University of Huddersfield Repository

Monro, Surya

Categories and their Discontents: The trials and tribulations of using the terms ‘LGBT’ and ‘MSM/WSW’

Original Citation

Monro, Surya (2013) Categories and their Discontents: The trials and tribulations of using the terms ‘LGBT’ and ‘MSM/WSW’. In: Categories and their Discontents: The trials and tribulations of using the terms ‘LGBT’ and ‘MSM/WSW’ HSRC Seminar Series, 20th February 2013, Pretoria, South Africa. (Unpublished)

This version is available at http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/id/eprint/16836/

The University Repository is a digital collection of the research output of the University, available on Open Access. Copyright and Moral Rights for the items on this site are retained by the individual author and/or other copyright owners. Users may access full items free of charge; copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided:

- The authors, title and full bibliographic details is credited in any copy;
- A hyperlink and/or URL is included for the original metadata page; and
- The content is not changed in any way.

For more information, including our policy and submission procedure, please contact the Repository Team at: E.mailbox@hud.ac.uk.

http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/

University of HUDDERSFIELD

Categories and their discontents: The trials and tribulations of using the terms ‘LGBT’ and ‘MSM/WSW’

Dr Surya Monro

Why ‘trouble’ categories?

University of HUDDERSFIELD

- Aims/objectives: To think critically about LGBT/MSM and WSW and related terms
- Structure:
  - Context
  - Current uses and abuses
  - Intersectionality theory and strategic essentialism
  - Concluding thoughts

Methods

University of HUDDERSFIELD

- Key projects:
  - Transgender in the UK in the 1990s (26 in depth interviews with a range of contributors)
  - Organisational Change and Resistance: LGBT Equalities in Local Government project (with Professor Diane Richardson as PI, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council) (4 strands, England, Wales and Northern Ireland, 2007-2010)
  - Bisexual Identities (25 in depth interviews)
  - Also conducted some fieldwork with gender/sexually diverse people in India (funded by the Leverhulme Foundation, 2003)

LGB and T in cross-cultural context

University of HUDDERSFIELD

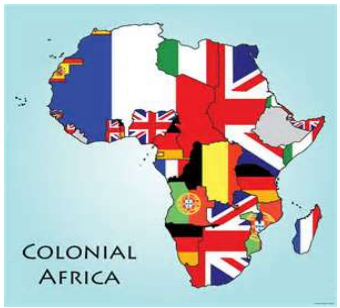
- There is a wide range of sexual and gender diversity in evidence historically in a range of countries, but this is stratified by the particularities of socio-economic structures

- *From a Western viewpoint, sexuality constitutes an essential or core attribute of identity; individuals are said to have fixed sexual identities or orientations. Sexuality as it is understood in the United States and Europe, however, often bears little resemblance to sexual relationships and practices across cultures* (Evelyn Blackwood 2000: 223)

The origins of ‘LGB’ categories

University of HUDDERSFIELD

- *Capitalism demands specialization and categorisation for most efficient operation and is inextricably intertwined with patterns of social organisation beyond the realm of the strictly economic* (Donald Hall 1996: 101)
- Importance of imperialism, classed/raced/gendered hierarchies in the formation of the categories of homosexual, bisexual and heterosexual – the Victorian sexologists contributed to the project of classification



Other key terms

University of HUDDERSFIELD

- The term ‘Transgender’ was a reclamation/reformulation of an identity (transsexual) that also emerged from sexology
- Terms such as ‘gay’ and ‘dyke’ are reparative
- ‘Queer’ destabilises the project of categorisation but the term has been criticised for stemming from white male-dominated Western cultural theory – and has different connotations depending on context
- Various locality-specific terms such as ‘Hijra’ and ‘Kothi’ in India

‘Gay’ and ‘lesbian’

University of HUDDERSFIELD

- Both ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ assert a positive same-sex sexuality forming a basis of identity politics, cultures, and commodification
- Advantages include:
  - Transnational networks and alliances and international human rights agendas
  - Simple and coherent enough for policy makers, politicians, and practitioners facing multiple social challenges
  - In some countries (such as UK) now tied into a normative citizenship agenda
  - Strong commercial sector makes more palatable to politicians in some countries

‘Gay’ and ‘lesbian’ – disadvantages

University of HUDDERSFIELD

- The erasure or ‘shaping’ of indigenous genders/sexualities
- The association – by homophobic nationalists – with Western agendas
- Homonationalism
- The assimilation and erasure of sexual and gender fluidity and complexity
- A failure to address same-sex sexualities where individuals do not identify as lesbian or gay
- Normative trend tends to erase non monogamous relationship forms in some countries such as the UK

‘Heterosexual’

University of HUDDERSFIELD

- Advantage of naming ‘heterosexuality’ is that this destabilises the assumption that everyone is heterosexual/straight

There are profound difficulties with its assimilationist nature, rampant associated commercialism, and relationship with market-driven hierarchies – perhaps much of the work activists and policy makers need to do is to destabilise heterosexist assumptions, leaving space for more fluidity and diversity

‘Bisexual’

University of HUDDERSFIELD

- A ‘category in process’ (low visibility, weak movement)
- Evidence of prejudice against bisexuals in the UK and a social erasure of bisexualilty
- *…how can you be bi, and fancy both?...its seen as indecisive and kind of having your cake and eating it* (Local authority officer, Wales)
- *...for many people you don’t exist. Its the complete invisibility and erasure of bisexuality* [pause] *you need to be stronger, to say all the time “I am bisexual, I identify as bisexual” when other people tell you “you don’t exist” or, if they recognise that you exist, then you are “greedy”, you “can’t decide”, you are “not able to decide”, you don’t have the, you “lack the mental skills” to decide...but now I really feel that I have to say all the time, that I am bisexual…(*Merina)

‘Bisexual’ cont.

University of HUDDERSFIELD

- Advantages of the term ‘bisexual’:
  - Allows for recognition, organising and alliance-building

- Disadvantages:
  - Arguably includes many people (who have had some same and opposite-sex experiences or desires) so becomes meaningless?
  - Rejected by people who do not want to use categories
  - Problematic association with Western agendas
  - Term ‘bisexual’ implies that there are only two genders although some bisexual trans people find the term useful e.g:

    I also feel my own sexuality is nuanced; I have emotional attraction generally to women, and sexual attraction to men. And when I put people in those categories I’m talking about their identity rather than their physical body type (Dave, FTM man)

‘Transgender’

University of HUDDERSFIELD

- This more recently developed term has now been complemented in the UK with other increasingly socially viable terms such as ‘non-gender’, ‘genderqueer’, and ‘androgyne’
- ‘Transgender’ is a useful term because it is broad (according to e.g. Leslie Feinberg 1996) but loses meaning if becomes inclusive of all gender variance (e.g. boys who like to play with dolls)
- Transgender and gender variance ‘trouble’ the gender binaried basis of LGB and Heterosexual (H) identities (Monro 2005) – one reason why there has been considerable stigmatisation of gender variant people in the UK LG scene (the bisexual community is more inclusive)
- As with LGB there are difficulties in applying the term in non Western contexts although variants of it are widely used internationally

MSM, WSW

University of HUDDERSFIELD

- The term ‘MSM’ has been taken up in international development since 2000 as *‘the preferred descriptor for myriad expressions of same-sex desire by men’* (Andil Gosine 2006: 1); the terms ‘WSW’, and ‘MSMW’ and ‘WSMW’ have now also become widespread
- ‘MSM’ and ‘WSW’ may challenge hegemony of terms ‘LGB’ and ‘H’ but are problematic – based on gender binaries and:
- *…collapsed cultural differences between non-western (and non-white) people and marked them as “Others”. Kothis in Bangladesh, Ibbi in Senegal, Yan dauda in Nigeria, African-American men “on the down low” in the USA, and hijra in India are collectively tagged “MSM” despite speaking different languages, holding different religious beliefs, occupying different social positions in various environmental spaces, and being engaged in different kinds of sexual practices and emotional relationships* (Gosine 2006: 3)

Advantages of ‘practical’ categorisation

University of HUDDERSFIELD

- Despite some difficulties, the terms ‘MSM’, and ‘WSW’ do have advantages – they are far more inclusive and delink sex acts from identities (to a degree), and they are not tied to normative politics and commercial structures in the same way as LGH
- Other policy-oriented interventions can also be useful for example anti-hate crime campaigns that tackle homophobic hate crime regardless of the sexual identity of the victim

- This leads us to look at *strategic essentialism……*

Intersectionality theory and strategic essentialism

University of HUDDERSFIELD

- Intersectionality theory introduced by Kimberle Crenshaw (1991) to examine the intersections between different social forces (race, gender, class)
- Developed further by Leslie McCall (2005)
  - Anticategorical (critiques/deconstructs homogenous forms of categorisation)
  - Intercategorical (explicates relations between different social groups/forces e.g. ethnicity and sexuality)
  - Intracategorical (engages with complexity including within-group)

For all of these approaches, identity is understood as constructed but important and strategic use of identity politics is stressed

Some concluding thoughts

University of HUDDERSFIELD

- The answer is neither to reject nor wholeheartedly embrace ‘LGBT’ and ‘MSM/WSW’ – we can use these terms critically and strategically
- Similar arguments for terms such as ‘Sexual and Gender Minorities’
- LGBT and MSM/WSW categories are heavily context-bound and easily manipulated by those with other agendas
- Conflict between L,G,B and T and internal hierarchies within e.g. T are not strategic; they fail those with an interest in equality and human rights

Further information

University of HUDDERSFIELD

- http://www.hud.ac.uk/ourstaff/profile/index.php?staffuid=shumscm
- http://research.ncl.ac.uk

- References to literature cited available on request