Queering Inside Out: Professional Reflections on Practice

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Over the last 12 months I have been working across the miles with 2 feminist lesbian colleagues. We are professional Youth and Community Workers and all have or are working within HE. This research is a work in progress - we have set out to explore issues around sexual identity and the place of Queer theory in Youth and Community Work teaching and practice.

In working towards this aim we have:

• used our own life stories (Defrancisco, Kuderer & Chatham-Carpenter, 2007) - taking an autoethnographic approach to reflect on how we talk about our sexuality in our work;
• sought to link context and theory in ours’ and others’ understanding of our sexual identities
• sought to reflect on and discuss critically with others different approaches to sharing their sexual identities or other issues on which Queer theory may throw some light.

In previous presentations we have examined our own stories and their relationship with Queer theory. Time doesn’t permit me to go into these stories now but they are available on paper. Today I will further our reflections (Harding 1991, May 2002) on our biographies by covering 4 main areas:

1. to look briefly at the challenges for lesbian feminists of engaging with queer theory.
2. to discuss why we have used an autoethnographic approach.
3. to look briefly at some of our learning so far
4. to listen to your comments and questions.

The challenge for feminist lesbians to use Queer theory

As lesbian feminists in the academy or in the Youth and Community Work profession we have grown used to feeling that we need to be true to ourselves and to be clear about our identity within our work situations (Adams and Jones, 2011). However as
Zimmerman (2008) suggests this is not always helpful to us, our students or our colleagues. Using a Queer theory stance may be more useful as it

- recognises multiple identities (e.g. Audrey Lorde or Jackie Kaye) and the diversity of sexual identities e.g. moving from the binary division of straight and gay or lesbian to noticing and celebrating bisexuality, transgender, transvestite and other sexual minorities (hooks, 1990)
- emphasises that identity is a fluid not fixed (Zimmerman, 2008): identity is not something that we arrive at but something that is continually changing and moving over time as well as in different places and contexts
- notices that if we are 'out' we may put ourselves outside something (Stein and Plummer 1994) thus enabling the world, or students, to marginalise us and our views (Shildrick, 1997).
- encourages us to be ambiguous about our sexuality - to be ‘disruptive’ (Marinucci, 2010 citing Halperin, 2003) about ‘identity’ and ‘labels’ -thus encouraging discussion as was the case recently for me when a colleague suggested that I was being provocative in stating a research interest as 'Queer identities'
- focusses on Butler's (1999) ideas of performativity so noticing the diversity of performance within one sexual category (e.g. 'lipstick lesbians' compared with 'butch dykes) and may be 'bringing a lightness to 'LGBT' discussions which may be heavy, personal or defensive. A good example of this is Act Up campaigns of the late 1990s or even 'Pussy Riot' in Putin's Russia
- builds bridges between different communities (Correa, 2006), individuals or groups who feel marginalised by society such as minority ethnic communities (links between CRT and QN) rather than the label of 'LGBT' which can be seen as being exclusive and drawing boundaries.

While embracing many of the ideas of Queer theorists we would agree to being 'out' as lesbian feminists within HE for the following reasons:

- to be confident and positive role models (Redman, 1994) regarding our sexuality within our professional and work setting
- to challenge the heteronormative agenda (Richardson and Monro, 2012) that assumes that all are straight - to enable all our students to notice 'difference'.
- to be sure that no one leaving our courses can say (as I did until I was in my mid 20s) that they have never knowingly met a LGBT person.
- offering students who may not have heard life stories of LGBT people the chance to listen to and question 'different' experiences (as Epstien, 1994 does in her useful book). This approach has only ever felt like a positive opportunity to discuss the reality of 'difference' when students have asked personal questions
about my own life experiences such as my 'coming out' or experiences of lesbian parenthood

- to be aware of the power difference between ourselves as tutors and the students whose learning we are supporting and assessing.

**Why ethnography?**

We have chosen to explore identity relative to queer and feminist theory through narratives of our lived experiences as professional Youth and Community Workers and HE lecturers. Adam and Jones (2011) suggest that autoethnography is an ideal method for looking at Queer theory as it seeks to "disrupt traditional and dominant ideas about research, particularly about what research is and how research should be done" (Adam and Jones, 2011:111 citing Diversi and Moreira, 2010). They go on to say "ethnographers treat identities and experiences as uncertain, fluid, open to interpretation and above all to be revised" (Adam and Jones, 2011:111 citing Adams 2009; Ellis 2009 & Wyatt 2010) so highlighting many of the themes of Queer theorists.

We have recognised that our stories are not the truth but are contextual (Bourdieu, 1992). They are selective accounts, some made consciously and some made unconsciously. We have reflected on our individual identities, recognising our own individual journeys and shared collective identities and influences (Bruner, 2004, Williams, 2010). As women of certain age we recognise that our experiences are not the only valid experiences.

**So what did we do?**

We shared our life stories informally, reflected on the key points of these stories separately and together to illuminate our 'unique life experiences' (Defrancisco, Kuderer & Chatham-Carpenter, 2007:238). We wrote down our life stories and considered carefully the common themes and how our stories linked to the theories that we had been reading- testing the limits of 'our knowledge and certainty' (Adams and Jones, 2011:108). We shared these stories with anxiety and trepidation (Defrancisco, Kuderer & Chatham-Carpenter, 2007) in formal settings (conferences and research seminars). We have made ourselves vulnerable (Defrancisco, Kuderer & Chatham-Carpenter, 2007), 'leaving room for interpretation and not knowing' (Adams and Jones, 2011:109) allowing others to question and assist us in our critical reflections and inviting people from other backgrounds to make links with our stories and experiences.
Our learning so far

- the focus of our narratives has provided the space to hear and speak the experiences of living in the last 30 years; a time that has covered the span of massive change in the lived experiences for disadvantaged groups and especially for women and lesbians. These changes have been reflected in our accounts and recognise the steady increase of opportunities for open debate about feminism and sexuality in our professional lives.
- to continue to examine sexual identity from a Queer perspective whilst taking account of issues of power and gender which feminists have explored and are exploring (McLoughlin, Casey and Richardson, 2006).
- it seems useful to when teaching within HE to be 'out' - allowing students who identify as 'gay' (most students who I have discussed the issue with seem uncomfortable with the word 'Queer') to have role models and possible sources of support within the academy
- it may also be useful in some circumstances for (straight) HE lecturers to be unclear about their sexuality to encourage debate about gender
- being unclear or disruptive about one's own sexual identities could be useful for Youth and Community Work practitioners: thus enabling 'straight' practitioners to develop dialogue and challenge regarding hetronormativity and homophobia rather than leaving it to the LGBT practitioners.

Where to from here?

We plan to take this research further to examining the usefulness of Queer Theory and 'blurring the discourse' in the 2 different settings: Academics and their youth work students in HE settings and also professional Youth and Community Workers
References


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