GayCamp:

Community Work with Gay and Bisexual Men

On an International Summer Camp

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Abstract

GayCamp is a week-long residential summer camp for men. It has been organised annually for over thirty years by volunteers in Sweden. The event attracts international participants across a range of ages and backgrounds and reflecting a diversity of identities and experience. Research was undertaken to describe and understand how such an event functions as community work practice for engaging gay and bisexual men. Investigation was conducted through fieldwork observation and thematic analysis of semi-structured individual and group interviews with attendees. The researcher lived with the participants for the duration of the camp. This paper applies Minkler and Wallerstein's (2005) Key Concepts and Community Organisation and Community-Building Typology to describe and understand GayCamp as a grassroots community work strategy for health promotion and well-being. Participants confirmed that living together in a temporary community was strengthening of their identities, empowering and therapeutic. The telling of life stories was found to function as a consciousness-raising activity, producing personal meaning, supporting the development of peer networks and transforming individual lives. The role of camp leaders was effective in developing community capacity and raising social capital. This research demonstrates that grassroots community work and story sharing practices with gay and bisexual men in a residential setting can contribute to HIV prevention, mental health promotion and social inclusion.

Keywords: community work, life stories, empowerment, conscientization, gay and bisexual men, men who have sex with men, GayCamp, HIV.

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1.0 Introduction

Since the beginnings of the modern gay liberation movement in the 1960s, men who love men have been gathering together for a multiplicity of purposes including mutual support, sharing knowledge, political action and play. The advent of HIV/AIDS in established gay communities across the Americas, Australia and Europe threatened at first to tear apart the significant fraternal bonds established over two decades of collective organisation but instead saw a resurgence of activism and revitalisation of community work in a new set of struggles.

It was also in this era that a small but significant event for men was born. Over thirty years later, Sweden's GayCamp continues to draw together a diverse collection of men from all strata of society in Sweden and across the world. The Swedish based non-profit organisation known as GayCamp runs this annual summer camp of the same name. While the GayCamp association is engaged in a number of activities within LGBT communities, this paper is concerned with its main activity, the annual week-long men's summer camp in Sweden. What commenced as a response to HIV has gone beyond that and become something much bigger, not only in terms of sexual health promotion and contribution to participants' individual well-being but also with respect to development of supportive networks and collective identity.

According to the World Health Organisation, "Health promotion is the process of enabling people to increase control over, and to improve, their health. It moves beyond a focus on individual behaviour towards a wide range of social and environmental interventions". (WHO, n.d. para.1).

A focus for health promotion is the achievement of equity in health. The position of WHO is that people cannot achieve their fullest health potential unless they are able to take

control of those things that determine their health. (WHO, 2009). The fact that GayCamp, an event with no paid employees and little funding, has endured for 30 years is remarkable in itself. But viewing it through the lens of voluntary social work raises many questions about the possibilities for community work with gay and bisexual men and other men who have sex with men, particularly in terms of health promotion activities. How can organisers of such events foster inclusion and participation while acknowledging the diverse identities of those present? When men are brought together to live in community, what can be done to ensure relevance of issues? How might such events positively contribute to individual and collective mental health, well-being and empowerment?

To date there has been no academic investigation of this event. In fact there is little formal research into similar residential events where men are brought together for their mutual benefit. The time has come for a presentation of what is happening at GayCamp.

1.1 Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to describe and understand the event known as GayCamp from the perspective of community-based social work practice.

The International Federation of Social Work (IFSW) acknowledges social workers role in social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Human rights and social justice issues are fundamental to social work (IFSW, 2000).

Community work is at the heart of the change and empowerment dimension of social work practice. It has evolved from application of democratic principles in working with vulnerable groups outside of social agencies (Denvall, 1997). Twelvetrees (2008) makes the point that community work is still evolving so definitions are not always consistent. The community can either be geographical or a ‘community of interest’ but, in any case, community work generally involves autonomous collective action. Community work is often

assumed to be social work conducted by community-based, non-profit associations whether they are incorporated or unincorporated (TCLS, n.d.). Such associations may have either paid or unpaid staff. *Grassroots Community Work* refers to community work that occurs outside of formal social agencies (Denvall, 1997). I have provided more detail about the concepts and theory of Community Work in the Theoretical Framework section.

For gay and bisexual men, and other men who have sex with men, exclusion and marginalisation have been key drivers of poorer health outcomes, reduced access to goods and services and lower rates of participation in social programs (Douglas-Scott, Pringle & Lumsdaine, 2004; Irwin, 2007; Meyer, 2003). The expression 'Men Who Have Sex With Men' (and accepted abbreviaion 'MSM') has been used in the context of public health, and particularly HIV / AIDS prevention and research, since at least 1990. Epidemiologists created it originally to to avoid the social and cultural connotations associated with gay identity (Young, R & Meyer, I. 2005). The UN AIDS Action Framework defines Men Who Have Sex With Men as *males who have sex with other males, regardless of whether or not they have sex with women or have a personal or social identity associated with that behaviour, such as being 'gay' or 'bisexual'*. (UNAIDS, 2009). It has become a descriptive umbrella but is often used in HIV prevention and health promotion work to differentiate men who do not identify themselves as gay or bisexual but remain at risk of contracting the virus and other sexually transmitted infections.

Engaging with gay and bisexual men and MSM on issues related to sexuality and identity provides a focus for community work. As a grassroots community activity, GayCamp provides a forum for bringing together and engaging with these men. So it is important to understand how it functions from a community social work perspective.

1.2 Research Questions

In terms of the purpose of this research, the primary question is how might the GayCamp event be described and understood from the perspective of Community Work? From this question arise a number of sub-questions. What actually happens at GayCamp and how can it be understood as Community Work? How do the organisers of GayCamp engage the participants? How does GayCamp respond to questions of identity, health and well-being of participants? What further opportunities might residential retreats provide for community-based social work with gay and bisexual men?

It is important to state the limitations of this study. This is not an evaluation of the camp, individuals or bodies that make it happen. This piece of research is not concerned with measuring the effectiveness of the camp or explaining the behaviour or individuals attending the camp. Instead the focus of this research is simply to describe and understand the camp through the lens of community work practice.

In preparing the study and writing the paper, I cannot claim neutrality neither professionally nor personally. So it is salient to make some comments about my own positioning in the research and how I came to choose the focus of study.

1.3 Choice of Research Topic

I first heard about GayCamp in 2006 when conducting an Internet search of activities for a personal holiday in Scandinavia. Despite my vacation taking me all over Scandinavia, I did not attend GayCamp that year. However a series of events brought me back to Sweden and to enrolling in Social Work masters studies at Stockholm University in 2010.

During my second year in the course, I decided to attend GayCamp, signed up and paid my deposit. Initially my interest in the event was personal. I saw it as an opportunity to meet other gay men interested in communities of intent and to improve my Swedish. It was around the same time that I was considering a topic for my master's dissertation. Not long

after signing up, I started thinking about gay men's residential retreats and looking around for information on the Internet. In explaining how GayCamp came to be the focus of my dissertation, I offer a series of coincidental vignettes.

In my private practice as a talk therapist, a forty-something man told me that his experience of attending GayCamp had 'transformed his life'. He had always considered himself a solitary individual, but after attending the camp decided he wanted to be a part of a community of gay men and was, many months later, making persistent efforts to make this happen. Something about this story resonated with me, having had my own experience in 1994 of a gay men's retreat that affected the course of my life. What was it that happened at GayCamp that might *transform* a man's life?

Having decided to attend GayCamp, I mentioned my plans when writing to a colleague in Canada. "If they take you there in cattle cars, be careful to look for escape routes," he replied. It took me a while to get the joke but the analogy of a journey from ghetto to concentration camp seemed an astute critique of the very idea of a 'gay camp'. What underlying intentions warranted isolation from others and such an intense focus on gay identity?

While looking around the Internet for research on gay men's' residential retreats, the first links that appeared were reports of camps for gay teenage boys in Malaysia aimed at 'correcting' their behaviour. Not only could a residential retreat affirm gay identity, it could apparently also be used to try to deconstruct it as well. This had me considering further what happened at a gay men's residential retreat. In what ways might such events empower those who attend or enhance their well-being? How might conducting these events contribute to social change and be considered to be a form of community work practice?

During the masters course at Stockholm University I started discussing the prospect of doing a piece of research about sexual identity and how it might be influenced by

community gatherings or residential events. When I told my fellow students I was attending Sweden's GayCamp, their response displayed a surprising uniformity: "What is that? Is it a *Sex* Camp?" So this was interesting in itself, the curiosity that was aroused when we started talking about isolated mass gatherings of gay men. When we discussed the question further, what these students wanted to know were things like: *What happens at that place? Who goes there? Why do they go there? How is that social work?*

I couldn't really answer these questions because I had not been on GayCamp myself. And the more I started looking for examples of similar events, the more curious I became because not much, if anything, had been written about residential gatherings of men who love, and have sex with, other men.

It was at this point I started considering making GayCamp the subject of this dissertation. The purpose of my research became to describe and understand how this event might function, particularly from the perspective of community work.

1.4 Overview of the Structure of the Paper

I begin this paper with a background to GayCamp and literature review of the major themes of the study (Chapter Two). The literature review starts with a consideration of Community Work practice and proceeds to the key concepts for organising in community work with gay and bisexual men. The topic of social work with gay men is then considered, specifically in relation to the historical context of gay community work activities and the main foci for social work with gay and bisexual men in present times. The final part of the literature review deals with how HIV has impacted gay communities and their responses to it. In Chapter Three I have provided details of the theoretical framework of the research. Chapter Four is concerned with the method of my study and where I describe the design of the research and how interviews were conducted. The results of the fieldwork and interviews are detailed and analysed in Chapter Five. In Chapter Six I discuss my findings and critically

reflect on the event as an example of community work. Chapter Seven offers some conclusions including a summary of the findings.

2.0 Literature Review

There has been little formal academic research conducted on the subject of community work with Men Who Have Sex with Men (MSM) during residential camps. While undertaking a search for literature I did make contact with another researcher who confirmed this assessment and kindly provided me with a copy of the abstract he had prepared ahead of his PhD submission[1] which, at the time of finalising this paper, had not yet been published and was not available. I have provided an outline of the other limited research into similar residential camps in the last section of this review. The GayCamp organisation provided a history of the event on their website and other material was sourced through the board. I have included a summary of the most pertinent details here as background to the event and ethos of the association conducting the camp.

Preliminary investigations involved seeking out practitioners and academics who might assist with sourcing specific literature but with little success. Several scholastic databases were used including Proquest and Thomson Reuters Web of Science and CINAHL. Among the search terms applied were the keywords 'Community Work', 'Life Stories', 'Empowerment', 'Gay and Bisexual Men', 'Men Who Have Sex With Men', 'GayCamp', 'HIV', 'health promotion', 'retreats' as well as 'residential', 'camps', 'events' etc. The GayCamp board provided a literature list that was, by their own admission, somewhat dated, but offered some useful sources. Henriksson's (1995) published thesis was particularly enlightening because it provided some context associated with the commencement of the GayCamp event. As a result of finding a paucity of literature around residential events for MSM, I chose to focus on literature associated with several principal themes.

Following a summary of the GayCamp history and outline of the principles of the camp, I contrast some of the models of community work and shifts in understanding about

[1] *Havens in a Heteronormative World? Gay Men's Experiences of Retreats* by William Potter.

community work practice in the past few decades. I then review the concepts that have been influential in organising gay men, specifically homophobia, coming-out and heteronormativity as understood through Queer Theory.

The literature review continues with a brief survey of social work and community work practice with gay men including some of the evolution of this work through history. GayCamp was founded in response to HIV and is publicly funded primarily because of the health promotion activities conducted during the event. So I complete the literature review by looking at coverage of the influence of HIV on gay men and the community practices that have brought them together for the purposes of HIV prevention and general well-being.

2.1 Background History to GayCamp

The following information was gathered from the GayCamp website[2] and through discussion with board members both prior to and during the camp.

GayCamp, an annual week-long summer camp for men is now in its thirty-third year of operation in Sweden. Run as a non-profit event by a volunteer board, the camp is open to men regardless of whether they identify as gay, bisexual, 'men who have sex with men', straight or use another description of their identity. In effect camp attendees are self-selecting. The camp attracts participants from Sweden and around the world including a number of paperless asylum seekers and those who have languages other than Swedish or English as their primary languages. All ages from 18 years up are welcome at the camp.

The camp is conducted at different locations almost every year, partly because the organisers enjoy the novelty of new locations and partly out of necessity. Being within one and three hours travel time to Stockholm is preferred and it can be difficult to find group accommodation in the summer season. Generally the organisers look for inexpensive sites with opportunities for swimming and outdoor activities.

[2] website at: www.gaycamp.se

The first camp in 1993 was arranged at a youth hostel on the Swedish west coast by RFSL (the Swedish Federation of Gay & Lesbian Rights)[3]. It was conceived as an innovative way of informing and organising gay men about AIDS. There was initial resistance to RFSL using the campsite and, after the camp, local people burnt the youth hostel mattresses because they feared catching HIV.

Following the first camp, a separate association was formed so as to be independent from RFSL. Over the last 30 years, the board of GayCamp developed a number of principles used to guide how the camps were conducted. As a non-professional organisation comprised of about 10 volunteers, the board managed to established a pedagogy around its activities that was documented through these principles.

2.2 GayCamp Principles

The following were the documented principles followed by the board during the year I attended the camp. They were accessed through the GayCamp website.

1. *To create, through our GayCamp programme, homo-social networks for Men who have Sex with Men (MSM) and deepen relationships between men of different ages, backgrounds and cultures;*
2. *To integrate closeted MSM with men who are more secure and "out" with their Homosexual, Bisexual or Transsexual identity (HBT-persons);*
3. *To defend the rights of the bisexual and transsexual MSM in the homo/hetero community;*
4. *To integrate immigrant MSM with native MSM;*
5. *To integrate HIV positive MSM with presumably HIV negative MSM;*
6. *To promote sexual health among MSM, by giving out correct and non-judgmental information about HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases (STI);*

[3] website at: www.rfsl.se

7. *To create a forum for issues of religions, faiths and life philosophies and promote discussions about religion and faith. GayCamp is neutral in all questions about religion and faith;*
8. *To create a homo-social meeting place which is not dependent on a commercial environment with alcohol/drug consumption as a chief means of establishing social contact;*
9. *To create the opportunity for financially disadvantaged or physically challenged MSM to participate in the homosexual community.*

2.3 Practices of Community Work

The practice of Community Work is subject to competing understandings and terminology with overlapping meanings. The meaning of 'community' itself is contested. Craig (2010) proposes three meanings of community: geographic (defined by physical space), community of intent and an issue based around a campaign or event. Terms like *Community Work* and *Community Development*, *Capacity Building* and *Community Organising* are often used somewhat interchangeably in the literature yet meanings can depend on state and geographic contexts.

According to Denvall (1997), Community Work in Sweden developed as an element of social work practice in the 60s and 70s that was in direct response to the interests of the powerful. It is an inherently critical practice where empowerment is central and the social worker takes the role of change agent. Bullen (2007) presents a historical evolution of community development in Australia first as political action in the 1960s and 1970s, shifting to community self-help in the 1980s and then to government focus on social capital in the 1990s. Stoecker (2010) observes that in the United States it is primarily NGOs that engage in *Capacity Building* and communities themselves undertake *Community Organising* that tends to be associated with developing leadership skills. The broader term *Community Work*

remains open to interpretation particularly because it occurs within a political and economic context (Miller, 2010; Craig, 2010; Ife, 2010).

Miller (2010) describes *Community Development* as a democratic project characterised by conflict between Social Action and Community Building. While models of community organising originated within a social justice framework, he argues they became influenced by neo-liberal responses to the welfare state and globalisation, leading to the emergence of the concept of *Capacity Building*. Stoecker (2010) goes so far as to say Capacity Building has become a means to prop up global capitalism.

In exploring the meaning of Capacity Building, Kenny & Clarke (2010) note its opposition to social engineering and its promises to empower those excluded from participation. However Ife (2010) suggests Capacity Building incorporates a managerialist approach to avoid the 'dangerous ideas' that might arise from Community Development. That in turn raises questions about what *capacity* is actually being *built* and who defines it: The community? Managers? Funding bodies? Politicians? He makes a comparison with colonialism and highlights the tendency of managerialist approaches to try to measure social capital.

Further, Ife also argues Capacity Building implies deficit and that starting with idea of deficit is not an ideal way to begin working with communities. While reaffirming the imprecision of all of these terms, Craig agrees the expression *Capacity Development* infers its communities are deficient or carrying a form of social pathology, lacking skills or abilities. As such, he argues, Capacity Development fails to recognise pre-existing capacities in communities.

The *Strengths Perspective* in social work practice has become popular in the last two decades, yet critics argue it amounts to simply reframing and downplaying significant problems (Saleeby, 1996). Researchers, social workers, community workers and others

historically have represented the dominant social and cultural discourses. In the words of Anderson (1997) they are the knowers of human stories and what these stories should be. By implication, there is a danger that the 'strengths' of individuals and communities will be determined and assessed by those already in positions of relative power, that is, social workers and community workers, rather than participants of communities themselves. As such, taking a Strengths Perspective might represent a potential for colonising practices.

For Minkler and Wallerstein (2005) however, a strengths-focus is integral to the concepts of community-building and capacity building.[4] The Strengths Perspective offers an alternative to orientations that focus on difficulties or presumed deficiencies in individuals or communities. It was originally heralded as a challenge to the biomedical and psychiatric discourses (Healy, 2014). The Strengths Perspective proposes that it is the strengths and resources of people, and their empowerment, that should be the central focus of social work relationships, rather than approaches that emphasise problems or pathologies (see Chapin, 1995; Saleeby (ed) 1992). White, M (2007), a social worker, community worker and psychotherapist, takes the position that people are experts in their own lives. There is a corresponding argument that community social workers have a role in elevating people from remaining passive recipients of help and the colonising practices of well-intentioned professionals to active participants in the process of change (Munford & Sanders, 2005).

2.4 Coming-Out, Homophobia & Heteronormativity: Key Concepts for Organising

Coming Out is a broad term that is contemporarily acknowledged as referring to disclosure or acceptance of lesbian / gay / bisexual sexuality. Social Historian George Chauncey (1994) says the term became associated with the expression *coming out of the closet* around the time of the 1969 Stonewall Riots, often considered a turning point in gay

[4] I will present Minkler and Wallerstein's model of Community Building in the next section when discussing the theoretical framework behind the research.

community organisation, and not in use before that time. Prior to Stonewall, Chauncey demonstrates that gay people had other ways of describing themselves and their social worlds. He suggests that the current usage of *Coming Out* encompasses several myths about gay identity prior to Stonewall, namely that homosexual people were isolated, that they were invisible to the mainstream society and that they had internalised a view of themselves as sick, perverted and immoral. He also maintains that a previous use of the term *Coming Out* by gay men before the second world war derived from a turn-of the century tradition of drag balls in African American communities which played on the upper-class tradition of debutantes being *introduced* or coming out *into* society.[5]

In its current meaning, Judith Butler argues that *coming out of the closet* holds an emancipatory promise that guarantees dissatisfaction (see Gordon, 2005). Seidman et al (2004) refer to the 1970s gay liberation movement as the start of an attempt to legitimate and normalise the concept of homosexual identity. During the decades of political change since then, homosexual identity has been seen as a response to *Homophobia,* a term originally coined by psychologist George Weinberg in the late 1960s (Herek, 2004; Sears, 1997). It has fallen into common usage in the past 20 years and become popular as a social problem worthy of study and intervention. Originally intended to describe a fear of heterosexual men towards gay men, the term helped to shift the perception of the problem from a pathology in one social group to prejudice by another and, over time, has contributed significantly towards the progression of gay and lesbian rights and gay community initiatives.

Sprecher and McKinney (quoted in Williamson, 2000) define Homophobia as *negative and / or fearful attitudes about homosexuals or homosexuality*. Homosexual acts and

[5] The concept of 'Coming-In' does not appear to have been explored to date but it is a central theme of GayCamp. I couldn't find any academic literature specifically about the concept but make some comments based on my findings in the Discussion section.

desires as well as the identities based on them, are widely considered inferior to their heterosexual counterparts. Herek (2004) refers to the stigma of society's negative regard for behaviour, identity, relationship or community that is non-heterosexual. Gay hate crimes, discrimination in access to goods and services and unequal treatment under the law might well be regarded as the measurable and serviceable manifestations of homophobia in action. The existence, under-reporting and seriousness of discrimination and gay hate crimes have been well documented (for example: Dick, 2008; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2009; ILGA, 2012). Homophobia is a significant social problem across cultures and national boundaries. The construction of shared identity through gay community activities is a means by which openly homosexual men have responded to homophobia and subsequently developed collective social capital.

Queer Theory, a more contemporary field of research that emerged from queer and women's studies particularly the work of Judith Butler (1990) and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990), critiques the binary division of two sexual identities: heterosexual / homosexual. It supports a movement in the direction of diversity rather than assimilation (Henriksson, 1995). Queer Theory challenges essentialist understandings of gender and advances ideas about sexuality and identity as socially constructed. Butler (1993) argues that homosexuality and heterosexuality are not fixed categories but are 'done' by a person or performed. Emerging from Queer Theory, heteronormativity is a concept whose popularity appears to have taken over homophobia in recent years. Heteronormativity refers to the set of social norms supporting heterosexuality as the dominant sexuality (the 'heteronorm') as well as the alignment of biological sex, sexuality, gender identity, and gender roles (Lovaas & Jenkins, 2007). It has been argued that heteronormativity creates hierarchies of sex and sexuality with gay men, lesbians and others who do not fit the norm experiencing discrimination and disadvantage as a result (Rubin, 1993).

Other theorists propose the accompanying arising of a ‘homonorm’ (or homonorms) as both an understanding and response to heterosexual binaries (for example: Bryant, 2008; Rosenfeld, 2009; Rosqvist & Andersson, 2016) with Duggan (2003) claiming that homonormativity upholds and sustains heteronormative assumptions rather than contesting them. Brown (2009, 2012) however argues that the landscape of contemporary gay life can be read either for hegemony, or for difference and geographical specificity, and chooses to do the latter citing a danger of performatively regenerating the very subject of investigation when describing homonormativity.

Coming-Out, Homophobia and Heteronormativity have become key concepts around which communities of gay men are organised for commercial purposes, to address social problems, for health, well-being and political purposes.

2.5 Social Work & Community Work With Gay Men

It is generally agreed that same sex relations have occurred across time and culture. Both Edsall (2003) and Price (2007) claim psychology professionals constructed ‘the homosexual’ as a *type* of person rather than someone who participated in particular sexual practices. Foucault (1979) goes so far as to suggest that this distinction between ‘the homosexual’ and ‘sodomite’ distinguishes modernity from pre-modernity. The 1970s saw the start of a movement to legitimate and normalise the concept of homosexual identity and this process would dominate gay politics through to the 1990s (Seidman et al, 2004).

While a quick survey might suggest that more literature about social work with gay men is becoming available, this appears to be only a recent development. In their study of 2335 articles in four major US social work journals, Pelts, Rolbiecki and Albright (2014) find publications related to lesbians and gay men are barely visible. Their update of prior research reveals significant gaps in the literature in the areas of advocacy, research, education and services.

My own searches yield social work literature associated with gay men that is primarily concerning marginalisation, social exclusion and health, particularly drug and alcohol and mental health. The fields of mental health and substance use (drug and alcohol use etc.) present an abundance of problem-focussed sites for social work with gay and bisexual men. The relevance of association between homophobia, mental health and vulnerability to HIV and substance abuse cannot be overlooked. Williamson (2000) and others describe the self loathing of people who realise their homosexuality is at odds with heteronormativity as *internalised homophobia*. He presents evidence for a positive relationship between internalised homophobia and risker sex activity, increased alcohol and drug consumption that may impair decision-making and, subsequently, HIV transmission between men. Internalised homophobia has also been implicated in increased vulnerability to suicide, substance abuse, self harm, eating disorders and overrepresentation in mental health problems generally. It has been shown to present complex challenges for HIV prevention. For example, in a study of over 324 South African MSM by Vu et al (2012), internalised homophobia correlates with a high level of HIV related misinformation and high levels of HIV conspiracy beliefs.

Van Wormer, Wells & Boes (2000) argue that rather than problematizing homosexuality, it should be the objective of social work practice to *rename, reclaim and reframe* with clients. Appleby & Anastas (1998) consider how social work practice can respond to changing notions of gay identity. Joseph (2005) presents the result of a research project with Indian men and asserts that development of gay identity is a stressor in itself due to environmental factors and as such implies limitations to the role of social work.

In writing of the British profession, Cosis Brown (2008) claims that social work's association with homosexuality has been both ambivalent and hostile. She cites a lack of written history about social work with lesbians and gay men until recently and high levels of

anxiety around working with this group. She argues for increased emphasis on the relationships between practitioners and clients instead of further bureaucratisation.

In contrast to the problem / deficiency focussed perspective taken by conventional social work practice, community work in the context of men who love men, has a long and fascinating history. Considering the evolution of gay community organising is significant because it reveals a political context. While space does not permit a more comprehensive survey of particular influences figures, two significant characters in the history of gay community are Edward Carpenter[6] and Harry Hay.

Carpenter was an English socialist who wrote about homosexuality and was open about his own homosexual identity. In the early 1900s he purchased a seven-acre farm that became a place of pilgrimage and retreat for those who shared his ideals. The modern Edward Carpenter Community organises gay men's weeks and shorter events across England with the aim of nurturing community as an alternative to the commercial gay scene. They espouse principles of caring, trusting, personal growth, sharing and creativity.[7]

Known by many as the 'father of gay liberation', Harry Hay was an American who read and was inspired by the writings of Edward Carpenter (Timmons, 1990). He founded The Radical Faerie movement in California in 1979, as a political and counter-culture response to the assimilationist gay community initiatives of the time. The Radical Faeries have evolved and have a presence across the English speaking world as well as Western Europe, Thailand and the Philippines. They emphasise a spiritual dimension to gay sexuality, unique identity, creative play and healing. *Heart Circles* are integral to many Faerie

[6] Details about Edward Carpenter were gathered primarily from a couple of website biographies about him http://www.friendsofedwardcarpenter.co.uk/ and http://www.edwardcarpenter.net/ecbiog.htm

[7] The ECC website is at www.edwardcarpentercommunity.org.uk

gatherings, and present an opportunity for men to open up to each other emotionally.[8] One person speaks at a time, and everyone else listens until it is their turn (Stover, J.A, 2008).

Through most of the late 1980s and 1990s, as reforms were passed, the political focus of gay community activism became more oriented towards increasing social rights and then HIV / AIDS. It was in this context that many more gay community initiatives were established. One of these was the Body Electric movement. Body Electric conducts experiential personal growth workshops for men with an emphasis on celebrating eroticism and diversity. Events are primarily conducted in supportive retreat settings and involve men exploring movement, massage and other forms of physical touch together. The workshops claim to allow men an opportunity to explore both sexuality and spirituality in a communal setting.[9]

Further examples of retreat-type experiences for gay and bisexual men are the events arranged by non-profit HIV education and support organisations. Some limited research about these is detailed in the following section. However it is significant to note here that community engagement has been demonstrated to factor into gay men's well-being. For instance, McLaren, Jude & McLachlan (2008) investigate *sense of belonging* to general and gay communities as predictors of depression among 137 Australian gay men and find that increasing a sense of belonging to both communities is associated with a decrease in levels of depression reported by gay men. Their research also indicates that enhancing a sense of belonging to either community may enhance sense of belonging to the other and that a sense of belonging to both will benefit the mental health of gay men.

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[8] Details about the Radical Faeries were gathered primarily from http://www.radfae.org/about and http://www.eurofaeries.eu/

[9] Details sourced from http://www.bodyelectricoz.org/AboutUs.html and http://www.thebodyelectricschool.com/

2.6 HIV: Impacts to and Responses from Gay Community

As GayCamp originated in the shadow of the AIDS epidemic amongst gay and bisexual men in Sweden, it is pertinent to consider how HIV social research has influenced gay community organising.

The early GayCamp events are informed by the work of Swedish researcher Benny Henriksson (1995). Henriksson conducts participant observation at public locations where men had sex, informal interviews and more formal life-story interviews with a diverse range of sexually-active men. His conclusion is that gay and bisexual men take more risks in intimate relationships than when they visit what he calls 'erotic oases' (public toilets, parks, video clubs) and that men are competent safer sex negotiators in such public venues.

He explains that negotiation is more complicated in intimate relationships. Unprotected anal sex – the sexual activity that involves most risk for HIV transmission - is often reserved for love relations because it is invested with the most symbolic meaning. Henriksson finds the cessation of the use of condoms means the love is 'for real' with some men and, further, that the giving and receiving of semen symbolises trust and love. One of his critiques of HIV prevention initiatives is that it targets white middle class self-identified men and the milieus they visit. His conclusion is that HIV prevention must pay more attention to men's risk behaviour in intimate relationships and such a context requires sophisticated preventative strategies.

In investigating whether there is a role for gay community in HIV prevention, Rowe and Dowsett (2008) propose that the construction of mutual understandings of *gayness* is a lifelong process of positioning oneself in relation to ideas and shared understandings. After Butler (1990), they remark that this *doing gay* is performative.

Zablotska, Holt & Prestage (2012) find that the proportion of gay men socialising with other gay men has declined over recent years while the use of the Internet to find sexual

partners has increased. However they also find a positive association between HIV positive status, unprotected anal sex and gay social engagement. These factors mean challenges for HIV behavioural monitoring and research with gay men.

British researchers Smit et al (2012) present a literature review that reveals growing divisions between HIV-positive and HIV-negative gay men, and fragmentation of gay communities according to perceived or actual HIV status. They note the resultant HIV-related stigma affects emotional well-being, prevention, testing behaviour, and mental and general health of individual men and communities.

While active engagement with gay community is shown to predict the uptake of safe sex practices, the changing meaning of the term 'gay community' presents a challenge to health promotion with gay men. Holt (2011), for example, argues that not only is there contention what the notion of 'community' means, but generational shifts are occurring in gay identity. Ibáñez-Carrasco (2013) claims that weddings and marriage seem to be *the sanctuary of the new queer*.

The research around gay men's retreats with a health focus is scarce and somewhat dated. Smith & Van de Ven (2001) report that a retreat for sistergirls[10] held in Queensland, Australia as part of an HIV and sexual health education project addressed one problem but created another. Sistergirls were invited on the retreat so that educators could gain an understanding of their day-to-day lives and the issues that were important to them. While the intervention was considered successful amongst educators, other indigenous people in the wider community resented the additional services the sistergirls received, some suggesting the retreat was really an orgy or other 'inappropriate' behaviour.

Carneiro (2003) presents research into community HIV prevention intervention

[10] Sistergirl is an Australian English word used to refer to indigenous male to female transgender individuals.

through gay men's health retreats for a master's dissertation at the University of Montana. He surveys retreat participants with the objective of determining whether gay men's weekend health retreats are effective in promoting safer sex practices amongst rural MSM. His findings are that the retreats, conducted by the Gay Men's Task Force (GMTF) in Montana have a positive result on condom use, specifically in eroticising the use of condoms and in modifying sexual behaviour by reducing number of times men engage in unprotected anal sex. However he also finds the events affect self-acceptance, attitudes and sexual behaviour only to a limited degree, perhaps because participants are already benefitting from high level of acceptance and well-developed social networks.

Berg, Sondag & Dybdal (2007) also offer research into health retreats run by the Gay Men's Task Force (GMTF) in Montana. The researchers administer a quantitative questionnaire and conduct focus groups to evaluate the effectiveness of these gay and bisexual men's health retreats in addressing safer sex behaviour. They find improvements in attitudes towards safer sex and use of condoms, improved self-acceptance and social support. However the demographic data reveals the majority of participants to be white, middle-class and well-educated. These retreats tend to attract men who already possess significant attitudes, knowledge and behaviour associated with HIV prevention.

Page (2009) uses Gift Theory, his own construction, to explain his work with gay and bisexual men on large group retreats at Easton Mountain in New York State. He reports that many attendees at such retreats bear shame due to their sexual orientation or gender performance and he describes a journey from shame to expression and connection that is taken by men on these retreats. Page contends that storytelling practices aid healing and can produce powerful catharsis. He highlights this with claims about the power of kindness and nurturing practices occurring on these gay men's retreats. However Gift Theory appears to have little scientific basis and Page's assertion that sexual orientation and gentleness, or

capacity for sensitivity, are ‘gifts’ essential to all gay men is contentious.

Potter (2016) investigates *play* at gay mens retreats conducted by the Eurofaeries in the Netherlands and Edward Carpenter Community in England. He notes the separation by space and time and from social and emotional connections as key features of such events and remarks that play and the opportunity to play are significant aspects to the experience of these retreat participants. Potter also notes that the degree of spontaneity and lack of planning in contrast to the judgement of competitive play that accompanies rules is also appreciated by retreat participant who, through play, reinvent themselves and *see themselves differently*. This spontaneous play, according to Potter, is experienced as healing in relation to *homonegativity* and exclusion and, weeks after the retreats, participants express a yearning to incorporate play into their everyday lives.

The paucity of research into these kinds of events warrants further investigation, not only to ascertain the effectiveness of health interventions but also to determine how community workers can engage with, and respond to, the issues and needs of gay and bisexual men. It is this latter question that I will proceed to explore here.

3.0 Theoretical Framework

As discussed, the definition of Community Work practice remains at worst vague, at best broad and in any case contested. For the purposes of this paper I've chosen to use Minkler and Wallerstein's (2005) typology of community organisation and community-building through which to frame and analyse my research data.

3.1 Minkler and Wallerstein's Community Work Typology

While there might not be international consensus around ascribing Community Capacity Building a strengths base, I've chosen Minkler and Wallerstein's model for two reasons. Firstly because it clearly differentiates between different approaches on several axes and appears to account for all or at least most of the positions within community practice (see Figure 1). Secondly, they have used the model previously to describe and understand community practice with a health education focus and such a focus is explicit to the GayCamp funding and origination.

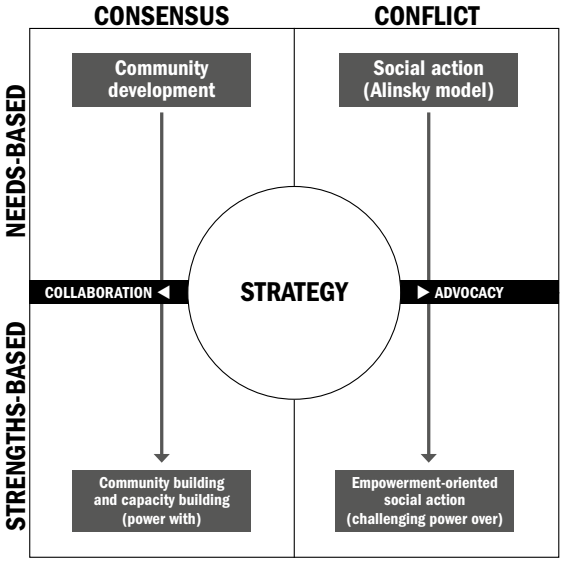

Figure 1. Community Work Typology (Adapted from Minkler and Wallerstein, 2005)

Minkler and Wallerstein's typology marks out a field containing four quadrants of community work practice. These quadrants are divided by a horizontal axis continuum from collaborative work (that which relies more on consensus) to advocacy work (that which involves more conflict) and a y-axis continuum that differentiates between needs-based and strength-based approaches.

Looking at a diagram of the model, starting in the top left quadrant and moving clockwise, we first come to Community Development which is positioned as a Needs-Based approach requiring collaboration and involving consensus, then Social Action, a needs-based, advocacy-centred approach involving conflict, then to what they describe as Empowerment-oriented Social Action, a strengths-based, advocacy-centred approach involving conflict and finally to the Community-building / Capacity-building quadrant which sits on the strengths-based, collaborative side of the field and relies primarily on consensus.

The typology is helpful because it suggests not only that community workers can move across the field to different positions of practice but also implies that their approaches to, the emphasis about and outcomes of the work will change when they do shift position. It is also pertinent at this point to contrast two different traditions of community organising to illustrate differences in how organising conducted and for this I am using a summary by Martinson and Su (2012). Space does not permit further description of the background to these approaches, which originated in the work of Saul Alinsky and Paulo Freire, but their contribution and historical significance must be noted. They differ in philosophies, strategies and end goals behind them and both approaches strengths and limitations.

Freire's approach to community organising emphasises emotional and cultural change, individual development and the organiser as a partner. It anticipates that marginalised people can understand the source of their oppression and aims to develop

critical consciousness through ‘liberation education’, a pedagogical approach where community members become empowered through learning about their relative situation.

Alinksy’s approach differs in that it emphasises organisational over individual development and positions the community organiser as a teacher-guide. This approach is more concerned with leadership development as a means to redress power balances by creating dissatisfaction amongst those with relatively less power.

Both Alinksy’s and Freire’s models of community organising can be used as keys to understanding the position that organisers take in community development. Minkler and Wallerstein also describe a number of key concepts that I will use in analysing the data.

3.2 Key Concepts in Community Building.

Minkler and Wallerstein (2005) propose the following concepts as central to community work practice.

Empowerment. According to Minkler and Wallerstein, Empowerment can refer to both the challenge to dominant power and efforts that expand power through common relationships. Empowerment results in an increase to perceived control in one’s life as well as critical awareness. A fundamental question is whether those in more privileged positions can empower others or if individuals and communities must empower themselves. Does empowerment have to involve transfer of power from those who have it? Empowerment is both a process and an outcome of change for individuals and communities.

Critical Consciousness. Freire’s approach is conceptualised as Critical Consciousness or Conscientization and involves liberation through education that enables people to challenge the conditions maintaining their relative powerlessness. Conscientization involves dialogical problem-posing, ongoing reflection and action. “Through structured dialogue, group participants listen for the issues contained in their own experiences, discuss

common problems, look for root causes and the connections… and devise strategies to help transform their reality" (Minkler and Wallerstein, 2005. p36).

Another description of Freire's dialogical problem-posing method is as *collective, shared and shifting* (McLaren, 1999. p51).

Community Capacity. This refers to the ability to identify, mobilise and address shared issues through effective collaboration. It depends on the characteristics of the community that can be described by a range of factors including participation, active networks, leadership, skills, resources and access to power. By definition, improving these factors can increase the capacity of a community to mobilise and address shared issues. Leadership development has traditionally been a key concept in community work.

Social Capital. Minkler and Wallerstein (2005) define social capital as *a collective asset, the structures and relationships… that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit* (p37). They point out that, in the past, social capital has referred to the bonds between community members but that bridging social capital – the connections between those of heterogeneous groups – is a more promising concept. Putnam describes Bridging Social Capital as the creation of outward-looking networks and connections across diverse 'social cleavages' and Bonding Social Capital as the formation of inward-looking networks that reinforce exclusive identities and homogeneous groups (Knudsen et al. 2006).

Issue Selection. Minkler and Wallerstein suggest there is a danger that community organisers can misinterpret community feeling if they lack cultural competence, access to key stakeholders or an understanding of power relations in a particular community. Issues selected need to be meaningful to the community but also informed by principles of social justice, which is where Freire's dialogical problem-posing approach can be instrumental.

Participation and Relevance. These authors support the emphasis on a community's strength and assets when working with issues that are significant to the community. Not only

do they advocate engaging community members as equals but also they suggest community members create their own agenda based on felt needs and awareness of resources. The principle here is ‘starting where the people are at’.

4.0 Method

The method of this research was driven by the purpose of describing and understanding GayCamp from a community work perspective. To this end, I chose to gather the data while attending the event, not only so I could be guided in investigation by my own experience and reflections but also so that the data-gathering could be conducted as an engagement with the participants of the camp including the event organisers. I was concerned that those on the camp and the currency of their experience should inform the data-gathering.

4.1 Positioning of Researcher

Gergen (2009) proposes that all human action comes into meaning through co-action, that is, through collaborative action with others. I decided early that my attendance could help me contextualise the knowing practices of the other attendees. For a number of reasons, I chose to position myself as a Participant Observer (Kawulich, 2005).

Henriksson (1995) describes the circumstances where the researcher is also the observer and participant as being an insider. He suggests that one's own interest in the subject justifies becoming an 'insider' but at the same time, there needs to be some exercise of judgement over the degree of participation. Kawulich (2005) draws on Gold (1958) to describe the different levels of involvement and theoretical stances for researchers conducting field work. The decision to conduct my research as a Participant Observer or, more specifically, Participant-as-Observer was based on several factors.

Firstly, the positions of Complete Participant or Complete Observer were rejected for ethical reasons. Both require the researcher to act covertly in the course of data collection and that did not sit well with my philosophical framework nor that of the GayCamp board[11].

[11] When I mentioned to a board member during the camp that I had rejected the option of covert presence he joked that if they had discovered me researching covertly "…*we would have killed you*"!

Secondly, the organisers strongly preferred me to take a full participatory role on the camp, while making it clear to other attendees that I was also researching the camp for my masters dissertation. Negotiating to have been primarily an observer who took a secondary role as participant might have been possible logistically but would have delayed the data collection for a year. And I could see the point of the board in terms of their preference. Subjecting homosexual men to research has a long history biased towards the representation of pathology. Several attendees shared their suspicions of researchers informally with me during the camp. In addition, had I been less of a participant and more of an observer, this would have had more of an effect on the functioning of the camp. Attendees would have modified the way they acted even more than they did knowing I was participating fully in the camp myself.

It was important for me, for both ethical and philosophical reasons, that I attempted to overcome the mistrust of researchers that I encountered, so I endeavoured to be as transparent as possible about my attendance, activities and personal behaviour on the camp. Participants were informed of my researcher status at the outset of the camp. I was also mindful to maintain what I considered to be an appropriate degree of participation in the camp. I was aware that, had I acted in ways that might be construed as challenging to the order or organisation of the camp, that this would have a greater influence on what I was observing. So I was conscious to behave within what I assumed to be the norms for camp participants. For example, I did not appear to ‘snoop’ or stay up very late after hours. I made a point of participating in informal activities including swimming naked with the other men (considered normal at this camp) early in the week, as I expected it might convey transparency.

I was careful not to engage as a researcher with participants who did not approach me or talk with me, particularly if they appeared to obviously be avoiding me. I made it explicit that I was not primarily concerned with observing individual behaviour but was participating

in the camp myself and writing about it as an event for my university studies because I was interested in how it worked.

4.2 Observation & Documentation

Not only do Riessman & Quinney (2005) argue there is an increasing push for 'evidence' over ethnography, but also they propose that positioning oneself as a detached, disinterested and disengaged observer is not appropriate for human studies. On the other hand, Silverman (2010) reminds us of the danger in ethnographic practice for the researcher to go native and take on the biases of particular participants, just hanging out rather than pursuing scientific methods of research.

Initially I considered taking an approach to data-collection that was both ethnographic and auto-ethnographic while drawing on narratives of participant's experience. I interviewed participants and organisers both alone and in groups. I used a camera and sound-recorder at various times. I documented what I saw, heard and felt in field notes and then reflected on the documentation both privately and with other participants and organisers. In an effort to make a systematic collection of my observations, I kept a journal, generally writing in the mornings and some evenings. I made informal recordings of sounds and 'public' announcements as well as using the voice recorder on my mobile phone to remember reflections as they arose during the course of the day. I took photographs as well in the hope that they would jog my memory about specific details or thoughts that would come to mind, and reviewed these when writing my journal each day. But I was careful to avoid photographing individuals without their consent and did not use my voice recorder where there was the possibility it would capture a private conversation. I had agreed with the board to be discreet in my observation and documentation, but at the same time, wanted to ensure it did not appear to be occurring covertly. This entailed trying to remain unobtrusive in my observations but also unguarded and willing to speak about what I was doing at any time. Ensuring I participated

on the camp presented difficulties in maintaining the consistency of approach to documentation and resulted in gaps to journaling in particular.

I also had an explicit agreement with the board not to mention any names without consent of that person or recount any life-stories from the Base Group[12] meetings I attended. As my role was to study the camp and not the attendees of the camp, I had no difficulty agreeing to or abiding by this requirement.

4.3 Interviews

So as to ensure I was informed by and engaged with a diverse range of men, I undertook a series of interviews as part of the data collection. Interviews were all audio recorded with consent. Some men wanted their real names used and others wanted pseudonyms. Some of these men opted to choose their own pseudonyms so they could identify themselves in any published work so I was careful to encourage them to choose unique pseudonyms.

The following table introduces the participants quoted in the paper with a few details. I have included this list to assist with understanding both the diversity of attendees and enhance their responses.

[12] *Base Groups* are the foundation of the camp. Individuals are assigned to groups of between five and eight participants based on their mother tongue and attendance at previous camps. Attendees sit in their base groups for three hours each morning tell *life stories*. Each base group also took turns working together to prepare at least one breakfast, one lunch and one evening meal for the entire camp.

Ali Abdullah, 28, Palestinian asylum-seeker, on his first GayCamp.
Bjorn, 40s, assisting the camp organisers.
Carl, 28 born from India but studies in Germany, second year at GayCamp.
Daniel, 50s, Swedish, has attended the camp 5 or 6 times
Ernesto, 38, from Spain on his second GayCamp.
Kalle, 46, on his first GayCamp. Works with people with disabilities.
Klas, 30s, Swedish, GayCamp board member.
Lennart, 60s, Swedish. Treasurer of GayCamp board and psychotherapist.
Niklas, 30s, Swedish.
Ollie, 60s, Danish, on his first GayCamp.
Patrik, 28, Swedish, Teacher and sign-language user, on his first GayCamp.
Peter, 40s, GayCamp board member.
Rey, 30, a camp leader assisting with the organisation.
Saul, 30s, Swedish, on his first GayCamp,
Tomas, 40s, Swedish, Chairman of GayCamp.
Xavier, 40s, Swedish, on his first GayCamp.

Table 1. GayCamp Participants Quoted from Interviews

I used an interview guide for the questions but otherwise they were unstructured, allowing us to follow the conversation and pick up on points of interest or divergent new points and remain open to discovery of new themes and concepts. I made a point of not asking the participants specifically about their own life experiences but did invite them to elaborate when they touched on these during the interview. It was my hope and intention to create an atmosphere of trust. At the same time, I needed to be realistic. These men had not

known me for long. I had to be prepared to interview people whenever they came to me. I generally had my voice recorder with me (I was using an iPhone) but did not always have paper and pen or list of questions.

Through the week I conducted a total of eight hours of interviews. These comprised sixteen interviews with individuals and two group interviews. The first of these group interviews was with seven of the organisers of the camp (who were mostly GayCamp board members). The second was an open discussion interview with up to eleven camp participants, nine of who spoke during the discussion. Some of these men were interviewed as individuals, some were not. The individual interviews varied in length but the average interview time was about twenty-five minutes. The group interviews took about twice as long. When the interviews were transcribed, the transcription came to over 47,000 words.

A few of the interviews were conducted in Swedish, which is a second language for me but required because some of the participants preferred to speak in Swedish as it was their first, or only, language. Parts of the group interviews also were in Swedish. Hence, some of the interviews also required translation during the process of transcription. In two individual cases, an interpreter assisted the interview because the interviewee was using a third language. Where I judged the material that was being discussed could compromise the individual without his realisation, in the transcription I removed names and other details that I thought might identify the person.

4.4 Analysis of Data

Following the transcription of the interviews it became apparent that analysis of such a large amount of data alongside the observations made during fieldwork data-collection would be far too ambitious a task for this paper. As previously mentioned, informal documentation and journaling had become patchy due to the expectation that I participate in all sessions. The interviews were the most consistent documentation tool. A stage came when

I needed to make a decision about which data might best inform my purpose and at this point I decided to focus on the data set of interview transcripts albeit alongside the insider knowledge of the camp I brought to the interview dialogue. Riessman & Quinney (2005) argue that translation and interpretation are ubiquitous in communication, even when researchers and interviewees are speaking the same language. Subjectivity can affect each stage of the storytelling. The more interviews I conducted, the more significance they took. I realised that the story-telling practice provoked by the interviewing had become a collaborative process involving sharing of identity and the development of critical awareness.

I have approached the transcripts through thematic analysis. I've made the content of these transcripts my focus with emphasis is on what is being said. A limitation of this approach to analysing transcripts in this way is that the meaning in context may be obscured. My attendance at the camp provided a means to consider the context of what was being said in the interviews and, in the results and analysis chapter, I have occasionally included further notes to explain the context of the conversations and remarks made by participants.

Guided by an approach suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006), after the transcription process I read through the transcripts several times, familiarizing myself with the data and looking for repeated patterns of meaning. I then generated some initial codes that might be used to systematically separate the data into themes. I read through the data again and made a list of concepts and themes that appeared in the transcripts over two readings of the transcribed interviews.

Next, I grouped together what appeared to similar concepts and themes in several diagrammatic thematic maps. I categorised these concepts and themes in different ways and looked for association to Minkler and Wallerstein's (2005) Key Concepts in Community Building. This took some time. Categorisations were applied, considered and discarded several times before the final thematic list identified.

I have then used Minkler and Wallerstein's (2005) Community Work Typology and Key Concepts in Community Building to guide the analysis of the data in each of these thematic categories. The decision not to categorise the concepts directly according to Minkler and Wallerstein's (2005) key concepts reflects a preference to honour both the language of the participants interviewed and the prevalence of particular concepts over others. In this final categorisation of themes, I have chosen the split that appeared to offer the starkest conceptual differences raised by participants. In writing up my report, I have selected quotes that reflect the concepts appearing in the interview transcript, that describe the GayCamp event in participants' own language and that illustrate the role of organisers in shaping the event as voluntary community work.

4.5 Limitations of the Research

It is pertinent to make some comments about the limitations to the methodology and research generally. The primary drawback to the approach I chose was undoubtedly the difficulty of holding more than one role during the data collection. Participants were informed I was conducting the research at the commencement of the camp, however it was clear more could have been achieved had they been notified prior to signing up the event. The fact that the organisers introduced me on the first day and it was obvious we had met beforehand factored into what appeared to be an atmosphere of distrust towards me that persisted for a number of days.

There was criticism about my presence on the camp. I heard this indirectly and realised the organisers had tried to shelter me from it. The specific criticisms related to the way in which I was introduced and how the other attendees were informed of my participation on GayCamp. Some men were of the opinion that everyone should have been made aware that a researcher would be present in advance of signing up to attend. Some men were aggrieved that they might be 'studied' in ways not dissimilar to the critical ways in

which gay men have been ‘studied’ in the past, i.e. as pathologies or deviants to norms of human behaviour.

There is also the possibility that, despite my careful attempts to clarify my purpose and explicitly advise attendees that this was not an evaluation of the camp, many approached their interviews with me as if it were. Some of them wanted to paint the camp in the best possible light. I expect there was also a limit to what I saw and heard due to the fact I moderated my activity to fit the ‘norms’ of the camp. I did not see or hear of any sex, for example, but became aware after the camp that some of the attendees had sex there.

In hindsight it might have been better to interview small groups of three or four to allow for the development of ideas. Individuals tend to say more personal things but small groups potentially advance the ideas faster. Trust was another factor. It was late in the week by the time I did most interviews as it took time to develop trust with the participants. The interviews were arduous to transcribe and I underestimated the time for this, particularly considering the diverse backgrounds of attendees and multiple languages spoken.

Finally, the chosen methodology may have been developed to have been more empowering. As feeding back was not explicitly part of the design, it is hard to say whether the participants benefited from their interviews or my presence at the camp. In 2013 I returned to the camp having been invited by the organisers to present my research and preliminary findings to that year’s participants. While there appeared to be some interest from participants with academic backgrounds, others indicated they didn’t understand the purpose of my task beyond promotion of the camp, justifying more funding or for evaluation purposes. The explanation I provided was that even though these were not explicit reasons for having undertaken the research, the findings could potentially be used for each of these ends.

5.0 Results and Analysis

In this section, I present the results of the interview data and a thematic analysis of the transcriptions of that data set. To begin with it may be helpful to offer a brief description of the camp. These details are based on my field notes.

The campsite was situated on the edge of a river about two hours north of Stockholm. The site was owned by the local branch of the Social Democrats youth association and this year the event was being held on the anniversary of the 2011 Norway attacks, a point that had been taken into account by organisers in maintaining the secrecy of the location until participants had paid.[13] The buildings comprised of a number of dorm rooms of five beds, some smaller rooms of two or three beds, several communal areas, kitchen and toilet facilities across three main buildings. A jetty and traditional Swedish wood-fired sauna stood beside the river. There were no neighbours close by but within the camp there was not a great deal of privacy from other participants due to the communal living arrangements. The camp did contain two 'Love Suites' (denoted by cardboard hearts that had been stuck on the doors) that were available on a sessional basis for anyone who wanted private space for intimacy.

On the afternoon we arrived, the organisers explained the activities for the week. Every morning we were to meet in the same small groups for three hours. There were two English groups and five Swedish groups with about six to seven participants in each group. During the afternoon, there would be different activities, all of which were optional. We would cook together in our groups at various times and live as a community for the week.

[13] In 2011 a lone gunman killed 69 individuals attending a political camp for young people on Utøya island.

The week immediately preceded the Stockholm Pride festival[14], so it was suggested that we might attend some of the festival activities after the camp. A programme was posted on large sheets of paper outside the dining room and we were invited to add any activities we were prepared to conduct.

I commenced my interviews on the third day. Interviews were conducted in both English and Swedish and, in one case, interpreted to spoken English from sign language. For most of the participants, English was a second language.

5.1 The Gay Village as an Alternative to both the Heteronorm and Commercial Gay Worlds

The most obvious theme in the transcripts appears to be what I describe as the *Alternative Gay Village* constructed through provision of, and structured organisation given to, the camp.

Across participant interviews there is an acknowledgement of the camp as an alternative. Daniel, for example, is now on his fifth or sixth camp but describes his first attendance as *opening a door to the gay world*. Others note the special atmosphere of the camp away from their *ordinary life.* (Kalle) Rey, a camp leader, speaks about the development of men who come to the camp alone but gain a sense of *belonging* through living in community.

The camp organisers are very clear in positioning the Heteronorm (Lovaas and Jenkins, 2007) as somewhat deficient in relation to supporting their other objectives.

[14] Stockholm Pride is an annual festival of homosexual, bisexual, transgender and queer culture www.stockholmpride.org

> *The idea is to create a homosocial society free of the heteronorm where we can be on the homonorm and feel free you know. It is a new experience, because out there the heteronorm is prevailing and here it is not. That is the very basic dynamic.* (Lennart, GayCamp treasurer and veteran participant)

Such a position aligns with Rubin's (1993) claim that those who do not identify with heterosexual norms experience both discrimination and disadvantage.

Relative to Minkler and Wallerstein's (2005) Community Work Typology (figure 1), this strategy situates the GayCamp organisers in the north-west quadrant of Community Development: needs-based, consensus-oriented, collaborative community practice. Both the Heteronorm and the commercial gay world are deficient, the first because it does not allow men to *feel free* and the second because it is hard to *make contacts* and to *talk seriously*. This introduction to *homosocial society* appears to parallel Chauncey's (1994) forementioned *coming-into society*. Along with being counter to the heteronorm, it appears the camp has established its own norms. Carl, for instance, refers to it as a *gay friendly situation* where participants are not *living the condition* of their usual lives. Other participants recognise that the camp also offers an alternative to commercial gay life, including *the glamour of going to pubs and discos and things like that.* (Patrik)

> *It's like a village with the legends and stories and different customs… There are so many things here that don't belong to the gay world; they belong to the camp world.* (Daniel)

> *I think it is very important that you have a sober alternative to the other kind of life that is involved with the gay community.* (Patrik)

The residential camp is considered firstly as an alternative to heteronormative society and secondly as an alternative to the commercial gay worlds. So the organisers argue that the camp's particular homonormative environment make it possible for a kind of talking that is not possible in commercial gay environments. Part of their role is to define the norm on the camp and this is done through decisions about which activities are conducted on camp and shaping the ways in which those activities are conducted. This is both the leadership, skills and access to power that Minkler and Wallerstein (2005) identify as *community capacity* and a reflection of what they might also term the *social capital*: collective assets, structures and relationships for mutual benefit.

> *It's not one or two people you might talk a little bit more to when you go to a bar for an evening, but you have time to talk to maybe twenty people for a long time about different topics. And you have time to become serious, about issues that matter to you.* (Tomas, GayCamp Chairman)

Several participants describe the *serious* nature of conversation in GayCamp as influential. Carl uses the expression *intense discussions* to describe such conversations. The seriousness of talk extends to a seriousness in socialising. One of the organisers, Peter, contrasts the kind of socialising that happens on GayCamp with that of the bars,

> *... where it is not so easy to make contacts and talk seriously about daily gay life and your problems and your situation and your daily life.*

In terms of how the alternative is accomplished, participants repeatedly refer to the structure and rules of the event. Even if this structure and these rules are *informal* (Kalle), participants recognise there is purpose to them such as *to bring out the gay issues* (Ernesto), *have discussions about HIV and … health* (Patrik) and establish what you *should* and *shouldn't* do regarding sexual health and relationships (Ali Abdullah).

The participants generally recognise that to bring about this alternative, organisation and structure are required, even it if is an informal expectation.

> *… you don't have to talk if you don't want to. But in a way maybe it is impossible, people are staring at you and saying 'now its your turn and I have nothing to say – you can't say that all the time.* (Kalle)

This is reiterated in the large group interview I organised,

> *- You are not forced to … nobody forces you to say something in the Base Group. You are part of it. You are about seven people in the Base Group and you could, theoretically, sit there silent. But then there would be a manageable sized group who would respond to that also, in some way or other.* (Xavier)
>
> *- But I mean it is up to yourself what you want to tell. Perhaps you don't want to tell everything about your sex life.* (Niklas)
>
> *- You could get away anonymously in a group of fifty but you can't do that in a group of seven.* (Xavier)
>
> *- That's true.* (unknown)

Most are positive about the balance between activities regarded as obligatory and those non-obligatory, describing it as, for example, *a good mixture* (Saul). One of the participants wants more structure *so you know exactly what is going to happen every day* (Patrik). The board members, however, tend to downplay their role in organising the way in which the camp is conducted and their influence over activities. While Peter proposes *socialising* at GayCamp to be *opposite* to that of commercial gay venues and Lennart speaks of creating a *homosocial society* for a week, Lennart also argues that organisers and participants are *all on the same level*.

> *There is a board but the board are here as individuals and take part on the same conditions as everybody else.* (Lennart)

However when asked about the different approaches taken to alcohol on the camps from year to year, Lennart indicated an intentional design to the week and an evolution in the way the camp was organised,

> *...the board has been more wise the later years to make structure of the alcohol drinking for instance. We recommend that no alcohol before Wednesday, the first party, because you are nervous the first days.*[15]

This is another *alternative* of this particular gay village: the de-emphasis on alcohol. This chronological shift from more grassroots and collaborative organising to more scheduling by

[15] Participants are welcome to shop for alcohol themselves while on the camp but the organisers do not provide it, which is in line with Sweden's national alcohol strategy.

leaders reflects a change of strategies rather than a different model of community work practice. Both the ease of making contacts and time for serious issues are held to be important. It is the scheduling and structuring of time on GayCamp for certain important activities that is implied as a task of organisers in building this Alternative Gay Village.

5.2 Promoting Inclusion through Respecting Diversity: Strategies to Ensure Participation

The next recurrent theme is reflected in the holding together of two concepts, Inclusion and Diversity.

To start with, participants evidence the diversity of men on camp and make regular reference to particular differences including the attendance of those with disabilities (those disabilities with representation included hearing impairment, visual impairment, learning disability and acquired brain injury), mental health diagnoses, refugees and asylum seekers, non-gender conforming men, transgendered participants, both openly HIV positive and HIV negative men, those older who are *successful and happy* (Carl) and those from different cultures. The attendance of Patrik, a deaf man, who I interview through a sign interpreter, demonstrates the emphasis on accommodating attendee's needs. It is the first time the camp has sign interpreters present. The men I interview report, without exception, encountering these differences as a positive experience. The capacity of the event to include such diversity of attendees is considered one of the qualities of GayCamp,

> *The tolerance level here is higher than in society.* (Daniel)

> *It's good that GayCamp is inclusive, everyone who is part of this feels included.* (Patrik)

Base groups are identified as episodes when individuals start *on different levels* (Kalle) but permit a *get to know people* experience that is *ideal* in comparison to that of the entire event. (Unidentified, large group interview). Participants recognise other activities as strategies the organisers use intentionally to create inclusion. Kalle described *this name game that suddenly became a dancing game*,

> *It was like a kidnap in a way. (…) I think it was quite smart (…) everyone had got to their places and then they said, 'Come now!', it's dancing (…) I think it was like a pedagogic trick that was very good in the surprising… 'Oh is it dance now?' 'ja! Nu Kör vi!' So you didn't have the time to say 'No!'.*

The strategies of these volunteer community workers makes the difference to participation and, therefore, inclusion. The organisers make a conscious choice to keep the camp open to those who want to attend, Lennart claiming this to be a political decision,

> *Those who come to the camp get to come. We don't sit and choose the applications, there came an 82 year old … from Örebro. Then he comes… and if an 18 year old comes he comes. If an immigrant rings, he is coming, if a transexual rings, (they) are coming… if there is someone who has a psychiatric hardship which you have seen in our group… sometimes, he also comes… The nice thing is that (…) richness of the knowledge and competence is improving us.*

It might be described, from the Community Work Typology (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2005) as *Empowerment Oriented Social Action* (the south-east corner of the field in figure 1). Organisers acknowledge those requesting to attend have strengths implied by their

differences and support their participation, even if aware that it may bring conflict. Again, the intention is to improve through difference. The highlighting of tolerance in making it possible to meet others identifies the Bridging Social Capital (Knudsen et al. 2006) of the camp and its capacity to mobilise and facilitate activities for mutual benefit.

Aside from *tolerance*, another word used in relation to the diversity of participants and their inclusion in the camp is *respect* (for example, by Ali Abdullah, regarding his attitude towards people with HIV and those with different opinions; by Klas, in relation to men from different ethnic backgrounds and by Carl, in relation to those with *minority* status).

It is also common for participants to make reference to their own vulnerability or that of other gay men in their *ordinary* (Kalle) lives or lives *outside* (Ernesto) Gaycamp. Ali Abdullah, an asylum-seeker from Palestine, speaks of wanting *some kind of security* or something to *protect* himself if he can not remain in Sweden and suggests this might be achieved if he tries *to organise something* that might help other gay men.

The sense of inclusion doesn't extend to, or at least is not enough, for everyone. During the camp, one man leaves. He discusses his leaving with the organisers who try to convince him to stay but he will not change his mind. Because this man is in my base group, I have an understanding as to why he leaves the camp but, for ethical reasons, I cannot repeat that here. I agree with the camp organisers and my base group to maintain confidentiality around what is discussed in the base group. While it is reported to be rare for someone to leave the camp, several men with whom I speak report difficulties on returning home from previous camps. This isn't necessarily believed to be a consequence of the design / ideology or pedagogy of the camp itself, although it can be in the case of Kalle's friend, also from a previous camp,

> *..it was horrible, it was so much bitterness, people hadn't come over their coming-out process and just problems all the time (...) and he thought it was so, so heavy so he left after four days. (...) you don't know how you will react until you have been here.* (Kalle)

The principle of Inclusion is concerned with ensuring those with less relative power will still attend the camp. Differences relating to age, citizenship, sexual identity, mental health, learning abilities and so on are considered strengths of knowledge and competence that improve the camp generally. Such an approach fits with the practice of renaming, reclaiming and reframing (Van Wormer et al. 2000). This argument speaks to both the Conscientization (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2005) and bridging social capital (Knudsen et al. 2006) aspects of community work on the camp. The organisers purposely value the diversity of experience and backgrounds of those on the camp as a strategy to bring about participation.

5.3 Learning through both Guidance and Conscientization

All the men I interview on GayCamp in some way express the capacity of the event for learning. From their words, it is apparent that this occurred in a number of ways.

Most reference is to the learning that occurs through telling and sharing of life stories. Base groups, particularly, are seen as being structured for learning. In the sense that their facilitators ask group members to agree to a number of ground-rules including the confidentiality of the group and permitting space and time for each participant to speak uninterrupted, the Base Groups are not dissimilar to the *Heart Circles* established by Harry Hay (Stover, 2008). In my own group, the facilitator makes a decision for each participant to speak on a different day to tell his own coming-out story. How the telling of this story is

performed is generally left up to the individual. There is room to disclose what might be, up to that point, quite personal and private matters but there is also allowance to talk relatively superficially. This is supported by Minkler and Wallerstein's (2005) theory that Relevance impacts Participation. Community workers must engage with individuals at a point of comfort for those individuals.

I ask Carl what difference he thinks hearing stories from other men makes to the health and well-being of those men,

> *They learn it. They know what not to do. Regarding their well-being, they know how to approach it.* (Carl)

Some of the learning is particularly around knowledge for living as a gay man. For example, to *know more* about *the gay life* (Carl) or *how to be open in society* (Patrik) or for participants to *learn about themselves in relation to the gay lifestyles* and *have more tools to live their life outside of here* (Ernesto). Coming-Out and how to do that is mentioned in particular. Some of it is associated with resolving doubts or confusion or feeling more comfortable.

> *…you can come here and have dialogue about confidence and your trust in your own situation and how you behave in a camp like this…* (Patrik)

Sometimes the learning relates to skills, such as more eloquence in talking and negotiating safer sex, using sign-language or giving massage. These skills are regarded by some participants as being *taught* (didactically) through instruction and by others as being *learned*, during the camp, in other ways such as simply listening during the Base Groups. The

community work traditions of both Paulo Freire (organiser as partner) and Saul Alinsky (organiser as guide) are used here (Martinson & Su, 2011).

> *It's very nice to listen to everyone experience how they do it and my base group, all of them are open except me. And to experience how they are open and what's the reaction from their family, how they act, it was great. (…) Also we discuss a good partner, how it should be and how we manage it. These things and, I need it in life. So I think it's a unique opportunity and I am so happy that I attended.* (Ali Abdullah)

Capacity Building (Minkler and Wallerstein, 2005) – represented in the south-west quandrant of figure 1. – occurs in strengths-based, collaborative practice. Base groups represent a collaborative opportunity for learning. They might also be aspects of the bonding social capital of the camp (Knudsen et al. 2006).

Conscientization (Minkler and Wallerstein, 2005) is also apparent. I've already mentioned the emphasis on tolerance. Participants report conscientization in other ways as well such as how hearing others stories *drives my thoughts much higher* and *opened my brain* (Ali Abdullah). Others speak of realisations, particularly regarding their preconceptions of homosexuality or gay identity,

> *…intense discussions* that *made me realise why I was thinking this way and they made me realise what I was not thinking.* (Carl)

Lennart points out that there is a lot of competence and expertise present on the camp. And both the lived experiences of participants and diversity represented on the camp is evidence of this. Carl indicates that many of those on the camp are *examples in themselves*.

According to the descriptions offered by Martinson and Su (2012), Freire's approach to community organising is more visible than Alinsky's here. Lennart's comments reflect the principle of organiser as partner rather than as leader. Participants learn about their relative situation through sharing stories and listening to others and, in doing so, become empowered. I address the theme of Empowerment in the next chapter.

There is not agreement about the importance of particular topics. For example, some claim that participants should already be knowledgeable and *well-informed* and *know how to behave* (Ollie) in relation to safe sex, while others indicate they had learned about HIV while on the camp and *discovered* that they should *be more careful* (Ali Abdullah). Saul objects to the emphasis put on sex[16],

> *I think it is all so… knulla, fitta[17], sperma– everything that stands for health… It was too much (…) Can we not talk about feelings?*

So while participants are in accord that learning is a common experience across the camp, what they learn and how they learn differs considerably and it can be said the issue selection is, at times, controversial. Whether the organisers are using a managerialist approach (Ife, 2010) is debateable. That learning takes place through exchange of experience is generally agreed. Where responses around the exchange of experience particularly stand out is in relation to the matter of shared identity. The acknowledgement of the role of shared

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[16] Almost all the formal scheduled activities of the camp have a health focus. For the year of my study, there was a grant of about 60,000 Swedish crowns (about 6000 Euro) from the *SmittsskyddsInstitute* or SSI (the Swedish equivalent of the United States Center for Disease Control).

[17] These first two are Swedish slang expressions for intercourse and vagina respectively.

identity appears so often in the interview transcripts to warrant establishing a separate theme for analysis.

5.4 Empowerment through Shared Identity

Bjorn, one of the GayCamp organisers, describes a function of the homonorm when he speaks of *recognising that there are other people in the same or almost same situation, or thinking the same ways, having the same issues.*

Individuals become aware that they share a position of being without power relative to others or, as Saul puts it, as *outsiders*. The camp provides a forum for collaboration of outsiders, a structure that facilitates cooperation for the benefit of all and could be a factor in developing a sense of *belonging* for the men present (McLaren et al., 2008). Minkler and Wallerstein (2005) note the significance of cultural competence and understanding power relationship within the community when interpreting community feeling. It obviously helps here to organisers belong to the same community and see themselves as on the same level.

During the group interview, there is a discussion about the kinds of group contexts that might bear similarity to the GayCamp event. Bern speaks of a book about women's liberation groups in the 1960s that documents the use of a similar approach of sharing stories and the way this fosters critical consciousness (conscientization). Kalle raises his personal experience in response,

> *I have been homosexual for a very long time, but I need a (refill of) my homosexuality* (laughter from others) *with all this nice atmosphere, all nice guys.*

When Lennart makes the claim that it is not a *Treatment Camp*, the comparison with Alcoholics Anonymous is made. Bern offers,

> *But in AA (…) they are dealing with a problem. But we are more like evolving.*

This is met with murmurs of agreement. This evolutionary model of empowerment is held by the organisers to result in stronger, more assertive individuals and stronger community. *Knowledge is strengthening* according to Klas, and Lennart speaks of the men who do outreach for promoting GayCamp as being *integrated* and *steady*. For Patrik, sharing experiences and discussion in this context of shared identity and *people who you identify with* can give rise to the *confidence to be able to say no* and *trust in your own situation*.

Minkler and Wallerstein (2005) include the efforts to expand power through common relationships in their explanation of the concept of empowerment. For GayCamp, the process of empowerment appears to rely on notions of shared identity.

Ali Abdullah, who I interview later in the week, for example, claims the camp participants are *like a family.*

> *We are all gay, we all know what it is to be a gay, so it's normal to say these stories to gay people and they will understand it.*

This is echoed in comments of others, like Saul, who wanted more focus on talking about *feelings* and less on the health aspects of sex.

> *It sounds romantic perhaps, but it has to do with, I believe, that gay people want to love. And to share with other people things.* (Saul)

Saul agrees with me that participants can be seen taking care of each other on the camp. When I ask him why this happens, he says he thinks it is the shared experience of being *outsiders* and adds, *that experience connects us all.*

Listening to participants when establishing the camp agenda is obviously important if organisers are to give the event relevancy according to Minkler and Wallerstein's (2005) definition of that concept for community work. Across the week I do not experience any instances of the event being likened to a problem-treatment camp. Instead, participants point to the *relationship-building* (Johan) that is occurring. The obligation to do this is contained in the fact that participants are living together for a week.

> *You can't hold your face or sort of mask when you came here for so long time, twenty-four hours, around the clock, several days and you share a room. It's very special.* (Kalle)

> *...you have to imagine that you will eat breakfast together every morning, and that is not the same thing as picking up someone at the bar. Because then you know, if you don't like him you can do whatever you like. You can throw him out in the street in the morning.* (Martin)

Johan suggests GayCamp participants have to *take more responsibility* for this *relationship-building* than men attending commercial gay venues. But it is not just an imperative of living together that has the men recognising their shared identity. There is recognition of mutual benefit through shared identity at GayCamp. This is conceived in simple terms like a *cheap and nice vacation*[18] and to *keep track of myself* (Daniel) but also in

[18] The cost for full-paying participants was about 360 Swedish crowns each a day.

more profound ways like how it can *improve my gay life* and *(I) become better as a gay person* (Carl). During informal conversations, I do hear various men say that they have stopped or started doing particular activities at the point of coming to GayCamp, for example, *smoking, drinking, picking up men online* or *having a boyfriend*. Tomas, from the board, speaks about the camp being a *life altering experience* for many men. After the camp, he says, they do things they never did before. So this camp also functions as a form of capacity-building in the sense that it empowers those previously excluded from participation (Kenny & Clarke, 2010).

For Daniel, the camp provides the opportunity not only to go beyond boundaries but also to decide limits for oneself.

> *We have passed one border, the border of our sexuality 'you mustn't have sex with a man'. Fine. But we also pass other borders like 'how much should you drink?*
> (Daniel)

Finally, Empowerment is reported to have occurred through Play. Play appears repeatedly as a concept through the interview transcripts and consequently is dealt with below as its own theme. But I document some of the conversation with Kalle here to illustrate how he constructs this playful public performance as a means to empowerment, his *Empowerment Through Curtsy*.

I see Kalle making curtsying movements around the camp. I ask him what he is doing and he replies *Empowerment Through Curtsy*. So I ask him how that works.

Kalle: *I don't know? I think that it's a way of living out… I can't say it that well because it is just something that is, you know, its connecting people in a way, in a funny... We exaggerate the femininity so it becomes a bit absurd (…) we exaggerate and we can laugh at it (…) In your ordinary life you have to be so, ah, not stiff but so 'regular guys' but here you can be a little bit, 'oh my god', 'oh my dears!', 'sweetie', 'honey' and those nick names, girl names, 'Delores!' You know. (…) I think it is a boundary thing, one makes fun of oneself and jokes and lovingly exaggerates the woman in oneself, the female character (…)*

Ash: *So it mirrors the status of men and women?*

Kalle*: Maybe when I just think of it it's a sort of empowerment of the female side in. to let it out a little bit more, and maybe I feel empowered of it… otherwise women in the society are suppressed, homosexuals are suppressed, feminine homosexuals are more suppressed… no one says 'Karl! You are so feminine!' with an angry voice. Instead they say 'Lovely darling, you are so sweet today!' And you curtsy with this too , in a joyful (…) way, so it is empowerment, I think it is really when you ask. I hadn't thought about it really.*

Kalle's experience of play reflects spontaneity and an opportunity to see himself differently (Potter, 2016). It is a kind of transformation.

5.5 Play as Transformation, as Liberation and as Healing

There are a range of descriptions of men's individual and shared experience at GayCamp that contribute to this theme of play. These include mentions of *fun* (for example, Kalle, Ernesto, Ali Abdullah, Ollie) and *playful* (for example, Kalle, Ernesto, David) behaviour scattered through the transcripts as well as other anecdotes about the behaviour of

individuals and groups of men during the camp. In contrast to the serious talk that sets GayCamp apart from commercial gay activities and is deemed to be significant by the organisers and several of the participants, play is also held up as positive aspect of the GayCamp experience, in particular, the freedom to play. Kalle's *Curtsy* is one example, and there were others,

> *I am so free. It's me here, acting normally I don't, er, care if some …movement I give or not, it's ok.* (Ali Abdullah)

Play is figured here as a freedom of action, simple liberation from the way a man performs his gender and identity (Butler, 1993) within heteronormativity. (Lovaas & Jenkins, 2007). Ernesto indicated that the *playful*, *fun* and *cheerful* atmosphere of the camp was what he first appreciated on return in his second year. This is a recognition of the social capital (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2005) of the camp, existing through the return of this atmosphere as a collective asset, from year to year.

There are also instances of play as healing (Potter, 2016). Here is an example from the field notes. At lunch and dinner times, Klas appears dressed up as 'cupid' carrying a post-box where messages can be left to be read aloud or passed on to recipients. We are invited to leave these, either anonymous or signed, in the post-box. Klas then hands them out or reads them out according to the instructions on each note. One of these read:

> *… My beloved friend and brother,*
>
> *I want to use this to confirm our standing friendship. Your support and your words have played a big role and contributed to my being alive and also loving you with the whole of my heart*.

Lennart suggests that the concept of fifty gay and bisexual men going into the forest together for a week is a *strong fantasy* for some people. Potter (2016) indicates that the opportunity to play is a highly significant aspect of both the retreat participants' experience and the promotion of such events. But while sex might be regarded as a significant aspect of play, particularly for a group of gay men living in the forest together for a week, it doesn't figure as such in the interviews with the GayCamp men. I hear little about barebacking[19] culture, for example. The organisers don't promote the camp as a sex event, but they don't deny sex may happen there either.

> *Always when people ask me 'What is this GayCamp? Is it a one week long sex orgy?' And of course it is very natural if you put fifty gay guys in a house, of course they will have sex. Some of them, at least.* (Martin)

This is another mutual benefit of the camp: you might meet other men and perhaps the possibility of sex, but it comes with the responsibility of acting in certain ways. This suggests there is a culture of behaviour fostered at the camp. Play exists but is biased towards discretion and friendly play rather than sexual play. The bonds between people create an environment where more is possible yet there appear to be unspoken agreements about what is possible.

Butler's emancipatory promise that guarantees dissatisfaction (Gordon, 2005) might well apply for those men who assume coming out to GayCamp will result in sex. However

[19] *Barebacking* can be defined as intentionally unprotected anal intercourse in circumstances where the risk of HIV transmission has not been ruled out (Carballo-Dieguez et al, 2006.)

further investigation is required to determine to what extent GayCamp participants are discouraged from sexual activity by the way in which the organisers structure the camp.

6.0 Discussion

This piece of research sets out to describe and understand GayCamp from the perspective of community work practice. In terms of Twelvetrees (2008) description of *autonomous collective action*, the creation of a temporary residential community that enables learning, empowerment and promotes mutually beneficial ends can be regarded as a very practical application of community work theory. In this case, the temporary residential community created by GayCamp reflects all of the meanings of community proposed by Craig (2010): a geographic community, a community of shared intent and an event. The camp provides both place and space where an event can occur. The volunteer GayCamp board meets the standard of a non-profit association acting outside of formal agencies that typifies community work activities.

To be *on the homonorm* and *feel free* is at once both a consequence and also a justification for the alternative gay village. As a justification, it means the campers are conscious of themselves, of their shared identity, for the week. Participants make sense of themselves and refer to themselves in particular ways when they perceive of themselves as part of something collective. It is clear that what proceeds from this alternative gay village may not be possible outside of the event neither in the ordinary heteronormative world or the gay commercial world and also the performance of individual selves according to particular discourses might be less possible in other settings.

Among the possible reasons for transformative nature of the GayCamp experience are that it is relaxing when the heteronormative imperative is dropped. This of course raises the question of whether a homonormative imperative takes its place. One must consider that the norms for gay and bisexual men can also be prescribed and GayCamp has some norms of its own. Are we really telling our stories under conditions of our own choosing?

In leaving a minority position with the Heteronorm to live in the Homonorm at GayCamp, participants are also leaving behind the homonorm of the outside 'Gay World' for the homonorm of GayCamp. The homonorms of GayCamp and of the 'Gay World' are different. The development of a homonorm within the camp is also about developing respect, tolerance and understanding. The expectation of certain standards of behaviour develops from a sense of safe homonormative culture. This differs from circumstances in which participants might be more anonymous and goes far beyond the impression that living in a community of gay men for a week has just a sexual connotation. Living the GayCamp homonorm is particularly influential on how participants experience their identity during the camp.

While GayCamp is not a therapy camp per se, it clearly has the environment of a therapeutic society at times in that it provides the place and space for personal transformation and play of a spontaneous, non-competitive nature. The community provides a transformative arena for the individual and collective lives of these men, but has men engaging with their identity in other ways as well.. Informal activities help participants broaden their perspectives on others. The companionship of the camp has participants feeling supported and encouraged. The organisers construct the camp in ways that result in it being therapeutic. The organisers intend to create an alternative.

The event remains dynamic and responsive to the needs of those who attended from year to year. They are still operating from a grassroots approach, albeit one that has thirty years of history behind it. The principles of GayCamp have been developed over time and through the interactive experiences of participants.

But they are also constructed with an agenda, for example, to emphasise friendships and de-emphasise alcohol use. Personal development and increasing community capacity are both considered to be highly relevant. The role of the organisers is clearly to determine the

mix and priority of issues addressed and ways to most engage participants. They function both as partners with the participants and as teachers / guides and developers of leaders. They create a homosocial setting where living in a community of shared identity is both therapeutic and identity strengthening for participants.

As an activity of community work, establishing each GayCamp represents the building of a micro gay society – an Alternative Gay Village – into which men can come-in to Gay Worlds.

The diversity of participants on GayCamp is cited as one of the most positive experiences of the camp. There is no indication that anyone attends believing they will obtain treatment or healing or because they had a particular problem. However curiosity, a quest for knowledge, learning and personal development and an opportunity to play all appear to be motivating reasons for attendance. GayCamp is not responding to a problem but dealing with the evolution of issues as men develop their identities. For this coming-in to occur, it was first necessary to establish a community with some similarity of experience as a basis for collaboration. This similarity or shared experience is never definitively stated. Yet it is defined variously in terms of positioning outside the heteronorm, sexual activity, desire, identity and even love.

What the community workers do to build this shared experience might be described as culturally relevant acts of inclusion. Developing leaders is one of these. It can also be argued that those who repeatedly attend the camp have more influence over the shared identity. They are offered responsibilities or take initiatives at the encouragement of the organising committee. They are the bearers of past stories of the camp, which in turn influence the culture of the camp. The community work happening at GayCamp results in the establishment of peer networks. This is obvious to me from what I saw. Men who have been on previous camps meet up between the events through the year. Previous participants make

connections with those attending for the first time, and bring them into their networks and friendship circles. I am interested in how this sense of shared identity is contested and negotiated but a survey of such dynamics is beyond the scope of this paper. It is enough to say that creating a culture of inclusion where participants feel safe to share stories appears to be important when dealing with difference. It enables participants to be themselves. It also contributes to the sense of belonging felt by men attending.

These acts of inclusion include facilitating the participation of a diverse range of men with different experiences and levels of experience. I discuss this aspect with most of the men I interview over the week both formally and during informal conversations. While the development of a homonorm is obviously quite significant, it becomes clear to me that the accommodation of diversity is also a factor. Both contribute to the learning and development for participants over the duration of the camp.

Such a diverse range of participants can obviously present challenges to the organisers' intent on creating a gay village. Sweden has a tradition of people getting together to form associations. Along with this comes the expectation of tolerance. But the way in which the organisers respond to diversity also reflects the practical aspects of grassroots community work, the getting alongside and bringing together.

And this accommodation of diversity in turn leads to some speaking of experiencing transformation, be it in terms of *coming out* or in other ways, as a consequence of attending the event. Integration is another important concept in Swedish society. For GayCamp, it means providing a camp that serves the interests of homosexual and bisexual men, MSM and transpersons, supporting MSM from different ethnic backgrounds and participants of different HIV status. It is apparent that for some participants, the camp is an opportunity to make connections between different aspects of their well-being, namely, physical health, attitudes to HIV and emotional well-being.

The pay off for good behaviour (complying with the homonorm) may be the sense of inclusion the camp provides. This is evident from the first day when the organisers cunningly arrange for everyone in the camp to be dancing together.

Coming-in to the GayCamp society might also be described as an act, a defining time. Some men might say *I came out ther*e, for example, or use the camp as an audience for acknowledging some other intentional change they are making. Making a proclamation of intent during the base group appears to have some significance.

GayCamp helps some men become more established in their gay worlds and strengthens their identity. It becomes a therapeutic environment for the creation of identity. People with disabilities develop confidence. Those who misuse alcohol reduce their consumption. And participants come to new understandings about sex and love. Those who cannot talk about sex in their lives away from GayCamp might find opportunities to do so. The reality of the camp is possibly quite different to the fantasies some may have. During the week I see nothing overtly sexual happening which has me questioning: To what extent (and how) might those with the power to influence shared identity at GayCamp exercise that power to discourage sex?

The organisers make it clear that the camp is not about replicating the Gay World outside but providing alternatives so that men can consider how they want to live and draw from the variety of life experiences shared in this gay village. By welcoming men into a gay world through a gay village, the organisers make use of the diversity of individuals present on the camp to build an environment that was described variously as *fun* and *playful* as well as *educational* and *serious*. They grow the capacity of the camp by developing leaders from those who had attended multiple camps. But primarily they maintain and promote inclusion because that is what forms the basis for participation and participation means diversity can be appreciated and a critical consciousness can develop. It is the similarity of experience that

makes it possible to collaborate and the diversity of experience that facilitates Conscientization.

GayCamp becomes a place for participants to enter the gay world through an inclusive gay village where participants define themselves through their own and each other's stories.

It is clear that the experience of telling life-stories in a group is quite novel for most GayCamp attendees. Base groups of GayCamp are significant in the way they make space for telling life stories. Where else does the average person have the opportunity to do this telling and just be heard, without interruption? It is even difficult to discuss what was happening in the base groups without a point of reference.

While the base groups or GayCamp are never pitched by the organisers as being therapy, it appears they have therapeutic outcomes. Community work provides for a range of roles for social workers and leading a base group can be said to be very much a facilitator role.

This paper does not set out to provide an evaluation of the sexual health promotion activities at GayCamp, yet it is still relevant to indicate how sexual health promotion occurs through the community building activities there. At GayCamp, we see the community worker in another role, that of educator and guide. Sexual health promotion and HIV prevention are ever-changing fields. As new treatments emerge, more are living with HIV and each new generation develops new understandings of HIV in new ways. The organisers specifically structure the event with the intention of creating a safe, relaxed atmosphere and this, as well as a community established by intention, are both influential factors for the functioning as a site of sexual health promotion.

Developing a safer sex culture requires conversation and dialogue. Simply presenting information in a didactic way is not enough. The opportunities for development of identity

within the camp mean that there is constant encouragement of safer sex. The ‘Love Suites’ are one physical example of this. At the same time I wonder whether the organisation of the camp might not make for too contrived an environment and negate other possibilities for exploration of safer sex culture. As I point out, I don’t hear of or witness any forms of public sex, such as sex in the forest or even the sauna. That’s not to say these do not occur, as I do not go looking for them. But the camp doesn’t convey much of an invitation to explore engaging in sex, apart from the Love Suites. While the organisers might claim the camp evolves collaboratively according to the issues relevant to the participants, it can be argued that they instead favour particular kinds of interactions and construct an atmosphere of relative propriety that discourages more spontaneous sexual encounters. Did the camp go as far as it could in promoting safer sex, or sex-positivity generally? Historically, there have been some examples of innovative HIV education practices that encourage hands-on experience, so as to speak. GayCamp does not appear to do this. I also wonder about the extent to which participants are policing themselves within a standard of behaviour consistent with the homonorm of the camp. Again, perhaps I was not in the right place at the right time or was just not privy to such conversations but I question whether the sense of propriety on the camp means that some acts are off-limits.

On the other hand, there’s no doubt that, for some men, what they discover about safer sex on GayCamp represents a defining moment. If it is correct that gay men take greater risks in intimate relationships than they do in erotic oases (Henriksson, 1995) then it can be assumed that the focus on relationships, connection and intimacy at GayCamp is strategic. I suggest future research needs to be conducted in a culturally relevant manner and in consultation with the participants so as not to jeopardise the atmosphere of trust and openness that develops there over the week.

There will be those who insist that any event that brings fifty homosexually oriented men together for a week presents more of a risk for the transmission of sexual infections. My own reading of the situation infers otherwise. GayCamp constructs a caring atmosphere of responsibility and learning, a context through which love is still more likely to be openly expressed, acknowledged and respected rather than violated.

My experience at GayCamp echoes my experience as a therapist. Many people want a testimonial element to their lives. Participants are welcomed into groups and invited to speak and hear each other's life stories. They do this telling and act as audiences for each other in a collaborative setting constructed especially to include them: it is friendly and can be fun and playful as well as serious at times. Through this shared relationship, they develop knowledge and awareness of others lives which in turn can be personally, collectively and culturally transforming.

7.0 Conclusions

As an expression of community work, Sweden's GayCamp can be described and understood through a range of capacity building, empowerment and engagement practices. Attending the event as a participant-observer for the week, and reflection on the interviews and documentation, leads me to the following conclusions:

1. Living in a community of shared identity both strengthens identity and is therapeutic at GayCamp. It is an example of community building in that community workers can use it to create a homosocial environment where a new, relevant and agreed culturally-relevant homonorm can be established for mutual benefit;
2. When the GayCamp organisers establish shared-identity through practices of inclusion, they develop a collaborative and strengths-based foundation that facilitates both transformative personal development and the capacity of participants to be audience to the stories of others. Inclusion and participation are the fundamental means these community workers use to build the identity of the event;
3. GayCamp organisers are grassroots community workers who operate in dual capacities as both partners and guides in raising critical consciousness for camp participants. They are skilled in both maintaining a collaborative presence so that issues can be promoted democratically but they also lead, decide over and prioritise the agenda of issues and structure of the event with the intention of ensuring both relevance and participation;
4. The telling and retelling of Life Stories, and the facilitation of these tellings, is a powerful means to empowerment through confirming identity and making sense of life experiences. While they are not framed as therapy, the base groups for life stories do have therapeutic and identity-strengthening aspects. Participants report empowerment as an outcome of life story telling;

5. Diversity is presented as a positive means of developing critical consciousness on the camp. Diversity is a basis to the social capital of the GayCamp event and essential to building community identity. The voluntary community workers of GayCamp also employ diversity within their political and democratic agendas;
6. With respect to HIV Prevention & Sexual Health Promotion, residential based community work with Men who have Sex with Men has enormous potential. It is a sophisticated and low cost way to engage with participants to bring about the transfer of peer knowledge and to encourage men to be co-researchers in their own lives;

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