

Seeing Things: Queer Streets, Mobile Homes, and Moving Targets

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Background and Purposes

“Fag is still the number one insult to a guy, and I think that harassment against homosexual students is really prevalent, its everywhere, and it generally kind of goes unnoticed.” (Jerome, Alternative School Teacher)

The purpose of the study we describe and report on here was to *notice* and thereby to identify the needs street-involved “queer and questioning” youth have for housing and support. Sexuality is a significant, and indeed central category for apprehending and understanding the experiences and needs of a largely unrecognized, highly mobile population of youth at risk of homelessness and its accompanying harms and dangers. Yet sexuality remains an “open secret” (Kofosky-Sedgwick, 1990) about which shelter and support workers may be keenly aware, but about which little is ever officially said, whether in research, policy, or practice. Foster care and group homes are notoriously unsupportive of queer and questioning youth, who are scarcely mentioned and rarely taken into account in discussions and decisions about care. Within this social service “culture of silence,” many queer and questioning youth experience hostility, violence, and sexual abuse while in foster care where homophobia is the norm (O’Brien 1994; Pridehouse Report 2003; Travers & Schneider, 1996).

It is this very disregard, denial, and discrimination encoded in social service policy and provision which renders queer and questioning youth more vulnerable to social isolation, damaged self esteem, economic marginalization, and sexual exploitation (Chand & Thompson, 1997; Dempsey, 1994; Travers and Schneider, 1996). That the places of greatest safety – school, home, social services, shelters – become for queer and questioning youth the places of greatest danger increases the risk of street involvement, violence, ill-health, drug and alcohol addictions, HIV infection, and homelessness.

Initially, the descriptor we used in our study, “queer and questioning” (QQ), was intended to include both youth who have affirmed sexually marginalized gender identifications (whether only for themselves, or more publicly), and to include as well youth who may simply be unsure about their gender/sexuality identifications. Subsequently, what we discovered about the complexity of gender identification and attribution led us to question our initial presumptions about queer and questioning identity, especially as it relates to street-involved youth. What began as a study of (essentialized) identity became a study of the economics and politics of sexual exchange involving minors.

In writing up this study, we have sought to maintain a tension between “straight” research reporting (replete with sections on methodology, data gathering, interpretation, analysis and conclusion/s) and an explicitly reflexive, self-critical interrogation of the work itself. Through the use of varied methods, varied times and places for fieldwork, and by using varied representational media, we have tried to better understand and articulate the kinds of complex, messy, and surprising identities and sexualities that the research team, as well as the research

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participants (re)negotiated daily. Building on Lather and Smithies' (1997) pioneering study of women with HIV/AIDS which provided a strong model for catalytic, reciprocal research practices, and multi-modal research reporting, we decided to adopt a multi-modal, multi-methodological approach to all aspects of the work – from training, through fieldwork, to reporting. Cultivating “surprise” in research is fundamental to learning from its practice. A multimodal (and multi-site) approach helped us to devise ways that participants could express ideas not anticipated by our questions and enabled representations and expressions which might not so readily emerge in face-to-face interviews with researchers – even researchers from the community. We used these resources to enrich as well as to challenge our analysis. Engaging multimodal methods for this research entails an understanding of research in which the usual demand for “facts” will, of necessity, take a back seat to “catalytic” outcomes of persuasion, not least because the kind of facts demanded are hostile to the very identities to be recorded and represented and intractable for taking or giving any useful measure of the economics of those lived conditions. In areas such as these, multimodal methods and multimedia tools support a very different view, and function, of representation in research.

Description of Study

This article, then, describes a short-term, ethnographically-based study of the conditions and needs of youth at the intersection of economic conditions, sexuality, and housing needs. The study was initiated by and accountable to a community-based housing development organization in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. This organization, The Pride Care Society, seeks to create designated housing for street-involved lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered/transsexual (LGBT) youth who find themselves on the fringes of, or unable to “fit in” to, existing institutions and structures of support.¹ Among Canadian street-involved youth at risk of illness, homelessness, violence, and suicide are children and youth whose sexuality, whether self-asserted as “queer” or so assigned by others, renders them more likely than their peers to “fall through the cracks” of existing service provisions (Travers & Schneider, 1996). Such youth are, for example, far more likely than their peers to experience bullying and violence at school and to dropout of school prematurely, to suffer bodily and sexual violence, to be alienated from family members, to be “kicked out” of their family homes and to migrate to street-based survival (D’Augelli, et al., 1998; Dempsey, 1994; Savin-Williams, 1994; Tremble, 1993). Indeed, LGBT youth are over-represented in populations of homeless youth; The percentage of LGBT youth among homeless youth is higher than the 5%-20% identified as LGBT within the general population (Ryan & Futterman, 1998; Earl, 2003). There has been difficulty in accessing data on (a) the situation of homeless youth who identify as transgendered; (b) the relative agency of youth engaging in survival sex and/or sex work (sometimes referred to as youth “at risk of sexual exploitation”); (c) the character of the attachment of some homeless youth to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transsexual/transgendered communities and identities; as well as (d) the impact of sexual minority status and homophobia in the decision of some youth to leave home at an early age.

¹ For example, in response to questions about where and from whom sexual minority youth felt supported at school, most youth reported they received no support from the school guidance counselor, even though supporting students is central to the school guidance counselor’s role.

Because of the above noted research gaps – namely, little if any literature on street-oriented LGBT youth – the initial goals of the project were as follows: (a) to determine the distinctive and particular risks to – and therefore the distinctive and particular needs for – housing, supports, and services of homeless/inadequately housed queer and questioning LGBT youth who are, or who are at risk of becoming, street-involved; (b) to contribute to the shaping and informing of policy which better acknowledges and meets the needs of youth who, too often, “fall through the gaps” of existing social policy; and (c) to effect capacity-building and networking through participant-researcher training and community-university collaboration, providing youth with skills-training, work experience, and paid employment as community-based researchers. It was hoped, moreover, that what we decided to call the “PrideHouse Project” might contribute informational and educational resources which could be used as a basis for seeking further funding to establish safe and supportive housing for this at-risk population which, in turn, might directly prevent and/or reduce the kinds of social harms (e.g. bullying, discrimination, parental rejection) which induce youth to leave their homes prematurely.

In order to better inform the housing development society sponsor about the conditions, needs, and expressed desires of the specific population for whom they sought to improve existing housing support, our research was guided by the following question: What are the particular needs experienced by queer and questioning youth with respect to safe and supportive housing, and what are the “gaps” in existing social policy and service provisions which place this group at particular risk² of homelessness?

Methods

Being queer has never been much of a status symbol, and for most of us, there are real dangers associated with making it public that one’s sexuality diverges from the mainstream. As one of our informants so aptly articulated, “I would never wish a gay life on anybody.”

This study of the conditions and needs of youth who are queer or questioning presumed that little information could be accessed about the impacts of a stigmatized identity, unless the researchers themselves were also “marked” as such. While recognizing that all researchers inhabit “hybrid” (Fine, 2000) identities, and that research is invariably a practice of border-crossing and “working the hyphens” of our multiple identifications, the extreme vulnerability of street-involved sexual minority youth imposed a stricter-than-usual requirement upon researcher identities; We took the decision that all research team members must themselves clearly identify as “queer” in order to minimize at least the most obvious barriers to access for us and threats to safety for our research subjects. We understood from the outset that “outsiders” to the population studied would be readily recognized by participants, that those outsiders would not necessarily understand what they were seeing or hearing, and that their insufficient

² Social science provides one way of understanding people and situations, but people and their lived situations are, we recognize, far more complex and finely wrought than charts and graphs and the language of “causes” and “risk factors” can hope to encompass. In this paper, we use terms like “at-risk” ironically, acknowledging that they are invariably too-rough approximations of the “lived actualities” of youth who become homeless/street-involved. Although research ‘consumers’ very often most value quantitative methods of research and reporting, we in this study have found greater accuracy, depth, and significance in a combination of methods with face-to-face qualitative research guiding the work.

understanding might needlessly place informants at risk. Outsider status, moreover, could severely limit access to people and information, so for us it was a priority to support and, in most cases, to defer to the judgment of community-based youth researchers in deciding who to contact and where, when, and how to request information from participants.

On these premises, we created a diverse team of researchers, all of whom self-identified as “queer or questioning.” Half were university graduate students and half community-based “experiential” youth knowledgeable about street survival. We utilized peer-researchers and a participatory action-research process. An extensive preliminary literature survey and document analysis (e.g. policy statements, founding documents of service agencies, service provision guidelines, etc.) was followed by peer-facilitated focus groups, interviews, ethnographic observations, and video-documentary methods. An initial researcher training week gave intensive training in ethnographic research methods, and researcher training was supported by weekly “team-building” meetings where the week’s fieldwork was discussed, new skills were workshopped, discussions about problems and priorities took place, and the next week’s work was mapped out.

It was at these weekly meetings that a survey was developed, video work was viewed, and routine administrative issues were covered (this was the one time each week when the entire team assembled to work together). The remainder of the time, the researchers worked, normally in pairs, making site observations and recoding these in fieldnotes and images, conducting interviews and focus groups, designing and then administering a survey, conducting video-based research, and further developing their post-production video skills by creating a research-based video titled, *Building a Place for Pride*.³

Pridehouse researcher training, and subsequent fieldwork practices, were driven methodologically and pedagogically by the multiliteracies approach endorsed by the New London Group (New London Group, 1996). This group’s reconceptualization of literacy and its practices is particularly important, we believe, for populations with whom conventional text-based literacy in schools, family services, the courts and child welfare systems has been used primarily to discipline and punish. We therefore looked to other forms of literacy to create a bridge between the kinds of representation youth saw to be meaningful and useful to them, and our own more conventional, text-based literacies. Working with youth for whom formal schooling constitutes a hostile and exclusionary environment, and for whom text-based documentary forms and procedures have been more often used against rather than for them, presents particular challenges with respect to research practices, including documentation and representation. Community-based activist work which engages non-traditional forms of literate practices can be more inviting and less threatening than conventional language and text-based research methods for this population. The PrideHouse project, accordingly, embraced forms of representation, cognition, and expression beyond those language-based forms privileged by the state and school apparatuses which have excluded these youth, specifically in the form of image capture, image editing, image production, narrative production, video production, video editing, and sound production and editing.

³ See <http://www.sfu.ca/pridehouse>.

Critical to this study was the goal of gaining a more comprehensive view of a usually mobile urban population, and this required that we conduct ‘mobile’ research across multiple sites, and that we ourselves be ‘on the move’. A weekly late-night van delivery of hot food and snacks to youth on or working the streets provided valuable opportunities both to support as well as to hear from those within that ‘moving target’ population likely to be at greatest risk of violence, homelessness, illness, and addictions. Being the group least likely to seek mainstream supports and services, they are, therefore, youth whose voices and perspectives are least likely to be heard. Moreover, it was essential that we not limit our study of street-involved, sexually marginalized youth to daylight, nine-to-five hours. The research methods listed above yielded both qualitative and quantitative data to develop a richer, clearer and more well-informed picture of the conditions and needs of street-involved sexual minority youth.

Significant methodologically as well is project documentation, including the production of a web-based research report, “No Place Like Home”⁴. We elected to organize and present our research report as the story of a community-oriented, peer-based research project, rather than as a narration of facts about sexuality, youth, and housing. We confronted the need to produce a document that would be relevant, meaningful, and accessible to those whose perceptions and experiences it purported to represent. Accordingly, the research report became a multi-media document (both text and online), with each section taking up a different dimension of the research to show and explain what each component contributed to the study as a whole. The result is a stylistic hybrid: an unusual but hopefully informative and even eloquent mix of ethnographic, grounded, multiply-informed exposition which fuses both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Interspersed throughout analytical discussions, observations, and interpretations of the principal investigator’s text are the voices of field workers and participants, graphs and charts, lists, photographs, drawings, videos, fieldnotes and reflective analytical notes that were written often as critical ‘out-takes’ by research assistants commenting on their own work and the work of the project.

In the work we describe here, we focus specifically on our research methods in an attempt to make clear the ways in which the dual roles of researcher-participant, the use of multiple methods, and the need for our research to find ways to “give back” to the community, all combined to produce a nuanced, well-developed account of queer and questioning street youth. Perhaps, most importantly, the ongoing cultivation of multiple perspectives offered us productive ways to navigate and more fully elucidate those instances when our data appeared contradictory or misleading.

We begin by describing the difficulties in studying a population demarcated as “at-risk” given current university research ethics demands. In the section following that, we briefly describe significant components of the study and show how each was a source of very different, yet invaluable “data.” And finally, we show how the intersection of multiple data sets led to a clearer, more complete understanding of the housing and support needs for street involved, queer and questioning youth, as well as enabling a deconstructive analysis of the study’s own central category (“queer”) to afford a surprising view of what it signifies, threatens, and accomplishes for street-involved youth.

⁴ See <http://www.sfu.ca/pridehouse>.

Researching “At-Risk” Minors

Because the age at which many youth become (homo)sexually active is below the legal age of consent, service providers who do cater to this age group are precluded, whether de jure or de facto, from formally acknowledging alternative sexual identifications/practices. As a result, they may often fail to recognize and/or meet the distinctive social, cultural, psychological, health, and housing related needs of this group. This can often mean that child welfare delivery system deficits, and subsequently housing policies and priorities, have never adequately served LGBT children and their families. In other words, a significant gap exists between services provided to at-risk youth in general, and access to services for the *particular* at-risk youth who are the subjects of this study. However, any attempt to conduct research involving under-age, sexually active youth meets with the same obstacles. Under-age subjects – children in the eyes of the law – need their parents’ consent to participate in research. But youth who have no parental care, those who have left or who have been forced to leave their parents’ home, cannot very well be expected to obtain a parent’s signature on a consent form.

These constraints make it difficult for researchers to provide the levels and kinds of information about homelessness within this specific population that are required to remediate serious deficiencies and omissions in social policy and service provision. Formal research ethics aside, there are numerous substantive ethical questions which arise in research involving subjects under the age of consent, and, indeed, any vulnerable and disadvantaged persons or groups. As one of the researchers put it:

The issue is not that I am getting uninteresting information from my interviews and focus groups. Of course when you interview people who are street involved, you are bound to get tragic, dramatic stories of what happens to people in crises. The focus group was, in fact, quite interesting and from a personal standpoint, I learned a lot. The issue for me is that if we are going to get information from people in crises, I feel that there has to be some real immediate benefit to them besides a \$10.00 honorarium. I think for me (and I’m still exploring this) it is an issue of ethics. (James)

Although the research team continuously tried to raise these issues and to deal responsibly and ethically and in a sufficiently informed way with participants, it is important to draw attention to the apparent lack of concern among participants themselves about issues of confidentiality and anonymity, about risks, about privacy, or about “telling their story” in general. Researchers commented with some concern about the extent to which interviewees made themselves vulnerable by sharing often surprisingly personal and traumatic narrations which, however, were accompanied by little if any distress in the telling, and an almost embarrassing willingness to lay their lives bare to researchers. This is noteworthy given that abused children appear to be insufficiently guarded about their own welfare and insufficiently protective of themselves.

Other informants appeared to want to get through the requisite probing and prodding as soon as possible, and it was often clear that the monetary payment given to interviewees for their time was the sole motivation behind the interview. In these cases, interviewers would generally

choose to cut the session short. Whether for money, or for a brief connection with a person willing to listen, or because they have spent more time than most of us in reciting accounts of themselves and their lives, it appeared that many of these youth had become accustomed to telling their story. There sometimes seemed to be a fairly rehearsed “script” to many of the interviews. This is nothing new in this kind of research, but the fact that what we so often get from direct interview questioning is fairly formulaic and scripted mediates the ways we make use of interview “data” here.

Building the Pridehouse Project

The research component of this project took place in an intensive four months in the summer of 2002. During the time researchers (both community and university-based) were “trained,” a late night van run was developed and implemented, and data was gathered using a variety of media and methods.

Researcher Training

We began the study by providing youth hired for the project (both university and “experiential” youth) with skills-training, work experience, and paid employment as community-based researchers. Trainees worked in teams, pairing community-based youth with experience of street-involvement and/or homelessness with university-based graduate students, in the hopes that community-based youth might develop a better understanding of academic approaches to research and what being a university student might involve or offer them, and university-based youth could better understand something of the resources, skills, and knowledge under-supported queer youth use to manage their very different conditions of survival.

After the initial orientation and an intensive short course of researcher-training, the fieldwork began. Trainees developed skills and experience in field-based research which included logistics, team-building techniques, observational approaches, interviewing techniques, documentation and fieldnotes, record-keeping, running team meetings, transcription of interviews, how to set up and facilitate focus groups, as well as how to design, develop, and administer a survey. During the second month of the project, six trainees along with one senior research associate attended a week-long residential course in ethnographic documentary video making at the Access to Media Education (AMES) media center on Galiano Island in British Columbia, Canada. This intensive program helped to deepen and solidify relations among team members and offered youth unfettered access to tools, skills, training, and expertise. Working in two smaller teams, the group produced two five-minute videos as a vehicle for developing their skills in camera work, scripting, sound editing, directing, and video editing.

Learning from the Research Team

Because more than half of the research team consisted of “experiential” youth (youth who had personal experience of a range of aspects of street life for queer and questioning youth) a great deal was learned about relationships between non-hegemonic sexual identification and risks of homelessness and street involvement from the members of the research team themselves. These researchers gave their informed consent for this information to be used alongside other

study data. As important, then, as any other source of data for this study were the interviews, focus groups, and other activities conducted with research team members. As explained earlier, the team was composed of 10 members plus the Principal Investigator, and all team members identified as “queer or questioning.” Two of the women identified as bisexual, three team members identified as lesbian and one of these had personal experience of transgendered (female-male) identification. One team member identified as transgendered (male-female), and three others identified as gay males. All males were of color and one of the transgendered youth was First Nations (Indigenous). All female team members were White, and this representation is likely significant in itself.

Mobile Midnight Picnic: The Van Run

A key element in the fieldwork was the late-night food-van run, re-named by the research team, the “Mobile Midnight Picnic” (MMP). Save the Children Canada, a partner in this study, permitted us to make use of their van to conduct a weekly late-night outreach initiative, which proved to be one of the most challenging but also one of the most informative aspects of the research.

The idea behind the MMP was, firstly, that very little research on disadvantaged populations ever brings any real benefit to anyone but the researchers. The researched themselves rarely experience or enjoy any direct benefits. By bringing hot food, fruit, coffee, and other snacks out to youth on or working the streets, we could both offer some material support to youth in need, as well as hear from that sub-group of queer and questioning youth likely to be at greatest risk of violence, homelessness, illness, and addictions. Being the group least likely to seek mainstream supports and services, these are also the youth whose voices and perspectives are least likely to be heard, and the people we most needed to hear from.

Over the period of the study, we were able to make regular weekly trips out between midnight and 3 A.M. to feed and talk to youth and to observe, first-hand, conditions on the street. The evening of each trip, we would arrange in advance for food preparation (hot soup, vegetarian stew, or chili, and home-baked bread or buns), then equip the van with fruit, snacks, and drinks (such as coffee, tea, chocolate milk, bottled water, and juice), as well as condoms and shelter information, and set begin about midnight. The procedure we followed was that one person would drive, another would take notes and help set up and maintain food distribution, and two others would go out and invite people on or working the streets to come over to the van for food.

The MMP trips were significant as they gave us a “feeling” for late night street life, and we could thereby more accurately comprehend what the youth we sought to study had to go through in their struggles to survive. Even though it was summer, it is important to note that youth on the streets at night were cold and were often wrapped in blankets and huddled in liquor store windows or alleys in small groups. Many reported resorting to drug and alcohol use as a way of coping with the cold. Prominent among the reportable observations from these trips were that women and trans youth worked the least well-lit, least affluent, and most dangerous parts of the city while young gay men worked the most established, populated, and well-lit locations. Young women working the streets may be positively endangered by researchers wanting to speak with them since, unlike the young men who are normally ‘free agents’, many of the

women work for pimps who control their time and activity and from whom violence may be a real threat should the woman communicate with anyone but prospective Johns. As one young woman put it:

It just means you have to keep it [being a lesbian] more secret...you're in survival mode all the time when you're on the street, so you're not gonna do anything that will get your ass kicked or get your ass killed. It's not something you talk about, it's not something I even thought a lot about, except with my street sister cause all I was thinking about was using and keeping my ass alive. (Kitty Kat)

Least visible among youth on the street were lesbians, who were therefore the most difficult group for researchers to access. This may mean lesbian needs and experiences remain largely overlooked in studies like this one, and services and supports for young lesbians will, accordingly, tend to be less than for any other population.

Many young men working the streets identified as heterosexual, although their clientele are other men. It is men who typically buy sexual services; We found no mention whatsoever of women purchasing sexual services from youth.

Most significantly, we learned from the MMP that the activities and identities of street involved youth revolve far less around sexuality and far more around the economics of the sex trade. As one young man put it “*We're all queer out here; we're queer for money*”.

Because all too often research does not, in any material and/or economic way, attempt to “give back” to its participants, and because this was very much at the centre of how we thought about our research in terms of an ethics of responsibility to those disadvantaged populations we were researching, it is important to emphasize the need for more support like the MMP. All researchers agreed that the stocking and staffing of a dedicated, regularly scheduled, youth-organized and -operated food van is an excellent way to keep in touch with what is going on in the street (e.g. bad drugs, violence and other crimes, police violence, detox, health, and other needs) and for understanding the real impacts of social policies and cuts to social services and where these might most feasibly, responsibly, and effectively be addressed.

Survey Results

A 45-question survey was administered to 60 youth between the ages of 15-30 (30 males, 25 females, and 5 trans). Although the majority of respondents were White, it is important to note the relatively higher representation of Aboriginal and Metis youth, particularly among young women (approximately 30% of the respondents). Most surveys were completed face-to-face with researchers and a small honorarium of \$10.00 was given in return for participants' time. Over half (56%) of male respondents identified as queer or gay, while less than a quarter (23%) of the female respondents identified as queer or lesbian. As the qualitative aspects of the project illustrate, this difference may stem from the fact that, among the represented population, there seems to be more males involved in homosexual “survival sex” than females; This is, however, merely one interpretation of the figures.

In the following three sub-sections, we have focused on those questions in the survey which are most relevant to educators and community-based service providers – questions which ask specifically about experiences at school, of violence, and with social and community-based services.

School Life: “3 1/2 years of hell”

The most influential institution of secondary socialization in Western cultures today is the school and rejection, intimidation, and harassment at school (from teachers as well as from students) is very often cited as a major “risk factor” for youth leaving home and becoming street-involved. As a result, we asked a number of questions in our survey about life at school, about sources of support at school, and about whether or not youth were “out” at school. As one young man told us, being ‘out’ can be worse than being ‘closeted’:

...in terms of being gay in high school, I think its wrong... um knowing that they are queerand putting them in that situation of hell. (J. B.)

Of the 58 people who responded to the question of whether or not they were “out” at school, 9 stated it did not apply to them (6 of these identified as straight, 2 bisexual, and one self-identified as a “open”). Heterosexually identified youth did not see “coming out” as relevant to them. This is surely because the presumption at school is that everyone is heterosexual, notwithstanding that it is public knowledge, and has been for many years now, that on average 10% of our population is LGBT. What matters here is that although teachers and other educators know this, typically it receives no recognition (Uribe & Harbeck, 1992). Teacher education programs typically ignore and avoid any discussion of sexuality, let alone any educational intervention concerned with sexuality to guide teachers in dealing supportively with LGBT youth in their care. Homophobic jokes and remarks are, typically, both tolerated and even legitimized by some teachers who engage in homophobic discourses and practices themselves and model them for their students (Martin & Hetrick, 1988; Sanford, 1989; Sears, 1992; Whitlock, 1989). Parents no less than teachers may have difficulty both ‘seeing’ and ‘hearing’ such discourses and practices of exclusion, even when their own children are targeted.

... the kids would ... follow me home with a carton of eggs and...they would wait until I was alone ... and um they’d wait until I got home and just throw them at my window. They’d call me fag um like right outside the house and my mother would hear it...

But, this same young man continues,

I did not drop out of school...I didn’t want to leave school. I enjoyed it very much. I tried the hardest I could try at my abilities. The only reason I left is because my mother kicked me out. (J.B.)

In terms of the sources of support at school, the survey respondents reported getting the most support from their friends and teachers. The support QQ youth indicated that they received from school counselors, significantly, was no greater than that given to them by non-teaching staff (e.g. school secretaries, the school principal, etc.).

What we saw in the survey responses to questions about “school life” is a picture of schools as institutions which make little or no room for non-hegemonic sexualities. This impression is reinforced if we take a closer look at the characterizations of their school experience by QQ youth. Because one goal of this project was to provide an informational basis for education – specifically to enable care-giving adults to understand the role they play in excluding and thereby endangering QQ youth – it seems useful to reproduce for educators’ benefit the kinds of comments youth made about their life at school. Note that not all youth responded to this question, and a few (6) characterized their school life as “good,” or “fun,” or “OK.” The rest had this to say. School life was...

Rough...shitty... hated school... very hard...boring...very upsetting, people making fun of me all the time... hard and depressing... lot of harassment from students teachers and vice principal... shit. Just a lot of shit... I was never there... false, phony... scary, hectic, lonely...HORRIBLE, homophobic graffiti on locker, repeated sexual violence and hate, no one in the whole school was out... classist and homophobic...boring... torments of being something I wasn't... I loved it before I came out... not very good, a lot of problems...stressful... at some times very hard because I'm native... no support... had few friends... sucked... hated it, homophobic... 3 1/2 years of hell... OK except once I came out... hell: I hated every fucking minute of it... ostracized, excluded, picked on...not so good...couldn't read till I was 16 so it was very hard...confusing, chaotic...Hell. Almost life-threatening...saved me from home... bad.

Sources of Violence

Survey figures on sources of violence highlight the tragic realities which connect youth, sexuality, violence, and institutionalized homophobia both at home and school. Violence among this population most often stems from those physical and emotional arenas which are traditionally held to be safest: parents (51% claim to have been abused by their parents), family (44%), school (44%), and relationships (36%). For whatever reason, these realities are particularly harsh for the female respondents, as evidenced by more claims of abuse among the young women (parents: 68%, family: 56%, school: 58%, and relationships: 62%). For all kinds of violence, women reported greater levels than men. Bear in mind also that in this survey more males than females worked the streets and also that it may be that males are less likely to judge experiences violent, or possibly to acknowledge to themselves or to report to others that they have suffered violent treatment. As a result, it is not clear to what extent this finding of greater violence among women may be a result of internalized gender norms of “toughness” (males) vs. “vulnerability” (females).

Services and Support

A pervasive sense of isolation, a need for “community” and a need for better supports and services for QQ youth was stressed in much of the literature we reviewed,⁵ so it was important to ask questions about use of and experiences with the services available to, and in some cases

⁵ See www.sfu.ca/pridehouse, App.1-4.

specifically designed for them. In some of the surveys, the sense of isolation many youth feel from any and every support or service is palpable.

Even for those services specified for the LGBT community, the youth who responded to our survey did not necessarily find those services to be “QQ positive”, and this was especially true among minority respondents. Users of the Youth Center found it queer positive, while those who use aboriginal services, immigrant services, community centers and services, food services, and legal aid services overwhelmingly reported that they were not LGBT positive. The most queer-positive places were identified as the LGBT center, the community health center, and bars and clubs. Where people found they got the most support was, surprisingly, from service industry locations, such as bars and pubs – perhaps because of the lack of authority and subsequent degree of freedom found therein.

Interpretive Challenges

In interpreting survey data, some general points are in order. First, it seems important to explain that although the research team dedicated a considerable amount of time to rewording questions, deciding on what questions would be most important to ask, trying out the surveys with youth to get their detailed feedback and critique, and bringing those comments and criticisms back to the group, and revising a number of times to arrive at the final version, the actual practice of administering a survey to young people living under conditions of hardship and even crisis seemed to many of us to border on the unethical. What good, team members asked, does completing a survey do for these youth? The point of the survey – to collect quantitative data about what youth wanted and needed, as well as to try to get a better, more empirically grounded understanding of who these youth were, what their living conditions were, and the factors which contributed to their present circumstances – seemed “academic” in the worst sense of that term. The position many of us took was that the exercise felt rather exploitative, just another way of reducing the complexity of peoples’ lives and turning that complexity into numbers. Too-simple “data” could make us *look* like better researchers, when in actuality, in terms of our goals as community-based interventionist researchers, doing surveys made our research praxis *worse*, not better. It took peoples’ time, and gave them little in return (\$20 for helping us pilot the surveys and giving detailed feedback on them, and \$5-\$10 for completing the final version). The research team expressed a clear preference for face-to-face interviews rather than paper and pencil surveys as a research tool.

The problem with surveys is surely compounded because typically survey data are artifacts of the survey itself. In other words, how you design and word the survey produces the so-called “information” you can get from it. In our survey, we saw this in some very specific ways. For example, the survey asked if people would want future housing to be “drug-free,” and data show that this was a clear preference. In interviews, however, it became clear that many people believe that “no drugs” is an unrealistic and even sometimes oppressive condition to live under and wanted fewer rules and restrictions for their own “home.” One young man spoke of the need to be allowed to have moderate uses of non-addictive drugs as a “reward” for staying off harder drugs and as a way to help managing more harmful addictions. Even those who were adamant that trying to “kick” while around other users would be impossible, envisaged a house where one floor, but not all floors, would be drug free. People did recognize degrees of drug

(ab)use and addiction, and many people clearly felt moderate consumption of non-addictive drugs was certainly no worse than moderate consumption of alcohol. However, in the survey, we did not ask about drug use in any way that permitted respondents to express their views about degrees or kinds of drug use – nor, interestingly, did we ask whether the house should be alcohol-free. As a result, what we produced as a response to drugs was, in this way, an artifact of our own survey in that it told us more about our survey (specifically its errors and weaknesses) than about the (far more sophisticated and complex) views of the respondents.

Another apparent contradiction our survey produced was about whether homophobia is a barrier to accessing services and support. Although respondents stated overwhelmingly that there is a real need for dedicated QQ housing, in fact only 10 of the 60 surveyed reported that homophobia is a barrier to their use of services and supports. Taken by itself, the survey would tend to suggest that dedicated services, including housing specifically for QQ youth, are *not* needed. However, when we look in detail at the responses from interviews and focus groups, what we discover leads us to ask whether the question itself created these contradictory “findings.”

Interestingly, the question about whether homophobia is a barrier to accessing service and support was *not* answered by 33 out of 60 respondents. This is the highest number of non-responses in the entire 45-question survey and even higher than the number of non-responses to a far more time-consuming “cartoon task” question⁶. How do we interpret peoples’ failure to answer the homophobia question? One possibility is that terms like “discrimination” and “homophobia” use academic language which is alienating and/or meaningless to many respondents. One man urged that we should use the more “neutral” language of “alternative lifestyle”, and not mention “homophobia”. Another young woman who also did not answer the homophobia question, took the trouble to write on the “rant page” (a page where respondents were encouraged to write about anything they wanted to say) wrote that “foster care sucks when you’re gay” because, she said, of “homophobic staff/residents”. At least in her case, understanding the term itself was not the problem. What we need to be able to do – and what we have been able to do because we combined multiple data types and multiple ways of “getting at” youth views and experiences – is to interpret numerical data in greater complexity than is typical of survey data interpretation. One thing we might caution about a question like this is that people seem reluctant to accept and to state that their sexuality creates barriers for them, even though in many other ways – through words and pictures, through face to face interviews and in their responses to other survey questions about their home, school, and street experience – youth are very clear about the many ways that QQ sexuality definitely *is* a barrier. Rather than conclude that only 10 out of 60 youth found homophobia to be a barrier, we would suggest, instead, that this question makes people, even LGBT people, far too uncomfortable for them to want to answer, and would, again, warn against an overly literal interpretation of quantitative data, particularly when questions deal directly with stigmatized identities/practices.

Perhaps the most important warning about interpreting these data is the fact that the sample size is so small. However, this study first and foremost was an attempt at gathering “suggestive” information and to try out a range of methods to see what the powers and the limitations of each method appeared to be. We also wanted to see if using multiple methods

⁶ See <http://www.sfu.ca/pridehouse> for a fuller description and examples of the “cartoon task”.

produced contradictions (in the case of the “drug-free house” and “homophobia” questions, it did). We wanted to see how we could enrich our information by combining several data sources. For example, cultivating multiple perspectives helped us better understand young women’s relative under- participation in queer street-based life; On the basis of face-to-face interviews, ‘lesbian’ under-representation was better explained as an artifact of the economic determination, and limitation, of sex/gender “options” for young street involved women living in poverty.

From Identity-Based Research to Identity-Deconstructive Analysis

What soon became a clear and key difference between academic/textual work found in the literature we reviewed – and our own very partial and patchy, but also very much more embodied, immediate, “grounded” fieldwork – is the relative ease with which sexual identity categories like “gay and lesbian,” “heterosexual,” and “queer” are used in theory and research, compared with how problematic and contested/contestable these categories were when we tried to “map” them onto real bodies. A second striking difference is in the way “identity development” is often portrayed and reported on. Textual representations and theoretical models of queer identity development (Zera, 1992; Cass, 1979; Trioden, 1989) are very much of an embryonic, painfully emerging sexuality, whose specific “stages” of emergence map on to both epistemic “stages” (awareness, denial, acceptance, and so on), and particular perils (isolation, stigma, abuse, suicide, etc.) (Martin & Hetrick, 1987; Ryan & Futterman, 1998). We really did not see much of this determinateness of identity, nor its “stage-like” emergence, in our own fieldwork. Instead, sexual identification(s) and sexual practice(s) appear to be created far more by the economics of survival than determined by desire. It seems to be more outsiders who traverse these so-called stages of identity development which they then (as attribution theory might suggest) attribute to the “socially problematic.”

We should not be surprised, then, that while much academic work makes identity categorization a recognizably patterned “developmental” process (D’Augelli, 1994), identity as it is *lived* for queer children and youth, contending with unheeding, disbelieving, and often condemnatory others, is rarely a simple matter of accepting “what” one is, so long as one is perennially held hostage to what one is *allowed* to (be)come. In the words of one young man,

If my father found out I was bisexual, he would probably disown me, treat me like shit. I would not be his child anymore...and I wouldn't be able to see my mother anymore which would be the hardest part. (Tony)

It was agreed that even among street youth, it is stigmatizing and dangerous to self-identify as “queer”. This is particularly so for young women, for what appear to be largely economic survival reasons. “Queer” sexuality is in complex ways regulated by economics of sexual exploitation and sexual exchange. This may be why we saw relatively fewer women than men declaring themselves to be unequivocally queer. Said one researcher with direct experience of street-based survival,

I have yet to meet one [woman] who considered herself lesbian or bisexual while still on the street, yet I've met several who have come out after exiting street life. (Sara)

Men by contrast were more likely to self-identify as gay, queer, two-spirited, trans, etc. In fact, “queer” was interpreted by many people as “really about gay men”.

They [women] are prostituted and have sex with men...they have so many other things to deal with it's unlikely they really get to put any attention to their sexuality. (Darla)

Despite the complexities of navigating sexual identity categories, almost all participants spoke of the need for housing designated for queer youth.

Most of the people I lived in group homes with were homophobic...I'd have to listen to them make all these gay jokes, and I just wouldn't say anything...I'd have been the butt of every joke. (Sandra)

A recurrent stress among respondents was also the need for housing that recognized difference within the queer community. The category “queer” (including any expanded categories of “LGBT” or “queer and questioning”) does *not* refer to a uniform, compatible, integrated “community of difference” but instead to groups whose interests, and therefore whose needs for housing, would *not* necessarily be easily compatible. First among these was the need (stated by 62% of the respondents) for separate housing for people living with addictions and those seeking to be away from that struggle.

Life on the streets can be very dangerous for queer/trans youth. Life at “home” can be very scary and very heartbreaking for queer/trans youth. Where can youth who identify as queer or trans feel safe, even if being “home” can be scary? All people need to feel accepted and cared for, and if LGTB youth don't feel either way, something's wrong. (Jessie)

Because of the way sexuality creates risk of rejection, the places of greatest support and safety were also the places of greatest harm and danger. The streets, bars, and community centers were characterized as being more predatory than protective to the young. A repeated theme was the need for “queer” support beyond and outside of the rave/bar scene. Note that bars/clubs is the highest reported source of support for queer youth. This underscores expressed need for safe and supportive and stable housing in which one's sexuality could be accepted. Note also that for queer and questioning youth, violence at the hands of the police exceeded for both males and females their experience of violence at the hands of Johns.

Overall, in terms of sexual identification, youth themselves expressed far less concern about their sexuality than their survival and voiced far less concern with their own sexual identification than with the inability of those around them to treat them with respect and acceptance.

I don't believe in labels because they are very degrading, how is anybody different from anybody else? They are all humans, all made up of the same matter...everybody deserves love. (Tony)

A Concluding Note on “Interventionist” Research

Interventionist research, research in which you actively set out to *do* something in a context in which action is urgent (when simply “studying the situation” actually does harm to the population being researched) is one way to engage in a study such as this one. The context here is urgent; The lives of street youth, and particularly those involved in prostitution as many queer and questioning youth are, are genuinely at risk moment to moment. Conducting distanced, impartial data collection in such a setting can actively harm youth, whether by taking their attention and resources away from the urgent matter of getting enough to eat or a place to sleep that day, or by attracting the punitive attention of the pimp overseeing a young woman who bravely agreed to speak to us. This is why we followed what has become an established practice of paying participants for their knowledge and their time, why we ran the late-night food van, and as well why we tried to find ways we as researchers could become more knowledgeable about, and offer assistance in, accessing community resources for youth in crisis. What is clear is that we did not pay informants enough nor were we able to offer much real assistance, given the enormity of the problems these youth contend with. Researchers who hope to do “community-based research” have some work to do figuring out how these things can actually be done ethically and respectfully. As a member of the research team expressed it,

A lot of research is used as a stalling tactic in light of the fact that addressing the real problem with real solutions is a daunting task...” (James)

Overall, this research could be read as suggestive, as a place to begin, as a “trial run”, and therefore as a good basis for creating a longer-term, more extensive study of sexuality, street-involvement, and housing needs. It is perhaps best read as an argument for more complex, multi-faceted, and multi-dimensional research methods which can show the many ways in which layering one kind of data on top of another enables more complex, more complete, and indeed more accurate understandings of the topic studied. Perhaps most important of all, this work suggests that multi-method, multi-modal research can create occasions and opportunities – and, no less importantly, a stable and re-usable documentary archive – for new and different questions to be asked, to more fully interrogate ones own assumptions, disrupt ones perceptions and impressions, and to be surprised at and to see the unexpected in ones own “data”.

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