Contemporary Social Problems in Britain

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Awareness of Homosexuality

Ken PLUMMER

In both England and America, homosexuality is a stigma symbol.1 To be called a homosexual is to be degraded, rendered as morally dubious, or treated as different. To be publicly known as a homosexual is to invite your employer to sack you, your parents to reject you, the law to imprison you, the doctor to cure you, the moralist to denounce you, the public to mock you, the priest to pity you, the liberal to patronise you and the queerbasher to kill you. Further, given the currently fashionable theories of homosexuality which locate its origins in the parents, it is to court shame not just for yourself—but for your parents and loved ones too. Given such costs it is little wonder that most homosexuals elect to conceal their identity from public gaze.

Thus while the private incidence of homosexuality is high (around one in twenty),2 the public awareness of it is low. While members of society are constantly rubbing shoulders with homosexuals in their family networks, their places of work and in their neighbourhoods, they normally remain unaware of this fact. Homosexuality thus becomes a well-guarded secret identity harboured by many members of society. In this article, I wish to explore the conditions under which this ‘homosexual secret’ is kept, the conditions under which it breaks down to become public knowledge, and the consequences to the homosexual of keeping such a secret.

Awareness contexts and homosexuality

My take-off point in this study is Glaser and Strauss’s concept of ‘awareness contexts’, which can be used to describe the sum total of knowledge about identities held in any situation.3 This includes knowledge of one’s own identity, knowledge of the other’s identity, and knowledge of the other’s view of your identity. While such contexts may include many people, for simplicity I will limit my analysis to the simple dyad.

From this concept, a continuum of awareness about homosexual identities can be depicted. At one extreme is the closed context, where one partner does not know the homosexual identity of the other and where the homosexual knows this. At the other extreme is the open context, where the homosexual is aware that his partner knows his identity, where the partner does in fact know this identity, and where the homosexual also knows this.
Both partners establish a consensus about each other's actual, perceived and understood identities. Both of these types are extremes, and in between a whole range of 'suspicion' contexts could be depicted, where homosexuals suspect others know their identity when they do not, where others suspect people of being homosexual when they are not—and so on, through a range of possible permutations.

While each of these contexts could be described statically, it is important to see their precarious and unfolding nature. A closed context may be supported by a number of structural conditions, but as soon as one of these begins to break down, the contexts may rapidly topple from being closed to being one of suspicion, or even openness. Further it is important to see the differing consequences of each kind of context: in a closed context, homosexuals may feel relatively secure and not have to work too hard to preserve their secret; in a suspicion context, homosexuals may feel very threatened and have to muster great skill to avoid full disclosure; in an open context, the mask is completely dropped and the homosexual need not worry at all about his 'secret'—though he may well have to cope with the problems of possessing a discredited identity. In what follows my main emphasis will be placed upon the movement from a closed context to a suspicion or open one, and upon the consequences of preventing the emergence of open contexts.

Maintenance of closed awareness

I have suggested that members of society are generally unaware of having any contact with homosexuals. When this is combined with the homosexual feeling secure that others do not know his real identity, there is a situation of closed awareness. At work for example, the homosexual may feel sure that his workmates do not suspect his homosexual identity, and they may not in fact suspect. While always precarious, I suspect that closed awareness is a very common situation. Indeed, I would suggest that because of certain structural features surrounding homosexuality in England and America, it is relatively easy to maintain a situation of closed awareness. At least four broad factors contribute to this:

(a) Homosexuality is generally invisible. Unlike the physically handicapped, whose overt stigma makes them a highly visible group, homosexuality is not usually open to public gaze.
(b) Homosexuality is generally irrelevant. For most people and in most situations, homosexuality remains outside of the 'domains of relevance'. It is simply not given much thought.

(c) Sexuality is privatised. The major parts of the sexual life of Western man are restricted to certain 'back regions' and excluded from everyday routines. Sexual experiences are delegated to the realms of the private.
(d) Society is segregated. Much of the social life of complex society is characterised by extreme segregation, both of groups into subcultures and individuals into role segments. It becomes increasingly possible for an individual to 'slice' his life into parts—territorially, temporally and biographically. Only under a few limited circumstances—if any—need people be known in their totality.

Breakdown of closed awareness

While these four broad features may generally help to sustain a closed awareness context, many factors could contribute to its breakdown. Most generally, the breakdown becomes more likely whenever (i) homosexuality increases in visibility (ii) homosexuality increases in relevance (c) sexuality becomes deprivatised and (d) social groups become less segregated. Each of these hypotheses is interconnected. In what follows, I wish to isolate a number of variables which contribute to such changes.

Making homosexuality visible

Recognition of homosexuality depends upon both perception and action: somebody must identify a homosexual, and certain actions must be identifiable as homosexual. With the exception of being caught in the act there is nothing automatic and intrinsic about such recognition processes; they depend largely upon the mediation of certain patterns of socially constructed meanings. Given this, it becomes possible that some people who see themselves as homosexual will never become visible; and some people who are not homosexual will be identified as such. A potentiality for miscarriage of justice becomes possible.

As Kitsuse discovered in his study of the reaction of American students to homosexuals some ten years ago, identification of homosexuals may be direct or indirect. Directly, homosexuals may be recognised by discovery, denunciation or declaration; indirectly, homosexuals may be recognised through stereotypical symmetry and rumour. I will discuss each of these variables briefly in turn.

Discovery as direct visibility

By discovery here, I refer to the chance of being caught literally with one's
trousers down. Sexual acts between the same sex are relatively clearly
definable as homosexual—though there is always the chance that an ‘account’
of some form can neutralise away the apparently explicit homosexual
meanings of the act. Schoolboys may say that ‘it’s only a phase, sir,’ and
teenage boy prostitutes may say they were only doing it for the money—and
in both cases the homosexual act may be reinterpreted as ‘not really homo-
sexual’. In general, however, being caught in flagrante delicto is sufficient
to be tagged ‘homosexual’.

Since homosexual acts, like heterosexual ones, generally take place
away from easily offended eyes, such visibility is rare. At the same time,
there are a number of public locales—parks and commons, cinemas, baths,
public conveniences—where some homosexuals do meet to ‘have sex’. Although,
as I will argue later, they are generally shielded from public
surveillance, activities in these locales are more likely to be rendered visible.

Denunciation as direct visibility

For a variety of reasons, some homosexuals who offend society’s norms may
find themselves ushered into a public role of infamy from which there can
be little return. With fanfares and trumpets, witch-hunts seek out homo-
sexuals; the media announces them and the courts and prisons castigate
them. A private identity becomes a public one, recognisable to all. Such
denunciations may take place on a national level, as in the infamous English
scandals of Wilde, Montagu, Harvey or Vassal, where a public figure be-
comes universally degraded and stigmatised. Or they may take place on
a much more local level, where, for example, local newspapers fill in the
lurid details of local homosexuals who come before the courts. In both cases,
individuals are ushered into deviant labels visible to society’s members.
Once again, given the proportional infrequency of public prosecutions of
homosexuals, most homosexuals evade becoming visible in such a manner.

Declaration as direct visibility

Under a variety of situations, the homosexual may actually decide that it is
expedient for him to voluntarily declare his homosexuality. Not all homo-
sexuals, for example, are able to withstand the pressures of leading a double
life with their parents and a few therefore find it necessary to inform parents
of their sexual proclivities. Others, visiting psychiatrists, may again find it
necessary to inform the analyst of their identity. Likewise the ‘professional
homosexual’ who uses his public declaration to ‘advance homosexual
causes’, the soldier who declares his homosexuality in order to get out of the
service and the Gay Liberation Front member who publicly wears his badge
and holds hands in the street may all find it expedient to reveal their identities
and in so doing break down the closed awareness extent.

One especially important reason why a homosexual should declare his
sexuality, albeit discreetly, arises from his need to locate other homosexuals.
There is a paradox here: to the extent that the homosexual succeeds in
making himself invisible, so he will cut himself off from contact with other
homosexuals—who are, after all, potential lovers. The more successful he
is at ‘saving face’, the less successful he may be at ‘finding a trick’.

Stereotypical symmetry as indirect visibility

Although there is evidence to suggest that only a limited section of the pop-
ulation hold rigid stereotypes of the homosexual, and evidence to suggest
that very few homosexuals actually match this stereotype, the existence of
homosexual stereotyping is beyond dispute. Such stereotypes provide
‘cues’ for some perceivers to interpret an individual who exhibit these
‘cues’ (whether homosexual or not) as homosexual. To assist the public in
recognising homosexuals, several accounts exist in both the academic and
non-academic press of ‘points to watch for’. The News of the World, in
England, advised its readers in 1964 to be cautious of ‘the man who has
never married; the fussy dresser; the office or factory crawler with a snarly
grin on his face; the man with an excessive interest in youth activities; the
man who cannot resist pawing you as he talks’. These men, the article
suggests, are likely to be homosexual.

Another, much more comprehensive, list is provided by a religious
 crusader, David Wilkinson, in an article for Teen Challenge in America
titled‘Hope for Homosexuals’. He writes:

... there are many ways to tell whether or not a person is overtly homo-
sexual. Listed are 25 ways to tell a homosexual. *

1 Demonstrations of pouting—petulance.
2 Short interest spans—shifting moods.
3 A taste for unconventional clothing.
4 Attraction to bright colours, tight clothing and special boots.
5 Attraction to ornaments and gadgets.
6 Swaying hips.
7 Striking unusual poses.
8 Flirting with the eyelids (fluttering).

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9 Tripping gait and swaggering shoulders.
10 Certain types of chronic alcoholism.
11 Insane jealousy.
12 A tendency to lie and deceive.
13 Overly emotional.
14 Withdrawn—a tendency to want to be alone.
15 Delicate physique or overly muscular.
16 Broad hips.
17 Soft, pale skin.
18 A limp wrist.
19 Prettiness effected by make-up.
20 Special hair styles and artful combing.
21 Too much deodorant or toiletry.
22 Gushy, flowery conversation, i.e. ‘wild’, ‘mad’, etc.
23 Shrilessness of voice, lisping or a tendency to falsetto.
24 A dislike for belts, garters, laced shoes, ties, hats, gloves.
25 A compulsion to move around, walk, hustle.

* Normal men may demonstrate a few of these tendencies, while homosexuals will usually demonstrate most of the listed characteristics.

Such lists are plentiful, and they are not restricted to the popular press. Clifford Allen, for example, writing in his *Textbook of Psychosexual Disorders* tells the serious student:

It is not necessary to be homosexual to be able to detect inverts in casual social life. Although I am normal I have seen many homosexuals and am able to observe them in a crowd by minute gestures, tones of speech, and so on. Even on the wireless one can tell them by their speech which is either excessively soft and slightly slurred or else grating and harsh.  

Clearly, if an individual matches some of these stereotypical portraits, he stands a greater chance of being recognised as a homosexual—whether or not he in fact is. Such stereotypes could have disastrous consequences for the effeminate-looking heterosexual.

*Rumour as indirect visibility*

In the study of students’ reactions towards homosexuals by John Kitsuse, the author discovered that many homosexuals were recognised through aid of rumours and gossip; and in Schofield’s recent work involving over 300 young respondents, the most frequent answer to the question ‘How did you get to know that X was a homosexual?’ was simply that ‘Others told me’. Such rumours may not be restricted to people; they may also be applied to places. Thus knowledge may become public about a homosexual bar or public convenience, or even a whole community, and all who frequent it become suspect. Students in one class at a Midlands Technical College informed me of a homosexual bar nearby, and warned that anyone who goes there must be a ‘poof’. Such knowledge then, once public, places a strain on the homosexual, particularly at those points of entry to ‘bars’ and ‘cottages’ (public conveniences) where the public may see him and demand some kind of explanation. Of course this rarely happens but for the homosexual it may become a significant issue. One homosexual in Humphreys’s study commented about his departures from public conveniences this way:

> Sometimes when I come out of a tea-room, I look up to the sky just to make sure that some plane isn’t flying around up there writing JOHN JONES IS A PERVERT.

**Making homosexuality relevant**

I suspect, though it is a matter for empirical inquiry, that most members of a society normally face situations in which homosexuality is absolutely irrelevant. Even when confronted with information about it, they ignore or deny its significance. As Wildeblood wrote:

> I had on several occasions discussed the problem of homosexuality with my mother and father, hoping to find some ways of telling them about myself. But it was impossible. Their attitude like that of so many people was not one of particular condemnation or of particular tolerance. It was simply that they had not given the matter much thought because they did not believe they knew any homosexuals.

Generally, then, closed awareness can be easily maintained because homosexuality figures so low in most members’ ‘domains of relevance’. There are, however, some people, some times and some situations when homosexuality becomes an issue, and it is these that I wish to consider here.

**People who make homosexuality relevant**

Ironically, the most significant group to treat homosexuality as an issue are
homosexuals themselves. Each situation that a homosexual enters may, amongst other things, be briefly assessed for potential homosexual partners and for potential discréditors. To the homosexual, the secret identity looms so significantly in his consciousness that most situations will be briefly interpreted through it. This may well mean that seeing everyone as potentially homosexual and being seen by everyone as a homosexual becomes an implicit assumption of much homosexual interaction. And if such an assumption is held, closed awareness breaks down to a suspicion awareness.

Homosexuals, however, are not the only group in society for whom homosexuality is a salient issue: there are also those whom Goffman calls the 'wise' ('persons who are normal but whose special situation has made them intimately privy to the secret life of the stigmatised individuals and sympathetic with it') and the 'knowing' who have knowledge and awareness of homosexual activity even if they do not support it.8 Examples of the 'wise' may include the 'gay moll' (the 'straight' female who hangs around with male homosexuals and who enjoys their company) and the 'straight' friend who—through contact with homosexuals—becomes sensitised to the world view of the homosexual without being one. Examples of the 'knowing' include both agents of control (such as the police patrolling a local 'cottage'), and exploitative others who are able to prey upon the homosexual's vulnerability, (such as the blackmailer and the 'queer-basher'). All of these people then become aware of homosexuality as an issue and render situations of closed awareness highly vulnerable.

Times when homosexuality becomes relevant

Homosexuality may also become significant as an issue at certain critical times, particularly those that have been called times of 'moral panic'. A such American incident is that of the 'Boys of Boise' reported by John Gerassi.87 On Halloween night 1955, a witch-hunt hysteria began with the arrest of three men for homosexual offences in Boise, Idaho—a ('respectable') middle-class town with a population of about 30,000. Two days later the Idaho Daily Statesman published an incendiary story entitled 'Crush The Monster' clearly indicating that these arrests mark only the start of an investigation that has only 'scratched the surface'; and suggesting that the task of uncovering the homosexual underworld in Boise was 'too big and too sinister to be left alone to a private detective and an officer of the probate court'. About a hundred boys and several adults were said to be involved by this time. Police, community and press panicked and within weeks a list of 500 names of suspected homosexuals had been constructed; before the scandal ended in 1966, some 1,472 men had been questioned. All men became suspect in this highly charged atmosphere, where women would ring up the police and say: 'I've just seen so and so sitting by the high school practice field with a funny look on his face', and men had to avoid meeting other men alone for fear of being labelled homosexual. One male respondent told Gerassi in 1965:88

... after they arrested that pianist fellow and Larsen, both of whom were charged with indecent acts against adults, well, let me tell you, every bachelor became jittery. I was a buyer then, so I had to travel a great deal. Everywhere I went, people started making jokes. I used to wear my school ring on the third finger of my right hand. Well, I had to stop that. I remember talking to a guy in Denver, a buyer from Salt Lake, a guy I had gotten to know quite well. And all of a sudden, he starts kidding me about boys-y, and then he looks at my hand and says with the goddamnest sarcastic smile, 'hey, I see you're wearing a ring these days ...'. Boy, I felt like punching him in the nose. He had seen that ring ever since we first met, three years before. Well, anyway that's the way it went. It got so bad that everytime I left Boise on business I was sure some dirty gossip was spreading the word that I was going to see my boy friend who had left Boise not to get arrested.

Situations where homosexuality becomes relevant

Although in the past, homosexuality has been considered a taboo topic which cannot be raised in 'polite company', more recently it has become eligible for public discussion and debate—both jocular and serious. University unions debate homosexuality, women's magazines run feature articles on it, and the entertainment media constantly depict it. For the homosexual today, then, there is the increasing probability that he will be confronted with situations in which 'straight people' in his presence will be discussing homosexuality—the 'queer joke' which embarrasses, the discussion in which he must conceal his expertise and insight,89 the gossip where 'cool' must be kept. In each of these situations, the homosexual may try to avoid the situation or else enter a state which could be characterised as 'stage fright'—a state where identity is severely at risk.90

Deprivatising sexuality

Seeing homosexuality as largely invisible and irrelevant is a specific example of a more generalised phenomenon: the privatised nature of sexuality.
Most sexuality lies well within the realms of privacy and concealment. Wayland Young, amongst others, has described how sexuality has developed within a shroud of excluded imagery language, actions and people: people are not provided with a language with which they can talk about sex, are inhibited by morals which prohibit sex from any form of public display, and are denied access to most forms of sexual imagery. Under such circumstances it is easy for concealment of sexuality to occur. Nobody can see and nobody can ask.

For the homosexual, then, the fact that sexuality is rarely openly raised serves as an insulating factor, protecting his sexual identity from public gaze. Once again, however, there are situations in which the homosexual may find sexuality becoming an issue, and at such times his identity becomes tentatively vulnerable. The most apparent examples of this are the direct situations when sex is spoken about or when sex activity is actually expected, for there are, despite protestations to the contrary, a number of situations in our culture where sexual activity is actually prescribed. The most noticeable examples seem to come from the imperatives of male culture, where men together may be expected to talk sex and boast of their exploits. This may be particularly strong at adolescence: adolescent boys 'clearly talk about girls and sex a good deal of the time they are together'. Likewise, sexual jokes, 'stag nights', work talk and gang chat may all raise sex as a matter of course, and simultaneously raise problems of identity for the homosexual. Is he, for example, to 'play along' with a group whistling at women and talking about sexual exploits, or is he to 'drop out' of the conversation or the group? In the first case, his fragrant lying may be a source of embarrassment while, in the latter, his silence will be suspicious. In either case, when sexuality is raised, his identity becomes a problem.

So far, I have spoken about sex as it relates to genital meanings: it clearly also has broader gender and social (for example, marital) ramifications. Here, sexuality is much less privatised. It is, after all, very much a matter of public knowledge whether one is a man or a woman, and whether one is married or not. There are times and situations when a man may be able to get away with not being masculine, and there are times too when a man may be granted celibacy or bachelorhood. But, in general, failure to publicly demonstrate that one is a man or that one is normally married will be regarded by others with suspicion: people will wonder, questions will be asked and gossip will spread. Ralph Turner, in his textbook on Family Interaction suggests that marriage is one of the cornerstones of our value system, providing an important basis for judgements of normalcy and masculinity. He writes of the:—

implication of personal competence and normality associated with the married state, and the suspicion that the unmarried may be disoriented, incompetent, maladjusted—in some sense personally inadequate.... For the man there is ... reflection of his masculinity. If the man is not especially attractive, then his failure to marry is identified with weakness and possible impotence. If he is clearly attractive and holds on too long, the suspicion of homosexuality is often spread through gossip. The attractive man or woman with no discoverable personal deficiencies who fails to marry represents a continuing puzzle to those about him and is likely to be plagued constantly with questions or insinuations about why he or she has not married.

Desegregating society

It is a commonplace of social science that complex societies like England and America are characterised by differentiation and segmentation. Individuals may divide their lives temporally, territorially and biographically—living off the knowledge which they present in any situation to that which is strictly relevant for the purpose at hand, and avoiding being known in their totality. For the homosexual, this means that he may restrict the information that any group has about him merely by restricting his contact with that group. At work, he is known as the clerk; at church, he is the organist; in the street or on the bus, he is simply a stranger. Given the fleeting, impersonal and role-specific nature of most interaction in complex society, the homosexual need never be known as a homosexual in most groups. Closed awareness prevails.

Of course, in some parts of his world, the homosexual may well seek to be known as a homosexual. He may establish relationships where his role is specifically that of a homosexual, and he may move into protective, home territories where his homosexuality is taken for granted. By virtue or one's presence in certain bars, toilets and other public places, one may be presumed to be a homosexual. Open awareness prevails. The gay bar may be seen as one important 'home territory in a back region', a region invisible to the mainstream of daily activity where the regular participants enjoy a relative freedom of behaviour and a sense of intimacy and control. It is thus a place which permits many homosexuals the chance to drop the mask they wear during their working day and, in relative security and anonymity, to 'let their hair down'. A number of factors serve to protect such places from public visibility. First, such bars are concealed from 'front regions'. They lie at the top of long flights of stairs, or below eye level in basements, in the most remote bars in hotels, ones that are least likely to be wandered into by chance, or behind a protective front room.
reeking with respectability'. Very rarely are highly luminous signs displayed, and then they assert only that it is 'members only'—I know of no club which labels itself publicly as a homosexual club. The point of entry to such meeting places then is rarely left to chance factors: in clubs, it is almost impossible to enter without being at least aware of the homosexual nature of the setting.

A second factor in territorial defence is the management's policy of 'insulation'—in which a barrier is erected 'between the occupant of the territory and potential invaders'. The most obvious technique of insulation is the policy of 'membership'—where membership cards are regularly checked at the door by a gatekeeper, with varying degrees of stringency according to the gatekeeper's familiarity with the patron, or the patron's 'tales'. In London, for example, Continental visitors will be allowed in at most clubs on sight of a passport, but a lone stranger may well find it impossible to penetrate without knowing an insider or being a member. The policy may be taken to extremes, and in some instances remote-speaking systems have been introduced into clubs in order to 'screen' visitors before even opening the door. One club gives all its members a key to the front door, which enables them—but only them—to come and go as they please.

Although barriers are set up to prevent territorial encroachment, there are occasions when 'outsiders' may find their way inside. This is much more likely to occur in the 'pub' sector of the gay-bar world, where techniques of insulation are not usually so well developed, and sometimes may well be acceptable to the habitués—in some bars the two worlds seem to exist side by side. But more generally, the habitués and management will need to employ further techniques of territorial defence. Thus the bartenders may well display aloofness and unfriendliness to 'strangers', as Cavan recounts: There were only about sixteen people present when we entered, although they took up all the seats at the bar. I sat down at one of the small tables along the wall opposite the bar, and [my husband] went to the bar to get our orders. The bartender was standing almost in front of him, more or less listening to the conversation between two patrons. It took the bartender almost five minutes to decide to take the order and another three or four minutes for him to make the drinks, which were very, very light.

The habitués themselves may well always try to make the 'outsiders' feel out of place, uncomfortable and embarrassed. This may arise simply through inattention, monopoly of the facilities available and so forth or it may take the form of outright 'offensive' behaviour. Indeed while many 'strains' entering a gay bar may well instantly feel threatened by the activity—'You can spot the action straight away,' 'There's no mistaking what's going on,' 'Just takes a couple of minutes to tell', there is some evidence that some gay bars are not immediately noticeable as such to an outsider: one contact in Westwood's research commented: I once took a normal friend of mine there who said it might be the National Liberal Club. Everyone was so good mannered and quiet. He said he wouldn't have suspected a single one of the people there.

Thus, if it is true that the bar does not instantly offend—one technique of territorial defence is to make it offend. Therefore, homosexuals may deliberately exaggerate their feminity, or make direct passes at heterosexuals when they enter the establishment. The segregated nature of complex society, then, helps to separate some situations which sustain closed awareness from others where openness is prevalent. The homosexual may normally move between the two worlds in relative security.

While it is true that complex society is characterised by segregation, this insight must not be pressed too far. For homosexuals, like everybody, are clearly also likely to build up a small group of primary relationships—among friends and family—where affective bonds may be established and interaction patterns intensified. In situations, there may well arise what Simmel has called a 'strain towards totality', through which the knowledge about one's self that is presented to close friends is constantly broadened. Further, in such situations, there may arise a constant questioning by others in which the homosexual is asked to account for his sexuality, his marital status, his use of time and so forth. The business of establishing 'full' relationships is costly for the homosexual. For some homosexuals, this dilemma may be resolved by restricting their primary group contacts to other homosexuals with whom the problem of concealing sexual identity does not arise. Thus, the homosexual may leave home and his family, and maintain a simple working relationship with his colleagues at work, segregating his life into parts while keeping his full personal relationships for other homosexual friends. But for many others, such tactics are not readily available—it is not possible to leave the parental home and it would be a problem in itself to keep aloof from work colleagues. At these points, then, homosexuality may remain a constant potential threat to relationships.

The prevention of open awareness

It is clear from the above that although conditions of closed awareness are pervasive, they are also highly precarious. There are many situations in
which closed awareness may be sent hurtling into suspicion or openness; when the homosexual could render his closely guarded secret to the high costs of public exposure; when the smooth flow of routine interaction becomes ruptured. The homosexual cannot leave such exposure to chance, and builds up a repertoire of skills for concealing his discreditable identity and for passing as normal in a world of normals. I have no space here to discuss these passing strategies—information control, avoidance techniques, role distance etc.—or to consider their game-like features. These have been discussed elsewhere.43 Instead I wish to highlight two important consequences of the homosexual’s attempt to prevent the emergence of open contexts.

The homosexual as practical methodologist and dramaturgist

One consequence is that the homosexual develops a heightened self-awareness: the logistics of homosexual identity become a central part of his consciousness. As one fictional homosexual put it:44

Is there ever a second—just a single second—when, no matter what you’re doing or saying, or supposed to be keeping your mind on, you’re not also thinking to yourself: you mustn’t let it show. Whatever you do, or say, or whatever gesture you make, even in a casual, or of hand moment, you must never let it show.... You try to dismiss it, try not to think of it at all. But always there seems to be some sort of isolated cell in your mind that keeps twitching away at it. Watch your step in front of Barbara. Watch your step in front of your clients. Watch your step in front of your family, ordinary normal friends. Watch your step when you’re on the street. Watch your very step itself, the way you walk. It goes on and on ...

Or as Peter Wildeblood expressed it in Against the Law:45

The strain of deceiving my family and my friends often became intolerable. It was necessary for me to watch every word I spoke and every gesture that I made in case I gave myself away. When jokes were made about queers I had to laugh with the rest, and when the talk was about women I had to invent conquests of my own. I hated myself at such moments but there seemed nothing else I could do. My whole life became a lie.

‘Living a lie’ and ‘Watching one’s step’ become key features of much homosexual interaction, and as a consequence of this many homosexuals develop a dramaturgical awareness—an awareness of the stage-like features of social life. The homosexual is forced to hide behind a mask:

Society had handed me a mask to wear, a mask that shall never be lifted except in the presence of those who hide behind its protective shadows. Everywhere I go, at all times, and before all sections of society, I pretend.44 I’ve learned to put up a show to fool the straight world.45

While sociologists have recently stressed the usefulness of analysing the world as if it were drama, they also suggest that there are some problematic situations and roles where people may actually view the world this way.46 I suspect that homosexuals often view themselves as ‘acting parts’, ‘presenting selves’ and ‘managing their identities’—that dramaturgy in fact becomes part of their consciousness. While it does not necessarily loom large in their daily round (for such skills may become internalised and routinised),47 I suspect that homosexuals become very adept at stagecraft and that with this comes both a potential for self-deprecation and self-liberation. First, dramaturgy may mean estrangement and alienation. Hiding and posing, presenting first this mask then another, the homosexual comes to see his life as a series of plastic fronts lacking in authenticity and validity. Constantly denying his sexual identity, he becomes estranged from it. Constantly compelled to play other roles, he forgets who he is. Living a lie and shrouded in secrecy, his whole life may become denigrated and devalued.

But this need not be the case. For some homosexuals, dramaturgy may be a first step towards self-liberation. Here, the homosexual becomes what Garfinkle has called a ‘practical methodologist’—developing an uncommon sense knowledge of the ways in which social reality is daily produced as an ongoing accomplishment of its members. Through his constant encounters with situations that others may take for granted but which he finds problematic, the homosexual becomes aware of the fragile and negotiated order of everyday interaction and of the part he plays in sustaining such a reality.

From such an awareness, greater freedom and control over one’s life become potentially possible. The world no longer has to be seen as ‘natural’ or ‘God given’, but can be seen as the social construction of men in historical situations.

Paradox of homosexual secrecy

A second consequence of preventing the emergence of open awareness is that stereotypes and misunderstandings about homosexuality may be
daily confirmed and reinforced in society. As long as homosexuals remain largely invisible, they remain unable to contradict or alter the imagery used by other members of society about homosexuals. Thus, paradoxically, the desire for concealment exacerbates the homosexual's problems. For, while most members of society are daily rubbing shoulders with many homosexuals, they are hardly aware of this fact and remain dependent upon the often-mythical knowledge of both the scientific and lay media. Thus, condemned by society, the homosexual must hide; hiding he is unable to alter the stereotypes and condemnation. It is this which I have termed the paradox of homosexual secrecy.

Conclusion: social change and awareness contexts

In this article, I have analysed some conditions of closed awareness contexts, suggested ways they may break down, and discussed some of the consequences of preventing open awareness. Building upon this, it is possible to speculate about developments taking place in society which could bring about radical change in the prevalent closed awareness contexts.

‘Out of the closets and into the streets’

Perhaps the most significant recent development is the emergence of the militant homophile organisations in America and to a lesser extent in England. These organisations, of which the Gay Liberation Front is the most famous, explicitly attack the notions that homosexuality should be invisible and irrelevant and thus, for the first time in modern history, have produced homosexuals who are willing to go onto the streets, into the parks, and onto the media as ‘full frontal homosexuals’. Wearing ‘gay is good’ badges, holding hands and kissing in the street, carrying banners which declare ‘Be blatant, not latent’, shouting slogans like ‘Say it loud, we’re gay and proud’, and gathering together in public places as homosexuals—all these incidents have helped to change the climate for at least many younger homosexuals, and some older ones too. Some homosexuals have clearly decided that the costs of concealing one’s homosexuality is too high a price to pay for the avoidance of stigma.

But there is more to the liberation fronts than just visibility. They have also taken up the challenge of being publicly slandered, stereotyped and scapegoated. For example, in their eyes, the sickness theory of homosexuality has been a popular form of slander for many years—and nobody until recently has ever contested this as a homosexual. It is true, of course, that for some time homosexuals have, among themselves, attacked such a rhetoric; but they have not been willing to do so publicly. Now, with the Gay Liberation Front, one hears in England of demands to withdraw ‘slanderous’ books and of protest marches against aversion therapy; while in America, those social scientists who propound the sickness theory of homosexuality are likely to be greeted by hostile homosexuals in their audience. Tell, for example, in his book The Gay Militants describes how the Gay Liberation Front interrupted the national convention of the American Psychiatric Association on 14 May 1970, where aversion therapy was being discussed, how they ‘nonplussed a workshop on “family medicine” organised by the American Medical Association’, and how uproar broke out at the 2nd Annual Behavioural Modification Conference of the same year when Dr Feldman (of Birmingham University, England) was publicly attacked for his film on aversion therapy.

Homosexuals were not only visible, they were vociferous. This is certainly a dramatic change, with far-reaching consequences. Just ten years ago it would have been unthinkable for a homosexual to reveal himself publicly as such, unless of course he had been hounded into such revelations. But today there are many people publicly visible as homosexuals. Society has not yet accommodated to this new position: broadcasters still ‘guarantee anonymity’ to homosexual speakers, when the homosexual speaker wants his name to be used; priests who used to be able to condemn homosexuality with no fear of reprisal at public meetings, now find that such meetings will be attended by many homosexuals willing to stand up and be counted. Certainly, such changes have only so far affected a minority of homosexuals: but the change is such a startling new one, that it must still be regarded highly significant.

The rising tide of permissiveness

The emergence of the GLF is not the only indicator of change in the nature of homosexual awareness contexts. Another is the emergence of the so-called ‘permissive society’.

Whatever doubts one may have about the notion of a ‘permissive society’ (and I have many), there are undeniable changes occurring in the amount of public discussion of sex taking place in this society. If GLF is helping to break down the invisibility of homosexuality, the permissive society is helping to render homosexuality as relevant and sexuality as deprivatised. Thus, for example, as Sagari has commented:

Few subjects for so long completely ensnared in silence have so
quickly becomes so widely discussed. It strains one's memory to recall that the word was literally banned from the pages of the New York Times in the early 1950s, only to make its appearance there a few years later in the headlines.81

Sagarin relates this growth largely to the publication of the Kinsey Report—'a veritable sexual atom bomb'—in 1948, and the concomitant growth of awareness of the extent of the homosexual phenomenon. Whatever the reasons may be, in the nineteen-seventies homosexuality is a publicly spoken about issue—in films, plays, books, television, public meetings and so forth, homosexuality if not accepted, is at least no longer quite so firmly banished from consciousness. It is now more relevant. And, of course, the increasing discussion about homosexuality is but an example of the more widespread consideration of sexual matters in general.

Towards open awareness

These factors—militant homosexuals and the 'permissive society'—are just two signs of change in the nature of homosexual awareness contexts. In the past, as I have suggested in the body of this article, homosexuals have had to become skilled at dramaturgical stagecraft while the underlying structures of society helped them to conceal their homosexuality by facilitating the existence of closed awareness. In the immediate future, one may suggest that things are about to change—that homosexuality will become increasingly visible, spoken about and an issue; and that sexuality will also become a more public experience. If this does happen, the interaction problems analysed in this article will become speedily outdated.

Notes

1 In the arguments to be developed here, I am drawing from by observations of the male homosexual in London. I suspect that it also has relevance to female homosexuality and the American experience in a general way.

There is no study to date of the variations in the homosexual experience between England and America, although Hoffman, M. in The Gay World (Basic Books, London 1968), p.36, makes reference to a possible variation in sexual behaviour. I suspect—though it remains an empirical problem—that there are real differences. For example, America is probably more hostile to homosexuals—since psychiatry and organised religion seem more pervasive, police surveillance seems greater and in most states the law still condemns it. I suspect too that the longer history of homophile organisations and the existence of larger ethnic minorities gives a different flavour to American experience.

2 'One in twenty' is the most quoted 'guesstimate'. However, we do not (and probably never will) know the true incidence of homosexuality in society. See Gebhard, Paul H. Incidence of Overt Homosexuality in the United States and Western Europe (Working Paper for Hooker Report on Homosexuality) (mimeographed, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana 1969).


5 In their original study of dying, Glaser and Strauss stressed a fourth kind of context: 'mutual pretence'. However, as Abrahamson points out, this confuses the qualitative with the behavioural. For clarity, therefore, I restrict my discussion to the open-suspicion-closed continuum only. See Abrahamson, Mark Interpersonal Accommodation (D. Van Nostrand Co., London 1966), ch.3. See also Haystead, Jennifer, 'Social Structure, Awareness Context and Processes of Choice', Sociological Review vol. XIX (1971), pp.79–94.

6 Glaser and Strauss suggest a six-point paradigm for the analysis of awareness contexts. In this article I deal with only three of these—conditions, change and consequences. Elsewhere I have considered 'tactics and counter-tactics'.


8 In the Kitsuse survey of 700 students, 75 'had known a homosexual'. However, Schofield, ten years later and in England, found that 48 percent of his sample of 376 young adults from all classes had known at least one homosexual. Such contacts may have been transitory. See Kitsuse, J., 'Societal Reaction to Deviant Behaviour: Problems of Theory and Method', in The Other Side: Perspectives on Deviance, ed. Becker, Howard S. (Free Press, New York/Collier-Macmillan, London 1964), pp.87–101, and Schofield, Michael, Follow-up Study to 'Sexual Behaviour of Young People' (forthcoming).

9 For example, in one survey the author was concerned with, 1,832 male
respondents asked by postal questionnaire: ‘Do your employers know that you are a homosexual?’; 1,152 replied that their employers did not know, 233 replied that they did know and 447 were not sure. See also Westwood’s comment on this: Westwood, Gordon, A Minority: A Report on the Life of the Male Homosexual in Great Britain (Longmans, London 1960), ch.9.


14 Kitsuse, op. cit., p.92.
17 See the discussion by Laud Humphreys on the visibility of sexuality: Humphreys, Laud Tea Room Trade: A Study of Homosexual Encounters in Public Places (Duckworth, London 1970), pp.156 et seq.
20 Most accounts suggest that no more than 15 per cent of the homosexual population are recognisable as homosexuals. Pomery suggests that 15 per cent of men and 5 per cent of women may be recognisable. Sonenschein, after ethnographic fieldwork, concluded that 95 per cent are invisible. Westwood, who assessed the stereotypical traits of his respondents during his interviews, commented that only 13 per cent were recognisable as homosexuals (see Westwood op. cit., p.92). Magee also comments: ‘At a very rough guess I would hazard that something like one-twentieth of homosexuals are to the heterosexual eyes recognisable homosexual’. See Magee, Bryan One in Twenty (Corgi Books, London 1969), p.40.
24 Humphreys, op. cit., p.82.
25 Widelblood, op. cit., p.32.
26 Goffman, op. cit., p.41.
29 Ibid., p.48.
31 Cf. Lyman and Scott, op. cit., ch.6 and 7.
35 I have no space here to consider the full range of experiences in the ‘homosexual world’. I discuss these in Deviance, Reality and Sexuality: An Interactionist Approach to Sexual Deviance, ed. Plummer, Ken (Routledge &


25 Cf. Lyman & Scott op. cit., p.103.

26 Cavan, op. cit., p.229.

27 Cavan, op. cit., p.222.

28 Westwood, op. cit., p.71

29 See Plummer, op. cit. General discussions about 'passing' which embrace insights on homosexual tactics and 'game moves' include Goffman, op. cit.; Lyman and Scott, op. cit.; McCall and Simmons, op. cit.; Humphreys, op. cit.; Garfinkle, Harold Studies in Ethnomethodology (Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs 1967), ch.5.


31 Wildblood, op. cit., p.32.

32 Cory, Donald Webster The Homosexual Outlook (Peter Nevill Ltd, London 1953), p.11.


