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## Searching for Support and Community: Experiences in a Gay Men's Psychoeducational Group

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### Abstract

Support groups are a powerful tool that can assist gay men in dealing with isolation from other gay men, a lack of information about themselves and others as gay men, and the fear either of being identified or of self-identifying as gay. In this article, ten gay men speak about their experiences in a support/psychoeducational group.

### Résumé

Les groupes de soutien constituent un outil puissant qui peut aider les gais à remédier à leur isolement vis-à-vis des autres hommes homosexuels d'une part et au manque de renseignements portant sur les hommes homosexuels et pouvant les intéresser d'autre part. Ces groupes de soutien peuvent les aider également à faire face à leur peur d'être identifiés ou de s'identifier comme gai. Dans cet article, dix hommes parlent de leur expérience dans un groupe de soutien psychopédagogique.

In the late 1990s gay men's lives are visible in a way that they have never been before both to gay men themselves as well as to those who identify as non-gay. Through the popular discourse of newspapers, movies, and television programmes such as "Ellen" the public is provided with information about how gay men and lesbians live and experience their world. On occasion, this presentation serves to remind all of us of the adult bullying and social bashing, usually by men, of gay men and lesbians that takes place on a regular basis (Frank, 1990a). Greg Kinnear's performance as Simon, an openly gay artist in "As Good As It Gets," the recent award-winning movie with Jack Nicholson and Helen Hunt, allows the audience to experience the raw hatred and homophobia of Jack's character, Melvin, toward his neighbour, Simon. The "pansy" and "fag" name-calling and the resulting fear for Simon are the daily experiences of many of our gay students in the corridors of the nation's schools, of some gay men on the street and in the workplace, and of others in their families (Frank, 1990a; Jennings, 1994; Woog, 1995; Rasi & Rodriguez-Nogues, 1995; Signorile, 1995; Davison, 1996). In October of 1997, *The Advocate: The National News Magazine of the Lesbian and Gay Community* (of the United States) published its 30th Anniversary Issue, with contributions from thirty gay and lesbian leaders envisioning what the world will look like for gay men and lesbians in thirty years time. Lesbian, psychotherapist, and author Betty Berzon (1997, October 14) envisions a world quite

different in 2027 than the one many gay men and lesbians presently experience.

[gay and lesbian] Adults who have grown up in a non-homophobic society are self-valuing, fun-loving, altruistic people whose lives are built around a successful partnership, productive work, and the enjoyment of the new recreational options that 21st century technology has to offer [. . . that is], a strong sense of gay and lesbian identity. (p. 75)

These are the daily realities of some gay men as presented through the popular discourse of the late 1990s. On the one hand, there is the harassment and hatred, an experience far too many gay men know firsthand in lives saturated with homophobia and heterosexism,<sup>1</sup> while on the other hand, there is a positive future open to possibilities.

In 1999, many gay men still exist in fear and silence about who they are and what they need to have happy, healthy lives. Many who live in rural and non large urban areas know no other gay man personally. Typically, these men experience three kinds of isolation: the social isolation of lacking connection with gay peers, the emotional isolation of feeling misunderstood and alone, and, the cognitive isolation of lacking basic information regarding their lives and sexualities (Hetrick & Martin, 1987, pp. 31-32). In addition, gay men in rural and non large urban centres often experience a particular lack of social and professional services and support specifically designed to meet their needs (Peterson, 1996). Many gay men have the experience of being a patient of a physician for years and never being "out," or possibly an experience in psychiatry where they neither are out nor feel safe about the "treatment" they receive. Homophobia and heterosexism within social and professional services generates chilling silence and fear for many of these men (Pierce, 1996). It offers the possibility of both misinformation about gay men and an ignorance about genuine information regarding their daily realities (Scott, 1997). Rather, to understand bodily experience what is needed is a more thorough social analysis of sexual politics and an understanding of how these politics shape our lives, including our sexualities (Connell, 1995).

Group work with gay men is of particular value in offering to assist these men with the negative effects of homophobia and heterosexism. It is not our purpose in this article to make suggestions about how gay men's psychoeducational groups should be designed or structured. There is an emerging literature on gay men and groups available for counsellors, therapists, and others in the helping professions. At the

<sup>1</sup> The Canadian AIDS Society defines homophobia as: "Any negative attitude or behaviour directed toward a gay/lesbian person on becoming aware of another person's homoaffiliative orientation." Heterosexism is defined as: "The belief in one form of loving, i.e., between a man and a woman, as being of the highest and most natural order and thereby having the right to dominate and denigrate any other forms of loving."

same time, there is an emerging recognition that support groups of a psychoeducational nature can offer an alternative to how gay men see themselves portrayed in the dominant culture and can help to alleviate the isolation that many gay men experience (Schwartz, 1996; Alexander, 1996, 1997). In addition, support groups can offer to assist in the development of a healthy self and a feeling of positive identification with the gay community (Sheridan, 1997; Getzel, 1998). However, little has been said in the literature by gay men themselves about their participation in such groups. Not only with the group experience, but more generally, the sources for understanding gay men's lives have largely been the writings of "experts," and the accounts of the lives of gay men have continually patterned themselves after a theorizing which stresses that history is made "behind their backs." The idea that gay men make their history, including some of its constraints, has often been neglected (Frank, 1990b). Furthermore, the analysis of gay men's lives has been primarily constructed through psychological categories that have historically, to a large degree, defined their behaviour as deviant, pathological, and inferior (Oulton, 1994). On the one hand there remains an over-determinism of what it means to be gay in a homophobic and heterosexual society, while on the other, there is the on-going pathologizing of gay men's behaviour. This continues to produce a view of gay men as the passive receivers of a monolithic system of homophobia and heterosexism which is seen to be mechanical and consensual. It is not quite so simple. Gay men, like most people who experience life in the margins, live complex lives full of tensions and contradictions. Victimization coexists with empowerment, oppression with privilege, promise with danger, and all at the same time. An understanding of both the diversity and the similarities, as well as the accommodation and resistance in their lives, demands, above all, an examination of the psychological and social practices in which their lives are constituted and contested.

Many of us who live in the margins recognize that our approaches to our work should empower those people who are normally just the "objects" of research, so that they may develop expertise to study their situations and "evolve their own solutions" (Connell, Ashenden, Kessler, & Dowsett, 1982, p. 216). Thus our focus in this article is on ten gay men who participated in a discussion and support group as they talk about their lives. What we hope to do is to offer some insights into gay men's lives as well as experiences of being in a psychoeducational group and at the same time to focus upon the specific voices of these ten gay men as they offer reflections. Through their voices, they become the experts in the description of what it means to be a gay man in the late 1990s in a para-rural city: Halifax, Nova Scotia. As much as possible, it is their talk that we have attempted to represent. Through this talk, it is their practice, their history in the making that we hear.

### *The Facilitator and the Authors*

We are two gay men. One is a professor in a Department of Education at a Halifax University and a counsellor in the gay men's community. The other is a graduate student at another Halifax University. One of us facilitated this group; one of us was a participant. There is a wealth of scholarship, as well as much political debate, about how our own lives as counsellors, therapists, and facilitators influence our practice and professional work. Surely, it would be naive to think that we leave our experience, our own multiple subjectivities and our positionalities, including our sexualities somewhere else when we work with our clients and engage our professional work. For example, neither heterosexual privilege or gay oppression work quite that way (Bunch, 1975; Frank, 1997)! For us, the issue is not one of contamination, neutrality or objectivity, but rather one of ethics. It seems ethical to us that we must not only recognize our own locations in the process of our work, indeed, we must engage in a process of reflexivity that allows us to be astutely aware of our positionality when we do this work. Accounting for personal experience places the researcher/facilitator in relation to the research process and group facilitation "in an immediate and central way" (Kirby & McKenna, 1989, pp. 20-21). Here are our voices, presented in the same format within which the men will speak.

Blye: Almost every gay client whom I have seen talks of the psychic alienation and social isolation, as well as the psychic and social management it takes to accomplish their world as gay men. I certainly remember those feelings and those practices growing up. Put on top of that, any level of homophobia directed toward you and the resulting fear and feelings of rejection take their toll.

Art: I remember growing up and long into adulthood, feeling no sense of a life or future. I was functioning in a state of covert depression that seemed "normal" at the time. Living in a rural area, I knew no other gay people. In school, there was one teacher with whom I felt safe enough to talk. The research and work I now do with other gay men helps me construct a space in which I can be a happy, healthy, and productive gay man.

We account for our positionality in order to suggest that behind every piece of work is an autobiography. All of us are located in the processes of our work. Our sexualities, as well as our class, race, education, and so on, saturate our bodies as psychic and social sites.

### *Forming the Group*

An advertisement for the group in a local lesbian and gay newspaper and a letter to a few local physicians who have a large gay men's client base resulted in a number of responses. All men were interviewed individually before the first group meeting to inform them more specifically of the intent of the group and to discuss their expectations. The group met formally once a week for the first few weeks and then once every two

weeks for 12 sessions in total. During the first meeting the participants and facilitator decided upon structure, procedures, topics of discussion and goals. After the third meeting, participants began to meet outside the group without the facilitator. This was explicitly encouraged. On occasion, the entire group met to participate in a prearranged activity such as bowling, pool, or a potluck at a member's home. At other times, groups of men began to meet for coffee, participate in local community events, and sometimes in the gay community. On one occasion, the group purchased tickets to the local annual AIDS Auction and attended as a group, sitting together at one large table. For several men in the group, this was the first time that they had participated socially with gay men at a public event.

### *The Process of Gathering the Data*

The voices presented here are the result of individual in-depth interviews and conversations with a co-participant, Art, following the conclusion of the group process. All of the participants addressed each of these three guiding questions:

1. What would you like to say about your life-situation or context?
2. What was the experience of participating in the group like for you?
3. How might this participation carry over into the rest of your daily life?

The men's responses to these questions were recorded in writing during the interview process, enabling the men to review their statements, expand upon themes important to them, and feel satisfied with their comments. Following the interview process, many of the men said that this additional opportunity to reflect on their lives and participation in the group felt very satisfying. All participants agreed that any portion of their statements could be used in our work. None of the portions used here are "scrambled" or based on the responses of more than one person. To ensure the anonymity of the men, all names have been changed and identifying information omitted. All text is lifting 'life out of the field' and into text and the resulting fragmented account is not presented here as the only possible account of the group (Lather, 1991). Rather, here we present the voices around particular themes which came up in the conversations. The organization of the men's statements in the following sections is guided by the order of the interview questions.

### *The Men*

The men speak about their life-situations.

- Roger: I'm a divorced man, in my 40s and just coming out. I don't want to do the heterosexual script anymore. I don't want to be just playing that role. I played it too long.

- Kevin: I'm a 30-year-old gay man who has been out for two years.
- David: I've never been out waving a placard but I'm quite out. I'm in my 40s. I've always been quite busy, independent.
- Eric: I'm a student. I'm 33. I came from a small town and am now totally out to my family and those I grew up with and my friends. After being in the discussion group, I've finally started to love the fact that I'm gay.

When these men describe their lives, coming or being "out" is a familiar concept. The notion of "out" is a complex one. Gay men sometimes speak of "coming out" and mean a singular event, a disclosure on their part, of a merely natural sexuality. In reality, our lives as gay men are not so simply reducible to sexuality, and sexuality is not so simply natural. In addition, gay men are always having to come out as gay because of the assumption by many that all students, or all teachers, or all clients and colleagues are heterosexual. In the group, some of the men speak of being "out" for years, while others are just beginning the process. For others, participation in the group makes their perception of being "out" problematic. A gay men's discussion and support group often consists of a wide diversity of men. Some of the men are happy to be gay, others are struggling. Some are in long-term relationships, others single, and, others in heterosexual marriages with children. Some are teachers, some cut hair, some work in the food industry, some are unemployed, some work in the medical field. Several of the men speak of their relationships with women, and of their children.

- Jeff: I'm 45. I'm divorced and I have two children, 7 and 5. I've always been out.
- Fred: I'm 39. I acknowledged who I was at 35, after two long-term heterosexual relationships.
- Allan: I'm a married man in my late 40s, with grown children. I self-identify as a gay man, but I'm happily married. My wife knows that I am attracted to men, but doesn't know that I act on it. It's very complicated. My best friend, who is also her very good friend, is my lover.

Many of the notions that some people hold of gay men are challenged by the gay man who has always been "out" yet has been married with children, and, by the man who self-identifies as gay and at the same time as "happily married." Fear of rejection and the nonacceptability of same-sex relationships often force some gay men into heterosexual and married relationships with women. The resulting guilt, fear of being found out, and the possibility of the loss of their children, along with the anxiety that so often accompanies these situations, enforces throughout some gay men's lives that self-identifying publicly as gay is not possible (Gochros & Bidwell, 1996; Connolly, 1996). Some gay men who are fathers live happily within heterosexual families. For other gay fathers, homophobia and heterosexism produce barriers to adequate family relationships. In addition, some gay men's relationships with families of origin are happy. Many others are separations, marked by fear of rejec-

tion, physical and psychic distance, and a consequent lack of physical and emotional support (Driggs & Finn, 1991; Alexander, 1997). Some of the men speak about their relationships with their family.

- Martin: I'm reasonably out in every respect of my life except for my family. I'm fairly comfortable with that, I guess. I'm 31, in a relationship with a man—a committed relationship. But my family does not know.
- Bruce: I'm a 30-year-old male who thought he came out at 13—I told my parents. I always thought I was out or comfortable with my gay identity, but I forced myself into solitude for years, not participating with other gay people, not being sexual, never talking about it.
- Brad: I was raised in a foster home in a small community, lots of other children were there. . . . Never a real feeling of belonging, never being popular in school, picked on, always knowing I was gay but never wanting to admit it, coming out seven years ago when I was 25, after an engagement to be married. My whole life—even now—I'm still looking for a way to fit in.

As many of these men speak about their life-situations, a familiar emphasis on their comfortability and uncomfortability about being out to peers, parents, children and colleagues indicates the psychic and social management that is part of the daily terrain of gay men's lives. Throughout life, most gay men are forced to spend a great amount of time and energy thinking, planning and rehearsing the coming out process and the fear of the rejection that may result (Blumenfeld & Raymond, 1993). This management, and the time and energy it requires, are often normalized and hidden aspects of many gay men's lives. The enforcement in our culture of sexism, homophobia, and heterosexism, means that the choices gay men are required to make are often characterized by a desire to identify with hegemonic masculine practices in a society in which their personal safety is at risk (G. W. Smith, 1998). "Looking for a way to fit in" may be about identifying with the dominant relations of heterosexuality. At the same time, quite simply, it may be about staying alive (Frank, 1990a; Woog, 1995).

### *Participating in the Group*

Concerns with safety and fear of rejection informed many of the men's initial participation in the group.

- Bruce: We're so used to building barriers and shells to protect us from rejection by peers, family, at work. I've spent a tremendous amount of energy and time hiding. I've never felt safe and in most situations I still don't. The group was a safe haven for dropping the barriers and not being rejected. It was after the first half/two-thirds of the group that I felt I could be totally honest. I wouldn't be rejected. My mental censors came down.

Oppression in our culture is held in place by visible violence such as physical abuse, as well as in less visible forms as rejection and denial of needs (Bishop, 1994). "Violence prefers not to show its face. Whenever possible, oppression is held in place by the fear of violence." (Bishop, 1994, p. 38)

In this particular group, the men created a safe space. Mutually established ground rules ensured confidence, encouraged respect, listening and challenging criticism but not shaming judgement. The two-hour meetings focused on the concerns and interests of the men, such as growing up gay, relationships with families, dating, intimate relationships with men, coming out at work, fear of rejection and harassment, loss of children, aging, and AIDS. Some of the men had never had the opportunity to sit with a group of other gay men and talk openly and in confidence about their experiences of both the pain and celebration of being gay.

**Martin:** I was inspired by a lot of the courage required to just live the lives in those stories in the group, and, to get to the point where you can tell the story in front of other gay men. It's an inspiration to know that you're not really alone.

**David:** My participation was about existing openly with a group of gay men. There was a sense of being defined as gay without any other baggage, allowing vulnerability. I think people really listened in that group. I think the sharing of the stories was the biggest part. It was for me. I've been very careful about sharing because of my position in the wider community.

**Bruce:** In the group, you could be challenged but no one was allowed to dump on you. We talked about big taboos, like sexual practices, that I was interested in but afraid to talk about, my own secret little desires, which go back to gay experience, that this is my private desire that no one shares.

Within the group, some members may have hoped to find a sexual and or life partner, while others wanted neither of these options. No rules around sexual involvement outside the group were imposed. The men were encouraged to communicate with each other about their expectations, about relationship issues, and about sex.

Social processes such as sexism, heterosexism, and hegemonic definitions of masculinity regulate and restrict communication among gay men (Frank, 1997). Many gay men's sexualities become isolated and reduced, as Bruce says, to the "secret little desires" that no one shares. Compartmentalization is produced between "self" and "sex acts" (Clark & McNeir, 1993). For example, many men who have sex with men do not self-label or identify as gay. The argument here is not to suggest that they have to or should take on a categorization of their sexuality as gay; rather, their unwillingness to self-identify as a member of the gay community then isolates them from a community of support. For many men sex is constructed as "genital sexual function," and collective gay identity becomes centred on sex. This hegemonic masculine construction of identity inhibits learning about self and community, about the commonalities, complexities and differences of our lives and of our oppression (Kinsman, 1996; G. Smith, 1996).



Consider the following comment about gay men's sexual practices, identity, and about finding permission to have a voice and speak his reality into the world.

- David: Gay men, existing with their flies up and having a good time! People can't imagine that! When gay men get together, that's what they think they have in common, the genital level, not their stories. Given permission to talk, given permission to listen: the group served as a reinforcement about how wonderful this type of communication can be.
- Kevin: The group was the first time for me to meet gay men in a context that was non-sexual, not a cruisy sort of situation, not a gay bar situation. It was the first time in my life I had the opportunity to sit and talk with gay men about our lives.
- Bruce: Before the group, I used to think the only thing we had in common with other gay men was our attraction to each other. But there are emotional ties, common aspects of history and development. The group gave me an opportunity to hear people's struggles and their histories. And it informed me of the resources we can draw on, once we know they exist. There are gay bookstores, there are social and support groups, organized gay sports teams, bowling. The fact that we actually have a culture, that in itself was a big revelation. I had no idea.

Some of the recent research in gay studies, sociology, and history involves reclaiming gay historical figures, documenting histories of oppression, resistance and agency, and recording oral histories (Duberman, Vicinus, & Chauncey, Jr., 1989; Miller, 1989, 1995; Russell, 1993; Riordon, 1996). This work responds to the fact that in our society gay men's history and presence is "denied or ignored, omitted in formal historical instruction and given no place in the family-centered oral traditions available to other disenfranchised groups" (Duberman, Vicinus, & Chauncey, Jr., 1989, p. 12).

Through learning within the discussion and support group about the commonality and community which can surround their lives, some of the men, for the first time in their lives, developed a sense of access to, and belonging within, a gay culture. Becoming a part of a culture, in which gay men have a history and a community, where they can tell their stories and hear the stories of other gay men, is legitimating and grounding. Healing from the negative effects of homophobia and heterosexism can often happen best when we share our stories, both good and bad, with others who have had similar experiences.

- Eric: I found it was very healing to feel like I could open myself up to other people in the gay community and not be afraid of who I am or who they are, and not judge one another. It made me feel like I didn't have anything to be embarrassed or uptight about.
- Allan: I think I wanted to know how a group of openly gay men—more or less comfortable with their sexuality—how they interacted. I wanted to be included, to see how it fit for me. I wanted it to fit. I'd never had an opportunity to do that. To a very large extent, I experienced that. It made me more comfortable with my sexuality. There was something comfortable, natural and nurturing about it.

- Fred: One thing I found really, really good for me was that I could talk about my own grief over death and loss through AIDS. I felt that everybody understood and sympathized with me. That was a really big thing for me.
- Roger: I guess I really melted in that group, in the sense of a bond of trust with the members. I really felt safe to let go of some personal stuff. I felt good about myself. I felt normal. I wanted to accelerate this process because I'm entering this at a late age. I really felt that I was going to get all the keys, you know, get the keys and catch up. But as time went on, I became more comfortable with the answers—the answers that weren't there, with the ambiguities, with the uncertainties, with a lack of clarity in the gay experience. In the end, it was good for me to see the diversity of gay men's lives.

Simultaneous with commonality and comfort around being gay, including gay diversity, the process of healing from the negative effects of homophobia and heterosexism can create difficulties, differences, confusions, and contradictions.

- Brad: Some of the discussions I found unnerving, like the sexually explicit ones, or the ones on intimacy. I had no experience of talking about these things with other gay men.
- Jeff: Trying to relate to some of the experiences these people had I found a bit difficult. Always having been out, for one thing. I couldn't relate to the coming out stories.
- Bruce: With the group, I was given an opportunity to see people, not in the categories I put them in, but in the categories they put themselves in. It was a forum for discussion, it wasn't a love-in. It wasn't a place where you could take out your frustrations on other people or their differences. A lot of times, I left there feeling very euphoric but a little disconcerted. I guess I expected that all gay men were much the same.

### *Community Outside the Group*

The transition from weekly meetings of the support group to larger gay communities offered a challenge to many of the men. In addition, the community is not simply "there" waiting to be discovered. Rather, the entry into and the construction of community takes a good deal of planning, effort, and time.

- Allan: I was struck by the fact that many of these men seem to be isolated and alone, with no huge community or network. They didn't have the very thing I thought went hand-in-glove with being gay. As a married man I dreamed of a gay community. I thought that all other gay men had one. It was very shocking to me to see that this was not the case.
- David: In order to create that environment we have to design it, because it doesn't exist in our culture. You have to design a milieu for this in your life. You can choose to do with that what you want, carry it with you or let it slide. But taking it with you requires active investment and energy on your part to make community happen, which requires taking risks.

Some of the men in the group began the work of going into wider gay communities as well as building their own community within the first few weeks of the group meetings. This offered a good deal of challenge for

many. It was one thing to come to the safe environment of a psychoeducational group led by a professional out gay man with an established reputation. It was quite another to venture into the wider gay community. Perhaps the issue that loomed largest was the fear of being seen as a gay man and the lack of knowledge from first-hand experience with gay men in gay communities.

### *Group Friendships in Community*

Many men in the group were sexually experienced with other men yet they had no gay men as friends. As mentioned previously, this is not an unusual aspect of the lives of many men who have sex with men (Clark & McNeir, 1993).

Kevin: Before, there wasn't a gay man I could call to go for a coffee with. Now, I really do feel a part of something, connected to—a part of—the gay community in Halifax. And that makes a huge difference. I feel now like I can call someone, go to a movie.

The need for friendship was evident from the beginning of the group meetings. The participants spoke often of their sense of belonging and increased happiness once they began to develop relationships with other gay men both within and outside the group. For some participants, developing non-sexual relationships with other gay men was a risk they previously would not have taken.

Allan: Since the group, I have met another gay man, in another context, and have had conversations, a really comfortable non-sexual time together. Before, I would never have allowed myself to have that conversation, take that risk. I would have shut it down, withdrawn. Run away!

Bruce: Before the group, I could never open up to someone I was interested in for fear of rejection. Now I am much more capable of doing it, and, if I am turned down or rejected, it's not necessarily because of me. It's not just about me anymore. There are other points of view and perspectives.

Eric: I've found that the openness I was able to have within the group has carried over into the rest of my daily life.

For many of the participants, gaining a sense of self-confidence as gay men allowed their fears to dissipate, moving them from feelings of rejection and insecurity to adequacy, inclusion and strength. Like Bruce, above, several of the men expressed a sense of agency that they had not felt possible before.

### *Seeing Diversity and Difference in Community*

Gay men, just as the non-gay community, often think of gay men as a monolithic group. The participants in the group came with many stereotypical notions of what it means to be gay and were often not knowledgeable of the diversity and differences within the gay men's community.

- Brad:** Having been in the group helps me understand and broaden my views on how gay men can think in different ways, without myself having tunnel vision and only thinking one way.
- Fred:** Knowing now that each gay man has a somewhat different story makes me more open to others that are in my community.
- Roger:** What I found was a comfort with where I am. A kind of private acceptance, private contentment. My comfort around the word "gay" increased. I can carry that sense of comfort into other situations. Since the group, I'm much more comfortable being in a public venue in a gay context, much more comfortable having dinner with a gay man in public, greeting, meeting gay men, that kind of stuff. It's changed me a great deal, particularly in my acceptance of the differences within the gay men's community.
- Allan:** The group process normalized being gay. It made my gayness acceptable to me. Since the group, there has been change in terms of my comfort level with my own gayness and that of others' including all the diversity.

Getting comfortable with being gay as well as accepting the diversity of the gay community has a good deal to do with overcoming one's homophobia and heterosexism.

### *Confronting Homophobia and Heterosexism and Changing Gender Practices*

Confronting homophobia and heterosexism offers the additional possibility of exploring allegiances to dominant masculine practices of sex and gender. Consider Bruce's reflection on his fears and desires regarding masculinity, femininity, and social acceptability.

- Bruce:** Before the group, I used to go for the hyper-masculine, dominant-aggressive man, for the reason of shunning anything perceived to be feminine. Now, I'm more concerned with what kind of interaction I'm getting from the person, as opposed to accessorizing myself to make myself look better, more socially acceptable. . . . And I don't have to perform a hyper-masculine, youthful image.
- Fred:** A lot of times, religious and political communities believe we are, by nature, miserable and unfulfilled in our lives, when it is they themselves who have placed this damage upon us. This is a self-fulfilling prophecy.
- Kevin:** Don't assume I'm a straight male, first. Then don't assume, because I'm a gay male, that I'm an insecure, emotionally damaged slut.

Several of the men came to see homophobia and heterosexism as psychological and social processes having a large impact on their lives, defining and determining how they felt about themselves and others. During the group they began to shift from seeing being gay as the problem to seeing their and others' homophobic and heterosexist attitudes and assumptions as the problem.

### *Changing Scripts and Seeing a Future*

Having a new discourse to remake meaning of their lives and speak themselves into the world allowed the men to become open to possibilities and futures they thought not available before the group process.

- Allan: I have this calm that has kind of descended. I don't mean to belittle the anxiety, but I now feel that, regardless of what goes on in the future with my relationship, that I'll be okay. Before, it felt like I was so afraid of what it would be like without my family, that I would never have got to the point of having a dialogue about the future. . . . I could never go there. I thought I'd have to disappear if I was outed. Now, I'll weather it.
- Bruce: Some people who, initially, I thought were attractive have lost that sexual edge. Others, who I was not infatuated with, have become incredibly desirable because of the friendship, their outlooks, the dynamics. I didn't have to construct a personality for them, they had one.
- Kevin: I have been less sexually active since the group. When you have friends, there's much less of a need or emphasis on being sexual. Conversation, dialogue is another way of being gay, that can be as satisfying or more satisfying than a sex act.

### *Conclusion*

As we have said, our purpose in this article has not been to make suggestions about how psychoeducational groups should be designed or structured as a therapeutic or educational process. Rather, we wanted you to hear the men speak about their lives and the experiences that they had in being in such a group. In addition, we wanted to focus on the emotional and social skills and knowledge that they may have gained from the group experience, to be able to live in the world differently as different.

And the work is never undertaken without hope for a better future. For those of us who live and work as counsellors, therapists, and facilitators in the margins ourselves and with the disadvantaged and victimized, it seems to us that hope is such an important part of the work which we do. Consider what Roger said in relation to his experience in the group:

Really what the group was able to do for me was provide hope and possibilities in my life as a gay man. There will still be lots of challenges. But it does mean that I have hope in a way that I never did before and that makes a huge difference in how I see being different. To be able to share in a safe environment with other gay men about our experiences has made all the difference for me.

And finally, Eric said:

I feel free. Free from the fear of loneliness. I feel connected and at the same time I feel independent and strong. Able to get on with my life as a gay man. And that's different for me because there were times when I thought of ending it. Now I think of the future and that feels really good.

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