

Patrick Baxter

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PARTICIPANT: I'm Patrick Baxter, actually Doctor Patrick Baxter, graduated this year, not a medical doctor, even though I do work in sexual health now, so I've got background in anthropology, visual anthropology, artistic film-making, some performance stuff, research, and as I said I now work in sexual health for the LGBT Foundation. I identify as gay and queer, so gay is my sexual orientation and queer is a more sort of political subjectivity around how I view the world through sexual, gender lenses. I've been living in Manchester nine years now, eight or nine years. Prior to that I obviously lived in Ireland in Dublin, Spain, Mexico, travelled a lot in Germany, Holland, Italy, so experienced a lot of different types of gay and queer spaces in my time. I wasn't always out as a gay man, I was you know, closeted, then identified as bi for a while and was never really comfortable with that position in life. It's not that because there's a lot of biphobia that goes on and I didn't, like I was genuinely bi, but I just couldn't really determine how that suited my political viewpoint of the world, so it was a sort of uncomfortable position, one that I never really fixed clearly and then I suppose it was probably about five or six years ago that I was like, okay, I can't do this anymore and really just realised I suppose, that I'm a gay man. That might lead to directly I suppose into the nature of this project, that is talking about awareness of HIV and AIDS so yeah, I'm a child of the eighties, I'm giving my age away there somewhat. So I was probably about seven or eight when duly I became aware that I found boys attractive. I know that's quite an early age and I was very drawn to the darker skin boys. In Ireland at the time it wasn't very multicultural, it was very monocultural country, but I had this sort of awareness that that was something that was alluring to me. And at the same time there were all these reports in the media of this sort of new disease and it was very much positioned as a gay man's disease and I sort of became aware of this concept of gay and it was sort of positioned alongside this sort of death motif, so every time you saw anything about HIV/AIDS, it was sort of gay man's disease and you had these images of really sort of emaciated and very sickly people and that was something that I even at an early age found very troubling. To kind of contextualise that a little bit, Ireland in the eighties was what I sometimes controversially describe as a clerical fascist state. It was priest-ridden, the entire social fabric of the country was determined by this Catholic, puritan-Catholic sort of... how to say, yeah a very destructive force and as a child who was starting to have this awareness. I was massively into the media, I watched the news, looked in newspapers and whatnot and all these sorts of narratives were starting to develop around gay and death and my awareness that A, I might be that, so my person equalled death in a way, and also you had this culture that was saying explicitly, like often in the classroom that gay people are evil, and they're going to go to hell. I mean that's not hyperbole, this was, you know, it was the curriculum almost. So that was kind of troubling, I'd say more than troubling, kind traumatic in a way because you were growing up with the sort of notion that you were somewhat evil and that's the starkest way I can put it, I know that's kind of dramatic but internally you were manifesting.

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PARTICIPANT [continued]: I very quickly at the age of about ten decided I was an atheist and really became very very anti-church, I suppose that was my way of resisting but internally I still kind of, there was a massive fear of stating that I was attracted to men, or boys at the time, so that remained hidden for quite a while, and I suppose the long-term damage that causes is quite profound. So it took me a long time when I was starting to identify as bi to even trust my friends to state that, which is sort of, I suppose, in the sort of punk, free party, you know anarchist circles, that was read as sort of acceptable, if you know what I mean? It was sometimes a notion that the sort of punk world, and you know free party world, is really kind of free and open, but it is actually very macho environment and very heteronormative. That was also something I was becoming very aware of was that all these people with their very radical views and so on, still have heteronormative ideals which made it again quite difficult to come to terms with what my sexuality actually was.

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INTERVIEWER 1: When you were growing up in Ireland, did you have anyone you could talk to about this kind of thing or did you have support or acknowledgement or that kind of thing or were you aware of spaces that were more positive or offering services?

PARTICIPANT: No, zero. Nothing. No role models as in people who existed in my social surroundings, zero. I didn't have any awareness of any sort of social support networks. The internet wasn't really a thing back then, you know, god I'm giving my age away so much here. So didn't have access to the internet, I was very aware that when I moved to Dublin first of all, The George was the biggest, it still is, the biggest gay bar in the city and I would sort of sneak off and just go to that. One of the issues I've found, I'm very intimidated by it to be honest, I didn't really find any of the people there attractive, so as I said, you know, Ireland wasn't very multicultural and I suppose some of the sexual interactions that I had there now when I look back probably were akin to... not rape, but not particularly consensual either. I didn't think of them in that sense because there's that sort of self-loathing that goes on when you're closeted that if somebody is sort of abusive towards you in a sort of sexual manner, then you sort of deserve it in a kind of a way so that's sort of twisted. I don't know what the word is to sort of describe it, but it's a sort of internalised homophobia. So that was going on. When I moved to Barcelona things started to shift a little bit because A, I started to find lots more men attractive and it was a far more kind of open environment. It's much more accepting. There was far more gay and queer events, saunas, gay bars that went on until you know, three days, you'd go party. But also in terms of [missed] in Barcelona, because it was just sort of word of mouth that Barcelona had a huge prevalence, a really extreme prevalence at the time of HIV and what was still AIDS back then at that point. So that was then, then the paranoia started kicking in, like what did I do with that guy, I don't even remember doing that, meeting guys in parks and that sort of thing and not remembering whether I'd used condoms and that because you know, we'd used drugs and that as well, so then there was that sort of reflecting back to the growing up and the death motif and the hold on, that's part of my life now. Then for a long time when I was having any sort of interactions with men, having sex with men, I was actually quite on it, in terms of condoms. Not that I liked them, I always hated them, you know. But it was just that sort of intense fear and paranoia. I remember sexual health check in Barcelona and

then in Dublin when I came back both as being horrible, just brutal really. A real disincentive to get checked. The questions about what I'd done with men and why didn't I use condoms. And I was like, because I was out of my head. But it was very simple and very judgmental and very kind of like, you should do this, you should do this, and I wondered at the time I if had been going in there revealing sex, well I was having sex with women as well, but if, when I'd mentioned partners that I'd had, that there was less judgment about the sex with women, but when I mentioned the men, well, why didn't I use condoms?

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PARTICIPANT [continued]: The sort of notion then that, or if you pick up anything, if you contract anything, oh it's definitely from the men. This is something that actually I think that in a lot of straight imaginary still exists, a friend of mine, this is only about three years ago, before I was on PrEP, because I was doing a lot bare back and having to go to getting checked all the time, and my friends were giving me shit about this, oh you should be using condoms, oh it's like Russian roulette what you're doing. I was going, yeah yeah yeah, and then I was like, hold on, you're on Tinder aren't you? And it was like yeah. You go on lots of dates don't you? Yeah. Do you always use condoms? No, so I was like oh it's only gay people who get diseases is it? At least I get checked every three months, when was the last time you had a sexual health check? So it still persists in hetero imaginary that HIV is a gay person's illness or disease or whatever you want to call it, I mean it's a condition, it's a medical condition and actually what I think has happened is that there's a much better awareness amongst LGBT people of HIV is a very manageable condition, you just get your viral countdown to undetectable, you have a perfectly healthy life. I don't think awareness exists in straight culture at all. I still think there's this notion that HIV equals AIDS equals death. And it's really kind of strange, because I've mentioned undetectable to straight friends, they've got no notion of what it is. Now I know there's still a lot of young LGBT people and young gay and bi men who don't have a clue either, and older, who don't have a clue either, but I still think there's a real problem in how HIV is projected into the world and the stigma with how that creates and I think a lot of that has to do with how mainstream services view it and project it outwards. I think one of the interesting things about how we do here is trying to break down that stigma and talk about how HIV is just a medical condition like any other condition. You know, like diabetes and all the different ways you can manage it and trying to get that message across, you know. It's obviously, I don't know if I'm expressing that quite...

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INTERVIEWER 1: No, that's really good and interesting and I want to come back to the way in which the term MSM emerged as a way of not just making it about gay-identified people but also yeah. But also I was wondering if you could tell us a bit more about Barcelona when you were there. When were you there and what kinds of attitudes did you encounter? I mean obviously you told us about the clinic which sounded pretty horrible but in terms of the people you were hooking up with or having relationships with, or what kinds of conversations were there around sex and around safer sex?

PARTICIPANT: Interesting enough that kind of links into your question about MSM because a lot of the guys I was having sex with in Barcelona were Moroccan so they didn't identify as gay, or bi, or whatever, it was just they fucked guys and that was it. Conversations about safer sex were zero. Yeah, zero. It wasn't discussed. People would talk about SIDA, which was AIDS, a lot in Barcelona as this sort of death! SIDA! The gays! The attitudes in Barcelona despite it being in one sense this very hedonistic gay paradise, there was, it seemed very backward. But to me at the time I didn't have an awareness that it was backward, I just thought that's, that's the culture, you know, that's part of gay culture, that's part of Spanish culture, or Catalan culture I should say. I was as lacking in knowledge as everyone I encountered. There seemed to be people acting, as in having sex, bare backing in parks, and what not, but then there was this sort of paranoia afterwards. Sometimes there were guys that would sort of shut down, that they suddenly realised that they'd fucked me in the park or I'd just fucked them. I think that that's, there's one thing that anxiety around kind of risky sexual behaviour leads to more risky sexual behaviour rather than the counter. You would think that if you were anxious about something that you'd just done, you would be unlikely to repeat that but the opposite seems true and certainly for me for a long period of my life before I got on PrEP, that certainly was true. I was in a window period for I don't know how many years, I really don't know how many, there was never a period when I wasn't in the window period you know. Which is huge amount of anxiety to wander around with all of the time. I do like my PhD and you know, wonder do I have HIV all the time.

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INTERVIEWER 1: Could you say for someone who maybe isn't versed in sexual health, testing culture, what's the window period?

PARTICIPANT: Window period is three months. So that's the period which it takes for the HIV virus to become detectable in your blood stream. So it'll be active in your blood stream almost immediately when it gets into your system and there's a period after about two to three weeks of conversion and that's when it's starting to become, starting to copy in the blood stream. Now tests are so good these days, the full bloods, the [missed] tests or the NC tests that they can pick up, detect HIV in the blood stream after a month, six weeks. But for many people it will take three months and obviously then there's this sort of insipidness to the virus because it's there doing its thing and it's like your viral load is going up and up and up so it's making you more likely to transmit the virus but it can't be detected. So that's the window period, so there is that kind of, there's three months where you don't really know your status, so you might be going out bare backing, not using a condom with other people for sex, so there is that risk there that you're transmitting to someone else. And that used to be always my biggest fear. I have always considered myself a very strong person, I think I can cope with pretty much anything but my fear was always that ohhh... you know, particularly with a guy that I loved and still love, he's young and thinks he's tough, but he's not as tough as he thinks he is and I was always kind of worried, so you know, it's that social aspect to the virus as well, the social consequences of it. The stigma that exists around it that links back to the 1980s and you know, the big HIV/AIDS advertisements of graveyards, and... it's not to say, because I've spoken to people who worked on HIV wards in the eighties and nineties and things were really bad but the kind of social stigmas that built up around it then,

and what was happening in Africa in the nineties, they're still perpetuated every day. Working in sexual health, we know that's not the case anymore, we don't even use the term AIDS, we use late-stage diagnosis. If someone is diagnosed with late-stage HIV that is quite serious and they're probably quite an ill person, but there's still, it's still treatable, so it's trying to get those messages across and it can be really difficult because of these inbuilt series of motifs and tropes and images that are associated with HIV. I mean, they're very powerful.

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INTERVIEWER 1: What do you think in terms of changing the cultural politics around HIV, have you seen, have you come across any campaigns where you've thought, actually yeah, that speaks to me. Or that is kind of, hitting the right spot or note in a way in terms of a campaign that tries to get the more cultural...

PARTICIPANT: Well I think the positive speakers that George House Trust, and that's always really powerful, so if you go to the vigil during Pride or World AIDS Day you have these incredible people who are revealing their lives for you. You're standing up in front of several hundred, maybe a thousand people, and talking about when they first contracted the virus, what that was like, and the life they've had since. Usually talking about love, and family, and I think those are really really powerful kind of, yeah they're really powerful manifestations I suppose, they are a manifestation in themselves. There was a really cool video I've seen and I can't remember who produced it, maybe it was George House Trust, but it was a bunch of men talking about HIV and their status and reading stuff out that they'd had, really abusive and horrible messages that they'd had on Grindr, and in a really witty sense just turning them around. So there's a great, one of the things that we're trying to, use of language is really important. One of the things that we do here is try and... so when people here say I'm clean, it's like... hmm, what does that mean? So someone with HIV is unclean, impure? I have a friend, you know on Grindr you can put your status, before that existed people would message and go are you clean? He's HIV positive and he'd go yeah yeah I've had three showers today, I'm pretty clean. What does that mean? Are you clean? So this video, it's a five minute video, men living with HIV of various ages, ethnicities, but they were all really witty and playing with this use of language and abusive terms, and I thought that was really powerful. One thing I suppose, because my interaction with HIV and the campaigns around it is very much from the LGBT activist perspective, you know, a queer activist perspective, and I'm not aware, I don't know of how mainstream culture, is there campaigns within mainstream culture that, there doesn't seem to be. I mean, I'm not aware of any if they do exist, so I suppose one thing here that we'd like to do, maybe if this video reaches outside of our usual LGBT and queer circles is to, to people with big culture makers in mainstream cultures. Jeremy Corbyn maybe, Man United or Man City footballers. Some celebrities in the cities, Noel Gallagher or someone like that. I think it would be really good if those people became role models, or came to us for an HIV test. I think that would be a powerful way of breaking down a lot of the stigma and the barriers around testing, particularly. I mean, I want to test Jeremy Corbyn! And Sergio Aguero, who plays for Manchester City.

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INTERVIEWER 1: Is that your dream?

PARTICIPANT: Yeah yeah, they're the two I have on my list. I think that would be a very powerful campaign because I think the awareness within queer culture and within LGBT circles is quite good, it's not perfect, there is still a lack of knowledge out there, but I think the biggest knowledge deficit, the paucity, is more within mainstream culture. Heteronormative society, whatever way you want to describe it.

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INTERVIEWER 1: I was wondering if you could say a little more about your work here at the Foundation. How you first got involved. Leading up to maybe talking a little bit about your current projects.

PARTICIPANT: Okay, so, I first became aware of what was the LGF at that stage probably about five years ago and that was when I used to come in for a Monday clinic and get a full screening done. I was in an open relationship and my boyfriend was like, well come on, we have to come and get tested, partly because of the wacky stuff I was getting up to and that was quite interesting because I hadn't been aware of the building. I'd been to, it was Kiki at the time wasn't it, I don't think it was Queer at the time, yeah I think it was Kiki back then. And I hadn't been aware of the [missed] that existed for services or... and my boyfriend was going to icebreakers and I went along but I was like, no, it's not for me. So at that stage I suppose I had a little bit of the remnants of internalised homophobia where for me, gay was just sex. I'd read a lot of queer theory and that stuff, it wasn't that I was lacking knowledge, but my activism had come more from anarchist, black bloc type of stuff, you know. Fighting police and smashing windows and that kind of craic. So I hadn't really thought about my sexuality as a political thing at all, or as a social thing really, it was just sex. And that started to slowly break down and I came to a few events here, various things, like when Pride was on, just came into the building to watch a film and that sort of thing, slowly starting to engage with what was the LGF at the time a bit more. And then in 2015 I was back in Ireland making a film as part of my PhD research and [fortuitously] that was the same time as the marriage equality referendum was happening. I was in my home town of Longford, and they had a Longford LGBT group so I went along to this group and was sort of cajoled and drafted into the campaign because of my videography skills primarily at the time. I remember thinking marriage, like, I just think marriage, no matter what way it manifests is heteronormative patriarchal blah blah, and I also, why do I care about marriage, who's going to be crazy enough to marry me anyway? But anyway this sort of activist streak kicked in and got involved and that and that led to a shift again to start to see more politicised subjectivity through my sexual orientation. The battle wasn't so much for me about marriage itself. The battle was about all Ireland, the battle was against the church that had really really damaged me and traumatised me and this was like an act of resistance. Definitely when I got back to Manchester then, because a lot of the same sort of hedonistic stuff was still going on in my life around sex, and chill outs and that. I accessed counselling here and then realised I don't really need counselling, I'm actually really happy with my life, but that was revealing, just the fact that this free counselling existed here I thought was just kind of quite extraordinary because you'd be waiting six months to a year to get counselling on the NHS, okay this is something different and a lot of friends, I'd seen them around

the village when they'd be out for drinks, the Village Angels, and some friends of mine said you'd be really good at that, and I thought yeah, that's something that is quite interesting. So I volunteered for the Village Angels, nearly two years ago now, and that was kind of very profound and the Haven kicked off around the same time, a little bit later, so that was again a sort of different way of approaching Manchester.

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PARTICIPANT [continued]: Seeing the gay hedonism, from the other side. Because I'd been accessing said services in terms of sexual health testing and they'd really actually somebody who'd tested me during I suppose actually a crisis time, yeah it had just had a profound effect on me. And I'd also started accessing PrEP round this time through, self-medicating through advice and resources and things I got here, the LGBT Foundation and that kind of embryonically lead to volunteering for sexual and lo and behold now I'm the sexual health officer here. So it just seemed to snowball from one thing to the other, a natural progression in a way. So yeah then my work here, do you want to talk about some of the sort of stuff we do here? Point of care testing, rapid HIV testing, we support full screening clinic on Mondays. We do a lot of outreach work, that's doing workshops with students or professionals, you know, LGBT groups, MSM, we've done outreach clinics for national testing week, which was actually a fortnight of testing, so we went to saunas, community centres, student union buildings, to, yeah... the positive effects of which were obvious. Every outreach event we went to we testing somebody who'd never tested before, we also tested people who hadn't tested for ten years because of the trauma they'd gone through in mainstream sexual health services, so I think that qualifies what a good initiative that was. We do condom and lube distribution, supporting the Village here, we distribute safer sex packs around Greater Manchester, we're massive advocates for PrEP, at least I am, well, our team is, we're all massive advocates for PrEP but I'm a massive advocate for PrEP because I feel that PrEP has kind of changed my life. I mean, the sexual health team and the organisation is amazing in that they're allowing me to do a sort of artistic research project called Manchester Penetrate, so what this is is a psychosexual geography, a sex mapping of the city. People who are watching this would probably be aware of what psychogeography is, so it's a sort of radical walking in the city critiquing space and place and usually it's a critique of modernity and capitalism and psychosexual geography is attempting to link up historical sexual experience for gay, bi and MSM. The sort of furtive dark spaces in the city in which we engage in sex, so sort of saunas, and cruising down canal, cottaging, parks, sex in premises venues, fetish, but also what I'm interested in as well is experiences of gay love or queer love, how that feels like, how that's different to how mainstream society experiences space and place. There's a lot of things I suppose that I'm wondering about, so say, a few years ago, chem sex chillouts would be just in the city centre and now they're starting to move outwards, so prevalence just in Manchester we have extreme prevalence, that's more than five in every thousand people has HIV. We've got extreme prevalence here and Salford's going up from high risk into extreme prevalence, Tameside is going from lower risk into, like all the localities are starting to go up and chillouts are starting to go up in other parts of the city. When we look around us we've got apartment blocks going up in all parts of the city, a lot of the time have been bought by international investors for various reasons and have maybe been left empty but as a consequence property prices are rising, so is there a link there?

That's the sort of stuff I'm interested in. Are MSM gay and bi men who engage in chem sex moving out of the city because property prices are going up and with them obviously if they're moving out so are certain sexual practices are moving with them and does that have a linked effect to increased prevalence? I don't know. Maybe it does, maybe it doesn't, but those are the sort of things I'm really interested in exploring. So that's just one example, what is the effect of the undercroft of the canal has been closed off from ten at night and what sort of effect is that going to have on how people express their sexuality? I mean some people will say, oh well it's illegal anyway and it's dangerous and they shouldn't be down there, but that's a space for people and cruising is a way they express their sexuality and that's fulfilling for them, and if that space is now closed off, how do they then cope with that, is there other spaces to facilitate that. I mean not everybody has thirty quid to go into Eagle for the night, not everybody wants to do that. Is the official city attempting to censor, attempting to control our sexual practices? And if so, how do we resist that? I mean G4S have the contract I think to police the undercroft, that's problematic in itself.

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PARTICIPANT [continued]: The initial stages we had sort of, initial session on the 14th of November and I'm currently today or tomorrow we'll be putting out word for a night walk and the idea is to get a bunch of men, gay, bi, MSM, together, some cameras, sound recorders, sketchpads, you know, whatever, to creatively walk through the city and explore these spaces. It's all about storytelling really. There's certain ways you can approach sexual health, sexual identity and the problems and the beauties that exist within that. From a research angle you could do quantitative research or you know, lots of interviews, but there's also an artistic way you could approach that and a creative way you can approach that and that's also kind of really interesting, really interesting knowledge really, knowledge is a more interesting word, there's a lot of knowledge that we can get by telling stories, it's essentially what we're doing here today and I think that's really important the people have that space as well, to sort of explore their lives in a way that's sort of ca- it might be triggering as well, but it might be really cathartic, so that's what I'm aiming to do.

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INTERVIEWER 1: Sounds great.

PARTICIPANT: Ambitious anyway, you know.

INTERVIEWER 1: There's a lot there. I know you mentioned, earlier you mentioned chillouts, and I know you've done some work around this sort of nexus of drug use, drug use and sex basically and then I was wondering if you could say a little bit more about that from a personal or professional - maybe both - perspective as well?

PARTICIPANT: We do point of care testing, rapid HIV testing, we do try to explore a lot of these issues with men who try to present to us and we will ask questions like are chems ever a part of the sex that people are having? Ten per cent of the people that show up here identify that they do use chems as part of the sex that they are having. That's quite high. My thinking is that the number is actually higher, you get people coming in saying they've had thirty partners in the last three months and

they've got [missed] and you ask if they've ever been to a party and they say no, and you're like oh! okay. Methinks not. I imagine the numbers actually higher. We've also had quite interestingly in the last while a lot of people coming asking us questions about chem sex that are actually interested in... it's a cultural phenomenon and it's out there, so people are becoming interested or people are becoming curious. One of the things, I think this might have to be edited out, no I shouldn't, I won't go there about the chem sex documentary. I think a lot of the time from a professional sense there are a huge amount of problems, so we've got a problem about the transmission of STIs and HIV, you've got problems around consent, massively. If somebody shows up to a chillout and they use a certain combination of drugs and maybe they under are they consenting to sex with everybody at that party? My thinking is of course not, but there are a lot of people who are maybe a bit in a grey area about that and they don't really know what consent means in that capacity, which is really dangerous. Obviously dependency and mental health issues, so crystal meth is known to cause psychosis on quite dramatic levels. In terms of STIs this is a really interesting statistic that ninety per cent of diagnoses for syphilis are gay and bi men and syphilis is massively connected to drugs and chill out. Hepatitis C is massively on the rise in Manchester and the North West. From a personal sense, other than one or two occasions, my experience, I think because of the type of people that I gravitate towards, I do not like this sort of homonormative gym bunny types, they just bore me to tears. It's not that I don't like good looking men, I do, I just, I mean a lot of my experience of chillouts have actually been quite positive. I'm a long time into... and there's nothing I haven't taken and there's nothing I haven't done to excess so I think I've got a really good grip on that, so my experience would be quite different to a lot of people's around chem sex and I think there's a danger in assuming that just because someone would have engaged in chem sex, drugs and sex, for several days, that they immediately have some massive problem. I think the important thing you need to ask someone if they're engaging in chem sex is to what degree is this debilitating to your regular life. Are you missing work on a regular basis? Are you losing contact with friends? Are you not talking to family much? Are you really lacking sleep? Are you starting to have multiple STIs when you show up for clinic? Are you constantly in this window period, is there anxiety around that, is this causing you to lose sleep? Are you eating properly? There's loads, there's a whole series of things that you can start to look for that you can use to identify whether somebody maybe has an issue around chem sex.

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PARTICIPANT [continued]: In which case you don't go, oh you need to stop now, because they're not going to. Okay, chem sex is risky behaviour, how can we do it a little bit less riskily? I think it's dangerous to assume that just because somebody engages in chem sex that they have a problem, because they may not. It may just be something they like to do every other weekend or once a month or something. I suppose if someone is doing it every weekend then I might suggest that there is something going on because that might suggest a kind of dependency. The approach is not to mitigate the issues, because there are a lot of issues around chem sex, but yet again we're stigmatising if we approach it with this horror and shock. And okay, then I am going to say, the chem sex film that was made two years ago by VICE, it was just horrendous, bad film making, first and foremost. Really poor follow up, they'd have scenes in it, one that really struck me was a guy who switches

on his Grindr and he's like, urgh, 56 new messages and the implication is that in London every time you turn your phone on there are 56 more people wanting to engage in chem sex, which isn't, you don't know if they were old messages or that person just going hey you're cute, or hi what are you up to? There was no exploration of that, they didn't draw it out or question it. It was just ah! London! Chem sex! London! Chem sex! This is an epidemic. The aesthetics of the film was this really grimy, I mean my films have this horror aesthetic, I like that aesthetic, but the context you use it in, in this context just fed into this othering of gay men and this type of sex they have. Oh look at them, and their strange weird dangerous practices. And for me that links directly back to the start of our conversation about the death motif, HIV and the death motif. It's the same type of imagery, it's the same [missed] even, it's the same type of... gay mean equals death, and I really objected to that. I don't think I disliked a documentary ever as much as Chem Sex and I'm unapologetic about that as well.

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INTERVIEWER 1: I've got a couple of questions. This one's maybe of personal interest but you mentioned earlier about how in a way your first kind of politicisation was through radical politics and punk politics but then you've also now got this new subjectivity you mentioned as well, and I'm interested because it's something I've thought about as well in terms of that radical scene or radical politics and the kind of heteronormativity in it and how you've navigated that or not-

PARTICIPANT: I really sort of pulled away, my radicalisation was in the late nineties and it was very much around this sort of summit, protest, what was called anti-globalisation at the time, so Seattle and the big demos around that, and Reclaim the Streets, so Reclaim the Streets was the first point I became actively involved in anticapitalist antiauthoritarian anarchist type politics. I'd been, I moved to Barcelona in 2001, and obviously that was a really heightened time. I was on a May Day protest in 2001, paintballs flying at every building, banks being trashed. I came back from Barcelona later that year and got immediately involved in anti-summits, Reclaim the Streets stuff, very much Black Bloc. There was an intense machoism going on as well, I never felt it as a, I did go to outrage and Ladyfest sort of stuff as well, which was obviously a bit more queer, well it was queer. That was sort of solidarity. But I was still in a confused state about my own sexuality at the time, so, but I would go, any time I would go to anything that was queer as well. But I felt it was very much a macho scene as well and I was no different, I was masking up, running around, fighting the police, whatever it was. Increasingly I suppose as the years went on I started to disengage from that sort of protest and that sort of politics altogether. I still do consider myself an anarchist. I see it as a sort of way of life, a lens through which to look at the world. I mean I have loads of critiques of anarchism as a political philosophy. I think sometimes it can be way too utopian, not actually dealing with the realities of what, the world that we exist in. But I never felt a strong sense of queerness about it, and I'd started to read Judith Butler, Mike Warner and stuff like that, so I was aware of queer theory and queer writing and so on. I suppose it's only really the last few years that that's started to impact on me a bit more and I suppose the type of activism that I'm engaging in at the moment is more sort of, I don't want to use the word assimilationist, because I'm a liberationist, at my core. But trying to use that liberationist thinking through more official channels, or more normative channels.

Because you come to a certain point in your life when you're like, okay, you smashed the window of a bank, well the insurance is going to cover that and then the window replacing company is going to make a load of money, you know, it's all a spectacle. I was down in London in 2010 at that big march, that student and union protest. I was filming down there for a film collective that we had called Castles Built in Sand. We were going to do this big project about society as a spectacle. There was actually quite extraordinary to see that everybody just taking their roles. Black bloc smashing windows, the pacifists kind of go ooh! and the cops beat up the pacifists or UK Uncut or whatever and then we're there filming but also everyone else was there filming. There was tourists with their phones out filming a riot. Oh there's a riot on! I'll film it and put it on YouTube, or Facebook or whatever it is.

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PARTICIPANT [continued]: I thought this is actually quite extraordinary, I don't see the value of this anymore and that's not to say that protesting is futile because I don't believe it is, but certain types become sort of ritualised and I didn't really see how I as a subject in the world could have any real impact in that any more. There's a certain stage in your life when you're very angry and you've got no means of articulating that and going out and spray-painting buildings and doing loads of graffiti and locking on and doing all these direct actions and gluing up doors is a means of articulating that anger and getting it out of your body so I think it is important, it's very cathartic and I would never ever say someone is wrong to do it. I would say someone is wrong to go and smash somebody's window of somebody's house because that's just bullying and vandalism but I don't really care if RBS's windows are smashed in. I'm not going to shed a tear for RBS. But there comes a point where there's no means by which I can articulate myself anymore and film making and art and creativity became a means by which I could do that. A lot of my work became about space and place. Housing in Ireland, things that do make me very angry, but rather than going and protesting that sort of stuff, which for me no longer has any sort of really strong portent I can use my, the tools that I have, to talk about that, to challenge that, similarly in terms of increasing political subjectivity as queer, and awareness of my identification as a gay man and all the problems I see around heteronormatively and a lot of the stigmas the people living with HIV are facing because I have a lot of friends and a lot of lovers who are HIV positive and seeing the crap that's thrown at them rather than spitting bile and vitriol on Facebook, there's a more productive means of approaching that. So that's why I started volunteering with the sexual health because I thought actually this is a really interesting way of fighting that and then I got, started sort of working here, full time in the sexual health office, so carrying that into, well there's a lot of stuff, I don't know if I should be staying this on camera. Well you can be keeping it for the archive anyway, you can edit this out. So our commissioners run patch contract, our commissioners would be the sexual health commissioners from the NHS, and they keep on chasing the fucking goal posts on it. So recently it's like, oh we can't test sixteen- and seventeen-year olds and it's like I'm sorry, if a seventeen-year old, if a fifteen year old comes in and is sexually active and is engaging in bare back sex or chems or whatever and comes in to get tested, I'm fucking testing them. And if they come and kind of, I think the whole team are on the same page about this and they give us stick about, this isn't blah, this is stupid! It's immoral. It's actually discriminatory, because Brook and other mainstream services do test sixteen- and

seventeen-year olds, I mean why, this is stick your head in the sand. On the one hand they want us to end HIV in a generation and lower new STI diagnoses in the city, on the other hand they're constricting us all the time. If you want this let us go and do our fucking job. So that kind of spirit I carry, you know, I think it's, take it seriously. We're currently funded only to test MSM, we work in the LGBT Foundation, why aren't trans women, who are high risk? It's bad enough for gay and bi men to go to mainstream services and talk about the kind of sex they're having but for people who are trans, there's misgendering going on, there's really traumatic experience for them, the sort of invasiveness of testing when you're going through transition and so on and we're a service that has it, we're LGBT assertive, we're trans assertive, we have that knowledge and yet we're told oh no you can't test trans people. This is... we can test trans men but we can't test trans women. I mean that's just ridiculous. If somebody, well the way I look at it is other than straight person's got loads of mainstream services, the mainstream services are built for them anyway, unless they're really anxious and something really has gone wrong.

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PARTICIPANT [continued]: And a lot of the time if somebody identifies as heterosexual as well, and tick they have sex with only women, and then you bring them aside and probe a little bit, you find out, oh well I occasionally go to gay saunas and that, so it's not always as straight forward and that's why the whole MSM category exists and in terms of LGBT people if somebody comes here to get tested and they're very anxious or you know, I'm going to help them in whatever way that we can. Because there are funding streams and the funding streams are very constrictive but that needs to be resisted as well, we just don't rest on our laurels and say oh that's the way it is, that's what we have to accept, and it's like, I've never accepted the conditions that society has laid down for me, I'm not going to start doing it at my work. As I said, that will probably have to be edited out because it's...

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INTERVIEWER 1: Well we've got timecodes so yeah...

PARTICIPANT: I'd love to leave it in actually, but-

INTERVIEWER 1: We can get back to you on maybe the library copy can have that in but yeah. Okay, so I mean that was really fascinating to me because partly on this project but not in a very explicit way we've not only been tracking what is, I mean there is activism in the title of the project, so what is activism and how has that changed over the years from these things that were very grass roots and DIY and now we have a few very professionalised organisations so that's going to change so it's very interesting to hear your perspective on activism. So we're coming to the end of this time, so Gary, do you have any questions? Or a question? If not, no pressure.

INTERVIEWER 2: Might not be entirely relevant but you are very politically aware, shall we say, so I started to think about Pride and what you think about Pride because it was kind of activism at first, when it started-

PARTICIPANT: It was a protest yeah. it's a tricky one isn't it? I have very mixed feelings about what Pride now is. So even like the first Prides I would have went on in Barcelona and Dublin felt far more grass roots and felt far more like a protest party. And because I'd come from the Reclaim the Streets, which was protest-party, it was all about hedonism but it was also making the point that these conditions need to change and we need to challenge a culture that around cars, I think a lot of what was happening around Pride when I first started going to Prides, and I often went on my own, was, yeah, we were challenging heteronormativity, it felt way queerer. As it stands now, with most Prides in most parts of the world, have become very large, leisure, corporate type events. I mean, it tickles me to go, oh here's the Easyjet float! I don't give a shit about the Easyjet float. There is the problem that in order to put on these large events that twenty times the people or whatever, come attend, you need funding to do that, so you need to get these corporate bodies in. But isn't there a danger there? Are we questioning it? These companies may have great LGBT inclusivity in their workplaces here, but what are they doing in other parts of the world? If somebody, if an indigenous woman in Mexico is enslaved by a certain company that is funding part of our Pride, I don't think that's a good thing. Pride was a protest against heteronormative society but it was also a sort of implicit act of solidarity with other marginalised people. I mean that's the way I always read it. It's the notion that if one of us isn't free, none of us are free. And I still stick by that, you know, as a principle. So I go to Pride, and the great thing about it is that you've got twenty thousand gay, bi, lesbian and trans people on the street, having a laugh, and I think it is important sometimes to have a big party, to celebrate, to have fun, we're more fun than all the rest of them. We're more fun than a football match that has twenty thousand people because they're going to try and kick the crap out of them. We just want to have sex and dance. And that is important. I think that sometimes the grass roots, the origin, the source, gets lost in that and that can be quite sad in a way.

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PARTICIPANT [continued]: The space to protest has been removed in a way. I remember in London two or three years ago, there was a, I can't remember the name of the group, but there was a queer anticapitalist group that were doing the death of Pride and they had a coffin and whatnot and they were pushed off the street and actively censored and repressed by security, by official Pride. That's a very dangerous thing, because when official Pride and all these very big organisations and so on are part of that scenario, start suppressing critical thought, there's a danger that we start to become this frivolous side show in a way. Critical thought and challenges to the patriarchy and heteronormal society should be at the core of everything that we do. It doesn't have to be done manning the barricades but it should be acknowledged and considered and the space for protest within Pride should exist because Pride was a protest. It's the origin of Pride in 1971 I think it was in London. I think it was organised by the Gay Liberation Front. That history is very important, that we reflect on that and keep that space there. And not just in a sort of tokenistic sense, have your little protest over there, it should be at the core of what we do. I think the most, say with Manchester Pride, we'll keep it local, and the best piece of Pride is always the vigil. It's always the part that has an impact. Essentially Pride here in Manchester is just a busy weekend in the Village on steroids. It's ramped up to eleven. There's nothing that extraordinary about it otherwise. I had the

good fortune to go to North West Pride in Sligo a few years back and I brought, I have a son, a little eight-year old, I brought him to that, he's brilliant, and that was great because it was way more kind of grass roots, it was really quite sort of, yeah, let's get on the streets in the North West of Ireland, you know. Have a Pride with three hundred people there and there were lots of kids and it was really cool, and I really enjoyed that. There was one actually this year in Mayo, my friends in [missed] LGBT, was actually the local group along with the local businesses in the town, made a hundred Pride flags, and planted them in one of the parks. There was just flags, rainbow flags everywhere and that's quite profound. I think that kind of Pride, that's more meaningful. I'm not saying that what happens here is shit and should be dismissed. I mean, safer sex packs, that we distribute every weekend are funded by Pride, so it's not that really good things aren't funded by it, but I think more in terms of we approach it, I suppose a lot of the younger gays don't remember the struggles so much anymore. The struggles around coming out, queer bashing that used to go on. HIV and AIDS, the sort of things that we grew up with. So the vigil is very important because it sort of links back into that history. I think Pride is a good thing in general, I just think there needs to be more space for dissenting voice and critical voice.

[01:04:34]

INTERVIEWER 1: Is there anything else that maybe you would like to add that we haven't covered or anything you would like to ask about?

PARTICIPANT: Nothing that comes to mind at the moment. I mean I think there's certain things that, I mean I'm loving the sort of shift to, a lot of younger people these days are now identifying as non-binary and I think that's really amazing. I was actually doing an outreach stall in Salford University. There's this young guy, about twenty, very good looking! And he was interested in getting involved with the Angels, I was chatting to him about the Angels, and we do like demcards, demographics, anonymised demographics cards, and he ticked in the sexual orientation box heterosexual and then he ticked in the gender box non-binary. I thought that's really cool. It's great that younger people are starting to dismiss the concept, starting to become aware of how gender is sort of constructed category anyway. I worry about the sort of homonormativity in our culture, a lot of the time perpetuated by Grindr and dating apps. A lot of the time people have to be ripped to shit or else they're not of any value. I think we all feed into that in a way, I think we're all guilty in a way of allowing that to happen and it's something that troubles me and needs to be challenged and I haven't really thought about a way in which it can be socially and politically challenged yet but it needs to be on the radar. I think a project like this is really important because if we can get it out as much as possible and you can get this seen by as many young LGBT people as possible, okay I'm not going to criticise millennials now, but anything that predates the internet doesn't exist. There's a whole heritage there, a whole archive of experience from pre-Internet. Since the internet and Western society has become more accepted and LGBT rights are at the kind of fore of political discourse, to kind of tap into that history where that wasn't always the case and would really benefit from you know, young people, in the coming out process to be aware of that history, I think it would really benefit and ultimately it's a good thing they don't have to struggle in the way we did and I look forward to the day, say if my son, is gay or bi or queer or whatnot, he doesn't have to come out. It's

just oh yeah, I met a boy at school, I mean, that's true progress. On the other hand, that's almost like we're assimilated completely. It's kind of a bit of a poisoned chalice in a way really isn't it, because gay and queer is extraordinary because we're all extraordinary, so I don't know, it's a kind of an interesting one to ponder.

[01:08:15]

INTERVIEWER 1: I did have one last, maybe we could do it briefly, as someone who said that you're on PrEP, things like PrEP or treatment prevention, how are they going to, or are they not, what impact do you see them having on sexual health, safer sex, HIV, in the future?

PARTICIPANT: I think there's going to be a bit of, I mean currently there's a bit of a stick your head in the sand, la la la, doesn't exist, sort of thing going on. So we've got the impact trial that's being rolled out, that's only to thirty thousand men. Well actually thirty thousand people, because there's a few different categories, there's MSM, BME communities and I think some heterosexual people who might be engaged in higher risk practices or sex work and stuff like that, and people in [missed] discordant relationships, so for anyone whose watching who doesn't know what that means, that when one person is living with HIV and the other person isn't. I think the importance of PrEP as an emergency medication, you know, it's just a wonder, and the two of them work together, but preventative. I think PrEP is going to be really important, not just as a medication but as a social argument. So the right-wing press we all know who we're talking about here, have already had this whole thing last summer about oh gay lifestyle drug, NHS paying for gay lifestyle drug. Gay and bi men can do what they like and be hedonistic. Well sorry, people are going to do what they like and have certain practices and that's always going to exist so you can pretend it doesn't exist and have increased HIV transmission in case you're going to be paying for ARTs which are more expensive, four times as expensive as PrEP, or you can just fund the drug and give it to people so they are safer. Obviously PrEP is only effective in the prevention of HIV, so you've still got STIs, but if you're medicating on PrEP you're far more likely to be engaging with sexual health services anyway, so if you're part of the trial you'll have to go back every three months to get your supply, in which case you're going to get a full screening done and that's going to identify anything that's showing up there. I mean it's a logical thing, why don't we give PrEP to people and then when they come back in we'll screen them and then we'll identify any recent infections and then deal with it. One of the problems is of course that our government doesn't want to pay for sexual health services, so they just keep pulling funds all the time and clinics are closing down and reducing their hours. Yet again it's this weird dichotomy where they're like oh we need to do this and lower all this but we won't give you any money to do it. But PrEP's really important because what PrEP does apart from a personal perspective, I think I spoke about having been for years and years and years in the window period and constant anxiety, for me, condoms are just, and condoms are still the most effective barrier to, they're the safest, but they don't work for everyone and they don't work for me. I can have sex once wearing a condom, you know that's it, that's me gone, can't have sex again that night. And when you're bottoming, so that's different from topping, when you're bottoming, there's a huge pressure on bottoms to bare back, there just is, and you might be in a space with a guy and he's like, oh can I just get my tip in for a second and then you end up bare backing and then you're like oh crap, again, and

then in the heat of the moment of course it would be better to use a condom but it doesn't always happen that way. So why should someone have to exist in the anxiety, because I don't really believe that you can have good sex if it's followed by sort of negative reflection, anxiety and stress. Ultimately you haven't really enjoyed that because the after effect is something negative. So PrEP takes that anxiety away. You can actually just engage in the sex that you want to have. For me sex is a human right, good sex is a human right, same as food and shelter. And I think we'll be a better society if we're having better sex and we're less anxious about the sex we're having and we'll be a better society if we start talking about sex more. And to point to people who are fine to talk about their hernia but they won't talk about the fact that they once had gonorrhoea. Why? It's just an illness, an infection like anything else. What's the problem? Why is there this big shame? Sex is something that we do all the time but yet we're all oh god, don't talk about it. Surely as a society that's attempting to mature that's an aspect of us maturing, and let's talk about it honestly. So PrEP is another means of doing that, and it's a game-changer wonderdrug in terms of preventing HIV, but socially it's a means of opening up a conversation about the sex we're having, the sex we want, the sex we need, and what have previously been the barriers to that. So it's massively important and I think any healthcare system that isn't rolling out PrEP extensively is foolish and dangerous.

[01:14:21] End of transcript.