**Citizenship and Conformity: Evolving Gay Identities in the Rural Context**.

***Extended Abstract***

Proponents and advocates of sexual citizenship tend to view this model of rights and duties, as having had a significant role in helping to build significant political and social consensus on LGBTQI rights and equality, and thereby helping drive previously unimaginable and wholly positive advances in politics and legislation in many (mainly ‘Western’) countries. In many cases, such as in Ireland, the pace and speed of change from sexual criminal to sexual citizen has been rapid, seismic and unprecedented (Rose, 1994). However, numerous scholars urge us to also reflect on the limitations and troublesome aspects inherent in the concept of sexual citizenship (Richardson, 2004; Cossman, 2002; Stychin, 1998; Seidman, 2002). They point out that the invitation to citizenship is based on compromise, and that acceptance of this invite requires “an accommodation to heterosexual standards and the loss of distinctive differences, ways of being, and relational practices” (Taylor, 2011:583).

Citizenship can be conceived as a *negotiation of belonging* (Cram, 2016:270) and for Richardson (2004) the outcome of this negotiation is the integration of lesbians and gay men into social and political life as ‘normal citizens’, and this represents a significant shift, holding the potential for both positive and negative outcomes. Indeed Seidman (2002) offers some examples of positive outcomes of normalization for individual gay, bisexual and lesbian people, such as greater self-acceptance, pride in their sexual identity, and confidence to seek respect and equality. Other positive outcomes of normalization *may* be to facilitate a diminishing of the traditional hetero-bi-homo binaries whereby homosexuality (and bisexuality) has been perceived as threatening, subversive, anti-social and dangerous (Bell and Binnie, 2000; Seidman,2002; Richardson, 2004).

The sexual citizenship compromise though, leads inevitably to forms of normalisation, which encourages an assimilation that involves “accepting a condition implicitly imposed upon homo-sexual citizens where sexual subjects are privatized, de-eroticized and depoliticized” (Cossman, 2002: 483). After all, it can be argued that one of the ultimate wins for advocates of a conservative society is the creation of the desirable gay, de-radicalised, and depoliticized.

Seidman (2002) reflects on the nature of the ideal of the desirable ‘good gay’ and argues that this requires the new gay identity to be conformist, conservative and reflective of hetero-sexual values linked to family, marriage and politics. The cost, in terms of performing ‘good sexual citizenship’, is also identified by Carl Stychin, because “in attempting to achieve legal victories, lesbians and gays seeking rights embrace an ideal of ‘respectability’, a construction that then perpetuates a division between ‘good gays’ and (disreputable) ‘bad queers’, with the latter excluded from the cultural, and social embrace of citizenship (1998: 200).

For their part, Bell and Binnie (2000) contribute to the debate on problematizing sexual citizenship by arguing that while sexual minorities are seeing the end to their historical exclusion from notions of sexual citizenship, this is occurring in relatively specific (‘westernized’) geo-political contexts (and even here the situation is uneven). The notion of the reflexive sexual citizen whereby individuals and groups (in the ‘west’) increasingly feel free to mobilise identity around their innate sexuality (ibid: 33) perhaps brings into question whether sexual citizenship is an inherently ‘western concept’ with little agency outside of that cultural context; whether it is premised on the primacy of the individual (arguably another ‘western’ cultural artefact); and whether there is an undue emphasis on the personal life of individuals, which potentially encourages a (re) privatization of sexual citizenship (Richardson and Monro, 2012:72).

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

We can conclude then that a central concern being discussed here is the potential exclusionary impact of citizenship. Who are we leaving behind in our seeming unquestioning embrace of the citizenship model? For example, are we excluding gay asylum seekers and refugees? (Giametta, 2017). Do we passively acquiesce in the perpetuation of intersectional marginalisation within LGBTQI communities, for example, where sexuality intersects with race/ethnicity, gender, class, or disability? (Monro, 2006; Monro and Richardson, 2010; Plummer, 2003). And, is access to this new privileged citizenship status, located primarily through being in a (good gay) publicly recognized, normative, monogamous couple relationship, economically independent, not reliant on welfare, conformist and politically de-radicalised? (Bell and Binnie, 2000; Richardson, 2004; Plummer, 2003).

***The study***

This paper reports the findings from a wider study which sought to explore the concept of sexual citizenship as it applies to the lives of gay men living in nonmetropolitan areas of Britain, and Ireland. Both countries have undergone dramatic social, legal and cultural changes over recent decades, and have witnessed profound and progressive shifts in public attitudes towards lesbian, gay and bisexual people. Given historical tendencies towards a metro-centric bias in researching gay lives, this study took place outside the large metropolitan centres of population. It travelled to a world of smaller towns, villages and farms. In making this journey, the research sought to understand the life world and experiences of gay men living within these locales. Forty-four men were interviewed: twenty-two in England and twenty-two in Ireland.

Crucially the study strives to develop an understanding of the nature, depth, and scope, of the men’s sexual citizenship, as it applies within their geographic context. In assessing the men as sexual citizens, the study takes the opportunity to interrogate the model of sexual citizenship. To this end, it finds the citizenship model of rights and obligations to be seductive and appealing to many of the gay men. However, the study also highlights its exclusionary tendencies, and as its propensity to promote a de-sexualised, de-politicised, and de-radicalised gay identity; tendencies which are exacerbated by the context of the nonmetropolitan, small town, and rural spaces. This research concludes that the men in the study may be considered, *constitutional sexual citizens*, which is an enormous advance from the dark times of the past.

Recent constitutional and legal changes have helped to fracture the long-standing and historical relationship between citizenship and heterosexuality; an association which saw sexual citizenship and heterosexuality as natural bedfellows, a scenario where the sexual citizen was always a heterosexual citizen. As Weeks (1998) and Richardson (2000) remind us, in the recent past all citizens were sexual citizens but not all sexual citizens were equal.

Whilst one can conclude that these men can be conceptualised as newly liberated, *constitutional citizens,* the paper argues that they can also be conceived of as *constrained citizens, cautious citizens, conspicuous citizens, and concerned citizens,* who face the legacy of what might be referred to as ‘old homophobia’ as well as new, ‘downward pressures’ to be *conforming and compliant* *sexual* *citizens* so as to ‘fit’ the normative, and conservative mould implicit within the citizenship model.

***Conformist sexual citizens***

In conceptualising the men as conformist sexual citizens, we can view them as men who increasingly feel compelled to accept and adhere to, established behaviours and norms around sexuality and sexual identity, norms which are inherently conservative and traditional.

Academic contributors such as Richardson (2000, 2004, 2017), Cossman (2002, 2007) and Plummer (2003) among others, caution that modern models of citizenship (such as developed by Marshall in the 1950s) are largely built on around Western notions of individual rights, capitalist and neo-liberal economics, and are also inherently heterosexist, gendered and racialized. Therefore, seductive as the sentiment towards citizenship may be, for gay, bisexual and lesbian people claiming rights based on such models of citizenship may find that they require a certain negotiation of belonging (Cram, 2016) which forces potential compromises around the nature of identity; an accommodation to heterosexual standards; and the loss of distinctive ways of being (Taylor, 2011:583).

During the fieldwork, concerns were expressed that gay people were unwittingly colluding in the destruction of a distinctive identity, and by engaging a form of ‘identity abandonment’, they were gifting the conservative, heterosexual lobby what they want, namely the increasing re-invisibility of queer, sexualised, collective and campaigning homosexuality. One is minded here of the arguments of Edelberg (2014) that liberation and normalization have become “two sides of the same coin” (:71), and that with “equal rights and inclusion into mainstream society”, some parts of lesbian and gay culture have begun to disappear (ibid). A number of the men saw that increasing integration, and assimilation into heterosexual social spaces involves accepting a condition implicitly imposed upon homo-sexual citizens where “sexual subjects are privatized, de-eroticized and depoliticized” (Cossman, 2002: 483). Despite this awareness of the dangers of normalisation, most felt that they were being swept along by a very powerful tide, an overpowering force.

Quite a number of men spoke ironically that, just when gay people are granted greater citizenship rights (emancipation), at the same time there seems to be a parallel pressure towards greater conformity to a heterosexual ideal of sexual citizenship. An element of this conformity involves a greater push for the privatization of sex and sexuality.

While all the men recognise and celebrate the end of, the old tyranny of criminalization, some also recognise the emergence of a new tyranny - of normalisation and assimilation where the requirement to supress the sexual self in the public space; to be circumspect and eschew non-masculinist, and non-traditional codes can be overpowering. And so this paper will reflect on issues and concerns around evolving gay identities in the nonmetropolitan space, forged within a context of normalisation and assimilation; and also seeks to address a question posed by many men during the fieldwork in both countries when they consider what constitutes authentic and radical forms of liberation and homo-emancipation within heteronormative rural cultures?

**References**

Bell, D. and Binnie, J. (2000) *The Sexual Citizen: Queer politics and Beyond*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Cossman, B. (2002) Sexing Citizenship, Privatizing Sex, *Citizenship Studies*, 6 (4), pp. 483-506.

Cossman, B. (2007) *Sexual citizens: the legal and cultural regulation of sex and belonging*, Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press.

Cram, E. (2016) (Dis) locating queer citizenship, in Gray, M., Johnson, C., and Gilley, B. (eds.) *Queering the Countryside: New Frontiers in Rural Queer Studies*, New York: New York University Press.

Edelberg, P. (2014) The queer road to Frisind: Copenhagen 1945-2012, inCook, M. and Evans, J.V(eds.) *Queer Cities, Queer Cultures: Europe since 1945*, London: Bloomsbury.

Giametta, C. (2017) *The Sexual Politics of Asylum*, London: Routledge.

Monro, S., (2006) Sexualities Initiatives in Local Government: Measuring Success, *Local Government Studies*, 32 (1) 19-39.

Monro, S., and Richardson, D. (2010) Intersectionality and Sexuality: The case of sexuality and transgender equalities work in UK local government, in Taylor, Y., Hines, S. and Casey, M. (eds.) *Theorizing Intersectionality and Sexuality*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Plummer, K. (2003) *Intimate citizenship: Private Decisions and Public Dialogues*, Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Rose, K. (1994) *Diverse Communities: The Evolution of Lesbian and Gay Politics in Ireland*, Cork: Cork University Press.

Richardson, D. (2000) Constructing sexual citizenship: theorizing sexual rights, *Critical Social Policy*, Vol. 20, Part 1, Issue 62, pp. 105-135.

Richardson, D. (2004) Locating Sexualities: From Here to Normality, *Sexualities,* 7: 391.

Richardson, D. (2017) *Sexuality and Citizenship*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Richardson, D. and Monro, S. (2012) *Sexuality, Equality & Diversity*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Seidman, S. (2002) *Beyond the Closet: The Transformation of Gay and Lesbian Life*. New York: Routledge.

Stychin, C. (1998) *A Nation by Rights; national cultures, sexual identity politics, and the* *discourse of rights*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Taylor. Y., (2011) Lesbian and gay parents’ sexual citizenship: costs of civic acceptance in the UK, *Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography*, 18 (5), pp. 583-601.

Weeks, J., (1998) The sexual citizen, *Theory, culture & society,* 15(3), pp.35-52**.**

Richardson, D. (2004) Locating Sexualities: From Here to Normality, *Sexualities,* 7: 391.