Bridging Some Intercultural Gaps: Methodological Reflections from Afar

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Identity formation and self construction are inherently cultural phenomena. Although it may seem that human psychology–e.g., basic traits, tendencies, "characteristics," or even the definition of self–are universal and ahistorical, this essentialist view is quite erroneous and needs to be recognized and avoided. Generalizations grounded in good, vigorous scientific research about these issues should be hedged and clearly positioned within a time/space matrix. Inferences projected from one site onto other cultural sites may result in falsely imposing one set of values, norms, and overall social criteria on another, perhaps leading into a biased colonialism. This also applies to issues concerning the formation of a homosexual identity.

It may be redundant to recall that the concept of homosexuality is merely 135 years old (Foucault, 1978). Indeed, the Homosexual Species is but a modern being and a very much "Western" one. Yet, the past century with its incessant desire for a hygienic society (Sedgwick, 1993) made it a prime object for research, while concealing its cultural-specific predisposition. This endeavor, alongside the vast

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globalization trends sustained via the media, has resulted in the Western-European and North-American queer/gay/lesbian prototype becoming an all-inclusive, universal entity. The latter's biography–hardships, desires, inclinations–is now inescapably ours whether we are Manhattanite hip teens or Jerusalemite Orthodox Jews; whether we grow up in Long Island or in Kibbutz Ein Gedi by the Dead Sea.

Researchers as well as non-academics are consumed by this overwhelming yet unutterable and covert requirement: The very success of cultural apparatuses is emphatically their seemingly "natural" and neutral basis. Does any gay man, lesbian woman (and, perhaps above all, the relatively new hybrid, namely the bisexual person) ever stop to wonder whether their very "authentic" identity is but a cultural construct with its obligatory ingrained trajectory?

I am really at a loss here. As a researcher and veteran political activist who has been psychologically, professionally, and ideologically socialized deeply within the foregoing framework, I realize the answer is elusive at best. However, I wish to call attention to the need to bear in mind that the wealth of studies carried out in the United States' arena may not very well transcend its borders. We cannot assume with any degree of certainty that such vital and crucial findings and implications can be transplanted to other societies, even enclaves of ethnic or religious minorities within the U.S. For instance, in societies where heterosexual marriage is totally unquestioned, a committed relationship between men or between women may constitute nothing but sex. "Coming out" may be another facet of this problematic: Can we suppose that this epitome of self-actualization (Cass, 1979; Davies, 1992; Eichberg, 1991; Morris, 1997) is universally feasible or valued?

Nevertheless, by and large, youth throughout the industrialized world face similar or even identical problems and issues. The life experiences of these youth–including psychological and social aspects such as identity formation, coming out, dealing with both internalized and external homophobia–are most likely not unique to any specific locale at the time being. On the contrary, it may be argued that these very terms and conceptions are imported into indigenous "cultural psyches" from the U.S. Ideas of "identity," "community," and "coming out" have infiltrated many cultures in the past several decades. It is plausible that unless we lived in a globalized, post-modern, media-saturated world, they would have never materialized. At any rate, discussions of any empirical findings should bring these ontological, and to be sure epistemological and methodological concerns, into the forefront.

Another related aspect is the age range of "youth." Whereas North American scholars (many of those cited by D'Augelli and Grossman) regard age 21 or even 24 as its upper cut-off, Israeli adulthood, for example, begins at 18 when both girls and boys are recruited into mandatory military service. Again, even childhood and adolescence are not only modern cultural constructs, but they are differentially categorized in various societies. In this respect, an American 19-year-old youth who attends college shares little in common, psychologically and socially speaking, with an Israeli combat soldier of the same age (Kaplan, 2002).

The advantages of new media should also be regarded in the present context. The Internet plays a growing role in contemporary society and is embraced enthusiastically, particularly by queer youth (Gross & Woods, 1999; Silberman, 1999). To be sure, computer-mediated-communication and the vast riches of information inherent in the Internet now form significant aspects of daily lives of many adults. Yet, for young queers who are struggling with an alienating world and especially those who have not yet been socialized into the "Gay World" these new media are invaluable resources and means for individual growth, cultivation, and socialization.

Using the Internet for conducting surveys is a good instrument for overcoming obstacles of sampling. Many of those who have been researched in most of the known studies constitute a tiny tip of an uncharted and inaccessible iceberg. The anonymity afforded by the Internet as well as the fact that many youth access it on a regular basis can be of tremendous methodological advantage, in particular enlarging the representativeness of the sample. Moreover, it can serve as a means to overcome national boundaries and afford researchers accessibility to youth outside of their country, thus enabling a certainly more diverse sample. Local co-researchers can assist by translating the survey questions into the local language.

One final observation, based on my empirical experience, has nothing to do with intercultural differences, namely the positioning of researchers' identities *vis-à-vis* their informants. I would like to propose the need of researchers to be queer themselves since any compilation of knowledge about muted minorities–that is, social groups whose voices are silenced by the dominant culture–is being complicated by the inherent necessity to dissolve their discursive and performative shields. One way, suggested herein, to enable members of a muted group to utter their "authentic" voices, is to situate both researcher and researched within one experiential framework (Kama, 2000). This empirical positioning constitutes an optimal way to enter into queer youth research sites. Recounting the agonizing story of one's epiphany (i.e., labeling oneself as homosexual [Plummer, 1995]), for instance, is but one example. Discussing hardships experienced in school is another illustration.

In order to improve respondents' sincerity and openness (i.e., to strive towards maximal reportability and self-disclosure), both parties should belong to the same group. The researchers' emphatic capacities are bolstered because they underwent similar experiences and employed similar strategies for dealing with the "outside" world. Several scholars have already claimed that in the queer context there is a distinct split between "insider" and "outsider" researchers with a preference for the former (Lewin & Leap, 1996; Woods, 1994). This is grounded in the distinctive management and representation of self by gay and lesbian individuals, who build a tight partition in order to protect themselves lest potentially threatening information leakages may unwittingly "out" them. The typical researcher's dilemma of how to enter a research field and present him/herself to the informants becomes even more complex in the queer context. Non-queer researchers, because they may be perceived as representatives of heteronormative hegemony, may be discredited. Respondents will not be inclined to take their protective masks off.

This does not always mean that sensitive non-queer researchers are nonexistent or that all queer ones inevitably perform their tasks being sufficiently reflexive. Indeed, common sexual orientation does not necessarily solve difficult issues of status differences (Kennedy & Davis, 1996). Race, ethnicity, nationality, and educational level differences are also relevant here. Foucault (1978) maintains that people may be the target and vehicle of repressive discourses. Relative statuses are forever fluid: Inequities in power relations inadvertently permeate many situations and need to be negotiated–or, at least, recognized–in order to strive for a maximal sense of oneness between the two parties. Nevertheless, the propensity of researcher and informant to promptly develop reciprocal understanding and rapport is of tremendous methodological value.

Another inbuilt advantage where researchers are queer is their capacity to extract meanings that are part of the "hidden transcripts" (Scott, 1990) of the oppressed group. Hidden transcripts are those utterances that are not ordinarily "permitted" on the public stage. In the present context, these are concerned with unfolding experiences that may not be welcome by heterosexual interlocutors. Talking lavishly about a good-looking guy is but a trivial example of a hidden transcript.

Furthermore, silence is a common practice among queer individuals because they are apprehensive about revealing their sexual orientation. Indeed, in their daily transactions with the social environment queer persons are troubled by anxiety of disclosure and perform attempts at constructing communication systems that conceal more than reveal (Kama, 2005).

One more benefit of queers studying queers is rooted in the potential for a free flow of information thanks to being posited within one speech community. As a result of a long history of deprivation, a sociolect–that is, a dialect delineated by social criteria (Trudgill, 1974)–was formed. The gay sociolect is transmitted through interpersonal channels and is used as a coded language, enabling queers to communicate among themselves while outsiders are unable to decode it and thereby denounce or condemn them (Chesebro, 1981). The gay sociolect allows communication even when potentially threatening non-gays are present, all the while maintaining a discursive camouflage. For instance, even seemingly mundane concepts such as "top/bottom" and "family," or nicknames denoting cruising locations ("The Garden" has been used in Hebrew to refer to the Independence Park in Tel Aviv [Kama, 2003]) may be undecipherable to unsuspecting non-queers. In this context, it should be added that a non-queer researcher may unconsciously resort to obsolete phrases such as "homosexualist."

The task of studying one's "backyard" may erroneously be perceived as a methodological flaw. This may be even "worse" in the case of a queer researcher because one's sexual orientation is still widely accepted to be part of "behind-closed-doors" information. According to norms prevalent in the academic community, one's sexual identity should not intrude onto one's professional life (Wafer, 1996). When scholars are heterosexual, their sexual orientation is unquestioningly transparent and needs not be mentioned at all. Being a heterosexual is so self-understood that it is never spelled out. We, as gay and lesbian researchers, are required to neutralize our "otherness." But, in light of the aforementioned arguments, it is necessary not only to "come out" in the field and in our reports, but to acknowledge the benefits of queer researchers studying our younger peers.

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