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Qualitative Research: Methods and Methodology

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QUALITATIVE RESEARCH: METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

This entry provides an overview of qualitative LGBTQ research. It begins by mapping out the qualities and character of studies that use this approach with particular attention to psycho-social research. It then highlights how reflexivity, the iterative process of self-identity making, has informed qualitative research, influencing both understandings of sexualities and also the underlying methodologies and research methods used. Finally, it considers how “the everyday” and a practices approach have generated significant insight on the materialities (lived experiences) and emotionality in qualitative research on LGBTQ lives.

Approaches to Research

Qualitative research is rich and illuminating, focusing attention on the micro-politics and personal dynamics of LGBTQ lives. It is, by its methodological nature, overridingly small scale and often structured around tightly defined cohorts characterized by age, parental status, relationship status and sexual practice, for example. This focus in qualitative research thus generates significant understanding of how LGBTQ lives are lived but generalizability remains limited. Indeed the design of small-scale empirical research does not have the capacity to speak to wider population trends or social attitudes. Instead, these qualitative studies are more aptly suited to advance understanding of individual and/or group experiences, situated in their social contexts. The specificity of findings is, therefore, the purpose of research rather than a limitation.

The theoretical context and thus the driver for much early qualitative research design rests, in sociological terms, within Foucaudian ideas of power and the micro-politics of resistance that are exemplified in LGBT lives. Writing in the 1970s-1980s, Michael Foucault situated sexuality as the subject and product of discourse, with sexual identities being shaped through regulatory structures of governance that constituted personal understandings and articulations of sexuality. Disciplinary operations of power thus served to frame and often contain queer experience. The reflexive turn that followed is far more optimistic, arguably overly so. Anthony Giddens has been instrumental in this regard, suggesting that a recursive process of self-making characterizes the contemporary era of late modernity. His position is that through both the development of

personal narratives and engagement with external narratives and expert systems, such as those evident in contemporary therapeutic cultures, individuals engage in reflexive self-identity. The resultant transformations of intimacy reflect a root and branch democratization of the interpersonal domain, fostered through a culture of self-fulfillment. Narratives of self and personal identities offer emancipatory, or liberating, freedoms because they are neither predefined nor contained; transformations of intimacy and sexuality are constitutive of and constituted by personal and structural interactions. LGBT lifestyles are the exemplars of contemporary selfhood because they reside outside cultural registers, which regulate realms of possibility, determined through reproduction, for example. Lesbian and gay self-making identities thus not only epitomize sexual and queer potentialities they also break down homo–hetero binaries.

This theoretical context is foundational to understandings of much contemporary LGBTQ research. The post-emancipatory politics in Giddens' transformed sexual world open up queer ways of knowing but, as feminist critics such as Lynn Jamieson have so compellingly argued, this theoretically-contained schema also obscures the materialities where enactments of power reside. Sexual freedoms, for example, are not uniform; class, education, ethnicity and parenthood remain differentiating factors. LGBTQ studies have, in some instances, similarly invoked a universalizing narrative that subsumes difference under a queer sexual umbrella. Qualitative LGBTQ research that is attentive to the particularities of experience and the research-participant dynamic can, however, paint a far more nuanced picture.

Research thus framed typically advances a feminist reflexive methodology that recognizes how researcher subjectivities and subject positions inform knowledge practices. Here, epistemological (theories of knowledge) and ontological (how we come to know) positions intersect to shape qualitative research design. Feminist researchers emphasize how dominant “malestream” methodologies reproduce existing power relations, and, in Foucauldian terms flows of power. Feminist LGBTQ qualitative research thus has an embedded political goal in that it seeks new ways of knowing that can empower those being studied. There is no object of study, only subjects. Knowledge generated is not “the truth” but a particular slice of life that is captured at a specific moment in time through researcher–participant interaction. This interaction is situated in socio-cultural historical contexts and the biographies of both parties, resulting in co-constituted qualitative research that is informed by those being researched and those who generate these data and advance analysis of findings.

Qualitative research practice is therefore premised on reciprocity and often mutuality. Completing qualitative LGBTQ research is not ordinarily a dispassionate endeavor; it impacts upon the researcher. For the qualitative researcher, being “out in the field” combines personal and professional identities that bring together work and home lives: who we are and what we do.

Inside–out Methodologies

Qualitative queer research is designed to facilitate dialogue and interaction *with* LGBTQ individuals and communities. It comes from within: it is *our* lives that are being researched rather than *theirs*. This does not presuppose that a queer researcher will necessarily undertake queer research. Critical reflexivity can, however, be found at the methodological heart of most LGBTQ research. This practice calls into question the place of conventional research techniques, querying whether they can adequately examine the multiplicity, messiness and fluidity of LGBTQ subjectivities and social lives. Surveys and quantitative research design ordinarily require particular variables to be fixed, often including categorical distinctions such as male/female, heterosexual/homosexual/bisexual sexual identity. Qualitative LGBTQ research often contests such sampling categories and is thus more readily able to incorporate nuanced non-normative understandings of gender and sexuality.

The focus and design of LGBTQ research is, therefore, critical. It often places ideas of sexual/gender identities at its core, aiming to acknowledge and applaud the fluidity of identity categories. Sexual subjects and subjectivity are characterized as contingent, multiple, and constituted within historically, geographically, and socio-cultural sets of relations. LGBTQ qualitative research thus works to simultaneously destabilize knowledge through its process of meaning-making alongside advances in understanding. Structure and power relations are centrally positioned in the research dynamic resulting in queer methods and methodologies, which often applaud the messiness of findings. Queer theorizing, then, is troubled more than proven and disproven. Nuances and inflections caution truth-claims. Queer theory, data, and method intersect; to separate them is antithetical to their design and purpose.

There is arguably no such thing as queer qualitative research per se or qualitative methods that might be identified as queer. The ethos and practices that typify queer studies may, however, be said to characterize qualitative LGBTQ research. For example, the insider (emic)/ outsider (etic) status is often crucial in qualitative LGBTQ research, with researchers grappling with their situated position, inside and outside the field of study. The research dynamic materializes “inside/out” queer theorizing which has highlighted, among other points, the performativity of identities, or how ideas and displays of self are made, remade and unmade, through an iterative process that rejects any original or “natural” identity.

This is not to romanticize familiar research or overstate its capabilities. The insider/outside status has productively unsettled qualitative LGBTQ research, but the researcher does typically retain a privileged position, reinforced through their professional status in powerful, western academic institutions. The researcher can wrestle with the profound tensions that such differences may invoke and any communicative dissonance that may follow, but this does not entirely close the gap. Differences remain. The multiplicity of identities and subject positions simultaneously match and separate researcher and participant. Insightful qualitative research has come from an acknowledgement of how such differences shape the narratives told. Research on queer families, for example, has shown how being a lesbian mother involves multiple subject positions that extend beyond both sexuality and the maternal. Experience is shaped through reproductive narratives, social location and era, to name but a few factors. The salient point here is the extent to which the researcher acknowledges, learns from, and capitalizes upon their insider/outside status. As an insider they have privileged knowledge. From the position of outsider, the qualitative researcher can draw on their “otherness” to sensitize them to configurations of experience that may be more difficult for established insiders to see. Otherness is thus a *strategic position*. Looking in, in ethnographic terms, otherness renders the familiar strange. Looking out, the LGBTQ qualitative researcher can use their research position to challenge heteronormative assumptions that construct traditional categories of being.

Qualitative Methods

This strategic purpose, to unpick what is taken for granted, is rooted in the critical philosophies, such as phenomenology and social constructionism, which typically underpin qualitative research. Phenomenological research is guided by a belief that we can understand social structures and ways of being through the study of

lived experience. Social constructionist perspectives contests any fixity of being, posing that how we live and understand our lives is culturally constituted and historically located. These critical perspectives facilitate more complex understandings of sexuality, which can represent the marginal and diverse perspectives of those being researched. The epistemological and methodological creativity that drives qualitative research in the field is further extended through the rich palette of qualitative methods that have been used to study LGBTQ lives. Sophisticated research designs aim to interrogate the complexity of sexuality and sexual identities. Multi-layered dynamic methods resist both uniformity and conformity. Interviews operate alongside visual methods. Diary and memory work bring together past and present experience. Web-based methods mirror and work with online sexual communities.

The richness and dynamism of these methods require similar analytical creativity. Case studies are combined with cross-cutting thematic analysis of interviews. Oral histories and archival sources are read against the heteronormative grain. First-person reflexive accounts have been used to add another dimension to understandings alongside multi-method data from community workshops. Queer-affirmative perspectives challenge the pathologizing of sexual minority experience as meanings are mined between the lines. This multi-method combination of approaches does not readily lend itself to neat interpretations that standardize complex stories and tie up loose methodological ends. In this sense qualitative LGBTQ research typically – and intentionally – offers only partial answers. For example, accounts of identity “tell stories” which add to and shape the community pool of narratives rather than claim to represent and/or speak from a community standpoint. The creative interplay of different qualitative methods generate a dynamic account. Working across different datasets, these slivers of knowledge combine to shed light on the multidimensionality of LGBTQ lifestyles, identities and sexual subjectivities. This section offers a flavor of some of the qualitative methods used in researching LGBTQ lives, focusing on empirical techniques based in the Social Sciences.

Creative “hands on” methods have emerged from recent trends in sociology and psychology where discourse and uniform understandings have given way to diverse and contested accounts of experience, materiality, emotion and embodiment. While interviews (semi-structured and open) are the most common in qualitative LGBTQ research, other methods are now routinely used to augment and sometimes supersede these oral narratives. “Draw and talk” qualitative techniques have a longstanding history in research with families and

children, facilitating intergenerational research on sensitive topics such as sex and sexuality which may be otherwise hard to verbalize. Visual methods such as photo prompt interviews (also known as photo elicitation) have proven invaluable because they can enable the participant to represent their social and private worlds including their identity construction and relationship networks. In LGBTQ psychotherapy nonverbal methods are routinely deployed and participatory action methods have always been used in couple and family therapy. The most common visual method used in this context is the genogram or family map, tools that are designed to probe family processes and practices to facilitate clinical intervention. Other visual and action methods used in family therapy include enactments, sculpting, semantic polarities, and positioning. These methods rely on spatial metaphors and embodied techniques to engage the client/participant and facilitate personal insight.

Visual methods in LGBTQ research draw on these traditions and techniques to further academic understandings. Photo elicitation and other visual methods such as collage creation, modeling, and sculpting techniques have been used to examine identity practices, experience, and personal interactions. The combination of multiple qualitative methods has proven particularly valuable in studying complex phenomena such as LGBTQ lives. Multi-sensory, multiple methods research design generates richly textured data that can focus on different dimensions of experience and identity. For example, daily diaries can generate temporal data that shed light on routines and the sequencing of events alongside pictorial data that locate experience in their spatial contexts. Qualitative researchers working with multiple methods are not necessarily concerned with whether a study can be replicated. As such they may devise new tools in response to particular research questions and contexts. For example, researchers have devised bespoke visual tools such as the emotion map to study intimacy and sexuality in families. The visual data generated locate interpersonal experience in context, and thus facilitate examination of how sexuality and intimacy are materialized. This research method is now being extended for use in clinical practice. Indeed, an array of imaginative “hands-on” methods is often used to research non-heterosexualities and gender including body maps, sculpting, modeling and collage work. These techniques have proven to be highly successful in provoking discussion on highly sensitive “private” experience.

Visual methods such as those described above take time to produce. Reflexivity is thus built into the method itself as participants design, produce, and talk about the experiences and identities depicted. Events and roles that may be difficult to articulate can be visualized without recourse to narrativization, a linear process that

can sometimes serve to package experience through dominant cultural discourses, such as the inclusion of a beginning, middle, and end. Exponents of visual methods in LGBTQ research claim that such techniques move beyond the standard scripts of sexuality and sexual identities. The lives thus presented can advance both academic knowledge and foster empathy and understanding between those included – or excluded – within LGBTQ communities.

Typically advancing a phenomenological method of analysis, qualitative multiple methods research situates experience in context. This focus on the everyday facilitates understanding of how structures and processes of power operate and impact on the psycho-social dynamic of individual lived lives. Qualitative LGBTQ research thus often focuses on how sexuality is materialized. *Where* and *how* stories are told is crucial here. As sexual geographers have shown, familiar surroundings trigger memories. Material artifacts, such as photographs, keepsakes and everyday objects, can feature centrally in the research narrative if they are close at hand. Memorabilia can also serve to facilitate recall of events and emotions that may have otherwise faded over the passage of time. Stories in these contexts are often steeped in emotion. The telling and experience are proximal. Time may have passed, but the “story-teller” remains immersed in the scenario through physical referents that surround them. Embodied narratives are thus located, in context, through emotional and tactile points of reference. A key fascination within LGBTQ research is the study of personal relationships in all their diverse forms. Relationships are interesting because they reflect, in their myriad shape and form, the situated intersections of different personal–biographical, political, and socio-cultural contexts. LGBTQ relationships are thus often researched through everyday practices of relating. This attention to so-called mundanities in life is, in part, a materialist feminist response to high profile social queer theorizing that heralded “the spectacular” which typically focused on fateful moments and remarkable examples. Everyday practices have highlighted the *extraordinary* minutiae of LGBTQ lives; that is, how sexual identities are done and undone in the course of daily life. These are the shifting negotiations that are required as intersecting identities play out in bars, on the street, at home and in the school yard. The research encompassed under this rubric is too rich and diverse to list.

In contemporary studies of intimacy, sexuality and personal relationships, especially in the UK, qualitative LGBTQ research has moved away from structure and social units of analysis onto the ways in which relationships become materialized and experienced through everyday practices. This “practices approach”

focuses attention onto individual and relational behavior, and the habituated routines that serve to reproduce pre-existing ways of being and the diversity of relational experience. This practices approach shifts the research agenda away from dominant narratives that reify relationships into categorical types; it draws attention to the qualitative dimensions of interpersonal intimacies to recognize interpersonal relationships as reflexive sites that are shaped by, and in turn shape, public institutions.

Conclusion

The focus on practices' in LGBTQ research is not simply methodological preference or a byproduct of technique. As this section has shown, it is also an intentional and *political* decision to keep the constitutive and iterative process of *doing* relationships at the forefront of the analytical lens while being attentive to the interdependent and dynamic elements that extend beyond specific moments of enactment. Qualitative research design is shaped around the recognition that experience is embodied, located, and configured over time. This focus on practices in LGBTQ qualitative research thus serves to unpick personal and social dimensions of intimate life and the ways that sexualities are lived and change, over time.

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SEE ALSO: Focus Groups; Intersectionality in Research on LGBTQ People; Methodological Decisions; Quantitative Research; Queer Ethnographies/Autoethnographies

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