

“Story gives us lived experience in its purest, and rawest, form.” (Atkinson 2011, p.17)

An Introduction:

In conducting a life story interview with my Uncle, I was fascinated with the experiences that had shaped him. Listening to him speak assisted me in understanding a completely different time period with complexity and emotion; broadening my view on the world. Throughout the interview my Uncle approached everything with good humour and optimism, I found this very uplifting and feel incredibly privileged to have heard his story.

My Uncle (Edwardo) was born in 1959. He grew up in a small country town in Australia, in a working class, Catholic family. He shows great appreciation for his parents; *‘Mum and Dad gave us everything that they possibly could’*, and feels *‘lucky’* to have grown up in a small town (Interview, 26 April 2020). He left home for Sydney at seventeen and eventually resided in another city. Around the time he moved out, he realised he was gay. During his childhood he *‘didn’t know what gay was’* but he always *‘knew he was different’* (Interview, 26 April); however, didn’t necessarily want to entertain the idea of homosexuality due to a homophobic environment. Many aspects have influenced Edwardo’s life, however this essay will focus on gender and sexuality in Edwardo’s macro, meso and micro worlds; as these two concepts were implicit throughout the interview. My research suggests that gender expectations cause homophobia which consequently impacted on Edwardo’s experience of sexuality; proving gender and sexuality are intertwined entities. Herek (1986) reaffirms this link, explaining that defensive, homophobic attitudes *‘result from insecurities about personal adequacy in meeting gender-role demands’* (p. 566).

In analysing Edwardo’s interview, I found that Connell’s theory of Hegemonic Masculinity could be applied to his experiences. Connell proposes a hierarchy of masculinities, with hegemonic masculinity as *‘cultural dominance in society’*. She reveals how hegemonic masculinity leads to the subordination of other masculine forms; positioning homosexual masculinities at the bottom of a male hierarchy (p.237). The reinforced notions of what a man ‘should be’, particularly strong in Edwardo’s context and time period, meant it was difficult for him to discover his own form of homosexual masculinity as it didn’t align with the cultural expectations of masculinity.

Edwardo, like many young boys growing up in this era, experienced harsh pressure to fit a specific form of masculinity. But what makes Edwardo’s experience of gender layered, complex and arguably more difficult was that these expectations used his own sexual orientation as a basis of what not to be. As Connell (2005, p.238) puts it, *‘gayness...is the repository of whatever is symbolically expelled from hegemonic masculinity’*. Expressing hostility towards gay people *‘enhances’* a masculine identity (Herek, 1986, p.563). To put it simply, in Edwardo’s context, being homophobic was a characteristic of being ‘masculine’ or a ‘true man’. Growing up, this sense of negative stigma around homosexuality was obvious to Edwardo: *‘Back then, if you were called a ‘pansy’¹, it was the end of the earth... You were basically called a homosexual’* (Interview, 26 April 2020). From my understanding, it seemed that because Edwardo knew he was masculine, *‘I don’t think I’m a feminine person’* (Interview, 26 April 2020), it may have been difficult to comprehend the exploration of homosexuality, as it was socially taught that masculinity and homosexuality did not coexist.

¹ A derogatory term that means homosexual or effeminate.

The Macro World: Australian and Western Attitudes

Discussing sex and sexuality in 1960s Australia was taboo, as Edwardo explains: *'People didn't talk about sex back then'* (Interview, 26 April). Adams (cited in Downey, 2001, p.36) proposes that the reason LGBT people feel they have to suppress their sexuality *'stems from the assumption that sexuality is private'*. In addition to sexual stigmas, the political climate of the 1960s and 70s was riddled with homophobia. Edwardo discusses how he felt he had to protect himself due to extremely homophobic laws;

'I think that any minority person would do that for self protection, particularly in the 60's and 70's. People were jailed for being gay. They were sent to institutions, they were given electric shock treatment.' (Interview, 26 April)

In the state Edwardo grew up in, it was only in 1984 that homosexuality was decriminalised (Australian Broadcasting Commission, 2015), and by then Edwardo had already left home; so for all of his childhood, being gay was illegal. These macro-level laws were a contributing factor to his experience of gender and sexuality and could explain his late discovery of homosexuality.

The decade before Edwardo was born, the 1950s, was extremely repressive towards homosexuality in Western countries like Australia (Willet, 1998 p.16). These political beliefs presumably carried over into Edwardo's context, as individuals who grew up in the 1950s were parenting their children by the 60s and 70s. To contextualise the attitudes towards homosexuality in the 1950s, at the time The Superintendent of Police in Edwardo's state identified homosexuality as *'the greatest social menace'* facing Australia (Willet, 1998, p.20). One of Edwardo's uncles grew up during the 1940s and 50s, his uncle was gay - something Edwardo found out later in his life. When I asked Edwardo if he ever discussed being gay with his uncle he replied; *'No. Never.'* (Interview, 26 April) From my understanding, the macro-level repression facing Edwardo's uncle meant he didn't have the opportunity to discuss similar experiences with a family member, which may have been beneficial for Edwardo growing up confused about his sexuality.

When Edwardo began to understand that he was gay, the AIDS epidemic was sweeping the macro, Western world. Homophobia intensified as a reaction to the AIDS epidemic, a presumably difficult context for anyone who was beginning to understand their sexuality at this time. Power (2011) describes the public reaction as *'layered in homophobia'*, Edwardo explained that it was: *'a "gay person" disease'* (Interview, 26 April). However, it wasn't only that AIDS exacerbated Australian homophobia, it was also a severe health issue. As Edwardo explains *'people were just... dying left, right and centre'* (Interview, 26 April), and they were; from 1980 to 1996, 5,100 Australians died from AIDS-related illnesses (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006).

Edwardo reveals that living in this context was *'quite frightening'*;

"It was pretty much the reason I moved to another city... It was like... I don't want to have this killer disease...nobody knows that I'm gay. So I could just move to that city..., I don't know anyone there and I can become an academic and live in a house full of books and never have sex again and I'll never die of AIDS." (Interview, 26 April)

Australian society during the 1960s and 70s was focused on hegemonic masculinity, consequently resulting in a distaste for anything that challenged it, such as homosexuality. Following this, the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s fed off this distaste and exacerbated homophobic attitudes. AIDS also meant that homosexual expression was weighted with a genuine fear of fatal illness. This macro-level context significantly impacted Edwardo's experiences of gender and sexuality.

The Meso World: Immediate Context, Country Town, School

Edwardo reflects on his time growing up in a country town positively;

'It wasn't until years later that I realised how lucky I was to have grown up in a place like that small town... I felt that country people had greater understanding and empathy' (Interview, 26 April)

However, growing up Edwardo revealed that he felt limited;

'Growing up, the town was never for me... I always wanted to get out of there' (Interview, 26 April)

It has been well established that rural areas are often more rigid in their beliefs (Little, cited in Conn 2014, p.3) and are usually more homophobic than city areas (Flood & Hamilton, 2005, p. 6). In fact, rural places have been referred to as *'homosexual vacuums'* (Aldrich, cited in Annes & Redlin 2012a p.31), and are *'highly heteronormative'* areas that emphasize stereotypical gender roles (Campbell, cited in Annes & Redlin 2012b, p.257).

Edwardo explained that showing feminine characteristics as a man *'didn't exist'* (Interview, 26 April). When asked about any personal interests that were deemed traditionally feminine, Edwardo revealed *'I would keep all of that secret'* (Interview, 26 April). This aligns with the idea that to be masculine, one had to contrast with femininity (Connell, 2005 p.232), and homosexuality. (Cheng, 1999, p. 298)

Connell (2002) points out that *'Australian boys are steered towards competitive sports such as football, where physical dominance is celebrated'* (p. 4). Edwardo emphasises that in his meso context, *'sport was a really big deal'*, revealing that *'luckily'* he loved sport and was good at it (Interview, 26 April). From my interpretation, this feeling of 'luck' stems from the fact that it was easier to fit into the archetype of a masculine man when you were good at sport, because strength and dominance were characteristics of hegemonic masculinity.

Partnered with these gender expectations, Edwardo received very little education on sex and sexuality in his country town, the 1960s attitudes were exacerbated by the environment of a rural town;

'You were in a small country town in the 60s, what the hell was sex anyway?' (Interview, 26 April)

Edwardo continues to explain that he didn't entirely know what homosexuality was until he left home at 17, *'There was no description or discussion.... no education...'* (Interview, 26 April). Robinson (cited in Flood & Hamilton, 2005) notes that gay identities are excluded from school curricula (p11). Morrell (2001, p. 141) explains that schools greatly influence ideals of hegemonic masculinity.

However, even if Edwardo was educated on homosexuality and gender, there was very little freedom or choice to experiment anyway. He reveals that fear of 'exposure' was *'highlighted by the fact you are living in a small country town'*, because he lived in a smaller community, people knew about everything anyone did; *'You couldn't afford to... explore... or know what your sexuality was'* (Interview, 26 April). The inability to discover sexuality in a rural town meant a complete lack of exposure to other gay people; homosexuality was invisible (Annes & Redlin 2012a, p.30). Edwardo reinforces this;

'I didn't know what homosexuality was.' (Interview, 26 April)

In my research, homophobic slurs were a consistent and repetitive theme. From my analysis, these social interactions occurred mainly on a meso-level with peers. Mead (cited in Herek, 1986) notes that *'our sense of self is established through social interaction'* (p.570.) Boys learned to fear being classified as 'sissies' or 'poofers' (Connell, 2009, p.4). Edwardo reveals that he *'grew up in fear of being called a pansy'*; this fear seemed to impact Edwardo emotionally, he describes that he was *'always very nervous'* (Interview, 26 April), compelling him to try to 'fit in'.

'I couldn't bear the thought of someone calling me a sissy or a poof... so I did what everyone else was doing... and tried to fit into the tribe, so that I didn't stand out at all' (Interview, 26 April).

Many rural gay men aim to fit a 'conventional model of masculinity', what Connell describes as hegemonic masculinity, to pass as 'normal' (Annes & Redlin, 2012b, p.257); these insecurities could create a sense of hyperconformity to gender-appropriate traits (Herek, 1986, p.570).

From my interpretation, rigid gender expectations caused a lack of freedom, education and exposure, as well as a constant fear of being labelled homosexual. Thus, impacting Edwardo's experience of gender and sexuality on a meso-level.

The Micro World: Family, Personal Life

'Family moulds our identity and the development of our personality' (Wilson, 1985 p. 11), children learn about gender roles through the process of socialization (p.10). Edwardo grew up in a close and loving family, he describes his parents affectionately, explaining that they were encouraging and supportive of their children to *'do their own thing'* and were *'big-minded people'* compared to others that grew up in a small town (Interview, 26 April). From my understanding, these values of support, confidence and independence moulded Edwardo's identity and personality. I believe that Edwardo's experience of gender and sexuality was greatly influenced by micro-level interactions with his family.

Edwardo's family were working class, he explains that growing up they didn't have that much money; however, Edwardo only realises this in retrospect as his parents never made him feel like they were missing out on anything.

Although, growing up in a working class family did have some impact on Edwardo's experience of gender and sexuality. Edwardo explains that his parents weren't *'wordly people that travelled'* (Interview, 26 April), most likely due to socioeconomic status and personal values. This lack of travel also translated to lack of exposure and meant Edwardo was unable to experience different cultures and

their interpretation of gender and sexuality - possibly reinforcing that idea that the gender roles he knew was the only way to be masculine.

Edwardo also mentions that his parents didn't discuss sex and sexuality with him, lessening his understanding of sex and sexuality. He humourously describes an interaction with his father after a sex education lesson at school:

'The nuns did a slideshow for sex education... Dad just said 'so, you right?' and I said, 'yeah I'm all good thanks' (laughing).' (Interview, 26 April)

Furthermore, his family were strongly Catholic and until he was 17 he attended church every Sunday. Edwardo reveals:

'Religion was enforced upon us. We had no choice... It was all about what your parents wanted, it had nothing to do with whether you believed it' (Interview, 26 April)

He later adds that he does not believe in God, and from my understanding he didn't believe as a child either. Especially during Edwardo's childhood, Christianity stood as one of the central oppressors of homosexuality (Willet, 1998 p.13), Edwardo comments on this:

'From the moment I realised I was gay... Why would I go to a church and worship some God that doesn't believe I exist?' (Interview, 26 April)

Growing up in a family that valued a religion that discriminated against homosexuality and impacted Edwardo's experience and understanding of sexuality and gender.

The fact that Edwardo's family were working class and Catholic were contributing factors to his experience of coming out to his family. Edwardo describes that his brothers had different reactions, one was seemingly unphased and another made a comment like; *'Oh you dirty, filthy poofta'* (Interview, 26 April). The gender expectations of hegemonic masculinity and the subsequent opposition to homosexuality were reinforced by his parents' reactions;

'Mum and Dad didn't really have anything to do with me for about 12 months. I wrote to them... but nope.' (Interview, 26 April)

Edwardo explains that his parents' distance impacted him strongly as it went against the values of family taught to him. From my understanding, this distance probably resulted from a lack of understanding as his parents grew up in a time where homosexuality was extremely taboo and undiscussed. However, it is a clear example of the strength of gender expectations to override other values in certain circumstances. While it took time, and with the help of his brother, Edwardo and his parents reconnected and the close family unit remained.

Edwardo notes that one of his biggest fears was that his sexuality would cause embarrassment to his father;

'I was worried about Dad sitting down at the pub and someone at the end of the bar yelling out 'Hey! I believe your son is a poofta!' (Interview, 26 April)

Edwardo confirmed that he felt a sense of responsibility if a situation like this happened, an example of how the negative attitudes towards sexuality and types of masculinity on a micro-level emotionally impacted him.

Spraggs (cited in Downey, 2001 p.36) describes coming out as *'announcing... words that are widely pronounced with embarrassment or distaste... a moment of vulnerability as well as assertion and freedom'*. This two-sided outcome aligns with Edwardo's experience as he notes that while his parents' reaction emotionally impacted him, he was also *'being a happy gay man without worrying'* (Interview, 26 April). From my interpretation, the values of strength, grounding and independence that Edwardo received on a micro-level from his family, assisted him in his journey of understanding his sexuality and personal form of masculinity, allowing him to be brave in difficult times.

A Conclusion:

The sociological imagination has allowed me to interpret the relationship between society and Edwardo's personal experiences, to understand the ways gender and sexuality have underpinned his life and impacted him; on a macro, meso and micro level. Throughout the interview, Edwardo's positivity and optimism is clear. He concludes his story in the same manner, revealing;

'Everything turned out exactly the way it should be... I give all credit to Mum and Dad...I've had a really lucky life'

Word Count: 2,750

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