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Jowett, A. and Peel, E.

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# Psychology of Sexualities: Past, present and future directions

Adam Jowett in conversation with Elizabeth Peel (The Section Chair)

*Professor Elizabeth Peel, the new Chair of the Psychology of Sexualities Section, has been involved in the Section since its inception. She was the Editor of the Section's previous publication, the Lesbian & Gay Psychology Review, and has gone on to publish prolifically in the field. Liz has published three books in the psychology of sexualities field including 'Out in Psychology' (Clarke & Peel, 2007) which won a distinguished book award in 2012 from the American Psychological Association's Division 44 and the first undergraduate textbook in lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer (LGBTQ) psychology (Clarke et al. 2010) which won a British Psychological Society book prize in 2013. She has also won several prizes from the Section including the 2012 research prize. She is currently working on a co-edited book about Ageing and Sexualities with Sue Westwood and Rosie Harding (Peel et al., 2016). In March 2015, I interviewed Liz about her new role as Chair of the Section and her views on the current state of the field. What follows is an edited version of our conversation – Adam Jowett*

**AJ: Can you tell me how you first became involved in the Section?**

**EP:** Well I got involved in the Section in 1998 when the Section first came into being as it was then the Lesbian and Gay Psychology Section and it had come to fruition after about 10 years of campaigning headed by people like Celia Kitzinger, Sue Wilkinson, Adrian Coyle and Martin Milton. At that time I was a postgraduate student and I have been a member ever since.

**AJ: The political landscape for LGBTQ people has changed quite a lot since then. Have you noticed any change in the field of the Psychology of Sexualities over that time?**

**EP:** Yes there has been massive social and legal change. At the point when the Section was established there was no protection in the workplace for LGBT people so theoretically you could be sacked if you came out at work. There was also no recognition of same-sex relationships at that time. It certainly felt like sexuality related research and practice was very marginal then. I remember people like Celia [Kitzinger] and Sue [Wilkinson] receiving hate mail from other psychologists when trying to set up the Section. Although psychological research on sexualities had existed for a long time it felt much more edgy and it was not very well integrated. In some circles the Lesbian and Gay Psychology Section, as it was then, was positioned as a 'support group' for psychologists who identified as lesbian and gay (see Peel, 2001). I think now there is more recognition that research and practice about non-normative sexual and gender identity is as legitimate as any other psychological field. I think part of that is to do with the legislative framework shifting in that intervening period but also the work of psychologists within the British Psychological Society and within this Section over that time period. So the status of that body of psychological knowledge was far more precarious then than it is now. There are still areas of precariousness but, generally, it is seen much more as a legitimate field of psychology. It's much more firmly embedded in the discipline. I think the fact that the first undergraduate focused textbook in the field of LGBTQ psychology was recognised by the BPS with a book prize is pretty amazing. That was something I was very pleased to have been a part of because it really does signal the legitimacy of this field which I think is really important – especially for new students and researchers coming into the field.

**AJ: When you say there are still some areas that are still quite precarious, what do you have in mind?**

**EP:** I think research addressing transphobia and trans issues are an area where the research base is not perhaps as well developed as I'd like it to be, and certainly research conducted by organisations such as Stonewall and others highlight how difficult it can be for people who aren't cisgendered in terms of experiences of prejudice, mental health outcomes and those kinds of things. So that's an area where more work needs to be done. And similarly in terms of mental health outcomes for people who identify as bisexual or identify in ways other than lesbian or gay. There have been huge gains in some areas but often they do cohere around gay male and lesbian identities, and also for people who live in ways that resonate with more heteronormative ways of doing things. There's lots more to be done in terms of the evidence

base from a psychological perspective. One of the things I'd like to see continue is an emphasis on how the different ways that heteronormativity and other kinds of normativity work in a way that can enable or marginalise people who are not mainstream in terms of their gender identity and their sexual identity. The legislative framework has changed but that doesn't necessarily change 'hearts and minds' so there's very much a need for that work to continue.

**AJ: You mentioned that the field felt more edgy when the Section first began. Are there any disadvantages to the field being less edgy?**

**EP:** For me there is a need to continue to locate the critical edge of the field if the field itself is less on the margins. Being a Section of a learned society functions to say that this is a legitimate body of knowledge but there needs to be a continual reinvention to find criticality. So it could be, for instance, critique of assumptions embedded in existing psychological literature (e.g., Ansara & Hegarty, 2012) or radical experimental work, as well as using methods and theories more typically aligned with critical psychology. It could include diversifying or pushing the boundaries on topic areas. Inter-disciplinarity gives a lens of criticality inherently because it's about drawing on knowledge and theoretical perspectives that conventionally sit outside of the discipline. There's not one way of maintaining a critical edge. Another way is working with community organisations and services to gain a sense of what's happening at the grass-roots and look at how our work can help inform, add to, shape or challenge their agendas. I think it is an interesting time for the field in the UK because some of the key drivers around legislative exclusion have gone. It is such a different world in much of Britain now. Young people are growing up knowing, in theory, that they could have a legally recognised relationship with someone of the same gender and that there is no structural impediment to them having children. So there's certainly much British work to be done on contemporary sexual identities and what they mean in different age cohorts and across intersecting identities and contexts.

**AJ: So there's still plenty of work to do?**

**EP:** Of course. Early year's education can be contentious. The Challenging Homophobia in Primary Schools (CHIPS) initiative recently seems to have generated some backlash.

Homophobic bullying in schools is still very much a live issue with 'gay' still being used as a pejorative term, and gendered norms can be heavily inculcated and policed.. Whilst that's the kind of environment that young people are surrounded by, problems associated with heteronormativity and cisgenderism are going to be perpetuated. So there is a dis-connect in some respects between the changes in the legislation around LGBT rights and the reality on the ground. How heterosexism is manifest in everyday interaction is something I've a longstanding interest in and it continues to be an important concern and provides an antidote to the notion that the world is 'fine and dandy'. And then there are parts of the world where there aren't these protective legislative frameworks at all. Also, you still don't necessarily get a good representation of LGBTQ issues in postgraduate psychology provision, and the BPS undergraduate syllabus doesn't mandate undergraduate psychology courses to cover sexualities. If the BPS were to mandate undergraduate courses cover 'diversity and inclusion' – of which LGBTQ psychology formed a part - it would create more opportunities for the field to thrive and impact.

**AJ: So tell us a little more about some of the projects you have previously been involved in and are currently involved in**

**EP:** My early interests were in lesbian parenting – Sociology A level project - and homophobic hate crime – final year undergraduate project - and my PhD focused on how we can reduce heterosexism through education and that has led to lots of other sexualities research. A lot of my current work really focuses on health and intersections between health, gender and sexuality broadly speaking (Peel & Thomson, 2009). Recently I've been doing work looking at LGBT people with dementia for example (Peel & McDaid, 2015). My work around relationships and families is important and ongoing. The research I have done on pregnancy loss – which was very much a 'passion project' – has helped the recent Miscarriage Association's campaign with Petra Boynton called 'Partners Too' include female as well as just male partners (Peel, 2010). One of the many benefits of the psychology of sexualities field is that it intersects with many other areas, and LGBT issues can be incorporated into projects that don't necessarily foreground sexuality or gender diversity.

**AJ: You've recently been involved in work with LGBT organisations too haven't you?**

**EP:** That's right. I've been working with PACE Health in London over the last five years on a project researching 'risk and resilience' in LGBT mental health inequalities based on a systematic review by King et al. (2008) which highlighted disproportionate risks of body image disorders, suicidality and self-harm and alcohol misuse in LGBT communities. The research is led by PACE and I'm part of the academic panel and there's also a panel of lay members. The research is very community oriented, and of course, the channels are very well established for the findings (Nodin et al., 2015) to feed back into community work that organisations like PACE are engaged in. So that feels very rewarding. Some years ago the Section ran BPS funded workshops looking at how academics and community and voluntary sector organisations could engage in partnership working so impactful working with the LGBT voluntary and third sector has often been on the agenda of this Section (e.g., Hagger-Johnson et al., 2013).

**AJ: What would you say to those who think the field of Psychology of Sexualities is just for LGBTQ people?**

**EP:** Back in 2004, Adrian Coyle and I published a special issue of *Lesbian & Gay Psychology Review* (Peel & Coyle, 2004) which was about heterosexuals working in the field of lesbian and gay psychology and there is always more scope for the field being seen as for all psychologists to engage in and with. Researchers and practitioners within this field have a long history of innovative and transformative work which can be aligned to, and beyond, individual and group identity categories (e.g., Hegarty, 1999).

**AJ: And if you were to recommend a book in the Psychology of Sexualities for those starting out in field what would it be?**

**EP:** I am likely biased but I think everybody should read *The Social Construction of Lesbianism* (Kitzinger, 1987). I like a lot of the classic early papers like June Hopkins' (1969) *The Lesbian Personality* which was a really nice example of using mainstream psychological methods to innovate. I'd also recommend some of the classics in the field, some of which are North American books on LGBT psychology, because they do really useful work in terms of using mainstream psychological methods to tackle LGBTQ issues.

And they're good because they're in a language that is intelligible to undergraduate psychology students. So they resonate.

**AJ: What would you like the Section to achieve during your time as Chair?**

**EP:** Well I'd like to see much more collaborative working between our Section and other allied Sections of the BPS. There are lots of crossovers between the kinds of work that happens in this Section and other areas such as the Social Psychology Section, the Psychology of Women Section, the Division of Health Psychology, the Division of Clinical Psychology and so on and it would be very nice to see more links between them. I'd like to see the Section have a bigger international presence because there are quite a lot of allied associations now internationally and it would be good for us to work in concert with our partner organisations across the globe in order to pursue and raise the profile of LGBTQ and sexualities research and practice globally. One thing that strikes me at the moment is that we're living in a time when, in the West, many of the big human rights fights have happened and been won, but in other parts of the world there are still death penalties for homosexuality. So I think if we can work with and support organisations in a culturally sensitive way, I think that would be a very positive thing. And the other key thing I think is about interdisciplinary working and drawing the boundaries around this field of psychology in a way that is inclusive and permeable. So making better links with researchers that work for example in sociology or public health or other social sciences that enables us to think more imaginatively and more critically.

**AJ: So more reaching out to other Sections, beyond psychology and also globally?**

**EP:** Yes. And I think it's an incredibly exciting time. We've got a new committee of 10 people with different skill sets focusing on different areas of work and I think, in part, the secret to a vibrant Section is a vibrant committee who are working with a common purpose. I also want to engage better with our members. We're planning a membership survey to find out what our members want from the Section and how we can best serve their needs. The Section membership is incredibly important, and I would like the membership to grow and to shape the Section's focus 'beyond equality'.

## Correspondence

**Elizabeth Peel**, PhD, is Professor of Psychology and Social Change at the University of Worcester, UK. She is a critical psychologist with research interests in health, sexuality and gender. Her latest book *Ageing and Sexualities* (co-edited with Sue Westwood and Rosie Harding) is due out in 2016. Email: e.peel@worc.ac.uk

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