Changing landscapes: Gay men in the west and northwest of Ireland

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Abstract

This article focuses on the experiences of gay men in the rural west and northwest region of Ireland, during a period of transformational social and political change in Irish society. These changes have helped facilitate new forms of LGBTQI visibility, and local radicalism in the region. Same-sex weddings, establishment of rural LGBT groups and marching under an LGBT banner at St Patricks Day parades would have been unthinkable in the recent past; but they are now becoming a reality. The men report continuing challenges in their lives as gay men in the nonmetropolitan space, but the emergence of new visibility, voice and cultural acceptance of LGBT people is helping change their lived experiences. The study demonstrates the impact of local activist LGBT citizens. Through their testimonies we can gain an insight into the many, varied and interwoven factors that have interplayed to create the conditions necessary for the men to: increasingly define themselves as gay to greater numbers of people in their localities; to embrace greater visibility and eschew strategies of silence; and aspire to a host of legal, political, cultural and social rights including same-sex marriage. Organic forms of visibility and local radicalism have emerged in the region and through an analysis of their testimonies we can see how the men continue to be transformed by an ever-changing landscape.

Keywords

Sexuality, gay men, Ireland, rural, change

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Introduction

Few societies have changed so rapidly and so radically than the Republic of Ireland. The resulting economic and social transformations are particularly striking given Ireland's image as a rural, conservative and Catholic backwater (Breen et al., 2016: 1). Irish society has witnessed a radical departure from its historic, visible and rigid adherence to strict Catholic moral doctrine on family and sexuality, which until recent decades was pursued energetically by both politicians, and people alike (Fahey, 2014: 73).

The decriminalization of sex acts between men, in 1993, was a landmark moment and indeed is seen as an important building block in the cultural and social construction of the Republic of Ireland as a tolerant, progressive and modern society (Cronin, 2004: 251). As equal sexual citizens under law, gay people in the Republic of Ireland can now marry, inherit property on the basis of their state sanctioned relationships, adopt children, receive state benefits, and are protected from discrimination in all aspects of life, whether as employees, as consumers, or as individuals in the wider social context. In 2017, an openly gay man, Leo Varadkar, became the first gay Taoiseach (prime-minister) of the Republic of Ireland.

Within academia, such developments are reflected in the contemporary debates that have emerged and developed around the concept of sexual citizenship, an analytical framework developed by a number of key academic thinkers and theorists (Plummer, 2003, 2006; Richardson, 2000, 2017; Weeks, 1998, 2016).

Debates around sexual citizenship, and rights for sexual minorities, are increasingly global in nature. However, there can be different interpretations of rights in different environments. Gay men may also have different concerns, priorities and strategies in different regional and national contexts (Bell and Binnie, 2000: 33) and in different times.

This article reflects on the experiences of gay men who live and work in one such national context – Ireland, during a time of profound socio-political changes in attitudes to sexuality and LGBTQI persons.

Specifically, the article aims to assess the impact of social and political change for gay men living and working in the west and northwest of Ireland; a place where their sexual identity continues to be mediated by the spatial, cultural and historical context in which they live (Hammack, 2005). As a gay man originally from the region, but who moved away many years ago, I was motivated to capture the experiences of men who had stayed. In particular, to assess the diffusion of the rapid liberalisation of social values in Irish society on gay men in this rural region.

The west and northwest of Ireland is a region of low population densities, with few large urban centres, poor agricultural land, a low industrial base, older demographic profiles, and a history of emigration and rural de-population (Storey, 1995). Electoral constituencies within this region recorded the lowest votes in favour of same-sex marriage in the Irish Marriage Referendum of 2015, and

includes the only constituency to return a 'No' vote in that referendum (Murphy, 2016). Yet, it would be a mistake to misinterpret this backstory, by characterising the region as inherently inhospitable or hostile to sexual minorities. Indeed, this research reveals openly gay men successfully living and working in their locales, and helping to shape cultural understandings and narratives around gay male sexuality.

The article is centred on these men, who have observed, reflected and responded to signals: legal, social and political signals. The article explores these signals, the impact on the men's sexual identity, and how their new identity status encourages, greater visibility and voice at the local and nonmetropolitan level.

Intersectionality: The importance of place and socio-political contexts

There appears to be a growing acknowledgment of the importance of place in intersectional analysis, and an increased awareness that there is a need to examine the ways in which categories such as gender, ethnicity, class or sexual orientation experience disadvantage in their situated context (Tatli and Ozbilgin, 2012: 250). Multiple identities can oscillate and vary depending on location, place, dominant cultural narratives and socio-political contexts (Bell and Binnie, 2000; Kazyak, 2011; Plummer, 2003).

In characterising the Irish socio-political context, Inglis (2005) speaks of a past 'sexual regime' (which was really an *anti*-sexual regime) having existed in Ireland until relatively recently. From the foundation of the State in 1922, the Catholic Church exerted significant influence on successive Irish governments' thereby ensuring that ecclesiastical morals were embedded within the State's socio-sexual policies.

A controversial provision in the Irish constitution which read, that 'The State recognises the special position of the Holy Catholic Apostolic and Roman Church' was removed in 1972, thereby heralding the promise of a more secular state. However, the 1980s saw a litany of failed attempts by campaigners to legalise homosexuality, divorce and abortion.

By contrast, the 1990s was a decade of considerable social and political change. On the issue of gay rights in particular, the 1990s saw mainstream political parties embrace equality, often as the result of lobbying by Gay and Lesbian Equality Network which successfully argued that the Republican ideals of the founding fathers of the Irish state, as articulated in the 1916 Easter Rising proclamation, demanded equality for all citizens, regardless of sexuality (Rose, 1994). It was within this context that the Irish parliament decriminalised homosexuality in 1993.

By appealing to the sentiment and embrace of an authentic republican vision, one can discern a political narrative, which sought to 'morally reframe' (Khazan, 2017) arguments for LGBT equality. The aim was to appeal not only to liberal sentiment, but also to 'the middle ground' of opinion, and hoping to

persuade socially conservative citizens that the ethical codes of the modern nation demanded equality.

Since the mid-1990s, the legislative landscape for LGBT persons in Ireland has continued to change (Norris, 2015). As constitutional sexual citizens under Irish law, lesbian, gay and bisexual people in Ireland 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. This marks a huge change from the recent past.

However, the legacy of the historical anti-sexual regime referred to by Inglis is partially responsible for the absence of any historical discourses that might have challenged the dominant national obsession with purity and piety. We see a culture where sex-talking and writing about sexual practices, feelings and emotions were actively discouraged and dissuaded.

In Rose's (1994) account of the rise of Irish gay and lesbian political movements he notes a pervasive and all-encompassing silence over the issue of homosexuality with little research into Irish lesbian and gay history. The narrative on lesbian and gay lives in Ireland, came from those who were seeking to *control* homosexuality with little in the way of memoirs or diaries from lesbians and gay men themselves (Rose, 1994: 24). Despite the bleak backdrop in Ireland and the sense of a beleaguered and invisible Irish gay community, the 1980s did see the publication of a book entitled *Out for Ourselves: The Lives of Irish Lesbians and Gay Men*. The book was the first in Ireland to deal openly with LGB experience in Ireland, but was ignored by the media and many bookstores refused to stock it (Rose, 1994: 21).

While published research on Irish LGBTQI lives remains relatively scant, recent years have seen some empirical studies, including work on homophobic bullying among LGBT youth (Minton, 2008), the experiences of LGBT young people in the Irish education system (Reygan, 2009), religious homophobia (Reygan and Moane, 2014), experiences of older LGBT persons in the Irish healthcare system (Burke Sharek et al., 2014) and a qualitative study drawing on the experiences of 23 lesbian, gay and bisexual teachers in Irish schools (Fahie, 2016).

However, there remains a dearth of research on LGBT lives in rural Ireland, aside from important work by Ni Laoire (2001, 2002), on men and masculinity in rural Ireland. In her work, Ní Laoire (2002) offers some optimism towards the emergence of a more open and flexible type of masculinity among young farmers in modern day rural Ireland (16).

Outside of the Irish context though, there has been a significant body of research focusing on the intersection between LGBTQ sexualities and rurality since the late 1990s. These include the work of Boulden (2001) which focuses on gay men in Wyoming, Smith and Holt (2005) showing that lesbians act as gentrifiers in Hebden Bridge, England via their migration, residential and consumption practices, Gray (2009) who observes how rural gay youth form identities in rural areas of Kentucky, Kennedy (2010) who explores how men negotiate and manage their sexual identity in rural Ontario, Kazyak (2011) which examines how gays and

lesbians in the mid-west of the USA, modify the cultural narrative that has linked gay and lesbian identities to metropolitan and urban environments, Annes and Redlin (2012) who explore the intersection of gay men, masculinity and rurality in France and the USA, Kuhar and Svab (2014) on gay experiences in rural Slovenia, Preston and D'Augelli (2013) who comprehensively deal with many issues facing gay men, in particular lingering stigma, in southern states of the USA, Leap's (2017) work exploring the intersection of rural masculinities with race, class and sexuality, and McGlynn (2018) on public sector equalities work and sexual minorities in nonmetropolitan England.

These studies assert that *Place* has a decisive role in shaping individuals' sexual identity and demonstrate the need to study the intersection of gender, age, sexuality and place/space in order to understand the life world and real-life experience of gay men in nonmetropolitan settings (Annes and Redlin, 2012; Jones et al., 2013; Kennedy, 2010).

The term 'gay identity' is salient here. Some of the earlier work on gays in rural areas provided a focus on gay people in rural areas, from the perspective of queer desire and non-normative sexual practices (Howard, 1999). More recent literature (Kazyak, 2011) has heralded the arrival of a new focus of study: namely a focus on rural gay identities, people identifying as gay or lesbian and performing that identity in the space of the rural.

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 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.

Studies show that the rural can be seen as a place of alienation, but also belonging for sexual minorities (Gormann-Murray et al., 2013: 3). Increasingly, some scholars question the prevailing, and powerful presumption that rural spaces are sites of anxiety for sexual minorities (Anderson et al., 2015; McGlynn, 2018). Rather, it can be argued that lived experiences and spatial ideas actively intersect, in ways that can 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 at the national level (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 article are derived from fieldwork conducted between, 2012 and 2017 in rural and small town areas of Ireland and England.

This article focuses on the findings from Ireland only, generated from 22 in-depth interviews as well as attendance, participation and observation at local meetings of the rural LGBTQI groups in the west and northwest of that country. In addressing the lives of gay men, in a legislatively progressive jurisdiction, I am aware that their experiences are exclusive to their habitus.

The fieldwork region covers seven counties in the west and north-west of the country, and includes Counties Cavan, Donegal, Leitrim, Longford, Roscommon, Galway and Sligo.

Hermeneutic phenomenology provides the philosophical underpinnings for the study. I was particularly attracted by this hermeneutic emphasis on 'historicality', (Laverty, 2003) because I felt this resonated with the lesbian, gay and bisexual experience in Ireland; as persons adjusting to a changed contextual environment where, rhetorically at least, their subjectivities are being re-cast by progressive legislative advances and liberalising social attitudes.

The fieldwork study adopts a qualitative research design and utilised qualitative data collection methods. Respondents were recruited with the assistance of newly established LGBT networks in the region, and furthermore, through forms of snowball sampling from contacts made within the groups. 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 18 years of age or over, self-identify as gay men, and live in the locale.

In many ways, the interviews conformed to what are known as 'life story' or 'life history interviews', where the person chooses to 'tell a story about the life he or she had lived told as completely as possible usually as a result of a guided interview by another' (Atkinson, 2002 in Annes and Redlin, 2012: 263). Life history interviews seemed relevant and consistent with both the principles of hermeneutic inquiry, and the aims of my study, given that they can reveal much 'in-depth understanding of social, cultural, and historical structures shaping this personal experience over the life course' (Annes and Redlin, 2012: 263). Furthermore, they are often considered suitable for researchers working in the field of sexuality in that they provide a scholarly audience for new stories not previously heard such as the coming-out stories of gay and lesbian people (Robinson, 2013: 9).

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. Ten of the men were out, eight partially out (out to some but not to others), with two not out.

I grew up in this region, but have spent over 20 years living and working in academia in London. Returning to this region, as a researcher, I felt an immediate affinity with the concept of 'native-as-stranger' (Heilman, 1980) in which he discusses the experiences of 'studying people that were my own' (100). Seen as an insider due to his upbringing in the community under study, but also an outsider, due to his subsequent career as an academic outside the community.

Following Moustakas's (1990) guidance on data collection and analysis, the interviews (with the exception of one) were recorded and later transcribed. In using a form of life history interviews, I am aware that, while they provide rich evidence and documentation of personal experience (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 and discussion

The men's testimonies support the view that the rapid advancement of LGBT inclusive equalities legislation in Ireland has had a crucial role in changing the nature of the relationship between them, as gay men and the wider communities in which they live. Yet, there was a widespread view that legislation was not the only reason for their transformation from closeted men, to men who increasingly acknowledge their sexual identity in public settings.

Social, political and cultural changes in Ireland have been of the utmost significance to these men. They have observed how attitudes and practices are changing in their rural and small town locales. As a result of these changes, most of the men have begun the process of coming out (albeit unevenly) and some have become involved in local gay networks and groups; and in doing so they advance visibility in their local communities.

They remain cautious about the intersectional difficulties between male homosexuality and the rural space. Fintan, aged 36 (County Longford) spoke of how he 'tested the waters' locally before he came out.Other men used phrases such as 'dipping your toes in the water' to 'test the temperature' locally (Jerome, 42, County Galway).

By this they meant, that they surreptitiously gauged local opinion through a variety of subliminal methods, and in doing so, seeking reassurance that they would not be met with local hostility at the other end of a coming out decision.

They were aware that once 'out', there would be no going back in the closet, especially if they continued to live in their local, nonmetropolitan communities. The men are also aware that although society at large has advanced greatly for sexual minorities, stigma was, and remains a reality and decisions about how open to be, or not to be, about one's sexuality remain relevant and salient (Solomon et al., 2015).

Despite lingering suspicions about how gay friendly the local community really is, the Irish men believe that their journey, as gay men, has been transformed in recent years, by what was described at a network meeting as, 'nothing short of a social revolution in the space of just twenty years'.

The key changes they consider responsible for increasing gay-friendly environment of their local communities, include: the diminishing role and influence of the

church in rural Ireland; the impact of Ireland's first female presidents and the election of a gay prime minister; increasing rural diversity; local LGBTQI networks; the media and; the power of celebrities, especially sports stars, who publically come.

A chastised church

The diminishing role and influence of the church was a key theme to emerge from interviews. Respondents spoke of a decline in the moral authority of the Church and its reduced power over social life and social policy in Ireland. For many, this fall from grace began in earnest with the widespread publicity of child abuse scandals which have dogged the Irish Church since the mid-1990s, and which have had a profound effect on Irish culture and society. (Keenan, 2014: 99). Respondents believe that at a local level, the Church has lost its 'pulpit-power', which was often used to publically castigate and denigrate gay men as sinners:

> It's been twenty-five years of abuse cases after abuse case. The church has lost a lot of moral credibility . . . so how can they preach to me from the pulpit that gay sex is a sin and that sort of thing. (Jerome, 42, County Galway)

Where the church once dominated their rural locales, the men (some of whom do still practice their faith) observe that that church services are now sparsely attended, and attracting few young people.

Respondents are clear on the impact of this social change for them as gay men. The decline of church influence is seen as a form of liberation, in that it has released them and the wider community from excessive clerical influence. Many respondents view the church's demise as positive for LGBT people:

> Their power has gone. And with that, the fear has gone, and people aren't afraid to stand up to the church now when they preach about homosexuality being a sin, abortion, and such like. People now make up their own minds about what is moral and immoral (Columba, 47, County Leitrim)

In such testimonies, we see many of the men sensing a form of release from the weight of historical homophobic narratives as articulated by O'Brien (2003): 'Unless you are gay you don't experience the awful weight of history, both secular and religious, both past and present, that works to convince us that in the very depths of our being there dwells no "rightness"' (14).

Presence of other types of diversity

Ireland has seen increasing levels of inward migration. In 1996, only 2% of the population of the Republic was born outside the British Isles, a figure which rose to 17% by 2017 (*Irish Times*, 2017). A society marked by homogeneity has become

one marked by diversity. Jerome provides a narrative on the impact of diversity for him as a gay man, in his rural home community of County Galway:

> Diversity, other types of people coming in (to our rural community) has had a big impact. Even ten years ago it was all Irish, all white. Now we have people from the Congo, from Brazil, and Nigeria in the locality. Their kids are in the local schools.

> And all of this difference, and diversity, all these things have softened the locals up to the gay thing...as just another type of difference to get used to (Jerome, 42, County Galway)

For Jerome, the public acceptance of his cousin, by parents and the rural community stands out as a defining moment:

> My mother's niece came back from America with an American girlfriend, that was a shocker...and she settled down with her partner...they built a house and set up home together on the parent's farm...and adopted a child from Singapore...who is now in the local school. My parents, aunts, uncles, all accepted it. I saw that happen and I was surprised to see them change with the times.

Here, we see an example of parents from traditional rural backgrounds publically having to adapt to, and accept, new forms of living and new types of relationships, and the impact this can have on creating a more gay-friendly environment for a local gay man.

In an excellent narrative on the Irish family, Tony Fahey highlights trends such as cohabitation becoming an accepted and widely practised form of union, and with marital breakdown and divorce having become an accepted fact of life. Another highly significant and symbolic indication of social change is the growth in children born out of marriage, which in 2015 stood at 36%, up from 5% in the early 1980s (Fahey, 2014; *Irish Times*, 2016).

Jerome feels that these changes in the nature of family have implications for how gay people are seen in the rural context.

> Divorce is legal, so we have separated couples, even around here, we also now have single parent households, single mothers, we have couples living together before they get married. And I think this allows a chink of opportunity for gay people to set up their own home together too, to live together as a couple. If straight people can now live in sin, why can't we.

Within these rural regions of western Ireland, there is now a growing acceptance that the heteronormative conception of the nuclear family, comprising one man and one woman, and their children, is no longer the only manifestation of family:

> The family as we came to know it in ideology and practice is no longer what it was;
> the divorce figures, the incidences of single parenting, the delay of marriage, the rise of
> cohabitation, rapid rise of single households, the emergence of new patterns of inti-
> macy, for example lesbian and gay 'families of choice', all these are indices of pro-
> found change. (Weeks, 1998: 41)

These changes have become more common in the west and northwest of Ireland in
recent years and they mark a significant change in the social fabric of these rural
communities.

Role of popular media, culture and 'celebrity' role models

Many respondents cited the power of radio, television and social media in helping
to change attitudes towards LGBTQI persons in their rural and small town locales.
Historically, there has been profound underrepresentation of, and/or stereotypical
and narrow representations of gay, lesbian and bisexual individuals in the media
(Fryberg and Townsend 2008; Gomillion and Giuliano, 2011).

A number of respondents welcomed the broadly positive representations of gay
people in the contemporary media, with those from the past, where gay men, were
typically depicted as the 'sissy' - an asexual, effeminate, and often ridiculous char-
acter, or alternatively as victims, or as rather sinister characters (Gomillion and
Giuliano, 2011: 340):

> Growing up in the 1970s and 80s, the gay people I saw on television, they were
> caricatures of gay people. There was John Inman in *Are You Being Served*, there
> was, Liberace, Kenneth Williams, these people were camp and flamboyant
> people . . . But they weren't the fellow living next door. I mean, they were very differ-
> ent to the people that ordinary folk in Cavan knew. . .so people like that didn't exist
> here . . . at least nowadays we're seeing a more honest portrayal of gay men in the
> movies now, like in Brokeback Mountain. (Phelim, 48, County Cavan)

For men like Phelim, it seemed important that gay men be portrayed as regular,
masculine 'bloke next door' types. This demonstrates the persistence of heteronor-
mative conceptions of masculinity for many gay men, and the prioritisation of
masculinity in the rural context (Annes and Redlin, 2012; Boulden, 2001).

Masculinity and in particular notions of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995),
which limit the possibilities of identity negotiation by gay men, are powerful con-
cepts, 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 mascu-
linity 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 their
identity as a gay man *if* they are macho and masculine, but to be effeminate and
gay is quite another matter. Here we can see that it is hegemonic notions of

masculinity that are important, with images of rural masculinity emphasizing phys-ical strength, hardiness and individualism (Bell, 2006 in Preston and D'Augelli, 2013). Such concepts can be coercive and disciplinary.

The testimonies of the gay men in this study demonstrate that they see being masculine as a necessary survival strategy and the rural gay men in this study are, as Annes and Redlin (2012) note, 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). A con-sistent theme in this study was the extent to which men perceived to be camp or effeminate endured significant bullying growing up in these areas and experienced feelings of isolation, ostracization and exclusion.

Public role models

The impact of role models 'coming out' is crucial, not only in educating wider society, but in the role they can have in shaping and encouraging positive gay identity development, higher self-esteem and self-efficacy (Gomillion and Giuliano, 2011: 331).

Through the global media, Ireland has witnessed many global celebrities 'coming out'. However, there is an intrinsic difference between a Hollywood movie star coming out, and a local sporting legend from rural Ireland coming out. When Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) hurling star Donal Óg Cusack openly disclosed his sexuality and proclaimed his identity as a gay man the impact was truly profound.

Since most sports are infused with ideals and practices associated with hege-monic masculinity and heterosexuality, coming out presents some unique chal-lenges for gay sports people. Resistance to homosexuality within sport, especially mainstream sport is well-known. Indeed, a man who is both gay and athletic transgresses pervasive understandings of homosexuality and sport and can provoke much negativity (Gough, 2007: 157).

Cusack's confident, public narratives about his sexuality, received widespread media attention. Reactions from general public, other athletes and GAA officials were largely positive. As such, his 'coming out' was seen as a hugely significant moment by the gay men in the west and northwest of Ireland:

Donal Óg Cusack, the hurler who came out a couple of years ago. I think that was a huge sea-change, a massive sea-change; can't be underestimated, because he is a sporting legend... I think it, it's great to have gay artists, gay musicians, gay journalists, but to have a gay sportsman, a guy who's, you know, is big and manly and just, you know, he's, probably he's the best goalkeeper in hurling at the moment and for him to come out and say yeah, I am gay, I think that's huge. (Thomas, 44, County Cavan)

The 'Two Mary's'

Many of the men spoke of the importance of brave radicals and human rights campaigners such as David Norris, a veteran gay rights campaigner, described as a hero by a number of the men, and the presidencies of Mary Robinson (1990–1997) and Mary McAlesse (1997–2012) which they saw as highly significant for LGBT people in Ireland. Both of these female presidents had roots in the rural northwest of Ireland. Mary Robinson, had been a prominent feminist campaigner in Ireland in the 1970s and 1980s, campaigning on issues such as the right to the legal availability of contraception for unmarried people.

During this time, she was also involved in supporting rights for gay people at a time when same-sex activity between men was still a criminal offence (Rose, 1994).

When Mary Robinson won that election it was really great for gay people and anybody who was different because she brought a new face, a modern face to the presidency of Ireland... and she actually, you know, invited gay people and campaigners like David Norris into Áras an Uachtaráin [presidential residence] that was a complete first. This made me feel good about myself inside, as a gay person (Mac, 40, County Roscommon)

For many gay people in Ireland, the popular discourse of Ireland as a modern, progressive, liberal society, which embraces and is inclusive of its gay and lesbian citizens owes much to the highly symbolic event by President Mary Robinson, when in 1992 she issued an invitation to a group of lesbian and gay activists to meet her at Áras an Uachtaráin (the presidential residence). It is remembered as all the more symbolic, occurring as it did, one year before the legal decriminalization of homosexuality (Cronin, 2004: 251).

With openly gay people now holding high political office, most notably, Prime Minster Leo Varadkar, the men remark how the previously unthinkable has become reality. With pro-equality and pro-LGBTQI leadership now the norm at a national level, the men and the local groups do sometimes ponder whether all their local politicians and councillors actually embrace the political changes happening at a national level:

Some do and some don't. In the Marriage referendum, a lot of local councillors did not accept the offer to canvas the locality with the LGBTQI group. It makes you

wonder how committed some of them are to the liberal Ireland. But the big change nowadays is that even if a local politician is anti-LGBTQI – they stay quiet. The pendulum has swung the other way (Mel, 46, County Longford)

Civil partnerships and equal marriage

The impact of same-sex partnership and marriage ceremonies on local rural and small town communities in the west and northwest of Ireland was seen as groundbreaking and seismic. Eugene, aged 52 (County Donegal) had been in a same-sex relationship for a number of years but decided to come out soon after civil partnership became legal. He came out because he wanted to regularise his relationship legally. He entered into a civil partnership with his partner in 2011, and the couple held a marriage ceremony in 2017 when same-sex marriage had been legalised.

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 civil partnership 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 running a successful business, and being gay is 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 on the County Donegal coast.

His testimony also highlights the power of the wedding invite within the context of rural Ireland, a place where weddings tend to be important social occasions. Eugene believes that, because of this legislation:

Even the begrudger, has to go to the wedding if he's invited because he might be the next door neighbour or something . . . When I did our civil partnership we had this guy, he's a real stalwart of the GAA, and the other guy who was along with him played for the county team and you couldn't get more masculine straight guys, you know, and they came to the wedding with their wives . . . and . . . they reported that, it was the best wedding we ever attended! It's very educational.

Eugene's testimony illustrates how this legislation has enabled a change in dominant rural cultural narratives about gay people, through shared social experiences at the local level.

Local LGBTQI networks: Radical visibility

Although common in major metropolitan areas, LGBTQ organisations are less likely to exist in nonmetropolitan communities. In the west and northwest of Ireland, only one such group existed post decriminalization (1993), but in recent years at least six have emerged in different parts of the region.

These LGBTQI groups make a real difference to many individual lives. Turlough (48) had lived in London for a number of years, had come out whilst living there, but on returning to live in his native County Roscommon, he felt the need to go back in the closet. He recently joined a newly established group (50 kilometres away) and attends weekly:

> Oh, yeah the impact has been huge. Because you just go in and you meet others who are living and working in the same area with same types of issues . . . and it helps get me through the week . . . I am not out at work, not out at home so this weekly get together is a life line for me. Because of it, I am slowly taking the baby steps to coming out again (Turlough, 51, County Roscommon)

In these areas, the local LGBTQI group was often the only visible and tangible gay infrastructure that exists. Some of the men had never met another local gay person before joining the group. The local groups have attracted people from a wide variety of ages, some of them were older men. One respondent reflected on the impact of the group that he observed, on one local farmer in his sixties:

> I see the absolute hands-on difference we make. One of our oldest members for example when he first came to the meeting, every time the word gay was mentioned he sort of ducked his head almost in a sort of shame thing, you know. And it was visible, you could see it, and you could perceive his closing in. But now he attends our discoes, which are held in the local town, and that is the way we feel we're definitely making a real difference to real peoples' lives. (Dermot, 43, County Cavan)

Finian, aged 45 (County Sligo) cited his experience with an LGBT group in the region as life changing; and he is in no doubt that the group was a crucial component in his journey of sexual identity formation:

> I was 30 and I felt, it's time to do something. I had read about Outwest LGBT group- . . . so I put my toe in the water and started ringing their helpline, spoke to my first openly gay person. Then from that to go to their disco . . . it was like, it was like a flower blossoming really because . . . . you created a network of friends, you created a structure

around yourself, you went on to be having your first boyfriend …. I was changing, I was changing as a person…I was a lot happier, that I was a lot more content.

While helping people cope with the social isolation their surroundings can entail, this research believes that local LGBT groups go beyond coping support, and act as strategic, developmental change agents; building identity, sexual citizens and sexual citizenship in the nonmetropolitan space.

The groups were considered radical by all respondents, simply by virtue of their very presence in the rural and small-town environment, which only a few years ago would have been considered unthinkable. As such were seen by many as 'active change agents' in promoting LGBTQI visibility and inclusion within the wider community.

Local groups have provided journalistic pieces in local newspapers, have organised group dinners in local restaurants, had occasional discos in local bars and held fundraising events in local premises. They have taken part in discussions and debates on local radio. They have set-up information stalls in local libraries during community citizen's week. Their weekly meetings are often followed by an informal drink in local pubs and in a highly unusual turn (which attracted national television coverage) the Longford LGBT group took part in the annual local Saint Patrick's Day parade, marching behind a rainbow flag:

> Our very existence, our very presence tells the local people that there are LGBT people living and working here, amongst them…that we are not some strange species up in Dublin…and that we are not going to hide ourselves away in a corner, we can proudly walk in our own town in the St. Patricks Day parade…I think that tells people we are not afraid and ashamed…the group offers that power in numbers; safety in numbers feeling. (Fintan, 36, County Longford)

As such, we can see the value of such local groups in helping to challenge the heteronormative construction of space; end silence, increase voice and visibility, and assert the right of sexual minorities to openly, exist, live and interact in the public sphere. Throughout all their efforts, they are truly changing the cultural narrative of what it means to be gay (Kazyak, 2011), in this rural community.

Taking it home

From the perspective of embedding and weaving openly gay identities, and sexual minority citizenship into the fabric of the nonmetropolitan community, perhaps the greatest impact is when a local man 'comes out' publicly within the community. The local LGBTQI groups played a pivotal role in facilitating this. One story illustrates this perfectly.

Finian came out over the space of a number of years whilst attending an LGBTQI group in Galway, 120 kilometres from his remote village (population: 512) in the hilly and mountainous terrain of South County Sligo.

> The regional LGBT group, Outwest, holds a Christmas dinner every year and about forty guys would attend. That year I put my hand up and I said I want you to come to my home village this year. The guys to this day still talk about the great Christmas party they had in this rural pub in the back of beyond, and the whole village was looking at what was going on and everything else. That was one thing I shall always remember.

Here, we see Finian bringing his gay friends into the heart of his rural community. Finian remarks, 'the locals got their eyes opened'. Many locals had never knowingly seen or met LGBT people before. And here, they see, meet, and interact with people, no different to their own friends and family. Irish and rural Finian firmly believes attitudes changed that night.

In this narrative, one can trace Finian's journey from attendance at the regional LGBTQI group, his slow coming out to other gay people, and eventual coming out more widely. A sexual citizen who becomes a vehicle for visibility in his native area:

> I also benefitted from these experiences. My double life was finally over. Ballyfadden is part of me, just as being gay is. These two parts of me, my home place and my sexuality don't have to be separate anymore.

I finish with a final example of the power of the local out man. Phelim attends a local LGBTQI group, and came out, after entering into a same-sex relationship. He is a pub landlord in his village (population: 393). He is the only known 'out' gay man in the village, and he recalls one social interaction which illustrates how the local 'out' gay man, can become our hero, the sexual citizen (Bell and Binnie, 2000; Weeks, 1998) altering and disrupting previously held stereotypes:

> There's another publican up the street. He was in my bar one day, he comes into my pub sometimes, and he was in the bar when me and Paul were living together. He came in and he said, 'I never liked gay people, I never had anything but bad things to say about them, he said. But, I know you all my life, and I'm also getting to know your partner Paul now. And the more I get to know about it all, he says, if one of my children came to me now and told me that they were gay, he said I would be quite happy about it, whereas before I absolutely wouldn't have been.

Conceptualising a changing landscape

The following quote resonates with the journey of many of the respondents in this research.

> In the past, no one would have said "I am gay/lesbian" as a defining characteristic of personhood and of social involvement and presence. Yet, today, at least in the metropolitan heartlands of western societies, it is commonplace for many previously marginalized people – for example those belonging to sexual minorities – to define

themselves both in terms of personal and collective identities by their sexuality, and to claim recognition, rights and respect as a consequence. (Weeks, 1998: 37)

Crucially, this research illustrates such identity forming occurring in nonmetropolitan heartlands.

As a sexual and social historian, Weeks (1998, 2007, 2016) places much emphasis on identifying the social transformations that have given rise to the publically identifying 'sexual citizen', including, the general democratization of relationships; the emergence of new subjectivities (identities) and the development of new narratives (stories) (1998: 39). These transformations are clearly reflected in the testimonies of the men in this research.

Firstly, Weeks argues that there has been a long-term tendency towards the democratization of relationships. Institutions, such as the churches, who propagate traditional values, have seen their influence diminish. Instead, there has been a growing acceptance of pre-marital sex, divorce, single parenting, delay of marriage, rise of cohabitation, new patterns of domestic involvement and the emergence of new patterns of intimacy – all of which point to profound change in family arrangements.

Such examples of de-traditionalization have unsettled and destabilized traditional patterns of relationships and Weeks (1998) hints that this destabilization has 'opened up' the possibility of new and diverse types of relationships and families emerging and becoming established (for example those involving same-sex couples) (44). This research illustrates such de-traditionalization occurring quite rapidly, in rural Ireland.

Secondly, the emergence of new subjectivities (identities) which he sees as fluid, where people feel free to self-identify and to embrace multiple identities. It is, for Weeks (1998), a testimony to what Giddens (1992) has called the 'reflexive project of the self' (45). The women's movement and the lesbian and gay movements have also been pivotal in shaping the debate, and have helped identities today display a greater fluidity (Taylor et al., 2010). The local LGBTQI networks and groups in rural Ireland play an important role in this regard at a local level.

Thirdly, and aligned to these new forms of public self-identification has been the emergence of new stories, narratives and voices from a previously unheard community of individuals. For Weeks (1998), these new stories of the self from ordinary individuals, about sexuality and gender, make the sexual citizen visible and audible, 'because these stories (often involving every day persons "coming out" and disclosing their sexuality to friends and family, work colleagues and the media) tell the world of what "it is like to live life as gay or lesbian", and their stories of exclusion and marginalisation' (47).

Throughout, a consistent factor in the evolving conception of identity formation has been the influence of the changing social conditions (Dunlap, 2016: 22). The LGB identity development process, including the realization of one's same-sex desires and coming out, needs to be conceptualized as a dynamic process that is mediated by the cultural and historical context in which LGB individuals

live (Hammack, 2005). Sexual identity development, including the timing and the meanings ascribed to developmental events such as coming out, is related to the social and cultural context in which individuals develop. This research confirms the importance of contextual factors when studying gay identity (Gomillion and Giuliano, 2011: 331).

Furthermore, the findings of this research find substance in the work of Robson and Kessler (2008), that notions of 'sexual citizenship' must be grounded in the legal consequences of sexual minorities' access to (and denial of) rights. Failing to address formal legal status, 'erases individuals who do not have access to even the most basic rights of citizenship' (Robson and Kessler, 2008: 535) and 'trivializes the struggles of people who lack formal citizenship status' (571).

> Regarding legislation, some people say that legislation has had no impact on their life, I say that is nonsense, they may not realise it but it certainly has had an effect, the fact that people can be as open as they can, has been helped by the legislation, legislation forces people to reflect, and leads to a change of opinion, and leads to people being more accepting. (Columba, 47, County Leitrim)

Conclusion

The granting of new rights, and personal freedom, to lesbian, gay and bisexual people in Ireland in recent years is seen by the men in this study as momentous. Many recall a history where, from the criminalization of gay sexuality to the legal condoning of discrimination, lesbians and gay men were enthusiastically denied genuine civil, political, social and cultural membership (Cossman, 2007; Phelan, 2001; Richardson, 2000). Most men in this study have lived through this transition from sexual outcast to sexual citizen.

Their local, rural and small town environments have become more open and inclusive. Their historic oppressors seem less potent. Homo-negative and stigmatising cultural narratives are increasingly challenged by new stories and new voices from an assertive local gay rights movement. There appears to be increasing understanding of their sexuality as innate, and natural as opposed to debauched, and immoral. They witness other men come out, local men and public figures. As reflective agents, they acknowledge the striking alteration in their subjectivity, and in the place of gay people within their societies.

However, the men also testify to the heteronormative cultures of their locales, which require a continuous negotiation of sexuality, masculinity and identity. The centrality of heterosexuality, and hegemonic masculinity to normative conceptions of rural sexuality, gender relations and rural masculinity is apparent throughout. Heteronormative dominance can blight social transactions at times.

Nonetheless, many of the men are slowly and quietly asserting their right to be, to live and work in these rural communities, and are changing the cultural narrative about what it is to be a gay man in their locales. In deciding to live together as (often the only) gay couple in the locality, or in forming a local LGBT group,

contributing to newspapers, speaking at meetings, marching in local community festivals; I see a new, local, identity-based radicalism. And in the everyday acts of coming out, educating and sharing stories, they are seeking rightful inclusion in the cultural and social affection of their geographic context (Bell and Binnie, 2000; Delamore, 2013; Weeks, 1998).

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