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# Men as Victims: "Victim" Identities, Gay Identities, and Masculinities

Journal of Interpersonal Violence
27(17) 3442–3467

DOI: 10.1177/0886260512445378
http://jiv.sagepub.com

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**Abstract**

The impact and meanings of homophobic violence on gay men's identities are explored with a particular focus on their identities as men and as gay men. Homosexuality can pose a challenge to conventional masculinities, and for some gay men, being victimized on account of sexual orientation reawakens conflicts about their masculinity that they thought they had resolved. Being victimized can reinvoke shame that is rooted in failure or unwillingness to uphold masculine norms. For some gay men, victimization therefore has connotations of nonmasculinity that make being a victim an undesirable status, yet that status must be claimed to obtain a response from criminal justice or victim services. Men who experience homophobic abuse are helped by accepting a victim identity, but only if they can quickly move on from it by reconstructing a masculine gay (nonvictim) identity. This process can be facilitated by agencies such as the police and victim services, provided they help men exercise agency in "fighting back," that is, resisting further victimization and recovering.

**Keywords**

masculinity, homophobic crime, victims, victimization, violence

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## Introduction

In this article I address the meanings that hate-motivated victimization have for gay men. I explore the relationship between the condition of "victim" and gay men's perceptions of their masculinity. Some men describe a struggle to reconcile being a "victim" with being a man, as if these conditions were essentially incompatible. I focus on gay men's views of victimhood in the context of masculinity and the consequences of homophobic victimization for identity. I discuss the question of how the participants perceived themselves in the aftermath of homophobic victimization and the implications for their identities. I shall first explore the extent of homophobic crime in the United Kingdom and briefly review the literature about its impact and consequences, then consider what the literature says about how conceptions of "masculinity" might color gay men's experiences of homophobic victimization. I focus on the participants' conceptions of victimhood and identity; the relationship between victimization, stigma, and the undermining of masculinity; and how some of the participants were able to reestablish their masculine gay identities and move on from victimhood. I conclude with a discussion, drawing upon the literature and the insights of men who participated in this study, about how responses to homophobic victimization might be improved.

## Homophobic Crime in the United Kingdom: Extent, Impact, and Consequences

Recorded crime statistics are notoriously unreliable indicators of the extent of victimization because much of it is unreported, misrecorded, or unrecorded. Stonewall's (2008) research about homophobic crime found that 20% of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people surveyed in the United Kingdom had experienced a recent homophobic incident and 75% of them had not reported it (Dick, 2008). Galop's research found that many LGBT people might *tell* an agency they are in contact with (such as a social housing provider) about homophobic victimization but few *report* victimization to the police (Kelley, 2009). Nevertheless, the number of homophobic crimes reported in England and Wales in the year ending April 2009 was 4,300 compared with 39,300 reported racist crimes (Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, 2009), so the amount of reported homophobic victimization is substantial. Reasons for not reporting

hate-motivated victimization include fear of reprisal, expectation of a discriminatory response from the police, and the belief that nothing will be done about it (Chahal & Julienne, 1999; Jarman & Tennant, 2003; Victim Support, 2006). The Metropolitan Police found that in London most homophobic crimes reported to the police were committed by people known to the victims, often their neighbors, with whom they could not avoid contact (Kielinger & Stanko, 2002). When people do report hate crimes, an unhelpful police response can exacerbate their feelings of vulnerability and helplessness (Hall, 2005; Noelle, 2009).

Studies of homophobic victimization in the United Kingdom have tended to focus more on extent and incidence than on impact and consequences, which perhaps reflects the dominance of quantitative methods in research on this issue (Noelle, 2009). Many incidents are serious crimes: Stonewall found that homophobic crimes included being shot, raped, being set on fire, sexual assault, being held at knifepoint, being urinated on, and so on (Mason & Palmer, 1996). In London, there have been several murders motivated by homophobia during the past decade, including the killing of Jody Dobrowski, a 24-year-old barman who was beaten to death on Clapham Common in October 2005. When sentencing his killers, the judge referred to their "homophobic thuggery" (Morris & Roberts, 2006). Further homophobic attacks that year in the same location included a man who survived an attempt to garrotte him with wire, a beating that rendered the victim unconscious, and an attack that caused severe facial injuries and a broken leg (Chakraborti & Garland, 2009).

Achieving an accurate appraisal of the type of victimization associated with homophobic attacks is difficult because of the tendency of lower-level incidents such as verbal abuse to be unreported and because of the limitations of victim surveys where, as Tiby (2009) describes it, "different measures and methods give rise to different questions and different truths" (p. 32). Chakraborti and Garland's analysis of recent British research, including some of the studies cited above, found that "being a victim of homophobic harassment is a persistent fact of life for most lesbians and gay men" (p. 62). Far fewer violent attacks were described than incidents of harassment and the extent to which violence had been experienced by gay men varied greatly, from 23% of participants in one study to 61% in another (Chakraborti & Garland, 2009).

Anger, depression, fear, shame, loss of self-esteem, and onset of posttraumatic stress disorder following homophobic victimization are frequently cited in the literature (Craig-Henderson, 2009; Jarman & Tennant, 2003; Mason & Palmer, 1996; Victim Support, 2006). Shame may be engendered

because victimization is part of an ongoing process of stigmatization to which as members of a marginalized group, LGBT people are subject (Craig-Henderson, 2009). A respondent in Jarman and Tennant's research talked of how repeat homophobic victimization "can get to your very core . . . (destroying) all confidence in yourself" (Jarman & Tennant, 2003, p. 47). A distinctive aspect of the impact of hate-motivated crime is that it is often experienced as an attack on the most central part of one's identity (Craig-Henderson, 2009; Iganski, 2001; Lawrence, 2002). It may also cause people to change their behavior to avoid further victimization, such as ceasing to go out (Iganski, 2008; Jarman & Tennant, 2003; Tiby, 2009). Such instrumental fears can transfer to members of the minority community who are not directly targeted (Tiby, 2009).

Before describing findings from the research that is the subject of this article, it may be useful to consider some theoretical perspectives from the literature about masculinity and identity that can contribute to our understanding of gay men's responses to victimization.

## Masculinity as a Factor in the Experience of Homophobic Victimization

Connell (2005), who writes of "masculinities," shows that rather than being a condition that is essential, masculinities change over time, are constituted relationally, and can be "defined as not-feminity" (p. 70), whatever that might be. He argues, "There is no masculine entity whose occurrences in all societies we can generalize about" (p. 43). With reference to homosexuality, this leads to the conclusion that achieving a gay identity is a project: "The making of a homosexual masculinity as a historically realized configuration of practice" ( p. 160). Similarly, Kimmel (1994) writes that being a man means not being a woman and that gay men become masculine by identifying with the oppressor: "(H)omoerotic desire is cast as feminine desire, desire for other men. Homophobia is the effort to suppress that desire, to purify all relationships with other men, with women, with children of its taint, and to ensure no one could possibly ever mistake one for a homosexual" ( p. 130). In such analyses, masculine identities are changeable, tenuous, and fragile, but nevertheless certain enough to be experienced on occasions as incompatible with gayness. The damaging effects of homophobic victimization on identity are identified in the literature (Galop, 1998; Mason, 2002; Noelle, 2009). Stanko and Curry (1997)

argue that an issue for gay men is that to claim to be harmed by homophobic abuse involves recognizing that one is a legitimate target for such violence, so we should consider what the implications of this might be for men's conceptions of victimhood. Does this mean that some gay men might not perceive themselves to be "victims," that is, having been offended against, because they feel they might have deserved the abuse they experienced, perhaps by not "measuring up" to conventional masculine norms? Would many feel that way, and in what circumstances might they reach that conclusion? Allen (2002) argues that it is victims' interpretation of a violent event that is the most significant determinant of impact. If that is correct, we need to understand the meanings of homophobic abuse for men's identities as men, as gay men, and as victims of crime.

## Methods

This article is based on my PhD research, which involved semistructured interviews with 25 gay men in London during 2008 who had experienced homophobic harassment, verbal abuse, and violence and a similar number of interviews with police officers and people who worked for support services. I also conducted a survey in LGBT bars and a public sex environment, and I spent 6 months observing police officers responding to homophobic crime reports. The data cited in this article are drawn mainly from the interviews with gay men, though many of the themes that arose from the interviews with them were echoed by the insights of the support service staff and specialist LGBT police officers I interviewed and by my observation of police work. Goodey (2005) refers to the lack of research data about the experiences of victims who do not report crime, so as well as interviewing men who had reported their victimization to the police, I also wanted to record what men who had not reported thought about criminal justice systems that they had not used. I therefore recruited *via* organizations that are in touch with gay men for reasons unconnected with homophobic crime. These included an HIV support organization and an LGBT housing association. I advertised my research in a weekly free gay magazine, and I recruited some participants in LGBT bars and public sex environments. Some participants were referred to me by the police and support organizations. The youngest was in his early 20s, the oldest in his 60s, and most were aged between 25 and 40. Six men defined themselves as being of Black and minority ethnic heritage. All were to some extent "out," that is, open about being gay, though some had largely been "outed" as a result of the homophobic victimization they experienced. The seriousness of their

victimization ranged from verbal abuse to stabbing. Six of the men had experienced physical assault and five had received threats to kill. Five had sustained criminal damage to their home. In this way, the proportion of the men in my study who had experienced physical violence is similar to the lower end of the range discussed by Chakraborti and Garland as mentioned previously. As I shall later show, participants' descriptions of the impact of verbal abuse and damage were in many respects strikingly similar to those arising from homophobic violence.

I used the free association narrative interview technique, which is considered effective in engaging "defended" subjects who may be reticent about recounting previous painful experiences (Holloway & Jefferson, 2000). It provided a means of working with the tendency of many men to want to focus on factual descriptions of events instead of emotionality (Stanko, 1990). Several of the men I interviewed told me that they had never discussed these issues with anyone before.

I asked each participant whether he would like his real name or a pseudonym used. Some of the names used in this article are real, and some are invented, according to participants' preferences. Interviews were held at a venue chosen by the participant, all in London, including coffee bars, the London School of Economics, participants' homes, a police station, and the offices of a support agency. Two interviews were conducted over the phone. I conducted all the interviews myself, using an interview schedule whose content was informed by data from the survey I had conducted. The shortest interview lasted 55 min and the longest 4 hr.

I generated code labels derived from the literature and from the survey I had conducted (see Strauss & Corbin, 1998), displaying the coded data in an Excel spreadsheet. I also summarized each interview by writing a "theoretical memo" about the interview (Layder, 1998). These contained a description of the victimization the participant had experienced, a summary of how the participant had been affected and how he had coped with the consequences, and how the data related to those from other interviews and to the theoretical literature.

## Conceptions of Victimhood

It may be helpful to start by exploring what participants thought of the term "victim" and the extent to which they felt this somewhat "loaded" term applied to their particular experience. Because of its capacity to signal passivity and powerlessness, the word "victim" was problematic for many. Some men thought it a useful term, but most saw it as having wholly negative connotations and for some it was unhelpfully gendered. Peter said,

> Using terms like "victim" gives the offender more power than I want him to have. I refuse to be victimized. The term makes me feel weaker than I really am.

For Peter, victim status was imbued with a sense of weakness, particularly in relation to the offender, so describing himself as a "victim" would represent acceptance that the offender had prevailed. Another participant (who did not want to be named) said,

> My first sex experience was not consensual and I don't like to feel like a victim. I'm not in denial, but I am concerned not to be labeled as a victim. It gives too much weight to what happened [referring to the homophobic attack he had experienced] and I don't want to get into a victim mentality.

That participant had recently been assaulted by neighbors, and he had become so fearful that he and his partner decided to move home: The abuse therefore had serious consequences for them. Yet he was reluctant to accept "victim" status, as it might signal that he was claiming to be more seriously victimized than he had been, particularly in relation to his earlier experience of sexual abuse. Feelings such as this were described by several men, indicating that victim status was neither desired nor easily resorted to. Franco, who was shaken by how distressed he had been by verbal abuse he experienced in a supermarket queue, felt the term "victim" signaled passivity:

> I don't see myself as a victim. It has negative, passive connotations. If you are a victim, there isn't anything you can do. I did something: I told . . . [the abuser] to fuck off and I reported it.

Carl, a White man in his early 20s living in social housing, had been subject to a long campaign of homophobic abuse by his neighbors that included assaults and excreta being smeared on his front door. He had reluctantly accepted the label "victim" as one that applied to himself. He did not want to see himself as a victim, and it had brought him neither effective help nor financial compensation. He seemed stuck in that state, on medication for depression but otherwise in receipt of little effective help or support. A physical move to a new area or protection from his abusive neighbors might have enabled Carl's victimhood to cease. Instead, he felt inadequate for needing help. He talked of his struggle to reconcile his conception of being gay with family norms around masculinity, and victimhood confronted him with, in his conception, vulnerability that was the

antithesis of masculinity. Acceptance of victim status, combined with his orientation toward working-class expectations of heterosexual aggression, was humiliating to him. He therefore did not want to talk to support organizations about his emotional reactions to victimization and how this affected his identity as a working-class gay man. For Carl, no amount of emotional support would be effective until the source of his humiliation, either his neighbors or their homophobia, had been removed. We might ask: In what way could Carl have, in Randall Collins' terms, "learn(ed) how not to be a victim?" (Collins, 2008, p. 465).

Like Carl, Paul thought the term "victim" denoted passivity and the inability to exercise agency. Unlike Carl, when Paul and his partner found the home they jointly owned vandalized by homophobic neighbors, they were able to engage the police in an effective campaign to end the abuse. Paul said,

> I think that victim means a highly emotional state, where there are emotional things going on that you are not really able to resist—where you can't fight back.
>
> Question: Did you feel that, with this abuse, what you were doing was "fighting back"?
>
> Yes I did actually, because we decided to follow a course of action, and follow it through, and with the help of the police it paid off. . . .

In Paul's conception of victimhood, there was a strong association between masculinity and the logical following of a planned process of specified actions, expressed in the masculine language of "fighting back"; however, perhaps an emotional rather than practical reaction to the victimization would, for Paul, have been unacceptably "feminine" and less effective in ending the abuse.

George had experienced years of homophobic violence from his family when growing up in Ireland. Unlike most participants, he was willing to embrace a victim identity because it signified that he had started to come to terms with what had happened:

> Yes, I was a victim; I was a victim of my family, a victim of police failure to act appropriately. I was a victim of the way the court system treated me. . . . And I had to do everything—nobody helped me. I sometimes wished I was dead. . . . I had it (violence) from my dad and

> my two brothers at the same time. I feel a victim of my mother, and of my sisters who let me down as well. . . .

George talked about how he was able to restore his self-respect by deciding to come to London in search of a new life. It was the exercise of agency at a time when his autonomy had been systematically undermined that enabled him to regain pride in himself. Like George, Adrian, who had been subject to homophobic verbal abuse in the street, believed that the term "victim" was helpful because it underlined the fact that it was the offender, not himself, who had been responsible for it. This property has been noted in the literature (Janoff-Bulman & Frieze, 1983). Adrian said,

> Yes, I would say I'm a victim of hate crime because I did nothing to warrant that kind of abusive treatment. Their actions were wrong and were against me, so yes, I was a victim. . . . I don't want to be a victim, but it does say what happened to me.

It may be that by acknowledging that he had been a victim, George had come to terms with his situation more readily than Carl. This had enabled him to move on from victimhood at a time when he had also physically distanced himself from the source of the victimization, which Carl had not been helped to do.

## Black Gay Men, Identities, and Victimhood

The Black participants in this research described further complexities in their conceptualizations of themselves as Black gay men and as victims of hate crime. The distancing from family that homophobia brings about and the implications of this for identification with culture transmitted through family ties was a dimension in many of the White participants' experiences, but it was even more problematic and painful for the Black participants. This may be because families provide the vehicle for upholding links with minority ethnic heritage and ancestry that assumes a larger significance in White, racist society (Mercer, 1994; Phellas, 2002). Therefore, Black gay men may have to grapple with the added complexity of establishing an identity that could successfully encompass their orientations as Black men, as gay men, and as Black gay men. The experiences of Lamar, a young Black gay man who lived in a hostel, is illustrative of these complexities. His experiences of repeat homophobic victimization by other Black young

men in the hostel seemed to have led him to see his Black and his gay identities in exclusively negative terms:

> I wish I wasn't Black. Black people see gay being a White thing. They think it's like a virus, that spreads from White people. . . .
>
> Question: Do you have friends you can talk to?
>
> If I talk to another Black man, they think he's gay too. I was friendly with the man in the room next door. Then they wrote on the shower that he was queer, and wrote up his room number. So he moved out. . . . I don't see him anymore. . . .
>
> Question: How about Black gay friends?
>
> Some of them are worse! No, I just have one Black friend who is gay. I don't like a lot of the others. . . .

Lamar had few social contacts that could provide positive models of gay sexuality that might counter the wholly negative assessment he had made of his identity as a Black gay man, and this self-appraisal had spilled over into his assessment of Black culture as well.

## Homophobic Victimization, Shame, and the Undermining of Masculinity

Although consequences of homophobic victimization such as fear of repeat attacks and avoidance strategies are widely cited in the literature (see Tiby, 2009), shame as a consequence has received much less attention, yet it was a strong theme in my research. Several participants described one of the most significant consequences of homophobic victimization being a disturbing sense of shame. This arose from the undermining of their masculinity that victimization connoted, the manner in which this tended to be confirmed by the insensitive responses of some officials, and the capacity of victimization to reinvoke painful memories of previous experiences of homophobia that participants associated with failure to perform masculinity conventionally. Carl talked of how during his teenage years working-class culture was a strong dynamic in his struggle to establish his identity. Brought up in a working-class family with a relative who was a professional

boxer, the pervasive homophobia that he encountered at school and at home had made Carl want to appear to be heterosexual. He said,

> Yeah, when I was younger I hung around with straights and they were pretty rough and they would have a go at gay people. I would say nothing and feel really bad about it. Once when they were harassing a gay man I . . . liked, I said to them "leave him alone" and they said to me, "What, are you a faggot as well?" So I had to shut up. I went to apologize to the other guy the next day. He tries to avoid me now, and I want to tell him how sorry I am about that, but I don't know how.

The homophobic *milieu* in which Carl grew up resulted in his conception of his identity being shot through with sadness, shame, and confusion. It was apparent that homophobia was a strong and ever-present influence in his upbringing, to the extent that he had tried to become heterosexual in his late teens. He said, "If I could change it and be with a woman I would, but I tried that and I can't." The strategies he had to employ to survive as a gay teenager in such a homophobic environment had adverse consequences for people he liked, and he felt ashamed about the effect on them. By making gays pose as straight, homophobia has been highly successful in dividing gay people (Babuscio, 1988). Being a victim was an affront to Carl's identity as a man because in his world men are not expected to be vulnerable.

The insights of Stewart and Adam (who were young White men) can tell us much about the specific meanings of hate-motivated victimization for gay men. Stewart was stabbed in a homophobic attack in front of onlookers, and he experienced tremendous shame, much of which emanated from the public humiliation of the attack. There were four elements to the shame he described: (1) the abuse of him and his partner in public, (2) not being able to protect his partner from the double humiliation of being called a "Black batty boy"[1] who brings shame on Black people, (3) the failure of the bystanders to intervene and the entertainment they appeared to derive from watching, and (4) his inability to fight back.[2] For Stewart, his feelings of shame prevented him from telling the doctors who treated his stab wounds what had happened:

> I didn't know how to find the words to say I've been beaten up because I'm gay. I was out, proud, and all the rest of it, but I just really felt ashamed. I think I felt I was turning into all the negative stereotypes of the gay man—poofy, weak, couldn't defend himself—and I wasn't therefore a real man.

These feelings resonated for Stewart with his experience of homophobic abuse at school, which he said had made him feel "poofy and girly." He talked about how a few weeks after the attack he experienced violent fantasies and aggressive impulses, wanting to attack anyone he came across who had the same characteristics as his assailant, that is, young Black men. What became clear during the interview was that despite the powerful and disturbing emotions at play, Stewart had eventually resolved these issues. He found an identity as a gay man with which he felt secure, even though this did not fit with the negative stereotype of a gay man that he had internalized during his adolescence and which he had found hard to shake off. In the long aftermath of the stabbing, Stewart found he had to constantly revisit his conceptualization of what being a gay man is about because homophobic violence had brought about a temporary loss of identity as an "out" gay man. This may have become complicated further by the confusion that had arisen from being proud of being gay but ashamed of his vulnerability to victimization. For Stewart, there was a complex mix of hard-won identity, formed in the face of powerful pervasive homophobia, where his conception of a "typical" gay man did not accord with how he wanted to be, and which he described as seriously damaged by the violent abuse he and his partner had experienced.

There may be parallels here with men's experience of sexual abuse, which has features in common with hate crime, including its highly personal nature. Indeed sexual assault can be a vehicle for homophobic abuse as the experience of a survey respondent in this study who was raped as part of a homophobic attack illustrated. As well as intruding on someone's most personal life, it is enacted in conjunction with violence or the threat of violence and death. Mezey and King (1992) found that many men, gay and heterosexual, who were sexually assaulted were unable to mount any effective resistance and that this left them confused and depressed. It also created "enormous problems . . . for victims' later resolution of the attack and their role in it" (p. 9). They reported psychological sequelae that were similar to those described by women who had been raped. However, "the stigma for men may be even greater . . . in a society which expects its male members to be self-sufficient physically and psychologically" (p. 10). Reviewing a number of U.S. studies (not all of which yielded consistent data about this issue), Coxell and King (2002) nevertheless observed that "a sense of emasculation is not uncommon in men after experiencing sexual assault" (p. 54) and that this sense is associated with the men being unable to defend themselves.

Another participant, Adam, told his local authority housing provider about the homophobic harassment he and his partner experienced from his

neighbors. The authority's lack of concern provoked a strong sense of injustice and frustration:

> The (housing authority) don't care about our situation; it's like we're two blokes and can fuck off . . . they said we are two men, we are healthy and working, and we can look after ourselves. . . . If you're gay you expect people not to want to help.

The frustration that Adam described became combined with a further level of humiliation that derived from not being able to live up to expectations of masculine invulnerability. This echoes Carl's experiences, and it compounds the aftermath of the institutional failures to protect, which I found were often a feature of police and local authority responses to homophobic crime.

The contrast between Paul's and Adam's experiences is striking: Whereas the local authority caused Adam's masculine identity to be further undermined, with Paul, the action of the police, who initiated a plan to protect his home from further vandalism, served to uphold it. Here, social class may have been a factor. Paul was an owner-occupier in a middle-class area, better placed than Carl and Adam to mobilize the attentions of statutory authorities.

## Reestablishing Masculine Gay Identities and Moving on From Victimhood

So far, this article has addressed mainly negative connotations of victimhood and it has raised the possibility that shame might be an underrecognized consequence of homophobic victimization for some gay men. It now seems important to consider how the participants dealt with the consequences of their victimization and reestablished a positive masculine gay identity that enabled them to move on from victimhood. It will be necessary to revisit the discussion about the concept of victimhood, but from the perspective of the participants who saw it in positive terms.

Several participants described a struggle to define and reestablish gay masculinity after they had experienced homophobic abuse. Michael, a former police officer, had a "gritty" persona and he did not appear vulnerable, yet he had experienced several incidents. He claimed to have used violence himself in such circumstances and that doing so had helped him feel better:

> I've punched back when I've been abused. Someone threatened me with a knife once and I kicked him hard in the balls. He was singing

> *Soprano* for a very long time. Huh! That's what I mean, I'm not violent but come at me and I will respond. With a couple of drinks I think I'm far better than I really am. But I won't be passive, I will fight back if I can.

Similarly, Lee, a young White man who experienced homophobic verbal abuse in a "straight" bar, seemed only transiently affected by his own experience; yet in speaking about homophobic offenders in general, not solely those who had verbally abused him, he said he wanted to "get even" with them.

Men such as Stewart, Chris, and David who had been able to discuss the aftermath of the abuse with a skilled helper (Egan, 1998) were much more willing to talk about their feelings. This was not simply explicable by class: Chris was unemployed and lived in a local authority flat. Chris believed that he had grown emotionally and that his identity had been strengthened as a result of his experience of violent homophobia and the events that followed. He had been assaulted when out "cruising" for sex and he had talked to the press to try to encourage other gay men to report homophobic attacks. Chris said,

> I think I came out as stronger. . . . I did something for me, but I also did a little bit for the gay community in terms of being able to go to the press and being able to admit where I was and what I was doing . . . you find through dreadful circumstances, if you can try to pull that forward . . . it's made me stronger and I hope it's helped me to achieve something.

It is possible that Chris is not very representative of the wider gay male population, so it is important not to overgeneralize from his experience. For instance, he had a remarkably positive experience of the police, which he thought had helped him move on from victimhood; and he proactively contacted me about my research having read about it, so he was generally motivated to take action that might help achieve better responses to homophobic crime.[3] Nevertheless, the key factors for Chris that led to him feeling his sense of identity had become stronger since the attack were that he was helped effectively, that he was open with others about what had happened to him and what he was doing (rather than being stuck with embarrassment at having been out "cruising" at the time), and that he tried to ensure other people might benefit from his experience.

Men who talked of their involvement in LGBT networks that provided mutual support and the opportunity to share experiences had worked

through their feelings to some kind of resolution far more successfully than those like Lamar who had little access to informal social support. Wachs (1998) writes about how groups of victims tell their stories to each other, and doing this is a means of defusing fears about city life. Such shared narratives are "a testimonial to urban resilience" that enables people to move toward "survivor" status (p. 12). The outlook of most of the men in this study who had received support of some kind was as Stewart described it: Victimhood is a stage you go through on the way to becoming a survivor. It is notable that those that saw positive properties in the term "victim" did so only in terms of it being a status one must claim to obtain help, or a stage that has to be passed through.

It may now be helpful to consider the views of the few men in this study who did not see victimhood in wholly negative terms. They talked of the significance of accepting victimhood in their recovery from victimization. Stewart had clear ideas about how an understanding of it may help recovery:

> I think the term survivor is better [than victim], which doesn't mean you haven't been a victim, but you survived it . . . it's like a stage that you go through. Even if someone remains in a terrible horrible place they are still a survivor as they have come through it. . . . I think the term victim can be disempowering.

For Stewart, resolving the damage involved working through violent impulses that seem related to his masculine impulse to fight back, which he had been unable to do when he was attacked; and resolving racist impulses, about which he felt highly uncomfortable. It also involved managing reinvoked fears around being "poofy and girly," which he thought he had dealt with years before. Jim, a White man in his 60s who worked as a counselor and who was verbally abused on an underground train, thought "victim" was an acceptable description only of a temporary state that organizations should help people move on from as soon as possible, so that victimhood would only ever be transitory. He was critical of the organization Victim Support for continuing to use that name. For Jim, the term signaled disempowerment and undesirable dependency on a helper. He felt the importance of making such a transition in identity was profound. Of the term "victim," he thought that

> It's an initial label that you have to use but after that initial use it should be about how you get people away from being a victim. . . . If you are

> a victim it may imply that you need others . . . you need to move people out of victimhood as soon as possible.

Some men thought that the term was helpful because people need to be classified as victims to obtain services. Adam thought that acknowledging he had been a victim encouraged him to talk about and resolve the effects of victimization. Similarly, Nicolas, who had experienced a long campaign of homophobic harassment from his neighbors, considered that strong words were needed to describe "strong events":

> I do feel I have been victimized. It doesn't make me less of a human being. I don't want to stay in that state but I don't want to obscure it and what happened . . . when you are trying to advocate your own case you do need to use labels like that. . . .

Most of the participants who were willing to accept that the term "victim" could apply to them were willing to regard it only as a temporary condition, one that signaled their lack of culpability and their entitlement to protection from further victimization. None of the participants said anything that suggested they wanted to be seen as victims: Even those like Adam and Nicolas who wanted their victimhood recognized so that they could obtain help were uncomfortable with the need to do that, and they wanted to move away from that position as soon as possible. George and Chris both felt that their identity had been strengthened by their experience of victimization, but this was because they had been helped to move on from victimhood. These findings call into question some of Furedi's claims that North America and Europe are experiencing "the ascendancy of therapeutic culture" in which, spurred on by identity politics, members of minority groups seek victim status (Furedi, 2004, p. 149).

Identity is not unitary: People may have several identities (Williams, 2000), and I asked each participant about how his identity as a gay man had been affected by homophobic victimization and what if anything had subsequently been helpful to them. The men who felt their identities had been strengthened were those who had received effective help, such as Chris, or who had unusually strong personal resources to help them deal with the aftermath and had received skilful support, such as Stewart. Those like Carl and Lamar who were still being harassed, who had really had no opportunity to come to terms with it or recover either found it difficult to talk about their identity or they said they felt it had been damaged by their experiences. The men who seemed to be the most secure in their identities were those who

were most closely involved with LGBT social networks that provided the opportunity to tell their stories to each other in the way that Wachs (1988) describes, though, I suggest, as gay men and not as victims. These affiliations seemed to affect not only how quickly the participants recovered from victimization but also how they saw the process of victimization and the victimhood itself. These findings might have implications for support services that use the term "victim," either in their name or in the publicity they produce to market their services: Many men may not wish to use services that are marketed under that term.

## Discussion

What emerges from the data is that the preservation or perhaps successful forming and reforming of masculine gay identity depends on not being prevented from successfully exercising agency in resisting victimization, and in particular, not being prevented from doing so by state authorities. The state can block victims' proactive efforts to resist further victimization, as happened to Carl, or state authorities and support organizations can instead facilitate their "fight back," as the police did with Paul and his partner. I suggest that this is not generally understood by police, housing authorities, and victim services. Accepting that one has been a victim is important in establishing that the abuse was not deserved, in other words knowing that being a gay man is not inherently wrong or maladaptive. Carl and Lamar in particular had struggled with that acceptance. Carl struggled because of the added dimension of working-class hypermasculine norms associated with his family. Lamar was troubled by the further complexities of race and, perhaps, the subordinated masculinity associated with being Black (Mercer, 1994; hooks, 1982, 1992, 2004; Ratcliffe, 2004) that is even more subordinate for Black gay men who occupy the double-minority status that Manalansan (1996) describes. For Lamar, these dynamics were played out in the difficulty he had in accepting that he could be subject to the "virus spread by White people"; his mother's perspective on homosexuality that he had been socialized into thinking was what constituted his sexual orientation. Franco said he thought he could accept homophobic abuse if he was expecting it, such as he might if he was dressed up to attend a *Gay Pride* parade. This may suggest that if homophobic abuse occurs when it is expected, that is, when dressed up and therefore going purposefully further in projecting a "camp" persona than would be usual, it may be less hurtful because the abuse would not represent an attack on one's central identity in the way one gets abused when going about everyday activities. Surviving

homophobic abuse, for Franco and for other participants, depended on not "having your defences down." For several men in this study, victimization "goes with the territory" of being gay: Homophobic hatred is a reality that has to be lived with, but remaining a victim has connotations of passivity and weakness and is not masculine. These connotations are affronts to the established and sought-after gay male identity that is unavoidably bound up in the action-orientated framework of masculinity. Each instance of victimization may bring the need to reestablish that masculine identity and to have access to support in doing that.

The process of recovering from homophobic victimization that Stewart described may involve what Weeks refers to as a constant making and remaking of identity as time and events unfold (Weeks, 2003). It supports Connell's view that there is no general gay identity, much as there is no general heterosexual identity. Rather, achieving a gay identity is a project: "homosexual masculinity as a historically realized configuration of practice" (Connell, 2005, p. 160). The consequence of homophobic abuse for this project is that some gay men who experience homophobic abuse find they have to repeatedly restart the process of achieving a gay male identity. Edwards emphasizes the way in which debates around sexuality and masculinity should not separate these concepts but should be based on a realization that sexuality and gender are inextricably linked in the way that oppressive norms operate. He argues, "On the face of it, gay masculinities are a contradiction in terms: Gay negates masculine" (Edwards, 2005, p. 51). But the experiences of men like Stewart suggest that in fact "gay" will only negate "masculine" if men do not work through for themselves the meanings that the interaction of these dynamics have for them. It may be that that the difficulty in achieving resolution lies in the pervasive nature of homophobia, the lack of support available with which to work through these issues, and the way in which (predominantly White) hypermasculine traits[4] are sometimes "sexy" in gay male subculture. Such traits may have evolved as a reaction against more traditional stereotyped images of gay men as feminine, weak, cultured, and so on, which are of course the stereotypes that homophobia both promotes and reacts against (Whitehead, 2005).

Mason illustrates the ways in which we tend to draw on our own subject position in coming to terms with our experiences. The meaning of a violent event is "never fixed or essential but, rather, is actively constituted through the distinctions and differences of language and discourse" (Mason, 2002, p. 24). She goes on to illustrate the significance of this for identity, which is that identity is a manifestation of the intersections between meaning and experience,

experience being both a cultural construct and the process by which the individual is constructed. For most of the men in this research, their conception of identity was constituted by a combination of internalized norms that held homosexuality to be deviant, the meaning that they attributed to the experience of having been victimized, and the interaction of these with their conceptions of masculinity. Homophobic abuse built on their experiences of homophobia and heterosexism, especially in their formative years. These had led many of them to question the legitimacy of their identities as men and as gay men. Allen (2002) observed, "The consequences of victimization may undermine the victim's view of himself as a man" (p. 26). She noted that gay men define what happened to them markedly differently from heterosexual men, and this indicates that any worthwhile exploration of the implications of victimization for gay men should encompass a focus on both the masculine and the gay dimensions of the issue. It is perhaps for this reason that terms such as "victim" were so problematic for most of the participants.

The experiences described here show how identities are formed and constantly reformed reflexively in interaction with other people (Giddens, 1991; Plummer, 1975, 1995; Weeks, 1991; Williams, 2000). This might seem a rather obvious conclusion to draw, but the particular significance of this for the gay men I talked with is that this is problematic when gay identity is something that comes under regular attack. Connell, Kimmel, and others (Plummer, 2007; Weeks, 1991, 2003) refer to the changing and tenuous nature of masculinities, and these analyses might help explain the harmful impact of verbal abuse in common epithets such as "queer cunt" that define gay masculinity as a type of debased feminity. Many of the men in this study talked about feeling hurt by homophobic abuse being an attack on a central aspect of their identity, and masculinity was often a component that was harmed in that way. As Connell (2005) argues, "Masculinity is necessarily in question in the lives of men whose sexual interest is in other men" (p. 90). So there is already a difficult issue to deal with even before any homophobic abuse occurs, which the abuse then compounds in its damaging effects on identity. Some participants talked about how the hurt that the homophobic abuse invoked was recalled by hearing homophobic views expressed in the media. Most participants who had also experienced violence motivated by other factors thought the homophobic abuse they experienced was more damaging because it was an attack on their identity or because there was a clear process to be followed in the aftermath of other crime that was not so well mapped out for dealing with the aftermath of homophobic abuse or both. These feelings were often compounded by a degree of self-blame that

might be attributable to their internalization of homophobic norms. These factors seemed to apply almost as much in the aftermath of verbal abuse and harassment as they did to the ostensibly more serious consequences of violence. This might explain why some participants, including Franco and Jim, were shocked by how profoundly distressed they were by the verbal abuse they experienced. They may also have contributed to Stewart's crippling sense of shame that was invoked, even before he was stabbed, by the inaction of the onlookers who witnessed the very public verbal abuse of him and his partner.

In view of Rock's (2002) recommendation that construction of a victim identity needs to be examined with heavily victimized groups, we can see from these data that gay men who experience homophobic abuse are helped by the process of accepting a victim identity, but only if they can quickly move on from it by reconstructing a masculine gay (nonvictim) identity. The men in this study did not so much construct a victim identity but instead found it constructed for them, and most of them wanted to resolve their discomfort with the state of victimhood by making for themselves a nonvictim or "survivor" identity. This characteristic is shared with some members of other groups, including women, where feminist perspectives on recovery from sexual abuse and domestic violence react against the term "victim" with its connotations of passivity (Walklate, 2003) and for whom it is preferable instead to refer to abused women as "survivors." Data from my research suggest that where help in accomplishing this transition is withheld or obstructed, men become fixed in a victim identity that is counterproductive. Weeks (1991) argues that gay identities are both constructed and essential. They are constructed in that they are historically molded and therefore subject to change, and they are essential in that they are necessary and inescapable. But for the people most regularly victimized, like Lamar, Carl, and others in this study, the identities that are chosen (Giddens, 1991) become not just inescapable but almost inoperable in the face of the weight of homophobic abuse.

## Summary

The concept of victimhood has a wide range of meanings, many of which can be highly "loaded" and which problematize its usage. For most of the men, a victim identity was not wanted, because it signified weakness, a failure of masculinity, and the inability to exercise agency; because it was seen as a term that should be reserved for the most serious types of abuse, such as rape; or because it implied the ceding of power to the abuser. If

victimhood was accepted, it was as a means of acknowledging to one's self the seriousness of what had happened in the process of coming to terms with the added harm caused by the state's failures to provide protection. Acceptance may mark the start of the process of recovering from the abuse, where victimhood is only acceptable if it is of the briefest possible duration. This concept, of moving "through" victimhood to a better state at the other side of it, has implications for the work of police, housing, and support services in responding to homophobic abuse. If Richardson and May's (1999) analysis that gay men are unlikely to be construed as innocent victims is valid, gay men and transgender people will not meet the criteria in the conception of "ideal victim" that Christie (1986) describes because people tend to blame victims who appear to be different to them (Elias, 1986). There are parallels here with the tendency of police officers to not recognize Black people being victimized (Ratcliffe, 2004), a notorious example of which was the failure in 1993 of the Metropolitan Police to treat Stephen Lawrence and Duwayne Brookes as victims. As Rock (1990) describes, the typification of victim has been instrumental in determining whether or not support is available. As the experiences of the men in this study show, that unwelcome identifier has to be claimed before any help might be forthcoming. Although there have recently been significant improvements in criminal justice attitudes to victims generally (Reeves & Dunn, 2010), if people do not wish to, or are unable to, accept a "victim" identity, they are unlikely to avail themselves of improvements in criminal justice practice, particularly if the term "victim" is used in the marketing of victim services. The claims of those who contend that victimhood is somehow a status that is promoted and desired in late modernity (Furedi, 2004, 2006) are not supported by the participants in this study. Instead, most of them tended either to play down their experience, or they eschewed the notion that they were victims because most did not want such an identity. Victimhood was incompatible with a masculine gay identity, associated with times when they had, through pervasive homophobia and other abusive experiences, felt powerless and, sometimes, shamed. As Rock (2008) argues, victimization has in any case long been a devalued status. For almost all the men in this study, despite their strong efforts to resist being victimized and the pride they took in "fighting back," they were not in a position to learn how "not to be a victim."

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Notes

1. "Batty boy" is a derogatory term derived from "bottom," referring to anal sex, thought to have originated in Jamaican slang. See http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=batty+boy&defid=1298071 and http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/batty+boy
2. A person who completed my survey wrote on it that he was angry with himself for not being able to defend himself during the attack he experienced.
3. Daniel in her PhD thesis about rape noted that some victims, male and female, disclosed the abuse they experienced because they thought it might help protect future potential victims (Daniel, 2006). It would be interesting to know whether such a prosocial orientation is a feature of people who experience rape and hate crime, or simply a defining characteristic of those who are willing to help PhD students!
4. Connell refers to these as "the tattoo-and-motorcycle style of aggressive working class masculinity" (Connell, 2003, p. 55).

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## Bio

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