, heteronormative conceptions of morality are real. Inclusion seems conditional upon social and cultural respectability. Sexual citizenship as a 'disciplining and normalizing discourse' (Cossman 2002, 486).

Respondents testimonies reveal that they are very aware that, 'lesbians and gay men continue to be positioned as threats to the sanctity of the heterosexual order and must complexly situate their citizenship struggles within this position' (Taylor. 2011, 587). As one man commented at a network meeting:

> You have to be very careful how to present yourself as a project, especially at work. In general, projecting yourself as the professional, respectable, and safe gay is fine but this means not talking about your sexuality in a real, gritty, way; talking to colleagues about cooking, and clothes and shopping is fine but nothing contentious; you have to be very careful as it can backfire if you don't fit the respectable, safe, gay mould (LGBT group meeting, Ireland).

De-politicization is an outcome of being an acceptable citizen (Bell and Binnie 2000) and there were worries about de-politicization among some men in the LGBT groups. They see Pride becoming less gay, less political, and more carnival; promoted and marketed as a 'party' which celebrates generic diversity and community. In these developments, a number of the men discern a subtle re-silencing of gay sexuality, certainly in so far as it alludes to an active, subversive and questioning sexual identity, which seeks to interrogate, and problematize patriarchal, masculinist, heterosexist norms and highlight the continuing dominance of heteronormativity within society.

Conclusion

From a legislative perspective, both Ireland and the UK have seen profound advances in the citizenship status of sexual minorities. Within a relatively short space of time, same-sex relations have attained the same relationship rights, parenting rights, immigration rights, pension rights, inheritance rights, next of kin status and tax benefits as those traditionally accorded to heterosexual relations. The respondents in this research, recognise the impact of these developments on their self-confidence as gay men, on their feelings of self-worth, inclusion and respect. They enthusiastically observe the growing numbers of open and out gay men in all levels of public life.

This was personified towards the end of the fieldwork, with the emergence of an openly gay man, as prime-minister of the Republic of Ireland, just over twenty years after decriminalisation. The Irish men feel that the scale and speed of changes and attitudes towards LGBTQI people in Ireland have been dramatic and profound, and for the most part, they consider Ireland as a progressive European country, which has embraced

secularism, and social democracy; and in doing so, is casting off old stereotypes of a people moulded by conservative and religious views.

Was there a difference between the men's experiences in England and Ireland? Both countries have introduced similarly progressive LGBT equalities laws in recent years. The gaps in economic wealth between Ireland and Britain have closed. Ireland has modernised and become increasingly socially liberal. The historical differences between a poor, agricultural, and religious Ireland compared with wealthy, industrial, and secular Britain have diminished. As such, the contextual differences between both countries have narrowed.

Nonetheless, testimonies from the Irish men reveal that, despite the diminishing influence of the Church in public life, traditional notions on the sanctity and primacy of the heterosexual family remains a significant feature of rural life in Ireland; the three C's of Communions, Christenings and Confirmations, continue to be hugely important social occasions. Some Irish men felt a tension between their sexuality and their presence at these events. Welcomed by their families, but unwelcomed by the rhetoric of the Church.

A feature of some latter interviews in England, was a regret that the UK had decided to leave the European Union. The basis of this regret was the perception that the EU had been an important instigator of sexual orientation equalities legislation in Britain. There was some uncertainty as to whether Brexit might have any implications for the protection of LGBT rights in the UK in the future.

However, the similarities in rural and small town experiences outweigh national differences. The men's experiences in both countries are, that the rural and small town environment places similar pressures to conform, blend and assimilate. The centrality of heterosexuality, and hegemonic masculinity to normative conceptions of rural sexuality, gender relations and rural masculinity is apparent throughout. Sexual citizenship for these gay men is often experienced as a form of contingent citizenship – contingent upon adhering to heteronormative requisites. Nonetheless, many of the men are slowly and quietly asserting their right to be, to live and work in these rural communities, and as such are changing the cultural narrative about what it is to be a gay man in the rural context.

Through the simple act of living as (often the only) gay couple in a locality, becoming the only out gay employee in an organisation, or the only known gay business owner in a small town, or as forming a local LGBT group, contributing to newspapers, speaking at meetings, coming out to friends and family, or getting married; in these activities I detected a new local and rural radicalism. A radicalism which derives its power from the everyday acts of coming out (however partially), telling stories, living with a same-sex partner; these help to change the cultural narratives about what it means to be gay. These men are pioneering new identities in the space of the rural, and slowly helping to realise the promises of sexual citizenship in the context of their spatial and geographic context.

Disclosure statement

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