



Researching Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Christians and Muslims: Some Thematic Reflections

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Abstract

This paper highlights some thematic reflections primarily based on two empirical research projects on lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) Christians and Muslims. It begins by discussing reflexivity by way of contextualising the subsequent exploration of specific themes. This is followed by a discussion of the plight of LGB Christians and Muslims which renders research on this population highly sensitive. The paper then explores the theme of researching meanings and lived experiences sensitively, focusing on the importance of being theoretically and culturally sensitive; and the relevance of methodological pragmatism and pluralism. It then proceeds to a detailed discussion of accessing 'hidden' populations and trust building; and the dynamics of the insider/outsider status. The paper concludes with a call for LGB research to take seriously intersectionality of contemporary LGB identity (e.g. sexual, religious, cultural, ethnic), and the role of religion/spirituality in LGB lives and politics.

Keywords: *Lesbian; Gay; Bisexual; Christian; Muslim; Identity; Methodology; Sampling; Hidden Population*

Introduction

1.1 This paper presents some thematic reflections drawn from my experience in researching lesbian, gay, and bisexual (hereinafter LGB) Christians and Muslims in the past decade or so, focusing on two mixed-method projects – *National Survey of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Christians*¹ (hereinafter referred to as Project 1), and *A Minority within a Minority: British Non-heterosexual Muslims*² (hereinafter referred to as Project 2) - which are theoretically and methodologically related.³ The paper begins with a broad discussion of reflexivity by way of contextualising the subsequent exploration of specific issues. This is followed by a brief account of the plight of LGB Christians and Muslims in order to highlight the sensitivity entailed in researching them. The paper then discusses the theme of researching meanings and lived experiences sensitively, focusing on being theoretically and culturally sensitive to participants' specificities; and the relevance of methodological pragmatism and pluralism in research of this kind. This is followed by a

discussion of two other themes: accessing 'hidden' populations and trust building; and the dynamics of the insider/outside status. The paper concludes with a call for LGB research to take seriously intersectionality of contemporary (LGB) identity, and the role of religion/spirituality in LGB lives.

Reflexivity and Telling Research Tales

2.1 Since the 'interpretive turn' in social sciences that challenges the objectivity and universality of knowledge, reflexivity has been a buzzword in qualitative research. Yet, this widely-used concept remains differently-defined. In this respect, Finlay's (2002a) typology of five variants of reflexivity, drawn from different research traditions, is helpful. This typology includes: introspection (e.g. self-dialogue; use of personal data), intersubjectivity reflections (e.g. exploration of mutual meanings emerged within research relationship), mutual collaboration (e.g. participant as co-researcher), social critique (e.g. management of power imbalance between the researcher and the researched), and discursive deconstruction (e.g. ambiguity of meanings in language). She argues that the practice of reflexivity depends on the research aims and focus, as well as the researcher's theoretical and methodological affinity.

2.2 Generally, then, reflexivity refers to the researcher's commitment to producing situated, unalienated, and reflexive knowledge that is sensitive to her/his own ideology and partial location, as well as the presence and working of power in the research process, particularly between the researcher and the researched, and other associated ethical considerations that structure the production of knowledge (Finlay, 2002a; 2002b; Hertz, 1997; Ramazanoglu, 2002). Thus, as Haney (2002) argues, reflexivity can be a research strategy (e.g. to address power imbalance) and an analytical tool (e.g. to examine the researcher's own location and its impacts on, say, the fieldwork and data analysis).

2.3 This 'reflexive turn' has led to the emphasis on disclosing the authorial voice in writing about research, by way of enhancing the authority of one's account - a kind of 'methodological self-consciousness' that encourages the researcher to tell 'confessional tales' about dilemmas and decision-making in the research process (Finlay 2002a: 210). Some scholars argue that this pressurises the researcher to confess and 'out' themselves as evidence of reflexivity (e.g. Adkins, 2002).

2.4 Thus, writing about the researcher's reflections on various aspects of the research process is not without its challenges. Some scholars have cautioned that, if excessive, such an attempt could be 'narcissistic' and 'self-indulgent', mistaking reflexivity as the researcher's self-narration, and misunderstanding the crucial difference between 'doing reflexivity' (i.e. being sensitive before, during, and after the research process) and 'being reflexive' (i.e. authorising the self through self-narration) (e.g. Skeggs, 2002: 368).

2.5 In my view, 'doing reflexivity' and 'being reflexive' are not mutually exclusive – one could practise reflexivity, and give an account of one's experience when the need arises. In other words, self-narration does not have to be narcissistic and self-promoting. Such an endeavour could be motivated by the commitment to using such tales as an opportunity to share lessons learned and good practice from the research process, to help make oneself and others more reflexive and sensitive – and therefore more ethical and effective – researchers (Gough, 2003; May 1998; Reinharz, 1997). Within a specific remit such as this Special Issue, foregrounding the researcher's reflections is justifiable, because they could contribute to the reader's understanding of the research project in general (DeVault, 1997). Banton's argument about the nature of social research informs my stance on this:

Social research is influenced by the research workers' personal characteristics. Our age, gender, linguistic ability and other qualities influence our ability to form relationships and gather information. Our personal interests motivate us and help give our contributions distinctive merits. When the social organization of research works well, we counterbalance one another's biases. The objectivity that can be attained in the social sciences does not stem from any attempt to distance the researcher from his or her subject matter, but from interactions between researchers. (2005: 622)

2.6 Following this assertion, we need to do more of what Weber encouraged us to do – declare our biases. This means that we need to account for *how* we produce knowledge and the ideological, socio-political, epistemological, and methodological context within which it is produced; and not just what we produce. As Hertz argues, reflexivity involves 'a constant (and intensive) scrutiny of "what I know" and "how I know it".... To have an ongoing conversation about experience while simultaneously living in the moment' (1997: viii). The thematic reflections in this paper are therefore written in this spirit. The next section provides a brief context of the plight of LGB people within faith communities, which highlights the sensitivity in researching them.

LGB People within Faith Communities

3.1 The past decade has witnessed progressive social, political, and legal change towards equality of sexuality. Within the UK, the enactment of legislations such as the *Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations* (2003), the *Civil Partnership Act* (2004), and the *Equality Act (Sexual Orientations) Regulations* (2007), have undoubtedly empowered the LGB community, and increased its political clout and social visibility. A recent representative survey also reported that the vast majority of British were in support of legal reform that promotes equality of sexuality, and comfortable with lesbian and gay individuals in all walks of life (Stonewall, 2007). In spite of resistance in certain quarters to such progress, there is incontrovertible evidence that sexual orientation discrimination is gradually being minimised, though social change often lags behind legal reform (Hunter et al., 2004).

3.2 On the surface, the speed and extent of progress in secular spheres do not seem to be matched by that in the religious sphere (Crockett and Voas, 2003). Recent high-profile controversies surrounding the proposed appointment of the gay priest Jeffrey John as Bishop Designate of Reading in England, and particularly the appointment of Gene Robinson as Bishop of New Hampshire in the Episcopal Church in the United States, have generated grave concern about the possible disestablishment of the worldwide Anglican Communion (e.g. Hassett, 2007). On the other hand, the Vatican continues to issue official statements that pathologise LGB people, such as its recent call upon governments not to put same-sex unions on par with heterosexual marriage, and the banning of 'active homosexuals' and 'supporters of gay culture' from priesthood.

3.3 Some Muslim religious leaders have made similar attacks on the LGB community. For example, the Dutch imam Khalil El Moumni declared on national television that homosexuality was a disease and a sin that threatened social fabric. His remarks caused much contention within the liberal Dutch society (Hekma, 2002). Within the UK, there also have been sporadic – but high-profile – homophobic outbursts from prominent Muslim public figures. For instance, in January 2006, Sir Iqbal Sacranie, the then General Secretary of the Muslim Council of Britain was investigated by police for his comments in a radio interview that homosexuality is harmful, and same-sex civil partnerships unacceptable, on the basis of health and Islamic teachings. In June 2006, Muhammed Aziz, the Muslim Council of Britain's adviser on equality issues was disowned by the Council for having endorsed dialogue with LGB organisations and expressing the Council's commitment to tackle homophobia within the Muslim community. Arshad Misbahi, an imam at the Manchester Central Mosque, also courted controversy in October 2006, for asserting in an interview that the execution of sexually-active gay men is justified on religious grounds, and that such measure would deter the spread of disease and protect the wider community.

3.4 The Muslim community's position as religious and ethnic minorities further complicates the lives of LGB Muslims. Often, cultural and social factors (e.g. close-knit family and kin network, emphasis on marriage, preservation of *izzat* [family honour], the pervasive perception of homosexuality as a 'Western disease') make the construction and maintenance of a LGB identity extremely difficult, further compounded by other socio-political issues such as Islamophobia and racism (Siraf, 2006; Tellis, 2002; Yip, 2004a; 2004b).

3.5 Within this context, it is not surprising that the religious sphere is perceived by the general public and LGB people themselves as significantly more homophobic and biphobic than other secular spheres. Anti-religious sentiments are often explicitly expressed in the LGB Press. Terry Sanderson's monthly column

Beyond Belief in *Gay Times* is an example *par excellence*.

3.6 Nevertheless, religious and socio-cultural constraints continue to significantly inform the everyday lived experiences of LGB Christians and Muslims. The comparative lack of acceptance within religious communities, at least on the institutional level, often make LGB Christians and Muslims more invisible and hidden compared to their non-religious counterparts (Yip, 2007a). Under such circumstances, accessing this population for research purposes and managing the research process could be a demanding task that requires creativity and tact, to which the paper will now turn.

Researching Meanings and Lived Experiences Sensitive

4.1 The previous section has established the salience of the sensitive context within which LGB Christians and Muslims live. Researching their lived experiences therefore must take into account such sensitivities and sensibilities. Renzetti and Lee (1993) – and many others after them (e.g. Kavanaugh and Ayres, 1998) – define sensitive research as that which could potentially expose participants, and at times the researcher, to danger, risk, harm, social cost (e.g. being ostracised) and psychological cost (e.g. feeling of guilt and shame). The area of sensitivity extends beyond the ethical realm, covering also practical aspects of the research, such as the negotiating access with gatekeepers (Alty and Rodham, 1998). Within this context, this section discusses the issues of being theoretically and culturally sensitive, and methodological pragmatism and pluralism in studying LGB Experiences.

Being Theoretically and Culturally Sensitive

4.2 LGB research is dominated by a theoretical paradigm which asserts that contemporary culture is characterised by significant processes such as individualisation, de-traditionalisation, and globalisation that lead to pluralisation of meanings and life worlds, proliferation of choice, diversification of lifestyles, and fluidity and hybridity of identities and social relationships (e.g. Bauman, 2005; Beck and Willms, 2004). Thus, individuals in contemporary society are disembedded from traditional roles, allegiances, commitments, and norms; and re-embedded in reflexive life projects with the self in the driver's seat, constructing do-it-yourself biographical narratives (e.g. Beck, 1992; 1997; Plummer, 1995). There is a significant relocation of interpretive authority to the self, buttressed by broad humanistic – often anti-authoritarian - values such as social justice, human rights, personal responsibility, liberty and diversity.

4.3 Within this context, LGB identity and lifestyle are constructed as a self-driven reflexive project that seemingly transcends the shackles of traditional structures. Two institutions in particular must be resisted in this respect – religion and the family (of 'fate' or 'origin') - the two bastions of heteronormative power structures. Not acknowledged enough in my view, secularism and distance from family of fate - i.e. the construction of 'families of choice' that relies on one's sexual orientation as the organising principle, underscored by expressive individualism (see e.g. Weeks et al., 2001, and their critique e.g. Pahl and Spencer, 2004) - are often assumed to be pivotal to LGB identity and lifestyle.

4.4 Coming from Malaysia, a rapidly developing country where religious and cultural conservatism rules generally, my personal biography as a religious and 'gay' man was much at odds with this theoretical orthodoxy. Experientially, I am sensitive to the fact that the impacts of the above-mentioned processes on individual and social life are always mediated through significant factors such as culture (e.g. Adams, 2003; Brannen and Nilsen, 2005; Korczynski and Ott, 2006). Thus, it would be naïve – and theoretically and culturally insensitive - to assume that the individualisation thesis, for instance, applies to all cultural groups to the same extent, without considering cultural and structural specificities. Thus, researching LGB Christians and Muslims for me is a professional pursuit, but also a personal endeavour in search of 'gayness' that is not detached from lived experiences of religiosity/spirituality and close-knit family and kin network.

4.5 As my research has testified, even within a culture of increasing empowerment and freeing of agency, there are segments within the LGB community at large that have less access to resources for this dominant

conception of LGB identity and lifestyle. Some indeed reject this conception in their attempt to balance the intersectionality of various equally salient identities such as religious and cultural identities. In the case of LGB Christians – but more so for LGB Muslims - the management of identity is often located within the cracks between postmodern sexual cultures and the demands of traditional religious and cultural norms and allegiances, which requires careful navigation. While agency is undeniably evident in these experiences, the salience of structures cannot be underplayed (Yip, 2005).

4.6 I cannot agree more with Sieber's (1993) argument that being an ethical researcher also means being sensitive to the participants' cultural needs and concerns, which may be quite different from those of the researcher's. I would add that we also need to be sensitive theoretically, being aware of the limitations – therefore the need to adapt – the dominant theoretical paradigm in researching under-studied communities. Indeed, as Tillman has argued, culturally sensitive research involves, 'culturally congruent research methods, culturally specific knowledge, cultural resistance to theoretical dominance, culturally sensitive data interpretation, and culturally informed theory and practice' (2002: 3).

Documenting LGB Experiences – A Case for Methodological Pragmatism and Pluralism?

4.7 In line with most research on the LGB population, I used self-identification or self-definition as the primary criterion for participant recruitment in order to prioritise participants' standpoint and definition. As a methodological pragmatist and pluralist, I used quantitative methods (e.g. big scale postal survey) *in addition to – not instead of –* qualitative methods (e.g. semi-structured interviews, focus group). I do not subscribe to the argument that the exploration of meanings – particularly subjugated meanings – is a preserve of qualitative methods, as Onwuegbuzie and Leech remind us that, 'meaning is not a function of the type of data collected (i.e. quantitative vs. qualitative). Rather, meaning results from the interpretation of data, whether represented by numbers or by words' (2005: 379).

4.8 In their exclusively qualitative project involving life story interviewing of non-heterosexual individuals, Weeks et al. (2001) justify their choice of methodology by arguing that:

As researchers, we felt it was crucial to acknowledge that if identities, and the patterns of relationships which are built around them and sustain them, are 'contingent', 'emergent' and 'processual'.... then reflexive research techniques which can begin to uncover that complexity were needed. Therefore, we rationalised that a questionnaire survey, even of a self-defining sample, would fail to reveal the complexity of meanings around identity and relationships. A methodology based on semi-structured interviews, on the other hand, could provide a way of exploring shifting nuances of identity by providing brief life-histories of the subjects, and allow for the development of narratives of 'intimate' and 'family' life. (Weeks et al., 2001: 201).

4.9 I partly agree with the above argument, which reflects the methodological preference and rationale of most British research on the LGB population. There is no denying that qualitative research methodology is particularly conducive in the study of hidden, vulnerable, and hard-to-reach populations (Hash and Cramer, 2003; Liamputtong, 2007). Both individual narrative and 'multivocal narrative' (as in the case of focus group, Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2006: 1999) are illuminating of meanings and experiences.

4.10 Nevertheless, I would argue that such methodology could be strengthened when employed in conjunction with a quantitative methodology with its unique advantages. Quantitative methods, particularly when a sizeable sample is involved (even when unrepresentative, for valid reasons), generate datasets that carry more weight in policy and political terms, thus promote more effectively awareness of the population studied.

4.11 In Project 1, the quantitative survey with a sizeable sample of 565 participants generated illuminating data that added weight and credence to the 'thick descriptions' from the interviews. For instance, the quantitative data was instrumental to demonstrating the force of the participants' disagreement with official church teachings on homosexuality. Further, the sizeable sample also enabled meaningful analysis to be

carried out, with 'gender' and 'sexuality' as independent variables (Yip, 2002; 2003). I would argue that church authorities and policy makers are more likely to take such data more seriously than a collection of disparate individual stories. Thus, the breadth of survey data could greatly strengthen the depth of interview data.

Accessing 'Hidden' Populations and Trust Building

5.1 The LGB population has been widely considered a hidden one. Nevertheless, as I have argued, progressive legal reform and socio-cultural and political change have indisputably led to the mainstreaming of LGB experiences and needs in public consciousness, political and policy agenda. All these significant changes – within the broader discourse of human rights and citizenship - have substantially increased social visibility and political assertiveness of this population (e.g. Plummer, 2003). Thus, I would argue that it is no longer accurate to consider the LGB population totally hidden. While there is no denying that being open about one's sexuality still exacts psychological and social costs in certain contexts, I would contend that the extent of this, and therefore the need to be hidden, is decreasing.

5.2 In terms of sampling hidden populations, Heckathorn (1997) argues that there are three primary strategies, broadly termed as 'chain-referral sampling': snowball sampling, key informant sampling, and targeted sampling. Such link-tracing sampling strategies, which are participant driven, have various shortcomings, such as the non-randomness of the initial sample, the selection bias of further participants by the initial sample, and the privileging of participants who are cooperative (Atkinson and Flint, 2001; Heckathorn 1997; 2002; Spreen and Zwaagstra, 1994).

5.3 Link-tracing sampling strategies, particularly those that focus heavily on support networks (i.e. user-groups), is the most commonly employed in research on the LGB population. However, critics argue that this sampling method privileges individuals who have access to such generally urban-based spaces because of geographical convenience and the confidence to do so. Some would argue that this compounds the exclusion of those who are already marginalised from both mainstream society and the LGB community, as their experiences are less likely to be documented in research of this kind (e.g. Greene, 2003).

5.4 In my research, I maximised participant variability, despite the unrepresentativeness of the convenience samples, by utilising a wide range of sampling strategies to generate a heterogeneous purposive sample that was criterion-based (Spencer and Pahl, 2006; See also Notes 2 and 3). The reliance on support networks is inevitable, partly due to time and financial constraints: around 60% of the Project 1 sample, and 40% that of Project 2, were recruited through this strategy. This strategy was operationalised in a variety of ways, which included: distribution of publicity flyers through postal mailing, or electronically via members-only distribution list, and face-to-face meetings. Face-to-face meetings were particularly important for Project 2, as they offered the opportunity to increase potential participants' confidence (particularly female participants) in the research as well as the research team.

5.5 Significantly, strategies that did not rely on user-groups generated around 60% of the sample for Project 2. These strategies - such as publicity in LGB Press, researcher's personal networks, LGB commercial scene, and snowballing - were particularly important in this project as I had expected LGB Muslims to be more hidden, with a limited geographical coverage of support networks (i.e. primarily London). Weeks et al. (2001) have argued that advertising is an effective way of accessing hard to reach segment of a hidden population. This is particularly evident in the case of LGB Muslims, who have less support network and encounter stricter religious and socio-cultural censure, compared to their Christian counterparts.

5.6 In sum, while I accepted that a representative sample of the LGB population was unobtainable (e.g. Fish, 2000; Heaphy et al., 1998), great care was taken to ensure that the samples were constructed in diverse ways to maximise participant variability. Indeed, both the quantitative and qualitative data demonstrate that the participants were in different stages of their journey of sexuality and spirituality, with a plethora of experiences. In other words, there is no typical 'gay Christian' or 'lesbian Muslim'. While there are similarities, there are also striking differences within and across the samples.

Trust building

5.7 Trust building is important to gaining access for research on sensitive topics. In the case of research on partly hidden populations such as mine where user-groups constitute the primary sampling site, negotiation with the gatekeepers of such groups becomes particularly crucial. The gatekeeper is normally someone who has a positive identity and the confidence to face the public when the need arises, and also the responsibility to protect other members (Irwin and Johnson, 2005). Thus, she/he has considerable power in opening or closing the door to a researcher, which directly affects her/his access to the field. This dimension of power imbalance is often neglected in literature which tends to focus on power imbalance between the researcher and the researched. Yet, it is an area that the researcher must tread carefully to maximise access to the field.

5.8 An important lesson learned in this respect is the management of the discrepancy between the research agenda and the political agenda of some of the user groups/organizations that participated in the research. My research has been widely perceived by participants and gatekeepers of such groups as advocacy research that should promote a better understanding of their plight. Therefore, its political dimension is necessarily salient. In principle, I am committed to the feminist research ethos that emphasises 'giving something back' and 'participant empowerment' (e.g. Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002; Letherby and Jackson, 2003). Nevertheless, not being a political activist of any kind, I constantly have to manage this expectation of advocacy, with varying degrees of success. There is no denying the management of diverse agendas is challenging, at times generates internal doubt (Brackenridge, 1999; Platzer and James, 1997).

5.9 Further, my commitment to documenting the diversity of the participants' experiences does not always fit well with the political agenda of some user groups that emphasises experiences of victimization and victimhood, arguably the most politically expedient and efficacious way of highlighting the distinctiveness and markedness of their identity. This has led to some gatekeepers and participants questioning my commitment to 'the cause'. Having spent years in such a research milieu, I have come to the conclusion that the issue of mutual expectation is best settled at the outset when access to the field is negotiated. That would reduce—though not eradicate—incompatible expectations between the researcher and the researched.

The Dynamic of the Insider/Outsider Status

6.1 LGB people take part in social research on their lives for a variety of reasons. Often, research offers a cathartic experience for being able to talk to a sympathetic 'expert' about one's marginalised experiences. Thus, participation in research affirms one's lived realities. Some also take part in such research for political reasons of promoting a better understanding of their plight to effect social change. Thus, research can be a tool for transcending marginality and invisibility (Fish, 1999; Meezan and Martin, 2003).

6.2 Whatever the gatekeepers' and participants' reasons for participation, the researcher being perceived by them as an 'insider' (e.g. for sharing a similar identity) has distinct advantages in terms of establishing trust and rapport. It increases the participants' confidence that the researcher would understand and interpret their lived experiences and perspectives accurately and responsibly (e.g. Hesse-Biber, 2007). The gatekeeper may also feel that a researcher with an 'insider' status is more likely to manage interactions with her/his group members with greater sensitivity and tact (Lee, 1995; Platzer and James, 1997).

6.3 Nevertheless, some scholars argue that being an insider is a double-edged sword. For instance, LaSala (2003) and Naples (1997) argue that being an insider may de-sensitise the researcher to the participant's unique and nuanced perspective or perception as a result of the researcher's over-reliance on their commonality. In addition, the commonality between the researcher and the participant may also lead to social desirability effects (i.e. the participant may offer biased answer for fear of being judged). More fundamentally, however, the insider/outsider dichotomy is artificial and unhelpful, as Naples argues:

[T]he insider/outsider distinction masks the power differentials and experiential differences between the researcher and the researched. The bipolar construction of insider/outsider also

sets up a false separation that neglects the interactive processes through which 'insiderness' and 'outsiderness' are constructed. (2004: 373)

6.4 Naples further argues that 'insiderness' and 'outsiderness' are not static, but fluid and shifting. In other words, nobody is a complete insider or outsider. In the case of research on the LGB population, it is important to acknowledge that this population is not monolithic, and that difference (e.g. in terms of class, ethnicity) structures the commonality of the sexual label (Sullivan and Losberg, 2003). My experience confirms the complex nature of this insider/outsider dynamic. There is no denying that, in Project 1, my 'gay' and 'Christian' identities significantly facilitated my access to the field and the operationalisation of the research process. Similarly, I believed my 'gay' identity, in conjunction with my ethnic minority identity (i.e. Chinese-Malaysian), and the fact that I am experientially – not just intellectually - familiar with Islam, have had positive impacts in these respects for Project 2.

6.5 Nevertheless, this is not the end of the story. In order to appreciate the nuance of Naples' argument, we need to consider another dimension of this dynamic – the researcher's own perception of the participants and the research community, which is equally significant to the positioning of herself/himself in the field and the research process.

6.6 As a researcher, I felt an insider as well as outsider in relation to the participants, contingent upon context. In certain contexts, I was uncomfortable with some participants' (particularly 'white' Christian gay men's) assumption of how all gay men – including me – should live the 'gay' identity. I found such 'homonormativity' experientially alien and limiting, exerting great pressure for conformity. Using Brekhus' (2003: 46) three ideal types of gay suburbanites as an example, I am much more a 'gay integrator' (whose sexual identity integrates with other identities so that none takes prominence), rather than a 'gay lifestyle' (whose sexual identity assumes a 'master status' in all social contexts); or a 'gay commuter' (whose sexual identity is foreground only in specific contexts). Much of this has to do with the fact that my ethnicity is equally salient as, if not more salient than, my sexuality in my everyday life. Thus, I have always found difficult the uncritical but pervasive assumption that the most 'valid' way to be gay is to make sexuality the 'master status', and demonstrate high-volume, high-intensity, and high-visibility gayness (Yip, 2005). Under such circumstances, I feel very much an outsider.

6.7 Interestingly, in Project 2, I felt much more an insider with the participants in terms of my cultural background rather than my sexual orientation. Coming from Malaysia, which shares many prominent cultural traits with the participants' Muslim/Asian cultures, I could deeply identify with their narratives of managing close-knit extended family, the tension between expressive individualism and social duties/obligations, and so forth. Such cultural resonances – and the commonality in their biographical narratives and mine - were heart-warming personally and rewarding professionally.

6.8 In sum, while my 'insider' status greatly facilitated the research process, significant cultural differences structured my feeling as an 'outsider' in certain contexts. The interchangeability of the insider/outsider status sensitised me to the reality of diversity within the LGB population. In spite of its chief identifier based on sexuality, in reality sexuality intersects with a host of significant factors such as class, gender, ethnicity, and religion, which crucially inform and structure LGB lives. There is no doubt that the double-edged and contextual nature of the insider/outside status could heighten the researcher's sensitivity to produce more reflexive knowledge (Naples, 1997; Wasserfall, 1997).

Concluding Remarks

7.1 In this paper, I have discussed the importance of reflexivity and its uses in exploring specific issues in relation to my research on LGB Christians and Muslims. The paper has discussed the importance of researching meanings and lived experiences sensitively, focusing on being theoretically and culturally sensitive to participants' specificities, and the relevance of methodological pragmatism and pluralism in research of this kind. This was followed by a discussion of accessing 'hidden' populations and trust building; and the dynamics of the insider/outside status.

7.2 With reference to women, Ramazanoglu (2002) has argued that being in the same political category does not entail that all women have the same experience and consciousness, since, I would add, experience and consciousness are culturally-informed. The same applies to sexual orientation. Reflecting on the experiences of LGB Christians and Muslims on the whole in comparison to their non-religious counterparts – and contrasting these two groups – has highlighted the significance of intersectionality of identity. Balancing sexual and religious identities – and in the case of LGB Muslims, heightened political and ethnic identities – demonstrates that often such identities intersect rather than one of them assumes a singular dominance. The lived experiences of LGB Muslims are particularly useful here to illustrate how this process operates. On a daily basis, they have to negotiate homophobia, alongside racism and Islamophobia, with the last two often eclipsing the first in terms of political salience and urgency. This significantly informs the ways they manage multiple allegiances, from coming out to their family members to participation in the predominantly 'white' and secular LGB community. Indeed, their experiences not only challenge the 'homonormative' paradigm within which knowledge of LGB lives is produced and re-produced, but also highlight the salience and power of cultural norms (for more details, see e.g. Blakey et al., 2006; Yip, 2004a; 2005. See also research on LGB lives from a cross-cultural perspective e.g. Han, 2007; Sullivan and Jackson, 2001; Kumashiro, 2003).

7.3 This important issue must be taken more seriously by researchers exploring particularly minority experiences within the LGB community. Using LGB Muslims as an example again, it would be naïve to assume that their identity, politics, and community will develop following the same trajectory of their Christian counterparts. Such an expectation of homogeneity and assimilation would be limiting and insensitive to cultural diversity within the LGB community. The assumption that there is *one* 'developmental model' for all LGB identity and politics - led by the precedent set by 'white' and LGB Christians - is unsound, since identity is socially and culturally grounded, not to say ethically problematic. Of course, it is unrealistic to expect a research project to be able to capture the intricacies of the intersection of gender, culture, class, religion, ethnicity in LGB lives. But it is important we recognise that inequalities and identities are mutually constituted, connected, and interdependent (Gamson and Moon, 2004; Verloo, 2006).

7.4 I also often encounter queries from colleagues regarding sampling LGB people in faith communities, underpinned by the assumption that it must be an uphill task, as such communities are rife with homophobia. I do not want to devalue the effort and tact that my research demands. But as I have explained, while I acknowledge that the religious sphere does seem to lag behind other social spheres in this respect, we should not exaggerate this simply on the basis of high-profile controversies and official statements issued by religious authority structures that do not necessarily reflect experiences at the micro level. This is particularly relevant to the pervasive perception that Islam is antithetical to democratic and liberal values that nurture sexual dissidence and diversity.

7.5 My own experience - and those of other scholars and some participants - demonstrates that the LGB community and the LGB Academy are generally indifferent – if not antagonistic – towards religion (e.g. Alison, 2007; Wilcox, 2006; Yip, 2005). As I have argued, this is because religion – alongside the nuclear family - is widely perceived as the most heterosexist of social institutions, thus oppressive to LGB people. Indeed, some LGB individuals (LGB scholars included) perceive their counterparts with religious faith as suffering from 'false consciousness' and 'sleeping with the enemy'. This kind of monolithic perception of religion being anti-LGB is unhelpful. My research and others' have shown that a more nuanced understanding is needed, for various reasons. First, different religions have differing levels of tolerance of non-heterosexualities. Second, the level of tolerance varies across denominations within Christianity itself (Geest, 2007). Third, the aforementioned high-profile controversies obscure an important fact, that there is often a gap between official or institutional stance and grassroots experience (Alison, 2007; Yip 2007b). There is incontrovertible evidence that religious believers in general are becoming more tolerant of LGB people (Stonewall, 2007). Indeed, many Christian participants in my own research also acknowledge increasing acceptance in their faith community, and spaces and places that nourish their sexuality and spirituality.

7.6 Indeed, my own research and those of others (e.g. Keenan, Forthcoming) continue to demonstrate what

a crucial resource religion and spirituality is for many LGB individuals, in enriching their sexuality and life, and in empowering them to seek sexual justice – and social justice more broadly – within and outside faith communities. With the return of religion to the socio-political and academic agendas, I think it wise to address this conventional neglect and avoidance of religion in LGB research and politics.

Notes

¹ This project was conducted in 1997–1998. It aimed to explore LGB Christians' life circumstances and lived experiences, involving 565 participants across Britain. Each participant completed an 18-page postal questionnaire. A sub-sample of 61, selected based on various criteria such as age, locality, level of church involvement, and relationship status, were subsequently interviewed for approximately two hours respectively. The sample, recruited primarily through support groups/organisations, LGB Press, personal contact networks and snowballing, consisted of 389 self-identified gay men (68.8%), 131 lesbians (23.2%), 24 bisexual women, and 21 bisexual men (altogether 8%). This proportional distribution in terms of sexual orientation is reflected in the composition of the interviewed sub-sample. The main sample's ages ranged from 18 to 76. The majority of the sample were affiliated to the Church of England (48%) and Roman Catholic Church (26.4%). Almost all the sample were 'white' (95.4%), with most of them living in Greater London and the southeast of England (42.1%). Almost a quarter of the sample were priests/chaplains, followed by educational professionals (13.5%) and medical professionals (11.7%). I gratefully acknowledge the financial support from Nottingham Trent University, and the important contribution from all participants and user groups.

² This primarily qualitative project, conducted in 2001–2002, aimed to explore LGB Muslims' life circumstances and lived experiences as members of sexual, ethnic, and religious minority. It involved 20 female and 22 male participants who were all non-white, and primarily of South Asian origin (approximately 88%). Each participant completed a brief questionnaire, and was interviewed for approximately two hours. In addition, two focus group interviews (one mixed, one all women) were held. The participants were recruited through similar sampling methods as the project on LGB Christians. The majority of the sample lived in Greater London and the southeast of England (71%), with almost 64% under the age of 30. They were also highly educated (52% had at least a first degree), and the majority (76%) were in full-time employment. I gratefully acknowledge the financial support from the *Economic and Social Research Council* (ESRC, Award No. R000223530), and the important contribution from all participants and user groups.

³ In addition to these two projects, I have also studied gay male Christian couples; and conducted membership surveys of *Quest*, the biggest support organisation for British LGB Catholics and the *Centre for the Study of Christianity and Sexuality* (e.g. Yip, 1997).

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