



## Will a gay partner turn out to be a transient hussy of a husband?



**Dianne Bardsley**  
**WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE**

**I**N A recent television interview with residents at a retirement village some participants of the elder generation claimed that when young, they were not permitted to change the meanings or senses of words as people of all generations, but particularly the younger ones, do today.

They also cited the problems that they now have with the term gay, and how they can no longer describe a gathering as a gay party. For today's teenager, the idea that one had to be given permission (or not, as the case evidently was) to change the sense or usage of a word is no doubt preposterous. For the youth of today, using words in different and sometimes exclusive ways is a given.

As for gay, the word has an interesting and honourable history, for in Middle English it was a term of high praise for people who were noble and "generally excellent", being used to describe individuals who were rational, had charm, beauty, good health, and who were articulate.

Shakespeare used the term in these ways, along with the additional sense of bright-coloured and showy. Chaucer, Cowper, Macaulay, and Wordsworth mainly used the word in the sense that has perhaps lasted longest and more widely – that of being cheerful and high-spirited.

But this carefree and frivolous connotation led to the new sense of promiscuous, being used to describe both a prostitute and the actual activity of prostitution. Brothels became gay houses. It was in the United States between the two world wars that the term

was secured for homosexual people.

Late in the 1970s teenagers in the US began to use the term for anything they considered stupid or naff, but that sense took some time to be used in New Zealand.

In a different context, people of the same elder generation were decrying the use of partner rather than husband or wife, suggesting that it had the connotation of a business arrangement rather than a state of marriage.

Added to the discussion was the view that partners can come and go, while the concept of a husband or wife is more suggestive of a state of permanence. But the terms husband and wife have basically always had connotations of business or economic arrangements. Written archives of Old and Middle English help us trace the historical inter-relationship between social and economic structure and word usage. Semantically, husbands were originally bound to a house or household rather than to a wife.

A husband looked after the interests of a group of people in the same way that a housekeeper or steward would, and a good husband in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was one who managed household affairs with thrift and frugality. (House husbands are centuries-old) Husbandry in Middle English was simply that – domestic economy, administration, and management.

It was further used in the management of other aspects of productive life and that is the context in which it has remained – plant and animal husbandry, along with

bee husbandry, are terms still used widely in agriculture and pastoral management.

A wife, similarly, was originally associated with a household and its economic wellbeing rather than with a husband. In medieval times, a good wife was defined as a thrifty woman.

But wives have not enjoyed the respectable semantic history of husbands, at times being synonymous with women of humble rank or of low employment, hussies, harlots, and skittish persons. The word housewife, huswife, or hussif was shortened in the fifteenth century to hussy, a term which endured with negative associations.

Hussif or housewife was also the name given to a soldier's emergency needle-case and during World War II a standard New Zealand army hussif consisted of folded flannel with a darning needle, two sewing needles, safety pins, three trouser fly buttons, three shirt buttons, three underpants buttons, a small skein of khaki wool, light and heavy thread, and a pair of small scissors.

The fact that so much of human society is associated with survival and economic wellbeing is well-supported in historical lexis.

It will be interesting to see how the term partner is treated in the future and whether the fears about its association with transient relationships will be fulfilled.

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