

The Gay Dance Party Culture in Sydney: A Qualitative Analysis

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ABSTRACT. We investigated the gay dance party phenomenon in Sydney in terms of its social and historical context by carrying out 16 qualitative interviews with patrons and organisers of these events. Sydney with a population of 3.5 million is both the capital of New South Wales and the Gay capital of Australia. The gay dance party appears to be a response to a number of conditions which co-existed in the mid 1980s, as previously suggested by Wotherspoon (1991). These included the decriminalization of homosexuality and enactment of the anti-discrimination legislation which set the scene for greater expression of a gay lifestyle, the tradition of inner-city gay bars and private parties as meeting places, and the development of an inner-city gay enclave centred around the Kings Cross, Surry Hills, and Darlinghurst areas. In addition, the development of so-called "party drugs" such as Ecstasy which acted as mood-modulators, the availability of appropriately sited venues, with the development of laser-lighting and other computer-generated light shows, and the

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new threat of HIV infection acted to provide the context for a more ritualized set of social interactions which fulfilled social and psychological needs for many of the gay party patrons.

There has been some analysis of the social context of gay interaction in the gay bar (Read, 1980), but more recent developments have suggested that there has been a movement toward the gay disco in the 1970s (Ringdahl, 1991), and more recently to the gay dance party. The dance party is a social structure which acts as a vehicle for expression of group identity as well as a place to meet partners, and in addition appears to serve a function in permitting expression of psychological coping with the HIV epidemic. It is apparent that the context of gay interaction has changed over the past decades, and that the gay dance party is an expression of changed needs and social contexts over that time.

Since the early 1980s thousands of young gay men have gathered together at large inner-city Sydney venues to dance and use illegal drugs on an almost weekly basis (Safe & Sager, 1990). The aim of this qualitative analysis is to investigate some of the cultural, social, and psychological dimensions operating within this context, which may contribute to increased risky sexual and drug-related behaviour amongst this subpopulation.

The parties afford patrons an opportunity to use psychoactive substances, particularly Ecstasy (Methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA)), and enjoy non-threatening social interaction on a large scale with minimal intervention by the authorities (Waingarten, 1989; Safe & Sager, 1990). According to Wotherspoon (1991), gay social institutions (including the dance parties and many others) evolved out of a specific set of social, political, and economic determinants dating back to the 1950s and 1960s. He suggested that these elements were mainly responsible for the current demographic characteristics (such as size, density, and location) of both the wider society and the gay inner-city subculture. First, Sydney had to reach a "critical population mass" before it was large and dynamic enough to tolerate a diverse range of subcultures (Fisher, 1975), such as the gay subculture and its social institutions. Moreover, two important gay legal reforms needed to be implemented before they were at liberty to "come out" of their traditional covert social venues (such as bars, nightclubs, and private parties) and publicly interact at gay social institutions. These legal prohibitions were partly redressed in New South Wales in 1982 with the enactment of the homosexual anti-discrimination law and later by the decriminalization of homosexuality in 1984 (Wotherspoon, 1991). Further, this social evolutionary process culminated in the raising

of awareness both inside and outside the gay subculture to the extensive size and diversity of the gay population in Sydney. Wotherspoon (1991) suggested that many gay entrepreneurs recognized the potential size of this "instant" market and established a wide range of social institutions (such as the dance parties) to cater for this previously "closeted" gay population.

One of the major obstacles for the organizers was finding a large conveniently located venue to accommodate these anticipated crowds. This dilemma was overcome with the acquisition of the Hordern pavilion in late 1983 (located at the main Sydney showground) within walking distance of most of the inner-city suburbs (Waingarten, 1989). The gay dance party and the Hordern pavilion proved to be a formula for success with crowds in excess of seven thousand people almost every weekend (Safe & Sager, 1990). Consequently many organizers decided to expand their enterprises by soliciting party patrons from outside the inner-city gay subculture (Waingarten, 1989).

In analysing the origin (and exceptional growth) of the dance party phenomenon it is important not to neglect the biopsychosocial effects of the HIV/AIDS pandemic on the inner-city gay subculture at this time. First, the gay subculture and the popular press were becoming increasingly aware of the prevalence of HIV/AIDS cases amongst western gay subcultures. Davenport-Hines (1990) comments that the early media reports were often inaccurate and sensational, only providing additional confusion and fear to an already frightening situation amongst the gay communities and the wider cultures. Many inner-city gay men were being faced with the stark reality of the virulence of the HIV virus as acquaintances and significant others (and perhaps themselves) were being diagnosed with this intimidating disease.

The confusion, frustration, and accumulative fear during this period were compounded by the absence of a vaccine or cure for HIV, as suggested by Davenport-Hines (1990). According to Sartre (1977), individuals who are constantly enmeshed in unrelenting life-threatening experiences usually seek out other people (who identify with their fears and lifestyle) to help them cope with their escalating anxiety. He said "they take great precautions by setting up supernatural barriers, at times reviving old myths, at others binding themselves by scrupulous rites. They [often] dance; that keeps them busy . . . and then the dance mimes secretly, often without their knowing, the refusal they cannot utter [to death]" (p. 16). Zoja (1989) suggested that many of these ceremonies incorporated the use of psychoactive substances which emancipated the person (or the group) from everyday reality where the source of their distress was located.

Frazer (1976) also suggested that the re-enactment of these life-fortifying rituals provided the individual (or group) with a sense of control (order) over an uncontrollable or chaotic situation. A similar phenomenon may be operating amongst the gay party patrons with their reported frenetic dancing and common use of psychoactive substances (Safe & Sager, 1990; Lansing, 1992). According to previous research the mind-set of the person and the context (set and setting) in which drugs are used are important determinants in the efficacy of the intoxication phase (Leary, 1968; Stevens, 1988; Newcombe, 1988). The organizer usually provided sophisticated light and sound technology which may have enhanced the party patrons' drug-induced experience.

The list of drugs available in the inner-city area appeared to grow commensurately with the dance party culture with the frequent additions of new drugs (Solowij et al., 1992). According to previous research a "new" illegal substance known as Ecstasy (MDMA), became increasingly available from inner-city dealers around the same time as the maximum growth phase of the dance party institution (1984-1985) (Chesher, 1990; Solowij et al., 1992). Newcombe (1988) reports that Ecstasy promoted highly desirable sociopsychological attributes such as feelings of enhanced communication and well-being. These dimensions may have taken on increased significance and played an important psychotherapeutic role amongst the gay party patrons with their growing concern about the personal consequences of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Many gay party patrons at this stage had been personally affected by the continuing "shock-waves" of this life-threatening disease, including the growing casualty lists in Sydney and overseas.

The major concern of this research is the development and context of the dance party institution and its interactions with the reported common use of psychoactive substances amongst party patrons (Waingarten, 1989; Safe & Sager, 1990; Lansing, 1992; Solowij et al., 1992), which have the potential to impair their judgement and result in unsafe sexual and drug-related activities (Stall, McKusick, Wiley, Coates, & Ostrow, 1986; Butt, 1989). According to Stall et al. (1986), the use of recreational drugs may alter the discriminative perception of the user and result in an increase of HIV infection.

Although there is an abundance of research and literature on the association between substance use and risky sexual practices by gay men (Butt, 1989; Gold, 1989; Stall & Ostrow, 1989), there appears to be no previous research on the gay dance party context and party drugs. This study attempted to examine the relationship between drug use and the gay dance party phenomenon by means of qualitative interviews to both de-

scribe the phenomenon and place it in its HIV/AIDS and drug-related context.

METHOD

The Respondents were 16 gay men from the inner-city area, whose ages ranged from 19 years to 40 years, with more than 50% in their twenties (Table 1).

All Respondents were paid \$Aust. 20 (about \$U.S. 15) for participating in the study. They were obtained through friendship networks, word-of-mouth referrals, recommendations from the Albion Street AIDS Centre and the AIDS Council of New South Wales. The criteria for respondent participation were (1) they self-identified as gay men, (2) they used recreational drugs (including party drugs and alcohol), and (3) they regularly frequented the gay dance parties in Sydney. An additional subject was invited to participate to furnish relevant data from an original (and current) gay dance party organizer's perspective.

All respondents were informed they could withdraw at any stage of the

TABLE 1. Demographic, Age, Educational Level, Drugs Used, Route of Administration, HIV Sero-Status.

Respondent	Age	Education Level	Drugs Used	Route	HIV Sero status
1	20	Tertiary	E, L, A, C, S	Oral, Nasal	Negative
2	22	Tertiary	L, S, A, M	Oral	Negative
3	25	Tertiary	E, S, C	Oral	Negative
4	29	Tertiary	E, S, K, N, L	IDU	Positive
5	24	Tertiary	E, C, L, M	Oral	Negative
6	31	Tertiary	M, E, S, N, Q	Oral, Nasal	Negative
7	25	Completed Secondary	E, L, S, M	Oral, Nasal	Negative
8	36	Tertiary	S, E, MDA	IDU, Nasal	Negative
9	30	Tertiary	S, L, A, N, M, E	Oral	Negative
10	30	Completed Secondary	M, S, A, E, N, C	Oral, Nasal	Positive
11	25	Tertiary	A, S, E	Oral	Negative
12	25	Tertiary	S, L, E	Oral	Negative
13	25	Tertiary	S, L, C, A, M, E	Oral	Negative
14	40	Tertiary	E, L, MDA, M	IDU	Unknown
15	19	Completed Secondary	M, S, A, E	Oral, Nasal	Unknown
16	26	Tertiary	M, L, A, E	Oral	Negative

*Drugs. M = Marijuana, C = Cocaine, N = Nitrite, A = Alcohol, E = Ecstasy, S = Speed, K = Ketamine, Q = Quaaludes, L = Lysergic Acid Diethylamide, MDA = Methylenedioxymphetamine

** IDU = Injecting Drug User, Nasal = Nasal Snorting

interview and that their anonymity would be preserved throughout the investigation. Moreover, their self-reports were strictly confidential and only available to the current researchers. The respondents completed the interviews following their informed consent to all the above ethical conditions (the study was approved by the relevant university ethics committee). To control for these factors the following procedures were adopted: (1) first names (and initial if more than one person shared the same first name) were used on the appointment schedules, (2) all respondents were required to use their initials only on the participant consent forms (informed consent forms), (3) all respondents were assigned a number from 1 to 16 when the data were transcribed. These numbers were not representative of their position in the interview schedules. The sixteen tapes were roughly shuffled on a desk top before they were transcribed.

Respondents were interviewed face-to-face by the researcher and concurrently tape-recorded in a private office for approximately one hour. The questions and interview were open-ended and embedded in a conversational context of interviews. At the conclusion of each interview the researchers analysed the respondent's data for patterns of consistency and any new information.

The number and content of these items were constantly being refined by new data being generated from the previous respondent's data. Whereby, supplementary items were generated through this process (in accordance with Glaser and Strauss's, 1967, Grounded Theory guidelines) and applied to subsequent respondents. The items were sequentially ordered in a non-threatening format with general social questions asked in the initial stage (approximately 20 minutes) followed by more sensitive personal items related to respondents' use of drugs and sexual behaviour within the context of the dance party scene. This procedure was considered an important control for the development of honest and open rapport between the interviewer and the interviewee given the sensitivity of the issues being tapped.

The questions administered to the organizer were derived from the data furnished by all sixteen respondents and data were mainly used for a descriptive analysis of the inner-city dance party scene.

Analysis

Respondents' tape-recorded interviews were subsequently transcribed verbatim and analysed for consistency of response and any extreme variances from the consensus views (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). These data were then organized into core categories and the most representative statements of the respondents were used to substantiate the analysis, as suggested by

Strauss (1987). The respondents' verbatim quotes are reported in the results section of this paper under the relevant core category.

RESULTS

The statements in this section were verbatim quotes derived from respondents' transcripts. They represented the individual respondent's social construction of the inner-city gay dance party reality and were "a truth" (one perspective) not "the truth" on this area (Berger & Luckman, 1975). It is important to note this limitation on the generalizability of these data, which may also be restricted by some unknown or unanticipated biases in respondents' inclusions. However, we attempted to avoid any obvious biases in their selection from the variety of sources. The data in this section have been reported in a sequential format, rather than a hierarchical or sensational manner to allow the qualitative analysis to emerge chronologically and contextually.

History of Dance Parties

The large-scale inner-city gay dance party institution's inauguration coincided with the first Mardi Gras Party held at the Hordern Pavilion in 1984, followed by the first entrepreneurial party on New Year's Eve 1984, according to the organizer and the respondents.

Several social and economic factors contributed to its inception, rapid growth, and evolution as suggested by the data. The acquisition of the Hordern venue and its unrestricted alcohol licence were some of the main elements in the success of the dance party milieu. As described by the organizer:

Sydney's licencing laws at the time [1984], combined with not many venues that are open all night . . . it was perfect. The Hordern's 24-hour alcohol licence meant that the venue there was perfect.

According to many of the respondents, the Hordern pavilion had a capacity to accommodate approximately 7,000 party patrons. They also said that the Mardi Gras and Sleaze Ball committee currently leased several adjacent venues (including the Hordern and the Royal Hall of Industries) to accommodate the crowds (often in excess of 15,000 patrons) at these annual gay celebrations. Respondent 6 said:

The weekly parties at the Hordern attract around 7,000 [people] . . .

for Mardi Gras and Sleaze we use both the Hordern and the Royal Hall of Industries . . . it's right next to the Hordern.

Wotherspoon (1991) suggested that the early inner-city gay social activities were held in secret underground venues because homosexuality was a felony in New South Wales until 1984. Respondent 6 described some of the social characteristics of these earlier covert venues. He said:

The parties were underground and they weren't very well known . . . 90% of the people plus would take drugs. It was all very well understood and very expected, not only by the people that go, but by the organizers. They're all generally inner-city residents.

As the dance parties became more popular they attracted a more diverse audience and many gay entrepreneurs capitalized on this opportunity. They began catering for smaller more exclusively gay patrons in underground venues (such as vacant warehouses and stadiums) close to the inner-city area. Respondent 6 described the current locations of the inner-city dance parties:

[They are] held at the Hordern pavilion, and underground warehouses in the inner-city area.

According to the organizer, his dance party's origin and instant and meritorious rise to success were not linked to the growing popularity of the traditional annual gay Mardi Gras celebration. He said:

We started independent to the Mardi Gras, over six years ago. Our first party was for over two thousand people . . . it really exploded after the first major success.

Moreover, he implied that his parties were important gay social institutions where patrons congregated and performed quasi-religious rituals. He suggested that people get together and they [the parties] are participatory celebrations.

An interesting social-legal contradiction emerged when the organizer leased the Hordern from the Showground authorities. That is, the leasing arrangements were conditional on the liquor licencing regulations which provided the patrons with a "perfect" venue where they could safely use illegal intoxicants. These gay inner-city dance parties were an instant success catering for an instant population.

One of the reasons for their success was that gay men in New South

Wales (of which Sydney with a population of 3.5 million is the capital) were experiencing increasing legal and social liberation which enabled them to socialize in public arenas, as discussed by Wotherspoon (1991). They provided a unique opportunity for people to see for the first time the diversity and potential size of the gay subculture.

However, this process began to attract a lot of attention and unwanted outsiders were attracted to the gay inner-city dance party scene.

The Gay Dance Party Transformed by Infiltration of Outsiders

Respondent 1 suggested that these heterosexual outsiders were disrupting the ambience of the parties with their aggression and lack of respect for the gay dance party patrons' norms and values ("etiquette"). He said:

The straights are coming into the parties and they are bringing aggression. They do not know the social etiquette of the scene and they are using alcohol.

Taylor and Leonard (1983) suggested that alcohol was one of the main contributory factors in the frequency of overt aggression. Many of the respondents withdrew from social interaction with heterosexual dance party patrons because of their alcohol-induced aggression, as suggested by Respondent 13:

I stopped going to straight parties: too much aggro, too much alcohol . . . straight guys don't know how to handle the drugs.

Many of the outsiders violated the norms and values of the dance party milieu because they were not familiar with the possible dangers of not adhering to them. Some of the norms and values developed as social controls to ensure the survival of the dance party milieu. They created a united front against the common enemy, the drug enforcement authorities. Respondent 8 provided an account of the outsiders' violation of one important survival code. He said:

The new wave of people from the outer-city limits do not know the party format of purchasing their drugs before the event. The etiquette involves getting your act together before you go to the party.

Respondent 4 suggested that the outsiders' intimidating and aggressive presence at the large-scale semi-public gay social institution was responsible for its disintegration:

When they see us they say "fags" and other things . . . the gays are the ones that started off the parties . . . they like fucked it up.

A form of "heterophobia" may have developed among this traditionally repressed group (Evans, 1988) with their possible threat of being overwhelmed by these outsiders from the dominant culture. According to Respondent 8, gay dance party patrons became increasingly discriminating in their choice of dance parties. He said:

There were some parties we just didn't go to, because we knew there'd be a lot of B & T people there.

The term "B & T" (bus and train) was used by some of the respondents to negatively describe these unwanted outsiders and their main modes of transport to the inner-city dance parties. It was also used metaphorically to communicate the cultural distance between the inner-city gay dance party group and the outer-city newcomers. Hewstone and Jaspars (1982) suggested that negative attributes were often used to socially categorize members of the opposing out-group. That is, the social world was divided into two distinct categories, them and us.

The norms and values of the inner-city gay dance party group were foreign to these predominately heterosexual western suburbs party patrons. The social structure of the original gay dance party institution had evolved into a hostile environment for many gay patrons with the infiltration of these heterosexual outsiders.

In response to this aggressive coup many party veterans abandoned the large-scale semi-public party scene and attended smaller gay-oriented underground venues. Respondent 8 described this phenomenon:

The underground parties have sprung up as a reaction against the widening group of people who have come to the Hordern parties. The underground parties are usually more exclusive, they're gay or inner-city type people.

The semi-public gay dance party institution became so unbalanced with representatives of the dominant culture (heterosexuals) that most gay men resumed their pattern of attending "closeted" dance party venues. Festinger and Carlsmith (1959) suggested that groups often reverted to familiar patterns of behaviour to reduce ambiguities and incongruencies between the conflicting groups; it also increased cohesiveness within the group.

Social and Economic Evolution of the Gay Party Institution

According to Wotherspoon (1991), the inner-city suburbs (such as Kings Cross, Darlinghurst, Surry Hills, and Paddington) rapidly gentrified with the influx of young men from the 1950s. For decades the Kings Cross area had a libertarian reputation and attracted many socially displaced people.

Wotherspoon (1991) suggested that financial independence and the growing ownership of cars were also two important contributory factors in the development of the inner-city gay subculture. Many of the gay social institutions (such as the dance parties) developed partly in response to the considerable leisure time amongst this affluent subculture, as discussed by Wotherspoon (1991).

According to the respondents the inner-city gay subculture had established a sense of community identity. As Respondent 10 said:

When you're gay you're always part of the scene . . . there is a set community.

Sorrels and Kelley (1984) suggested that commitments to a social identity generally involved prescribed lifestyles including norms and values, such as those adhered to by the gay dance party patrons.

According to the organizer the gay dance parties reflected the social status and lifestyle of the party patrons. He said:

They are too expensive for the poor kids, so they're mostly middle class.

According to Respondent 16 the dance party patron required "quite" an income to regularly attend the dance parties.

It is quite expensive, it can cost you say one hundred and fifty dollars to two hundred to get everything together for the dance party.

The gay dance party milieu was undermined by the infiltration of marginal outsiders who attended the parties despite the financial costs. Respondent 6 said:

The very hip crowd who go to the very hip clubs. The crowd has changed with lots of people from further out. It's far less drug-involved, it's far less fashionable, it's far more ordinary people coming in.

The respondents suggested that there was a definite class difference between the "very hip" (culturally aware) inner-city gay dance party group and the "ordinary" outsiders who had a degenerative effect on the ambience of the party scene. Feather (1985) suggested that group members often increased intra-group cohesion by attributing negative characteristics to outsiders.

Many of the respondents derived increased self-esteem and group identity by attributing negative characteristics to these unwanted outsiders. According to the respondents an increasing number of inner-city gay dance patrons resolved this conflict by attending underground gay-oriented parties.

Some Social and Biographical Characteristics of the Dance Party Milieu

Age. The age of the party patrons varied from mid-teens to mid-forties according to the respondents and the organizer. Respondent 9 suggested that party patrons were getting younger with the infiltration of outsiders:

The patrons are definitely getting younger. I think this accounts for the police interest or renewed interest. The age range from quite young because there is not strict rules . . . you're not talking about alcohol.

Respondent 9 described some of the social dissonance between the dance party institution's and the wider culture's sanctioned attitudes toward drug and alcohol use within the dance party context. Whereby, more young people were attending the parties (using illegal drugs) because they were not prohibited by the alcohol legislation with the statutory age being 18 years in New South Wales. The organizer provided a definite age range of the dance party patrons:

The age range of people attending the parties are 14 to 46 years with a concentration in the early twenties.

Overall cost of parties. The respondents suggested that the cost of attending the parties was a considerable expenditure. Respondent 16 said:

It is quite expensive, it can cost you say one hundred and fifty dollars to two hundred to get everything together for the dance party.

The cost of tickets. The cost of most dance party tickets ranged in price from \$ Aust. 30 to 35 according to the respondents. The gay-specialized

dance parties (including Mardi Gras Party and Sleaze Ball) only sold their tickets from established gay distribution outlets. Respondent 2 said:

The parties are only advertized in the gay circle and the tickets are only available from gay ticket outlets.

Male to female ratio. The male to female ratio of the party patrons varied in accordance with whether they were promoted as more exclusively gay social events. That is, most of the gay dance parties had some female patrons who were sensitive to gay issues. However, a small number of underground party venues were exclusively gay and by invitation only, as suggested by Respondent 8:

There are some gay underground parties where women are not invited. You have to be on an exclusively gay mailing list to attend.

Time span. According to respondents the parties generally started at 11 p.m. and ended around 8 a.m. the following morning. The parties usually climaxed between 1 a.m. to 2 a.m. which was the reported peak-phase of the drugs for most of the patrons. Respondent 8 said:

The parties start about 11 p.m., but most people wouldn't get there until 12 or 12:30 and then leave at 3, 4, 5 or 6 o'clock in the morning. Although it continues until 8 a.m. Everyone's drugs start to peak, to hot up around 1:30 to 2:00 o'clock in the morning.

The increasing number of young heterosexual party patrons (ranging in age from 14 years) were not deterred by the considerable cost of attending the dance parties including tickets and illegal drugs. Moreover, they seemed to be at liberty to dance through the night even though some of the younger party patrons were unable to purchase legal drugs (such as alcohol and tobacco) in New South Wales.

Set and Setting

Most of the respondents and the organizer suggested that the set and setting enhanced their drug-induced state and reinforced ritualized behaviour amongst the dance party patrons. The organizer said:

There's a ritual in what they do . . . the design of our dance certainly is, if you're on drugs it'll be great. There should be sufficient stimuli in the way it's created.

The standard set and setting included spectacular light shows using laser, vari-lights, strobes, and black lights, which often combined with artificial smoke machines.

According to Bogoras (1979), shaman (healers) in pre-literate societies used similar stimuli (such as drums, music, dance, coloured objects, and smoke) to facilitate an altered state of consciousness amongst their adepts. Both the shaman and the dance party organizers recognized the importance of set and setting in creating a consciousness-changing environment, as suggested by Ringdal (1991). Respondent 7 described the importance of the controlling external variables (such as set and setting) following the use of psychoactive substances:

The set and setting is designed to enhance the experience of the drugs. It's very important to have the right lighting on certain drugs, maybe Acid, just the whole feeling especially the music.

The organizers manipulated the environment with highly sophisticated technology to control for the different drug-induced states amongst the party patrons. Respondent 11 suggested that this wide range of external stimuli increased the efficacy of targeting the most of the patrons' drug-related effects. He said:

Just by providing each separate effect you're bound to accommodate the effects of a particular drug, lasers, you're catering for anything visual. You're receptive to all your senses, they provide satisfaction for all your senses. The drugs make you see the things you wouldn't normally see . . . changes your perception.

According to most of the respondents the skillful manipulation of stimuli afforded party patrons with an integrative mood-enhancing experience, as suggested by Stevens (1988). Respondent 16 suggested that the dance parties were

very well orchestrated, DJs know exactly what the crowd like. They take drugs themselves, so they're aware of what's happening. The lighting is also very much orchestrated to the mood of the crowd.

According to the respondents and the organizer most of the parties provided a back room (often the male toilets) for those patrons who wanted to participate in anonymous sexual behaviour. The lights were generally removed from these areas in the early stages of the dance party session. The organizer described the dramatic effect the toilet had on some people:

They used to knock the lights out in the toilets and you'd go down there and it'd be like Whoo! Whoo!

The atypical environment created by the set and setting, the use of psychoactive substances, and the sexual behaviour in the unlit back rooms may have increased the risk of HIV transmission. These risks may also have been intensified by the patrons' loss of visual perception within the context of the darkened back room.

Most of the party patrons had also experienced, according to Respondent 11, a "changed perception" through the use of party drugs. Stall et al. (1986) suggested that the combination of drugs and sexual behaviour increased their likelihood of risky behaviour in these areas. That is, the party patrons who performed sexual behaviour within the context of the back rooms at the dance parties may have removed themselves even further from their everyday reality and the significance of safe sexual and drug-related guidelines.

Parties as Ritualized Celebrations

The gay dance parties were social institutions where many gay men experienced and celebrated en masse the survival of themselves and of the inner-city gay community. These were important victories considering the overwhelming homophobic attitudes communicated by the wider society and the devastating effects of HIV/AIDS amongst their community.

According to Herdt (1982), humans engaged in ritualized celebrations to enrich their lives by giving meaning to their existence. Zoja (1989) suggested that rituals were the sanctified artifact of a subculture in crisis (such as the inner-city gay community) who were constantly confronted with life-effacing issues. The dance party organizer discussed the absence of life-reinforcing social institutions and the "unique" role the dance parties played in reconciling this social hiatus:

In Australia there aren't big festivals, where people can get together and celebrate. It's a unique experience of humans self-expressing together.

The dance party celebrations were not dissimilar in form and content to some local religious meetings, in so far as they offered the party patrons a structured format on a regular basis where they experienced ritualized social celebrations with their peers.

Ritualized Drug-Taking at Dance Parties

Leach (1978) suggested that the objects used within a ritual venue were imbued with powerful symbolic meaning which thereafter evoked the

re-enactment of these rituals. The drugs and the dance party venues were infused with symbolic significance and considered essential elements in the success of a dance party "ceremony," as discussed by the organizer:

Many people use recreational drugs as part of the ritualized celebration [at the dance parties].

Many of the respondents said that they would not go to the parties without drugs because there would be a negative outcome. Respondent 6 described this phenomenon:

In terms of going to the parties, there isn't really any point in going without drugs, you just wouldn't have a good time because that is part of the overall atmosphere.

Frazer (1976) discussed a similar phenomenon amongst some pre-literate societies where they believed a negative (evil) outcome transpired if they did not adhere to ritual prescriptions. The organizer used the term "conversation" to describe a similar implicit belief held by many of the dance party patrons.

It's a conversation . . . in order to do this we need to do that and in order to have fun we have to be out of it, it's a belief system.

The drugs may have served an important psychotherapeutic role for some gay party patrons by providing a vehicle of escape from the stresses of everyday homophobic reality (Herek, 1984). According to Read (1980), some gay men used psychoactive substances to escape from the hardships they experienced in everyday reality. This consciousness transformation was particularly poignant to the gay dance party patrons who were constantly faced with the virulent presence of HIV/AIDS in their community.

The Gay Parties Were Celebrations of Victories of Life in the Mortal War Against HIV

The parties were gay social institutions where gay men saw, felt, and celebrated en masse the survival of themselves and their community during the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Respondent 4 discussed the positive reinforcement he and other men living with HIV/AIDS derived from being participant-observers at the dance parties:

They're not well and yet they're out there having a really good time. They might be fucked on Sunday, but they are able to do it.

Siegel (1986) suggested that a psychological state of well-being was an important co-factor in the maintenance and promotion of a healthier lifestyle for a person living with HIV or related disorders. Respondent 4 described his positive emotional reaction to other HIV/AIDS positive party patrons who bravely normalized their lives by regularly patronizing the dance parties. He said:

Personal strokes when I see him and say Whow! I haven't seen him for ages, and think, well they're still around. [I] become emotional, I really am pleased to see them and they're really pleased to see me.

Paradoxically, the dance parties offered many patrons living with HIV the opportunity to reject the larger society's prescriptions for a person dying from a "deadly disease" and experience the significant meaning of the will to live, as Frankl (1984) also found amongst the survivors of the Nazi concentration camps.

Shared Experiences and Sense of Belonging to a Social Group

In accordance with Sorrels and Kelley's (1984) model the gay dance party institution constituted a social system with its shared norms, values, symbols, lifestyles, and experiences. Durkheim (1954) suggested that these norms and rules gave rise to a set of prescribed behaviours, ideologies, and belief systems which positively reinforced the individual's desire to be identified as a group member. Respondent 7 described some of the dance party patrons' (collectively) positive attributes and by extension his own:

People who attend the party scene have similar ways of thinking, very open minded, very accepting without questioning.

Respondent 16 suggested that group identification and interaction were important dimensions in the evolution of group cohesiveness. He said:

There's a sense of belonging, a whole big group of people that are doing the same thing at the same time.

The dance parties afforded many of the gay dance party patrons an alternative libertarian (and more socially specific) institution, where they could gather in large numbers with people from similar lifestyles and use a wide range of illegal substances in safety. The use of illegal drugs and other shared behaviours consolidated the group's cohesiveness and identity.

Drugs and Dance Party Develop Sense of Community Identity

The dance party was a social unit and according to Jaspers (1959) it relied on the efficacy of its symbols to communicate meaning within the group. The ritualized use of recreational drugs was one of their symbols which may have a particular meaning within the context of the dance party. One important meaning attributed to the use of party drugs by the respondents was that they extirpated them from everyday reality, as described by Respondent 13:

It also separates, excludes people from the rest of the world. It creates a safer atmosphere, where you can relate to other people on whatever reality you like.

Paradoxically, this transformation had undesirable side-effects which created social and cognitive boundaries. Tajfel and Turner (1979) suggested that individuals divided their social world into "them" and "us" and this process contributed to the antagonism between the dance party patrons and the outsiders and the mass exodus by gay party patrons from the large-scale semi-public venues.

The drugs may have also impaired the dance party patrons' cognition including their ability to recall the significance of safer-sexual and drug-related information. Or more hazardously they may have performed risky behaviour because they were amnesiac to everyday knowledge where safe sexual messages were learnt. This cognitive impairment has been extensively researched and was known as "state-dependent learning" theory (Overton, 1972; Eich, 1977; Lowe, 1988).

Parties Provided Social Genre for Many of the Inner-City Gay Men

Many of the gay men who attended the dance parties were single and often lived some distance from their family of origin and friends. They may have gravitated to the inner-city area to be with people who shared a similar lifestyle, as suggested by Wotherspoon (1991). Although the inner-city dance parties may have offered a sanctuary for these social exiles, they may still have been isolated and lonely for meaningful close relationships. Many of the party patrons developed a fraternity network and some acquired a surrogate family structure to meet their need for intimacy. Respondent 1 described this social function within the context of the dance parties:

The parties provide social networks, when you're new to the city with no friends. Ecstasy and the party scene filled a huge chasm and

the people became my immediate family. They provided the nurturing and affection I needed, they invite you into their space.

Many of the respondents suggested that they needed to be with a group of friends when they used psychoactive substances at the dance parties. They may have endeavoured to reduce their anxiety by taking a sample of their everyday reality (their friends) into the alienating large-scale dance parties. Folkman (1984) suggested that social support systems (such as friendship networks and substitute family structures) helped people to cope with stressful social situations. Many of the gay party patrons were accustomed to fashioning alternative psychological mechanisms to help them cope with their alienated homophobic everyday existence (Evans, 1988; Wotherspoon, 1991).

Friends and Social Situations Determined by Use of Drugs

Friendship and social groups were generally closed social units with similar goals, norms, values, and behaviour, as suggested by Baron and Byrne (1987). Respondent 1 described the important social bonding qualities of sharing recreational drugs with "friends" within the dance party milieu.

Friends are determined by their use of similar drugs . . . conversation is all around the use of drugs and the party scene.

Previous research demonstrated that shared experiences and external threats increased solidarity within the group (Sherif, Harvey, White, Hood, & Sherif, 1961). Stoner (1987) also suggested that people in group situations often behaved in a more reckless manner than when alone. The term used to describe this phenomenon was "risky shift." Whereby, an individual was more prepared to shift his attitude and behaviour to the 'risky' end of the continuum when he was a member of a group. The need to belong to a group may have been so overwhelming that some respondents were prepared to forfeit their autonomy and discriminative capacity in favour of group conformity, as discussed by Burnstein (1983). Respondent 5 described the powerful social forces of inter-group conformity:

I took Ecstasy because my friends took it, and I knew it would be fun to do. On one occasion I didn't really want to take LSD we were all going out and my friends were taking it too.

Respondent 1 suggested that anonymity was one of the major psychological dimensions which helped sustain risk-taking behaviour within the

context of the large scale dance party crowd. He said party patrons were able to

experiment with new ideas, and risk being yourself and know it was safe no matter how you behaved. By experiencing this in a public setting, it added a new dimension, allowing you to be disinhibited.

According to Cohen (1971), there was a strong association between group cohesion and group members' performing deviant behaviour, such as the use of illegal substances in public settings. Respondent 5 described the sociopsychological benefits derived from this socially dissident behaviour:

My friends and I go on adventures together using LSD. It's fun to do, and it is illegal.

Many of the gay party patrons may have gained additional satisfaction from performing an illegal (deviant) act whilst emerged in the culture that traditionally repressed them, as suggested by Evans (1988).

Paradoxically, this same behaviour was congruent with the norms and values of the dance party milieu. Cohen (1971) noted that subcultural norms and values were often more stringent predictors of behaviour within the group than the wider cultures' mandates.

Intuitively there seemed to be a correlation between increased risky behaviour (including sexual) and the size of the crowd, that is, the larger the dance party crowd the less personal responsibility an individual may have acknowledged in group behaviour.

Parties Promoted Anonymity and Sanctioned Social Disinhibition Amongst Its Patrons

Most of the respondents in this research experienced a euphoric and disinhibited condition following the use of drugs within the party context. This biochemically induced psychological state effectively separated the party patrons from their everyday social constraints and hardships (including life-threatening issues related to HIV/AIDS). As discussed by Respondent 1:

The drugs cut away the socialization process. Ecstasy permits you to drop your social guards enabling you to approach a total stranger, in a loving and caring way.

They also reported the liberating effects of being anonymous in a crowd of several thousand party patrons. Respondent 2 said:

The parties provide an atmosphere where people can be less inhibited, because of the anonymity.

Fromm (1976) suggested that people often feared freedom because they were accustomed to being controlled by the wider culture's (the State's) dictates. The drugs acted as a catalyst which enabled many of the patrons to discard their everyday socialized attitudes and behaviour. These social inhibitions may have included the daily moderation of their gay behaviour/identity which enabled them to "pass" as a heterosexual amongst the wider population. Respondent 16 described this social emancipation:

The drugs provide a sense of being able to think with total freedom, without society or reality saying you should do it this way.

According to Stall et al. (1986), drug-induced disinhibition and anonymity increased risky sexual and drug-related behaviour. That is, disinhibition and anonymity were heavily weighted dimensions against the party patrons' conformity to the wider culture's sanctioned attitudes and behaviour (which may have included safe sex and drug-related prescriptions).

Over-Exposure to Party Scene

Most of the respondents had become disenchanted over time with their loss of anonymous status (and consequently some of their highly valued disinhibited behaviour) which was invalidated through regular attendance. This status transformation was partly an artifact of the social process of conformity in which the patrons exchanged one set of norms and values (the wider culture's) for another set (the dance party milieu's). Respondent 1 said:

If you attend the dance parties regularly then the excitement is dulled . . . it loses some of its thrill. You could no longer be disinhibited, because people knew you . . . they may frown on your behaviour. You resumed your familiar socially restrained behaviour.

Schutz and Luckman (1974) argued that once anonymity was forfeited an individual often reverted to previous patterns of socially constrained behaviour. This may not have included safer-sexual and drug-related behaviour amongst the party patrons, because of their socially sanctioned use of psychoactive substance, as suggested by Stall et al. (1986).

Parties Without Drugs

Some respondents were ambivalent about the level of enjoyment they derived from attending the dance parties in a sober condition. Respondent 10 said:

I've been to parties without drugs before, and had a good time, probably not as good a time.

The organizer supported a drug-free dance party environment where patrons could gain an ecstatic experience without the use of Ecstasy. He said they needed to be

committed to having a good time and celebrating and self-expressing, and do so with no recreational drugs.

He suggested that the dance party patrons could have had an equally "good time" by substituting his prescription (a vague element he named "self-expressing") for their preferred vehicle of ecstasy, drugs. However, a recent media report on the same topic from a similar source suggested that "people have been going to rock concerts for more than 20 years, some with hip flasks, some with joints, Ecstasy or whatever" (Safe & Sager, 1990, p. 12).

This apparent contradiction may have arisen because of the organizer's concerns about the possible social condemnation of his role and the dance party patrons' use of illegal substance within the context of his parties.

Organizers' Role in the Gay Dance Party Social Institution

The organizer summarized his role within the gay dance party social institution. He said:

[Our] responsibility as organizers of the dance parties [is to] provide an excuse for drugs and sexual activities, but we certainly didn't design it that way. We have a responsibility to do something about it, the best approach is education and signage about safe behaviour in relation to HIV and the availability of condoms at the parties. I don't know what else we can do.

This acknowledgement of his "responsibility" as party organizer indicated a commitment to a future safe sex and drug-related intervention program within the context of his dance party organization. However, his responses may have been biased in accordance with what he believed was socially desirable in respect to the area under investigation in this study (related to safe sexual and drug-related issues).

Organizer Speaks From a Position of Authority

The organizer suggested that the combination of his role and gay identity legitimized his authority within the context of the gay dance party

institution. That is, his status empowered him as an instrument of behavioural modification within the gay dance party milieu. He also described himself as a charismatic figure who had the legitimate authority to be a spokesperson of the dance party institution, as discussed by Weber (1964). The organizer said:

Coming from the position that I am, where I believe I can actually make a difference what people say . . . because I influence people through what I create and produce.

The organizer was convinced that his dance party formula was a potent agency for communicating and influencing patrons' attitudes and behaviour.

Recent Media Interest in the Dance Parties

The parties at the Hordern pavilion were recently scrutinized by the media and Respondent 9 suggested that this public "exposure" partly led to the dismantling of the large-scale gay dance parties.

The recent media exposure is something to do with the dance parties attracting a younger crowd, and from a broader section of society, and for some reason all these things are starting to happen, and the Hordern is closed down.

According to the respondents, the termination of the large-scale gay dance parties at the Hordern pavilion (which represented for many people a sanctified venue) was due to unwanted "outsiders" and state intervention. This attention was magnified by the media (one of the State's agents) with their sensationalized reporting on the corruptive effects of these institutions on the young heterosexual party patrons (outsiders).

The Presence of State Authorities at the Hordern Dance Party Venue

According to the organizer and the respondents the police had recently escalated their interventions at the dance parties. Respondent 1 said:

There are more cops, people have been detained and given the opportunity of identifying dealers, or users.

The organizer endorsed this observation:

The police have had their undercover people in there for months.

Respondent 6 provided a first hand account of a police interception:

I was searched by a policeman on the way to a party a couple of months ago.

Respondent 8 outlined the magnitude of the problem faced by the authorities in policing the use of illegal drugs at the dance parties:

When you're faced with five thousand people who've ingested something, you can't give them all a urine test.

The New South Wales minister for police recently summarized (in a media report) the difficult task they had in regulating the use of illegal drugs at the inner-city dance parties. He said:

We're up against sheer weight of numbers—you can't individually search 5000 people before they enter a venue. (Safe & Sager, 1990, p. 12)

It was perhaps that other state mechanisms were mobilized to control this socially undesirable behaviour, such as the non-tenure of the Hordern pavilion to large-scale dance party organizations (other than the gay Mardi Gras Party and Sleaze Ball).

Closure of the Hordern Pavilion

The large semi-public gay dance party institution was reverting to smaller underground gay-identified social venues following the closure of the Hordern pavilion. Respondent 2 predicted the gay party patrons' social patterns after the disintegration of this important inner-city gay social institution. He said:

If you stop the dance parties and the drugs it all peters out, and they spread out.

Respondent 8 suggested that the closure was synonymous with the end of the large gay dance party era. He said:

It's now veering back towards going out every Saturday night to Oxford Street [the centre of the gay subculture].

This recent development was seen as an unfortunate and retrograde

social phenomenon for both the gay subculture and the wider society. According to Stephan (1985), prejudice and negative stereotypic evaluation were usually modified by increased social interaction. Individuals resolved their inter-group antagonism by focusing on the similarities in their attitudes and behaviour rather than their differences.

The large-scale dance parties may have afforded an opportunity (rare in our culture) where many impressionable young adults respectfully socialized with other party patrons irrespective of sexual preferences.

DISCUSSION

A rich set of alternative hypotheses related to gay social organization, stress reduction, and drug use patterns in relation to risky sexual behaviour were generated from these transcripts. These data may not generalize because of the small *n* and pilot nature of this study, although there is a tradition of ethnographic work with small numbers of respondents (e.g., Read, 1980) to describe the styles of interaction and the function of social structures in the homosexual subculture. Further, there was occasional evidence of contradictory statements in the direction of social desirability, which must be taken into account in the interpretation of these data. However, the data in themselves are important for the generation of future empirical research and an understanding of the structure, function, and context of the gay dance party milieu.

The dance party scene serves an important social and personal function for a significant subset of inner-city young gay men. The benefits are numerous and are enjoyed not only by those gay men who attend the dance parties, but also by the larger gay community. The dance parties afforded many gay men the opportunity to witness, and celebrate, their own survival and that of other members of their community over the HIV pandemic.

The dance party milieu also provided many gay men with a satisfactory alternative social structure and enhanced a sense of pride in belonging to a minority group. They could experience the rare opportunity for ritualized celebrations among a large group of people, who were in a similar mind-set (following the use of psychoactive substances and the influences of the setting). The rituals and etiquette of the dance party scene inherently called for respect (often absent in their everyday lives) and a degree of observance. Eliade (1974) discusses the importance of recognizing the psychological significance of the sacred in all aspects of social interaction. The dance parties in these terms fill an important role in melding both the sacred and the profane and not experiencing them as dichotomous aspects of life.

The dance parties attracted the curiosity and attendance of outsiders

(mainly western suburbs heterosexuals), who did not have the same vested interest or share the same ideological commitment to the gay community or the dance party milieu. The "B & Ts" were not part of the inner-city subculture, nor did they share the same pattern of recreational drug use (preferring alcohol) as the "old order" dance party patrons. These ideological, social, and psychological differences have mainly been responsible for the reported covert and overt hostility between the two factions. The conflict between the "new" and "old" groups at the inner-city dance party scene, combined with the recent closure of the Hordern pavilion has effectively led to the dissolution of the large-scale dance parties. The predominantly gay ("old") group of party patrons appear to have reverted to their smaller, more exclusive underground party venues.

The young gay men who attend the dance parties represent the "new" generation of gay men, and the parties afford many of these men the opportunity to externalize and celebrate this new image. That is, the parties may represent for many gay men the public symbolic expression of their newfound "freedom" of the gay identity. Gagnon and Simon (1974) suggest that previously many gay men over-reacted to the social and legal constraints imposed upon them, by presenting an ultra-conservative "facade" to the wider society, endeavoring to avoid discrimination in the workplace and in their private life. Because they were not free to display or publicly acclaim their gay identity, many men chose to socialize within the framework of the "underground" gay bars and nightclubs, as discussed by Wotherspoon (1991). These exclusively gay venues enabled gay men to safely socially and sexually mix with other gay men (Read, 1980).

By contrast the young gay party patron would have "come out" to a network of social support systems within the gay community (including the dance party milieu) where he may receive positive validation of his gay identity from other people who share a similar lifestyle, as suggested by Wotherspoon (1991). Because of the decriminalization and declassification of homosexuality as a mental "illness" and the current HIV/AIDS crisis, the gay community has become more organised and politically powerful. The dance parties offer the opportunity for many young gay men to experience pride and a sense of belonging to the larger gay community, even though discrimination and negative attitudes towards gay men are still serious social realities within the wider culture.

In addition, they may also afford the young gay men the opportunity to demonstrate and ventilate their anger, in the form of rebellion against the discrimination and negativity expressed by the wider community. This powerful reaction may have manifested itself with their widespread use of psychoactive substance and overt sexual expression within the context of

the dance parties. In this case, these people are gathering in large numbers using illegal substances on a regular basis in a public setting under the scrutiny of the very social and legal system that traditionally ostracised and until recently punished them for their lifestyle.

The dance parties are also a celebration of "youth" with an accent on good looks and performance. These attitudes are again an extension of the wider cultural norms and values. Bell and Weinberg (1978) suggest that the gay community places a greater importance on these transient characteristics. The gay party patrons represent the new gay identity with an accent on youthful muscular bodies (Evans, 1988), which perhaps reflects their community's newly acquired strength and pride.

The gay dance party phenomenon contrasts with the style of the suburban homosexual tavern described by Read. Whereas Read described a working-class tavern in a small city, the dance party phenomenon is set in a large conurbation and among predominantly middle-class and young gay men. The common components of the milieu described by Read, although altered in time, country, and setting, remain, but to these have been added a more "public" but still safe context and the replacement of one psychoactive substance (alcohol) with a range of others (party drugs).

The difference between the findings of Read and the present study revolves around the fact that the gay community has become more politically powerful and gay men have become more confident in expressing their gay identity in the more than ten years since Read carried out his research. However, the dance party should be seen as a development beyond the homosexual tavern, which traditionally was the most common gay meeting place until recently (Bell & Weinberg, 1978; Read, 1980), while still retaining many of the sociopsychological characteristics of the tavern. We believe that further research is warranted which describes and analyzes the diversification of the gay social scene, particularly the similarities to and differences from earlier settings. The dance party is one example of this diversification, which is a response to set and setting and, particularly, to legal and social context.

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