



UNIVERSITY  
OF WOLLONGONG  
AUSTRALIA

University of Wollongong  
**Research Online**

---

Faculty of Science - Papers (Archive)

Faculty of Science, Medicine and Health

---

2006

# Gay and lesbian identity work at home

Andrew W. Gorman-Murray

*University of Wollongong*, [andrewgm@uow.edu.au](mailto:andrewgm@uow.edu.au)

---

## Publication Details

Gorman-Murray, A. W. (2006). Gay and lesbian identity work at home. *Sociology for a mobile world: TASA 2006 Annual Conference of the Australian* (pp. 1-10). Perth: TASA.

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library:  
[research-pubs@uow.edu.au](mailto:research-pubs@uow.edu.au)

---

# Gay and lesbian identity work at home

## **Abstract**

Geographical and sociological literature on gay/lesbian experiences of domestic environments has drawn attention to the heteronormativity of homes, focusing on how these sites often marginalise and silence gay/lesbian identities. While not denying these arguments, I suggest that many gay men and lesbians have also used domestic spaces to resist heteronormative socialisation and affirm gay/lesbian identities. In this paper I explore some of these affirmative uses. Drawing on 37 in-depth interviews with gay/lesbian Australians, I examine two key ways that some gay men and lesbians have used homes to consolidate their sexual identities: (i) the role played by domestic spaces in the coming out process; and (ii) the importance of home-based social(ising) activities for generating gay/lesbian friendship networks.

## **Keywords**

Gay, lesbian, identity, work, home

## **Disciplines**

Life Sciences | Physical Sciences and Mathematics | Social and Behavioral Sciences

## **Publication Details**

Gorman-Murray, A. W. (2006). Gay and lesbian identity work at home. *Sociology for a mobile world: TASA 2006 Annual Conference of the Australian* (pp. 1-10). Perth: TASA.

## **Gay and lesbian identity work at home**

Andrew Gorman-Murray  
School of Earth and Environmental Sciences  
University of Wollongong  
andrewgm@uow.edu.au

### **Abstract:**

Geographical and sociological literature on gay/lesbian experiences of domestic environments has drawn attention to the heteronormativity of homes, focusing on how these sites often marginalise and silence gay/lesbian identities. While not denying these arguments, I suggest that many gay men and lesbians have also used domestic spaces to resist heteronormative socialisation and affirm gay/lesbian identities. In this paper I explore some of these affirmative uses. Drawing on 37 in-depth interviews with gay/lesbian Australians, I examine two key ways that some gay men and lesbians have used homes to consolidate their sexual identities: (i) the role played by domestic spaces in the coming out process; and (ii) the importance of home-based social(ising) activities for generating gay/lesbian friendship networks.

### **Introduction**

I am interested in the role that domestic environments play in the constitution and affirmation of gay men's and lesbians' sexual identities. Research on gay/lesbian experiences of domestic spaces has focused on how these sites often marginalise and silence gay/lesbian identities (Valentine 1993; Johnston and Valentine 1995; Johnson 2000). Conversely, a number of analysts have posited the 'public' venues of 'the scene' as key spaces for gay men and lesbians to 'make their identities' (Holt and Griffin 2003: 418; Valentine and Skelton 2003; Kawale 2004). While not denying these arguments, I suggest that many gay men and lesbians also use domestic environments – especially their own homes and friends' homes – to cultivate and consolidate their sexual identities. I contend that homes can be put to use in important ways to resist heteronormative socialisation. In this paper I explore some identity-

affirming uses of domestic spaces, seeking to recover affirmative meanings of home for gay men and lesbians.

I begin by reviewing literature on gay/lesbian experiences of home, suggesting how I build on previous research. Next, I discuss my data and methods. The data is drawn from in-depth interviews with gay/lesbian Australians about their uses of domestic environments. Finally, utilising this data, I present two ways in which gay/lesbian Australians use their homes to resist heteronormativity and affirm sexual difference.

### **Home, identity, sexuality**

There is growing interest in the domestic environment as a site of inquiry across both geography (Blunt 2005; Blunt and Dowling 2006) and sociology (Mallett 2004; Easthope 2004), generating a body of sophisticated literature on a range of topics. These include the social and gendered relations of home (Chapman 2005), home and family (Dupuis and Thorns 1998), domestic materiality (Reimer and Leslie 2004), and transnational geographies of home and belonging (Blunt 1999), *inter alia*. A key consideration underpinning much of this work is the relationship between home and various identity categories, including gender (McDowell 2002), race (hooks 1991), age (Dupuis and Thorns 1996), disability (Imrie 2004) and sexuality (below). This literature demonstrates that neither home nor identity are fixed, but mutually and ongoingly (re)constituted. In the process, inclusions and exclusions are generated by the discourses and practices surrounding domestic spaces, with some identities enabled and others hindered.

Literature on gay/lesbian experiences of home has accordingly focused on whether gay/lesbian identities are enabled or suppressed in domestic environments. Over the last century, discursive structures and material practices have imbricated home with privatised nuclear family life across the 'west', effectively 'heterosexualising' the image and materiality of domestic spaces (Johnson 2000). The effect on gay/lesbian identities has been largely alienation and inhibition within domestic environments, with gay men and lesbians rendered 'improper' for normative imaginings of home (Valentine 1993; Gabb 2005). This heteronormative proscription of gay/lesbian identities is pronounced in nuclear family homes. As the primary site of heterosexual reproduction and socialisation, 'the family home symbolises everything they do not want or are unable to be' (Valentine 1993: 400), and consequently gay/lesbian youth

residing in family homes often conceal their sexuality (Johnston and Valentine 1995; Kawale 2004). Those who come out often encounter negativity, rejection, threats and even abuse from family (D'Augelli *et al* 1998; Rivers and D'Augelli 2001; Valentine *et al* 2003; but see Gorman-Murray 2007). Similarly, this research shows that houses occupied by (adult) gay men and lesbians also come under hetero-regulation from surrounding communities, hindering the performance of gay/lesbian identities and relationships therein (Holliday 1999; Bell 2001; Gabb 2005). Many are not 'out' to neighbours, and conceal same-sex relationships and/or sexuality-identifying objects (like books, photos and shared beds) when straight family members or tradespeople visit (Johnston and Valentine 1995; Kirby and Hay 1997). Some gay/lesbian houses have even been targeted for anti-gay vandalism and harassment (Valentine 1993).

Other work, however, has questioned this oppressive coverage of heteronormative surveillance. While acknowledging that gay men and lesbians must work against the heterosexualisation of domestic space, some analysts suggest that they nevertheless use their homes to resist heteronormativity and affirm sexual difference. Elwood (2000: 17), for instance, found that some lesbians in suburban Minneapolis/St.Paul 'choose their homes as sites at which to assert their sexual identity to outsiders, rather than using their homes for concealment', displaying rainbow flags and lesbian-identifying posters in windows, and refusing to hide lesbian-related objects from visitors. Similarly, Gabb (2005) asserts that homes are crucial for lesbian mothers in Yorkshire, the one place where their maternal-sexual identities are consolidated. Meanwhile, in Australia, Gorman-Murray (2006a) and Markwell (1998) found that some gay men use their homes to socialise with each other, building friendships which affirm their sexual identities. Such actions demonstrate that homes can be sites of gay/lesbian resistance and validation. It is these affirmative uses of home I wish to explicate and develop here, contemplating how gay men and lesbians use their homes to constitute and consolidate their sexual identities, in the process resisting the heteronormativity of domestic spaces, and recovering positive meanings of home for gay/lesbian identity work.

## **Methods**

The data is drawn from 37 in-depth interviews with gay/lesbian Australians – 20 with gay men and 17 with lesbians.<sup>1</sup> Most interviewees (24) are resident in Sydney, and the remainder in Melbourne (4), Newcastle (3), Wollongong (2) and regional Australia

(4). Most (34) are working-age, between 19 and 55 years, with an average of 36 years. While they are from diverse backgrounds in terms of parents' social class, most have tertiary qualifications and work in white-collar, middle-class occupations. Moreover, most (33) are European-Australians. Since no significant numbers of working-class, non-white or rural gay men and lesbians were included in the sample, I acknowledge that the data drawn from the interviews is socially and geographically specific. Nevertheless, this case study is important *because* of this specificity: it provides a focused ethnographic window into the domestic identity-formation of white, working-age, educated, middle-class gay men and lesbians resident in urban Australia.

Interviews were conducted between September 2004 and May 2005. Participants were recruited through advertisements circulated in gay/lesbian periodicals, websites and e-mailing lists. The interviews were semi-structured and highly conversational, mainly conducted in participants' homes, and lasted about one hour each. Each participant was asked a range of open-ended questions about what home means for them as gay man or lesbian, including their experiences of the various domestic environments they have lived in, and if they used them in any way to establish and affirm their sexual identity. Subsequent discussion probed their various responses regarding the use of domestic spaces for gay/lesbian identity work. The interviews were then transcribed and analysed using manifest and latent content analyses. The qualitative software program *NVivo* was used to code the emergent themes and gather commensurate narratives together.

Several key themes regarding affirmative uses of domestic environments emerged from this analysis, and here I focus on the two uses most widely discussed across the interviews: (i) the role played by domestic spaces in the coming out process; and (ii) the importance of home-based social(ising) activities for generating gay/lesbian friendship networks.<sup>2</sup> While in the following discussion I consider each in turn, these uses also imbricate. For instance, domestic social gatherings for older gay men and lesbians can also assist younger individuals coming out. Some of these overlaps emerge below.

### **Coming out at home**

Contrary to studies which suggest that young gay men and lesbians primarily use bars and similar commercial venues to facilitate coming out (Holt and Griffin 2003), my

own coming out process was enabled by domestic environments. I befriended a gay couple and regularly visited their home, where we watched gay-themed movies, discussed stories about gay men and lesbians in the media, and talked about the attitudes of the gay 'community'. Through these home-based activities, rather than through 'the scene', I gradually came out as a gay man to myself and others. Some of my respondents discuss similar situations. David, who has lived with his partner Michael since 1992, offered the following observation:

A couple of our younger friends have mentioned to us or other friends that our home was important to them when they were coming out because it was a kind of 'model' if you like.

Likewise, Sarah and Helen, who have lived together for ten years, also use their home to help others come to terms with their sexual difference, inviting 'new' lesbians over for dinner parties and social gatherings:

We've welcomed people who are just newly coming out, who might still be married, to come here to see that you can have a 'normal' life. ... Yes, you can still live in suburbia and be a lesbian are the issues that we're wanting people to see when they come here. (Sarah)

Other respondents, meanwhile, recalled the importance of 'share-housing' with other gay men and lesbians in facilitating coming out. Mark, who had been forced from the family home, deliberately sought to share with other gay men and lesbians for this very reason:

Interviewer: After leaving home you lived in several share-houses. Were any of the people you lived with gay?

Mark: Majority. ... They were always very queer houses.

Interviewer: Was that important?

Mark: Absolutely essential. It was non-negotiable.

Interviewer: Can you explain why?

Mark: It was formative years: coming out; needed information; needed to make contacts; needed to be taught by people; needed to know about stuff. And I just wanted the security and comfort of knowing that you've got like-minded people so you can just totally be yourself. And also just for bouncing ideas off, sharing experiences. ... That sort of warning/protective mechanism of teaching you about what they went through so that you don't have to. Socialisation.

Likewise, Todd recalls that his flatmates underpinned his coming out process:

I went in with a flat-share with a gay couple and that really was an eye-opener. Everything was gay – all the friends, all the family, everything was gay all the time. I'd never lived in that situation before and that really helped a lot. That just brought me right out. Anything that was left behind just wilted away.

For others, though, it was the domestic space itself that was important: moving out of the family home, and into one's own residence, allowed a new level of freedom to explore emerging same-sex desire. For Will, moving out by himself meant that he 'could meet someone and take them home and express [him]self fully without any sort of intimidation or wondering about what other people think'. Likewise, for Paul, the need to explore and test same-sex desires precipitated getting a place of his own:

I have to say regarding the timing of moving out [of the family home], one of the issues for me was that I'd started wanting to date guys, and I thought that would be easier if I had a place of my own than if I was still living with mum and dad, because you don't necessarily want to introduce your parents to all your preliminary experiments that you happen to pick up. So I thought that it would probably be easier to try things out [in my own place].

Similarly, for Emma, moving away from her parents and into a share-house allowed her to consolidate her emerging sexual identity by starting to date other women:

I started having my first relationship in the share-house, so I think it's sort of crucial, it was really important for that relationship that I'd moved out, and I don't think I would have been able to have that kind of adult relationship at all if I'd still been living at home. I would have been way more anxious about the whole thing. So, I was a lot more able to like feel relaxed about that, and just a sense of happiness about that.

Here, then, are several ways in which my respondents have used various domestic arrangements and spaces to facilitate coming out. Against assumptions of homes as heteronormative environments, they show how domestic spaces are used to explore sexual difference and consolidate individual gay/lesbian identities. Relatedly, homes can be used to establish wider gay/lesbian friendship networks and communities. I now turn to these domestic activities.

### **Social networks at home**

Rather than using clubs and bars to socialise with gay men and lesbians, a number of respondents discussed the ways they have used their homes for gay/lesbian social activities, opening up their 'private' space to like others for dinner-parties, house-

parties and other social activities. In doing this, they use their homes to build networks of friendships and relationships with other gay men and lesbians. This appeared especially important for those in long-term coupled relationships, who often eschewed going out to clubs and bars in favour of domestic entertaining. Long-term couples Sarah and Helen and James and Geoff, for instance, preferred to socialise in their own homes, generating close social networks through hosting dinner-parties for gay/lesbian friends. Paul, although no longer with his partner of 16 years, also underscored the importance of dinner-parties for couples' friendship networks:

It would be very common to have gay friends over for dinner, especially couples, and especially when I was in a couple, to have other couples over for dinner. We'd typically have a nice evening with maybe two other couples, and sometimes after that we might all go out together to somewhere to dance or to do something else. Or we might not – we might just stay at home if it got really late – that happened a fair bit.

At the same time, it should not be assumed that couples only socialise with other couples at home. David and Michael and Sarah and Helen welcome into their homes younger gay men and lesbians coming to terms with their sexuality. Indeed, some couples appear to offer their homes as support bases for other gay men and lesbians:

Our home is quite a social space. We have had friends who have lived with us for varying lengths of time. We have friends – mostly gay guys – who eat meals with us several times a week. We have the odd dinner-party, BBQ. On Christmas night we have established a tradition of our friends – again mostly gays and lesbians – coming over as a kind of Christmas recovery, just having a very relaxed get together, which usually lasts until 1 or 2 am. (David and Michael)

We have a lot of friends who because they're gay and lesbian don't have families or don't have any supporting structure and its important to them that if they can feel at home at our place then that's what it is. ... There are a couple of immediate good friends that we each have that you could expect to be here [at home] at any time and I wouldn't expect them to knock. Some of them have keys to the house and they can just be here and it doesn't matter. (Linda and Samantha)

In this way the couples' homes become a kind of material anchor for a network of gay men and lesbians, offering physical, social and emotional support.

But single people, too, often use their domestic spaces in ways which generate connections between larger groups of gay men and lesbians. Natasha drew attention to

how her group of single friends prefer to socialise at home than in ‘the scene’, partly because of reasons of age:

I think it’s because I’m 36, I’m a little bit older. Most of my friends, we would much prefer to go to each other’s houses, have a good dinner, watch a movie and have a laugh. I mean I’ve never been to the clubs in Sydney. They’ve never enticed me to go.

Rebecca’s story is also compelling: she came out in Brisbane in the late-1980s, and in her interview she discussed the crucial importance of house-parties in consolidating a sense of gay/lesbian community in that city during the 1990s:

In Brisbane an invitation to dinner or a drink meant come to my place and we’ll hang out on the balcony or whatever. ... Every single house that I lived in had a party and dinner-parties. I think that those spaces were important for the social relationships that we all had. They were an important part of affirming social relationships as well as introducing people to each other and so expanding those social relationships. ... More of a sense of a community. So, they were quite important as social spaces. Brisbane at the time was not exactly full of gay night clubs and certainly not the sort of in terms women’s events and shows and clubs. It was very limited access to any of that stuff, and so we’d create a lot more on our own in each other’s houses.

Without other options, home-based socialising became essential for generating gay/lesbian community – for introducing individuals and expanding gay/lesbian social networks. In this way, homes functioned as spaces of connection, enabling wider interactions and relationship-building necessary for sexual identity-affirmation.

## **Conclusion**

While not denying the pervasive heteronormativity of domestic environments, my research has found that many gay men and lesbians work against this influence in various ways, using their homes to resist heterosexism and foster gay/lesbian identity work. Various domestic arrangements – share-houses, couples’ homes, and single-occupancy – can facilitate the coming out process. Socialisation at home can assist here, generating supportive gay/lesbian friendship networks and communities. Such uses of home by gay men and lesbians constitute a refusal to be silenced in the face of wider heteronormative structures and heterosexist suppression. Instead, these homes begin to reveal gay/lesbian identities and networks to families, neighbours, visitors and surrounding communities, declaring a form of resistance rooted in domestic life.

In this way, gay/lesbian uses of domestic environments underpin an identity politics of home, recovering affirmative meanings of home for gay/lesbian identity work.

### Footnotes

1. Names have been changed for anonymity.
2. Thirty-two respondents discussed each of these uses, while 10 described sexual activities, and 23 considered the importance of home for gay/lesbian couples (this material on coupled homemaking is published in Gorman-Murray 2006b).

### References

- Bell, D. (2001) 'Fragments for a queer city', pp. 84-102 in D. Bell, J. Binnie, R. Holliday, R. Longhurst, and R. Peace (eds) *Pleasure Zones: Bodies, Cities, Spaces*. New York: Syracuse University Press.
- Blunt, A. (2005) 'Cultural geographies of home', *Progress in Human Geography* 29: 505-515.
- Blunt, A. and R. Dowling (2006) *Home*. London: Routledge.
- Chapman, T. (2005) *Gender and Domestic Life: Changing Practices in Families and Households*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- D'Augelli, A., S. Hershberger and N. Pilkington (1998) 'Lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth and their families: disclosure of sexual orientation and its consequences', *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 68: 361-371.
- Dupuis, A. and D. Thorns (1996) 'Meanings of home for older home owners', *Housing Studies* 11: 485-501.
- Easthope, H. (2004) 'A place called home', *Housing, Theory and Society* 21: 128-138.
- Elwood, S. (2000) 'Lesbian living spaces: multiple meanings of home', pp. 11-28 in G. Valentine (ed) *From Nowhere to Everywhere: Lesbian Geographies*. New York: Haworth.
- Gabb, J. (2005) 'Locating lesbian parent families: everyday negotiations of lesbian motherhood in Britain', *Gender, Place and Culture* 12: 419-432.
- Gorman-Murray, A. (2007, forthcoming) 'Queering the family home: gay, lesbian and bisexual youth coming out in supportive family homes in Australia', *Gender, Place and Culture* 14.
- Gorman-Murray, A. (2006a) 'Homeboys: uses of home by gay Australian men', *Social and Cultural Geography* 7: 53-69.
- Gorman-Murray, A. (2006b) 'Gay and lesbian couples at home: identity work in domestic space', *Home Cultures* 3: 145-168.
- Holliday, R. (1999) 'The comfort of identity', *Sexualities* 2: 475-491.
- Holt, M. and C. Griffin (2003) 'Being gay, being straight and being yourself: local and global reflections on identity, authenticity and the lesbian and gay scene',

- European Journal of Cultural Studies* 6: 404-425.
- Hooks, b. (1991) *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*. Boston: South End Press.
- Imrie, R. (2004) 'Disability, embodiment and the meaning of home', *Housing Studies* 19: 745-764.
- Johnson, L. (2000) *Placebound: Australian Feminist Geographies*. South Melbourne: Oxford University Press.
- Johnston, L. and G. Valentine (1995) 'Wherever I lay my girlfriend, that's my home: the performance and surveillance of lesbian identities in domestic environments', pp. 99-113 in D. Bell and G. Valentine (eds.) *Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexualities*. London: Routledge.
- Kawale, R. (2004) 'Inequalities of the heart: the performance of emotion work by lesbian and bisexual women in London, England', *Social and Cultural Geography* 5: 565-581.
- Kirby, S. and I. Hay (1997) '(Hetero)sexing space: gay men and 'straight' space in Adelaide, South Australia', *Professional Geographer* 49: 295-305.
- McDowell, L. (2002) 'Unsettling naturalisms', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 27: 815-822.
- Mallett, S. (2004) 'Understanding home: a critical review of the literature', *Sociological Review* 52: 62-89.
- Markwell, K. (1998) 'Space and place in gay men's leisure', *Annals of Leisure Research* 1: 19-36.
- Reimer, S. and D. Leslie (2004) 'Identity, consumption, and the home', *Home Cultures* 1: 187-208.
- Rivers, I. and A. D'Augelli (2001) 'The victimization of lesbian, gay and bisexual youths', pp. 199-223 in A. D'Augelli and C. Patterson (eds) *Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Identities and Youth*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Valentine, G. (1993) '(Hetero)sexing space: lesbian perceptions and experiences of everyday spaces', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 11: 395-413.
- Valentine, G., T. Skelton and R. Butler (2003) 'Coming out and outcomes: negotiating lesbian and gay identities with, and in, the family', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 21: 479-499.
- Valentine, G. and T. Skelton (2003) 'Finding oneself, losing oneself: the lesbian and gay 'scene' as a paradoxical space', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 27: 849-866.