

**'Come out, come out, wherever you are' :
the problem of representativeness and BME 'participation' in LGBT / lesbian research**

A dialogue presented at the 18th Lesbian Lives Conference, University of Brighton, 12 February 2011.

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Leela:

Jane and I met at the BSSN 'Transforming LGBT Lives' in Brighton in September, where Jane presented on early findings from her research, including the lack of BME respondents and responses to this.

I've worked as a volunteer with a couple of LGBT groups in Brighton over the past 6 years, which gets me the label 'activist', and I got involved in research through the Count Me In Too project researching LGBT lives in Brighton and Hove.

Jane:

And I'm currently a DPhil student at Sussex, researching the lives and experiences of lesbians over 60 – one of the last bastions of lesbian invisibility.

We all know that last forty or fifty years have seen an extraordinary shift in the social and legal acceptance of sexual diversity in Britain – a change which has, in the words of Ben Summerskill (2006) 'transfigured the lives of Britain's four million gay people.' Lesbians and gay men have become culturally visible in an historically unprecedented way. However, some are more visible than others. But the popular representation of lesbians and gays is still stereotyped and selective (Cowan and Valentine, 2006). The existence of **older** non-heterosexuals, especially lesbians, is rarely if ever acknowledged by the media. In Arnold Grossman's (1997) words: 'Society is aging. The old are diverse. But society tends to promote images of some aging individuals, while others remain invisible.' If, as Richard Dyer (2002) says, 'how we are seen determines how we are treated,' then it follows that those who are not seen will be treated as if they do not exist.

Older lesbians remain under-represented, not only in popular culture and the media, but also in academic research. Monika Kehoe (1988) described them as a 'triple invisible' minority, hidden from view by a particular conjunction of sexism, ageism and hetero-sexism which renders them culturally un-representable. (and my previous research suggests that ageism may be an even stronger force than homophobia in this mix) My focus of investigation is in this specific space, where 'old', 'woman' and 'lesbian' intersect – a kind of cultural Bermuda Triangle, into which we simply disappear. So my research is centrally concerned with the effects of multiple marginalisation and the 'intersectionality' of both identity and oppression.

Just recently there has been some academic interest in non-heterosexual ageing, mainly in a social care context. But gay men are more likely to be the subject of such work than lesbians. Brian Heaphy and his colleagues carried out a study of LGBT people over 50 in 2002, but in spite of their intention to have an equal gender balance, ended up with **twice** as many men as women. They suggest several possible reasons why older lesbians were difficult to access: saying 'older lesbians may have particular concerns about "going public" about their sexuality, and experience greater pressures to conceal their sexual identities' (2003:6). They imply here that older lesbians are not only made invisible by cultural discourse but are *hiding by choice*; and conclude that 'further research on experiences of old age by lesbians' is an urgent priority. One of the reasons I took up that challenge was that as an older lesbian myself, I felt I might be positioned to gain the trust of other older lesbians. I mention this because the issues of perceived similarity, difference and trust are relevant to our discussion here.

Doing your first piece of research in the social sciences is a bit like writing your first novel – you are quite likely to be (either overtly or covertly) actually studying and writing about yourself. I am no exception – I do indeed study old lesbians because their cultural obliteration is personally significant to me. But I also know that all older lesbians are not like me – that everyone faces her own complexity of struggle, and that within the designation 'older lesbian' there will also be (for instance) born-women and trans women, women with

different abilities and disabilities, women of many races, and of mixed heritage, and women of every social class.

I'm not interested in hierarchies of oppression – my point here is simply that we cannot ever be just one thing. And that as we study our own marginalization, we become more aware of our own privilege. So, what I study is only part of what I am, and of what each of my respondents is. While I share with them the stigmatised identities of 'woman' and 'lesbian' and 'old,' I am at the same time white, educated into the middle class, and an academic researcher. So I also inhabit a cluster of privileged identities, which can act – and I think have acted – as barriers to participation.

I thought I understood this when I set out – my own experiences of work and family life have meant that issues of inequality and inclusiveness, and in particular anti-racist and anti-ableist work, have always been central concerns for me. So I made every effort to make my research inclusive, and to disseminate it as widely as I could. For instance I began the research design in collaboration with two focus groups of older lesbians: I trialed the questionnaire with lesbians who identified as black and minority ethnic, as trans and as dyslexic. I emphasised the anonymity of the questionnaire, which I made available online, in hard copy, and in large print. I enabled contact by post, via the website, by email and by telephone on a dedicated confidential line. I sent the initial information to as wide a variety of individuals and organizations as I could. But (and this is the key point for us here) accessibility, however broadly-based, does not automatically ensure participation.

I launched my survey in these ways, early last summer. By the time Leela and I met in September, I had received more than 300 replies to the questionnaire and was able to begin to describe the demographic profile of those who had responded. There are several notable imbalances in my sample, ethnicity is not the only one - but the feature which drew the two of us into conversation was the overwhelming **whiteness** of the sample.

93% of my respondents identify as white. Of the remainder 1.5% describe themselves as of mixed heritage. **None** of the respondents identified themselves as Black, Asian or Chinese. I was disappointed, but not surprised, and I realised that the reasons for this result were neither single or simple. Our ensuing conversations have helped me to unpick some of the complexities, and hopefully moved me further towards a 'strong reflexivity'.

Leela:

Jane invited us, the audience, to put her in contact with any networks or individual lesbians over 60 who are BME that we knew of. I don't know any, but I wasn't sure I'd want to heed the call to put them in contact with the project even if I did.

So I asked Jane if she was interested in engaging in a dialogue about this, and presenting at this conference.

This is not an academic research paper and we have not looked at any literature around this. It's possible that what we have to say has all been said before.

I wanted to undertake the dialogue between us as a piece of anti-racist work.

For me, our dialogue about the issues of participation across demographics in research occurs at the interface of white privilege and BME identity, and could easily become conflictual between me as a person of colour and Jane as a white person, so presenting jointly at this forum is a vital part of this action for me, transforming the critique I initiated and Jane agreed to take on, into something possibly, hopefully productive.

Why say no to researchers who bring the privilege of being heard?

Whilst I'm confident that the call to put the project in contact older BME lesbians is motivated by Jane's commitment to inclusive practice, I'm not confident that participation from older BME lesbians will contribute to addressing important things for them as *BME* older lesbians.

I want to share three fears. Fears that research seeking to recruit BME participants may be-

- Tokenistic rather than helpful

- Failing to acknowledge the nature of marginalization that it attempts to address
- Reiterating the marginalization that may have led to the lack of BME respondents in the first place.

Why would this be 'Tokenistic'?

There is, perhaps, a simplistic rhetoric sometimes applied to demographics: if you score well on involving people from hard to reach groups, you have done well.

BME is an easy target for tokenistic work around marginalised minorities because you can count us using home office self-identifications, compared with, say, identity as a disabled person. When I spoke to Jane about representativeness of 'disability' within the sample, it's apparent that it's not possible to know whether the research has involved women who identify as lifelong disabled as well as those experiencing disability from conditions associated with aging. I found it interesting that this was not picked up on when Jane presented about demographics of her sample.

I fear that the sometimes the concern to 'recruit' BME participants to research may not be driven by a particular interest in BME experiences, but has become a touchstone for demonstrating inclusive practice, that in turn enhances the profile of research.

In this project, I hear Jane's commitment to unheard voices being heard, and because of that, I want dialogue with Jane. This includes:

Considering understandings about *the nature of the marginalisation* that researchers seek to address

There are also some assumptions about tackling inclusivity/marginalisation in research that focus on methods and fail to acknowledge the '-isms' of marginalisation like sexism, racism, differently-able-ism.

These focus on getting research methods 'right' and say

- i. make your research tool accessible (i.e. sensitive to 'marginalised groups' capacity for responding)
- ii. use appropriate language (i.e. avoid exclusionary language so they don't feel alienated)
- iii. contact the right networks to 'recruit' participants from 'a wide range of backgrounds',

Will this crack the problem of marginalisation? Are these the issues that form the barriers to equal participation from across demographic groups?

Reiterating marginalisation

The term 'hard to reach groups' captures and reiterates privilege/stronger agency of the researcher who 'reaches out' to the marginalised, and makes central the researchers' experience of the hardness in the reaching, rather than the processes that marginalise. It cloaks issues around choosing to participate or not to participate: in this choice lies the agency that the marginalised possess when faced with reaching researchers.

Being 'hard to reach' is problematic for me as BME person and puts the problem of marginalisation at my feet. I buy in to the political stance, we have been silenced, we want to be heard, we want to exist in other people's imagination, and so I'm drawn to participate - we should engage with research to claim visibility, particularly with researchers who have made strong efforts to be inclusive. For me, it frames opting out, choosing not to participate, as being difficult.

But opting out is motivated by evaluation of whether engagement will be a positive experience for me: What would participation mean for me as a person of colour? Can the white researcher honour my stories? Is the study constructed in a way that will capture what is important to me?

If racism is endemic in the context that we exist in, the answer is probably not an unequivocal, 'Yes it will be fine, Leela.'

And even if I totally trusted Jane to capture and honour my stories, me as a person of colour giving my story to be 'processed' and 'consumed' by a white researcher, uncomfortably reproduces the dynamics of colonialism.

Jane:

And I can't make that not true. So I ask myself, what can a researcher working within this context do that constitutes respect? I come up with three possible answers.

First, to acknowledge the issues, bring them into the realm of the discussable, as we two are doing and have done. Prejudice is like cancer; we can't bring back those it has killed, or ignore the scars of the survivors, but if it is ever to be eradicated we must start by being able to name it, talk about it, raise our own and others' awareness of the risks and the strategies for prevention.

Second, as Leela has suggested, I can resist that (perhaps tokenistic) orthodoxy that says I 'should' have certain people in my study.

And third, be conscious that the researcher's privileged position should impose a duty to use that privilege as far as possible to redress inequality – this is what good social scientists and feminists have always tried to do, to allow unheard voices to be heard.

In my work I want to honour what older lesbians have been through in their lives. I might do that by recording their stories, but I might also do it by recognizing our differences as well as our similarities, and the reasons why some of us might not want to be part of that. All I can do is to reach out, create a space and try to understand the reasons why people might or might not want to enter it. And remember that whatever I do, my research findings will always be indicative, not representative, of the whole community of older lesbians. It is not for me to decide who takes part.

I accept that. But it does make me sad. Because, as Audrey Lorde said, so long as we are divided because of our particular identities, we cannot join together in effective political action. And that is, after all, the ultimate goal.

Leela:

However, joining together across our diverse identities does not *of itself* constitute effective political action.

Jane's research seeks to report on commonalities within the experience of older lesbians, a diverse group. It tells of *collective* experience.

One is unlikely to step under the umbrella of common experience unless you are confident that your individual and personal experience will be recognized and respected.

The stories that individuals tell, are formulated and held within community. In order to hear these stories, research needs to connect with community. Where researchers find no community, they will find no story to tell.

Researchers have a responsibility not only to ensure that their methods are accessible and not exclusionary, but *also* to interrogate who *did* I reach and why, and who *didn't* I reach. Speculation such as 'maybe there aren't any older black lesbians' or 'maybe older black lesbians don't want to talk to an older white lesbian researcher' inserts a narrative into an absence - while their story goes unheard. Researchers can report where they find a dearth of literature, a dearth of respondents, and a dearth of findings.

Calling attention to these absences as areas for future research, can, as it did with Jane, connect with the marginalised communities, who may go on to tell their own stories and ensure that their unheard voices, are heard.

Leela Bakshi and Jane Traies
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