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Critical Sexology: Sexual Self-Disclosure and Outness in Academia and the Clinic

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Critical Sexology

Critical sexology is a London-based, interdisciplinary seminar series for psychologists, psychoanalysts, medical doctors, literary and cultural studies scholars, philosophers, artists, lawyers and historians with a critical interest in the construction and management of gender and sexuality in the medical, discursive and cultural spheres.

Established in 2002 by Iain Morland and Lih-Mei Liao, Critical Sexology has since held three seminars per year, with meetings taking place in central London. The seminar series is currently co-organised by Lisa Downing (Queen Mary, University of London) and myself.

This introduction summarises some of the key points which came out the seminar held on February 15th 2006 on sexual self-disclosure. This seminar was chaired by myself and included presentations from Professor Jeffrey Weeks, Professor Mandy Merck and Prof. Kathleen Ritter. This report will be followed by the presentation given by Kathleen Ritter and an interview between her and Darren Langdrige. Kathleen was funded by the *Lesbian and Gay Psychology Section* to attend and present at the seminar.

Please see the critical sexology website for details of forthcoming seminars on female genital mutilation, health and harm, female embodiment and bisexuality.

Sexual Self-Disclosure and Outness in Academia and the Clinic

Self-disclosure has been extremely important in increasing the visibility and acceptance of sexual minorities, and the personal testimonials and 'coming out stories' of lesbians and gays, and survivors of rape and domestic abuse have been vital in the history of feminist and lesbian and gay movements. Plummer (1995) and others have argued for the importance of telling sexual stories for

rights and citizenship. Plummer suggests that successful stories need both tellers and coaxers, as well as an audience to hear them. But what if the researchers and writers coaxing the stories are people with similar stories of their own? Should they tell their own stories or not if they are on the inside rather than the outside of the communities they are working with?

The ethics of self-disclosure and outness have been debated within the arts and human sciences in relation to reflexivity. Some have argued for the value of a simultaneously insider-outsider perspective which weaves the stories of the researcher and the researched together to decrease power imbalances and increased transparency about potential biases. Others have raised problems over the 'confessional' nature of self-disclosure which risks perpetuating the notion that those outside heterosexuality are 'different' and require explanation, as well as reproducing the positivist notion that researchers can access 'truths' about their inner self for scrutiny by others.

There are also issues for the teacher and the practitioner about whether to be 'out' with students/clients and the level of self-disclosure that may be appropriate. It may be empowering for students/clients to have role models who are open about their sexual identity, but it is risky to suggest shared experiences and understandings due to shared labels, and it may potentially be more valuable to challenge others by not applying specific categories to ourselves. Finally, for those of us attempting to combine the role of the academic/teacher/practitioner with that of the activist fighting for social and political change, there may be tensions over the degree of outness or self-disclosure that is appropriate in these different roles, as well as between our professional, personal, and political agendas. This seminar sought to further debate on these, amongst other, issues, considering the ways in which they have been tackled in different disciplines over time.

Objectives of the seminar

- To debate the ethics and pragmatics of sexual self-disclosure in the academic, pedagogical and clinical arenas.

- To assess the importance of personal testimony in the history of the feminist and gay and lesbian movements, and to debate the contemporary value of self-disclosure for those currently engaged in sexuality studies.
- To assess the extent to which different disciplinary conventions enable or discourage, promote or delegitimize, the subjective experience of the researcher, teacher, or practitioner (and to explore political/philosophical objections to the very concept of 'self-disclosure' which implies a centred and transparent 'self').

Personal perspective

What follows is a brief personal reflection on the issues which were discussed in the seminar and a summary of the questions that remain in my mind which I hope to continue to address in dialogue with other researchers and practitioners.

Nearly four years ago, three related shifts occurred in my life which gave these issues of outness and self-disclosure an increased urgency and relevance. After a period of trepidation I finally became confident enough to leave more conventional psychological research behind and to study what I was most fascinated by in ways that felt more comfortable. This, for me, meant researching sexual identities from a reflexive, qualitative perspective. I also began my first relationship that was visibly outside of heteronormative structures, and I became involved with activism through the communities that I was becoming a part of. Suddenly I had to consider how 'out' to be in my personal, political and academic lives, facing questions such as whether to mention my female partner in lectures (in the way I might previously have dropped in an anecdote about a male partner), whether to use a pseudonym when writing for a bi activist magazine, and whether to incorporate my own experiences when writing up my research with members of the communities which I studied and also belonged to myself.

To me, these issues have only become more complicated over time and the experience is one of always trying to strike a balance. I have discovered hierarchies of outness (it may be appropriate to mention my sexual identity but not my relationship set-up, my relationship set-up but not my sexual practices). I

have found that self-disclosure is something I may use strategically, carefully choosing the time at which I disclose, how to do it, and to which audiences, in an attempt to be either more challenging or less potentially alienating to those listening. I have also twice had the experience of these decisions feeling 'taken out of my hands' to some extent and the severe discomfort that resulted from this. Whilst part of me still clings to a perhaps naïve belief that 'honesty is the best policy', my deepening understanding of constructionist and queer theory perspectives questions the very notion that there are inner truths about my sexuality that can be openly and honestly conveyed, and suggests instead that whatever and however I disclose or do not disclose, this is a position I am taking rather than a revealing or hiding of some true self.

At a previous critical sexology seminar I used auto-ethnography to reflect on my own journal writing about the use and production of erotic fiction. At the time I was aiming for what Pat Califia (1999) terms 'an antidote to shame', proudly proclaiming desires which are still pathologised and criminalized in our culture (see *Lesbian & Gay Psychology Review* 6(3)). This sparked a debate between myself and Lisa Downing, which we continued subsequently on-line. She questioned whether such public testimonial was unproblematically empowering or whether this 'confessional' story-telling by those of us outside heteronormativity could actually be damaging in perpetuating the idea that we need to explain ourselves. As Lambevski (1999) suggests in his insider-outsider ethnography with Macadonian and Albanian men who have sex with men, 'confessing perversions' when people with 'normal' sexualities do not do so could continue to render these sexualities different and pathological. However, many heterosexual psychologists freely pepper their writing with anecdotes about their wives and families, perhaps it would be colluding with heterosexism if LGBTQ authors avoided any reference to a same sex relationship or relationships.

In our discussions it became apparent that what seemed to me to be very radical within my discipline of psychology was actually quite commonplace within Lisa's discipline of cultural studies. Previously I had attended a cultural studies presentation at a queer theory conference where a senior academic brought in

his own sexual fantasies and practices, and this encouraged me that this drawing together of academic discourses and personal stories was a possibility.

As Lisa said, I was trying to debunk the still prevalent position in psychology that the researcher can be neutral and objective by being open about my own biases. I was also attempting to reduce researcher-researched power imbalances by analyzing my own stories alongside those of my participants. However, as Linda Finlay and Brendon Gough (2003) point out in their critical psychological work on reflexivity, such attempts at openness and weaving in of author's stories is in danger of 'paying lip-service to the power dimension by assuming a fixed and knowable subject position' (p.17) rather than acknowledging shifting positions. Lisa also questioned 'the assumption that we can ever be completely in control of/identical with the self we choose to present to the world at any moment'. As Gough says 'the notion that reflexive researchers can uncover their 'real' motivations if they dig deep enough is reminiscent of the discourse of positivism, which argues that the 'truth' about the objective world can be revealed through rigorous application of scientific methods. Researcher honesty or openness may be imagined, but because neither the researcher nor anyone else can ever establish 'true' intentions or motivations, then such claims must be treated with suspicion' (p.27) Qualitative researchers use rhetorical devices to give a sense of authenticity to their work just as much as quantitative researchers do, and suggesting that detailed, open, insider accounts are more valuable, credible and trustworthy risks perpetuating some of the positivist assumptions we are often trying to escape.

Lisa also suggested that strategically it may be better not to be upfront about whether we share the fantasies or practices we are researching because, as I have recently found, we may be damned if we do and damned if we don't. If we do, we can easily be dismissed as deviant ourselves or as having too much of a vested interest: 'she would say that wouldn't she'. If we don't then it is possible for an audience to, as Lisa said, 'reclaim' us as 'okay after all'. Perhaps better to leave people in the uncomfortable position of not being able to dismiss us *or* accept us on the spurious basis of our own identities and practices.

I still feel I am navigating confusing and difficult territory with all this. Part of me wants to believe in the possibility of being bravely authentic and transparent, whilst another part agrees that this is not really possible. Every year several students ask me to supervise their dissertations on LGBTQ related topics, many saying that they wouldn't have had the courage to study such issues if it wasn't for having an openly queer tutor. My research with non-heterosexual counselling clients suggests that many find it empowering to have an LGBTQ therapist and a relief in the sense that they know they will not be pathologised for their sexual identity or practices. I am following, with interest, the ways in which Celia Kitzinger and Sue Wilkinson are using their own struggle, as well as their academic work, to push for the legal recognition of same sex marriage (see *Lesbian & Gay Psychology Review* 7(2)). However, recent experiences have alerted me to the risk that my own self-disclosure could impact adversely on friends and colleagues as well as potentially taking away the power of my academic or political message or implying that my stories are some kind of universal experiences of the communities I research. Also, I would be very wary of suggesting that somebody's arguments were somehow more valid because they were out themselves.

I suspect that there are no easy answers here, but I will find it extremely valuable to continue to engage with those with greater knowledge and experience of these areas than I have to address them.

Summary of some key perspectives in the debate

| Reasons to disclose? | Reasons not to disclose? |
|---|--|
| Disclosure may be taken 'out of our hands' if we do not | Hierarchies of outness Using disclosure strategically |
| Honesty/authenticity | Can we access a transparent self? |
| 'Antidote to shame' (Califia, 1999) | 'Confessing perversions' (Lambevski, 1999) |
| Heterosexual writers use anecdotes – | Confessional stories suggest |

| | |
|--|--|
| avoidance = colluding with heterosexism | the need to 'explain ourselves' |
| Autoethnography/reflexivity – minimising power imbalances | Paying 'lip-service' to power dimension assuming fixed subject position |
| Qualitative detailed, open insider accounts – valuable and credible | Perpetuate positivist assumptions - rhetorical device giving sense of authenticity |
| Students/clients welcome openly queer tutors/therapists – empowering | Damned if we do, damned if we don't (dismissed or reclaimed) |
| Politically powerful (e.g. Kitzinger & Wilkinson) | Suggests universal experience? More valid because of personal experience? |

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