

## **Abstract**

Happiness is often seen as the product of a good life, and can be attached to normative institutions such as marriage. The pursuit of happiness has been critically scrutinised, including by queer theorists and particularly Sara Ahmed who proposes a concept of aliveness. This paper explores what it means to put liveability into conversation with critical engagements with happiness. Using transnational empirical material regarding what makes lives liveable for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Queer (LGBTQ) people in India and the UK, we argue that this dialogue not only expands upon the existing critiques of happiness, but also rethinks liveability as a form of struggle between 'living' and 'surviving'. Challenge and struggle can be central to feeling alive. This emerges most prominently when LGBTQ people feel part of a collective struggle, or when they feel others are supporting them in their individual struggle. Delinking a normative understanding of happiness from liveability brings us closer to everyday struggles as a way to chart out paths through hegemonic orders and normativities. A good life can have 'flowers and sunshine' but it is not necessarily, or always, happy.

## **Keywords**

**Happiness, Equality, India, UK, Transnational**

# More than Happiness: Aliveness and Struggle in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Queer Lives

## 1. Introduction



Figure 1 – Image from UK Workshop

Harriet (discussing Figure 1): *'If you imagine a kind of filigree type sphere with a very bright light inside, and cast shadows and these are the shapes of the shadows that it's casting, because of the casing around whatever it is that I truly am, not only is the light dappled in some way that comes out of me. That's my identity, but also what I see projected on the walls are these shadows that I think are outside of me, but they only exist because of the prism if you like, not really a prism but of the thing through which the light has to shine. And I think, "Oh. There are these things in the world. How interesting", but all they are is a result of me not being aware of who I truly am. They can be very interesting and very beautiful. Like mountains and trees and wolves, dogs,*

*clouds and people. They can also be menacing. I can weave a story with them... Lovely stories or sad and painful ones.*

Project Workshop 1, UK

We use Harriet's picture and words to begin this paper with lights and shadows that co-exist and interweave. Invited to show a 'liveable life' in whatever way she chose, Harriet produced an illustration (Figure 1) in which even apparently external phenomena which are 'menacing', 'sad', or 'painful' emerge from her own self. These co-exist with those which are 'interesting', 'very beautiful', and 'lovely', so that both the positive and negative phenomena are ultimately products of the 'filigree' of Harriet's liveable life. We take her illustration and her words as starting points to consider broader investigations of what is often seen as the outcome of Lesbian, Gay, Bi, Trans and Queer (LGBTQ)<sup>i</sup> gains - pictures of happy couples getting married, happy parties at Pride, and other forms of joyful emotions accompany the welcoming of new and more equal laws. Conversely losses - rights being denied, freedoms of sexual expression limited - are often demonstrated through anger, protest, sadness and apparent pain. Happiness can be seen as an unquestioned goal in creating a 'good life', and is increasingly leashed to particular neoliberal modes of governance and the drive for economic growth (Kahneman & Krueger 2006; Stutzer & Frey 2012). Since the early 1990s there have been arguments in favour of quantitatively measured happiness as a guide for policymaking (Frey 2008; Stutzer & Frey 2012; see also Diener et al 1999 and work on a World Happiness Report by Helliwell et al 2015). Maximising happiness is the intended goal of such policymaking, while simultaneously improving overall production. The science of happiness and its improvement is clearly of

interest to governments and private companies alike, with global corporations like Google spearheading the quantification and psychosocial generation of employee 'wellbeing' to improve productivity (see Stewart 2013). Indeed Richard Layard strongly contends that 'Now is the time for every government to collect data on a uniform basis on the happiness of its population' (Layard 2010: 534) and argues that all social science should begin incorporating such measures as a matter of routine.

Yet happiness has been heavily critiqued by queer theorists who also question the 'cruel optimism' of nostalgia for the 'good life' (Ahmed, 2010; Berlant, 2011). Building on Judith Butler's premise that a 'livable'<sup>ii</sup> life is more than survival (2009), in this paper we explore the place and limits of happiness in creating what can be seen as a 'life that is a life'. Putting queer critiques of happiness into conversation with empirical considerations of liveability, we critically and empirically interrogate happiness as a goal for social movements. Taking one place where equalities are seen to be 'won' (Weeks, 2007) - the UK - and another where legislation that criminalised non-normative sexualities was reinstated - India<sup>iii</sup> - we augment the sparse literature on liveability by exploring the complex relations with happiness that emerged through a research project: 'Making Liveable Lives: Rethinking Social Exclusion' (hereafter 'Liveable Lives'). Liveable Lives sought to conceptually explore liveability from transnational perspectives and did not set out to interrogate happiness per se. Yet the accounts of the project's participants raised complex discursive entanglements of liveability and happiness – particularly where liveability did not easily correspond to happiness, and indeed might correspond to degrees of unhappiness.

Recent literature on sexualities has explored the limits of legislative changes in some countries that are popularly imagined to be progressive (Browne et al., 2019; Duggan, 2003;

Puar, 2013; Spade, 2011). It is clear when considering gender and sexual liberations that not all have 'won' and only some can have the 'good life' promised by new legislative orders. In Butler's terms, legislative 'progress' is 'double-edged', whereby as LGBTQ people we need to both claim intelligibility and recognition, but also be critical of the new norms that arise from these changes (2004: 117). When putting this recognition into conversation with transnational research, recognition of the double-edged nature of supposed oppositional politics is also clear. Just as restrictive normativities can arise through 'progressive' politics, so too can LGBTQ social movements thrive in places where opposition to LGBTQ life is imagined to be universal and pervasive via the lens of legislation (see Browne and Bakshi, 2013). Taking this transnational approach refuses to see some places as uniformly 'backwards' and others as 'progressive' (see Kulpa and Mizielinska, 2012; Long, 2016). This transnational approach then enables a dialogue between India and the UK, which is both located in these contexts *and* offers broader insights. Crucially, we suggest that feelings and processes of *struggle* around living and surviving are in fact key elements of liveability.

We begin this paper by outlining recent key critiques of happiness, the good life and optimism advanced by Ahmed (2010), Berlant (2011), Davies (2015) and others. Rather than offer a deep reading of these texts, we use these as a springboard to understanding liveability beyond a happiness paradigm, through Ahmed's alternative to happiness, 'aliveness' - a term that leads to liveability. However we recognise that happiness can, though does not necessarily, exist alongside or as part of liveability, as evidenced by our work. We then discuss the design and methodology of the Liveable Lives project, including our non-comparative transnational approach. Then we move on to explore the place of contestation and challenge in creating liveable lives. In doing so, and drawing on Harriet's introduction above, we suggest that happiness/unhappiness are both 'shadows' and 'light'. Connecting

with feelings of reduced happiness or even unhappiness, challenges were framed as having import in ways that transcended the dichotomy of happiness/unhappiness in making liveable lives. Placing liveability and happiness into conversation through empirical work thus sheds light on the complexities of liveabilities when these are explored with participants. Mindful of the diverse critiques of happiness, exploring the question of liveability not only expands upon the existing critiques of happiness, but also directs us in rethinking liveability as a form of struggle and possible resistance in individual and collective lives. Delinking happiness from liveability brings us closer to everyday struggles, as a way to chart our paths through hegemonic orders and normativities.

## **2. Happiness and Liveability**

Happiness typically emerges as an unquestioned goal for a life, without need for justification (Ahmed 2010; Davies 2015; Ryff 1989; for example, see Greene & Britton 2015). Critiques of happiness have a millennia-long tradition within Western philosophy and psychology revolving around the critical analysis of happiness and what is supposed to lead to it (Ahmed 2010: 22-45). Writers on philosophy, politics, feminism and the social sciences have identified and questioned the apparently increasing attention paid to ideas of happiness and wellbeing (Lorde 1997). The task of exploring these texts is beyond the scope of this paper, and we seek instead to outline some of the key tenets of the debate. This enables a move from happiness to liveability, both theoretically and empirically.

Happiness is often conflated or permitted to overlap with other terms such as 'life satisfaction' and 'wellbeing'. Tools such as the Experience Sampling Method (Hektner et al 2007) have been used to attempt measures of individual if not general happiness. Within

psychology, attempts to measure happiness have been met with scepticism about universal measures (Argyle 2013) and note the high affective, temporal and geographic variability of measured happiness (Kahneman & Krueger 2006). Conversely, William Davies has linked happiness and associated injunctions to be happy to neoliberal modes of governance and the exertion of biopower by states and large corporations (Davies 2015). The production and maintenance of particular forms of 'happiness', Davis argues, are linked to the desire of states and private companies to develop stable and productive worker-citizens. He suggests that centuries of attempts to measure, quantify and create happiness have primarily centred around profit rather than radical benevolence or philanthropy, and that 'what all of these traditions share is a certain political co-option of psychological science, in which human activities and feelings are studied so as to better understand how they might be predicted and controlled' (ibid: 258).

While Davies concentrates more on the measurement and production of happiness, Sara Ahmed tackles the concept of happiness itself and it is her work that we most particularly draw upon. Following Ahmed, we take happiness as a fluid and multifarious concept with numerous articulations, the unexpected emergence of which in our work that we wish to explore. In 'The Promise of Happiness' (2010) Ahmed frames happiness as the promised reward of sticking to a particular social, cultural and political 'script'. 'If you have this or have that, or if you do this or do that, then happiness is what follows' (Ahmed, 2010, 29). The promise in turn secures this script in place. Ahmed's thesis is particularly compelling given work that details how happiness is associated with the conventional markers of 'success' such as a high income, long life and marriage (Davies 2015). Demonstrating the temporality and spatiality of such markers, same-sex marriage was earlier regarded as a means of securing economic and legal parity (Weeks 2001), but has increasingly come to

constitute a particularly normative force for LGBTQ people (Bernstein & Taylor 2013; Lyubomirsky & King 2005). Conversely, straying from the script invites unhappiness and melancholia. The one who strays from these normative scripts, or who points out the unhappiness of seeking to adhere to them not only affect themselves. LGBTQ subjects and others who do not or cannot perform according to normative scripts are seen to disrupt the happiness of others. When their happiness is interrupted and the normative power relations of the script challenged, those who are perceived to identify problems with the script are themselves framed as problems by others. As Ahmed puts it in her essay on 'feminist killjoys', 'That you have described what was said by another as a problem means you have created a problem. You become the problem you create' (Ahmed, 2010: 1). Those who wish to maintain a feeling of happiness or satisfaction with the world are met with the killjoy feminist, an unhappy queer, or a melancholic migrant (Ahmed, 2010).

By killing the joy of those who achieve (or seek) the promise of happiness, killjoys point to the instability of the entire system. Lauren Berlant (2011) sees happiness and optimism for the future as complicit in maintaining a dubious raced, gendered and sexualised status quo through the figure of a nostalgic 'good life' which is to be sought if happiness is to be achieved. Her critique is of a form of 'cruel optimism', in which cruelty exists as 'something you desire [which] is actually an obstacle to your flourishing' (Berlant 2011: 1). She goes on to note that 'These kinds of optimistic relation are not inherently cruel. They become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially' (ibid.). Not only, then, do LGBTQ people become 'the problem' when refusing to align to normative versions of 'happy' or 'good' lives, the pursuit of a happy future through status quo desires may indeed become cruel – that is, the pursuit may itself impede flourishing.



Reflecting on the work of Betty Friedan and others, Ahmed argues that ‘to leave happiness for life is to become alive to possibility... the concept of *aliveness* is held up as an alternative to the social value of happiness’ (Ahmed 2010: 78-79, emphasis added). Seeing ‘alive-ness’ as the alternative points to the possibilities of liveability as a concept.

Butler (2009) contends that not all lives are considered ‘a life’, before we can consider what it is to achieve a good life, one must first be recognised as having a life. Butler's notion of ‘livable [sic]’ life deals with figuring out ways to survive and persist, what she describes as “to become possible” (ibid, 31). The “good life” then is what is available and/or granted only to people whose lives are already possible, recognisable and necessarily exclusive of those whose lives do not count (ibid, 205). For a life to become liveable, Butler (2004: 39) asks us to consider ‘what humans require in order to maintain and reproduce the conditions of their own livability’.

What humans require can be understood in two senses: one that indicates the *bare minimum* condition of biological and physiological processes of breathing and living, and another that indicates the *optimal* conditions required by humans to maintain and reproduce life favorably. We are interested in the latter. However, taking seriously critiques of happiness, means that such liveability, alive-ness cannot be located in social values, and normative structures. As we will go on to contend, a liveable life may not translate as a happy life.

### **3. Design and Method**

The Liveable Lives project explored the concept of liveability using participatory mixed-methods research revolving around 3 core questions: 1) What makes your life liveable?; 2)

What makes your life not liveable?; 3) Is the idea of 'liveable lives' useful?. As stated previously participants were not asked specifically about happiness or 'the good life' – rather these discussions emerged later through analysis in unexpected ways. Participants were invited to respond to these three questions in a wide variety of ways, choosing whichever method/s of expression they felt most appropriate.

Our empirical work included project workshops and qualitative online surveys for participants in the UK, and project workshops, qualitative online surveys, and in-depth interviews for participants in India. The project workshops were half-day events operating on a drop-in basis where possible, advertised to local LGBTQ people. Participants were able to take part in a variety of activities (short interviews, recorded group discussions, collage-making, map-making, timeline-drawing, and free writing) facilitated by the researchers. The qualitative online surveys were a series of short free text questions via the project's website, *liveablelives.org*, answerable by any LGBTQ respondents in India or the UK who signed up to the website. The in-depth interviews were private one-on-one interviews undertaken in India only. Excerpts presented in this paper are drawn from the project workshops, the qualitative online surveys, and the in-depth interviews. Our methodology recognised the potential implications of asking whether a vulnerable person's life was not liveable. Each method incorporated guidance toward appropriate local sources of support, including email or phone discussions with a registered cognitive behavioural therapist attached to the project. See Box 1 (below) for additional details or see Browne et al (2017) for further discussion of the project's methodology.

Through the co-design of the research, our transnational website where LGBTQ people could converse with each other, and the subsequent analysis, we sought to work across

national boundaries without negating place specificities or comparing and contrasting each country. This ambitious aim was partially achieved. For example, co-designed methods were used separately in each national context, and all Bangla articulations were translated into English by multi-lingual Research Team members. Analysis began with a thematic coding of the entire qualitative work from each country by that country's respective Research Team members. Researchers from both countries collaborated online via extended web conferences to explore the documents containing this thematically-coded work, and to share ideas and analyses. This paper was developed through conversations between the Research Team, initially drafted by academic members of the team (as it was destined for an academic journal). The paper was then reviewed and edited by the activists on the project. All of those involved in this process are credited as authors.

Our intention in working transnationally is to move beyond comparisons and compartmentalizations of India and the UK. We wanted to move away from a reductive post-colonial framework with some nation states understood as 'backward' and others comparatively 'ahead' (Browne et al 2017; Puar 2007; Kulpa & Mizielinska 2011). India and the UK (where the academics and activists are based, are working with each other, and are familiar with) were chosen precisely because they offered an opportunity to cut into the progress/backward narrative that frames global discourses around sexuality rights, and move toward an understanding of sexual lives through a different frame, i.e. liveability. We use the different geopolitical positionings of our respondents in India and the UK to help conceptualise liveability in ways that cannot be reducible to a single legislative context (see Browne et al 2019). At the same time we aim to identify accounts of liveability that are sensitive to immediate context yet which resonate (but are not identical or universal) transnationally – which includes internally heterogeneous national contexts. As such this is

not a comparative work. Instead, we aim to create knowledges around sexual lives that move across national boundaries, without neglecting country specific contexts and particularities (see Browne et al 2017 for details of our transnational, non-comparative approach). This approach was built into the project's methodology, resulting in a set of shared research aims which were implemented with some differences in India and the UK. For example, in India a set of in-depth interviews (IDIs) were undertaken to better facilitate engagement from particularly isolated or marginalised individuals. In terms of this paper, our approach allows insights to both emerge from local contexts, and be considered transationally in ways that might be applicable elsewhere. This is not to argue for generalisability, but instead to note the potentials of working across national boundaries in ways that refuse to be tied to comparative geographic hierarchies that are typically framed within legal rights parameters. This can be disorientating for those expecting a comparative approach that ground lives in specific national legislative contexts, and we see this as critical to questioning Global North/Global South hierarchies in the production of knowledge around sexualities.

## Box 1: Outline of the Project

- **Aim:** to explore what makes lives 'liveable' for LGBTQ people in India and the UK.
- **Partners:** Liveable Lives works in partnership with LGBTQ activists and academics and Kolkata-based LBT activist forum Sappho For Equality.
- **Funding:** Liveable Lives is funded by the ESRC.
- **Methods and data collection:**
  - 5 Project Workshops (UK):
    - Participants: 51 LGBTQ-identified participants.
    - Locations: Brighton x1, Southampton x1, Leicester x1, Hull x2.
    - Methods used: individual interviews, group discussions, mapmaking, timelines, collages, free writing.
  - 5 Project Workshops (India):
    - Participants: 43 LBT-identified participants.
    - Locations: Siliguri x1, Kolkata x2, Kolkata surrounding area x2.
    - Methods used: group discussions, mapmaking, timelines, collages, free writing.
  - 26 in-depth individual interviews (India only)
    - Participants: 26 LBT-identified participants.
    - Locations: Siliguri, Kolkata and surrounding areas.
  - LiveableLives.org website (online):
    - Participants: 146 members of the Liveable Lives website
    - Methods used: 5 online surveys with 115 responses, online discussion forum with 141 posts, image uploads with 87 submissions.

#### 4. A Liveable Life is Not Always a Happy Life

Drawing on the data gathered through the project's complex methodology, our analysis explores the relationships between happiness and liveability. In 'The Promise of Happiness',

Sara Ahmed (2010) specifically equates happiness and heteronormative ideals. In particular, she writes that 'it is hard to separate images of the good life from the historic privileging of heterosexual conduct, as expressed in romantic love and coupledness, as well as in the idealization of domestic privacy' (Ahmed, 2010: 90). Much attention has been paid to homonormative ideals, aspirations and behaviours leashed to these forms of heterosexuality, allowing access to a similar version of happiness or a good life (Duggan, 2003; Stychin, 2003). However we found a connection between 'the good life' and heterosexuality itself emerging from our data, whereby for our LGBTQ respondents living a happy life was possible within 'unconscious' heterosexual lifestyles. When discussing what made her life liveable, Ronette reflected on different periods in her life:

*Ronette: 'I don't really see my life as a straight line obviously, because it's much more complicated than that. So there is three periods. There's the happy unconscious heterosexuality period. Then there's the confusion, exploration period which I am still in at the moment. And then the third period is the future period which is hope for more self-acceptance and less confusion, which I'm sure will happen at some point, hopefully.'*

Project Workshop 7, UK

Ronette – who identified as bisexual – had a 'happy' life before she explored her bisexuality, reminiscent of Ahmed's identification of heterosexuality as a kind of unthought happiness (2006: 105). Ronette's subsequent 'confusion' and 'exploration period' reminds us of Butler's (2002) discussion of how experiences of epistemological crises in our own lives can

lead to questioning/challenging established ways of knowing. In Ronette's account, happiness and self-acceptance are deliberately placed at different points of the life course, through a period of confusion. Happiness, formed through unconscious and presumed heterosexualities, does not necessarily make LGBTQ lives liveable. Confusion here can play a key role in transitioning and remembering happiness as a period in the lifecourse. Ronette places happiness in the past – a period which she expresses no desire to return to – and instead sees 'self-acceptance and less confusion' as her 'hopeful' goal for the future. Happiness may be displaced in favour of these alternatives, which can make lives more liveable.

The data further linked to Ahmed's (2010) discussion of happiness as formed through the heteronormative ideals. This was seen as a duty to make others happy through adherence to specific societal norms – those which are said to lead to happiness (Ahmed 2010). Asked to describe how other people made life liveable, one website respondent from India describes a period when they attempted to live a 'straight' life:

*Respondent 3: 'there was a time when i felt so tired fighting shadow demons, i tried to live 'normal' life, straight life. i wanted to be accepted and appreciated by people who matter to me, i thought that will make my life liveable, because they will be happy and seeing them happy, i will also feel happy. but it did not happen, i was never a straight person and people who matter to me could not accept me the way i am. it created havoc in their lives and in my life as well, as our lives were connected to each other, liveabilities and happiness were connected. or so i thought.'*

Survey 3, Website (India)

Together, Ronette and Respondent 3 suggest a happy life, formed through conforming to straight ideals, is not necessarily a life that is felt to be liveable. Rather 'shadow demons' that lurk in the performance of these supposedly 'happy lives' can wreak 'havoc' where happy 'thems' (the 'people who matter to me') does not lead to happy 'me'. Even when the 'people who matter' express a wish for your happiness (we could envisage parents telling an LGBTQ child 'I just want you to be happy!'), the *nature* of this happiness and the assumption of its inherent goodness must be questioned (Ahmed 2010: 19). The stories of Ronette and Respondent 3 suggest that there can be distinctions made between happiness and liveability.

Questioning the assumptions that might place liveable lives alongside happy lives, some respondents discussed how unhappiness was not necessarily a state they needed to escape from. For instance, in Project Workshop 1 in the UK, Leland explained '*I'm okay if I'm somewhere and I recognise that I'm unhappy and I see a purpose in it*'. When, after an interruption, he was subsequently asked what made his life liveable by a researcher, he continued:

*Leland: 'Choices probably. Having choices as to what to do with your time, how to spend it. Like [my job] in Cornwall, the reason that I managed to stay as long as I did was because I had no choices in my life at all. I had enough money to get to pay for everything that I needed to pay for in a month and only just. So the car and the fact that I didn't have control over food. So just enough to supplement that so that I didn't collapse. I had no choices in Cornwall and it made me angry. I didn't really have a*



*choice about coming down here, but now that I'm here, I've got a choice about who I make friends with and how I do that, which does make a difference but I still feel like I'm trapped. So it is the bits that I can choose. It's what I can do with my weekends and where I can go and who I can see, because everyone lives across the country.'*

Project Workshop 1, UK

Leland talks about liveability disrupting the binary of happiness/unhappiness. He draws out a sense of complex movements and temporalities in his experiences and understandings of what makes his life liveable. Rather than focusing on periods of happiness or unhappiness, Leland uses choice to differentiate between what makes life liveable ('the bits I can choose') and that which makes it survivable ('Just enough to supplement that so that I didn't collapse'). The temporal and geographic complexities are revealed in his feeling trapped, and yet finding moments of escape and friendship – unhappiness is 'okay' when life can feel liveable in particular moments. Leland's narrative thus suggests a move towards liveability could offer engagement with complex ideals of living and surviving - which resist the idea that happiness is always to be desired, that it is always the goal.

What becomes apparent in the data exemplified by Ronette, Leland and respondent 3 is that liveability and its relationship to happiness is processual. Liveability and happiness are ongoing negotiations, where unhappiness and 'less liveable' moments are expected as part of the ebb and flow:

*Researcher: 'It would be interesting to hear what you think about [liveability]. Is that a useful idea? Is that something that feels relevant to your lives?'*

Shelley: *'I think it doesn't imply extremes about either, you know, life being completely wonderful or completely shit, you know, like isn't it always to do with a process of negotiating and trying to tip the balance? [laughter] In favour of something more liveable rather than less liveable. It feels like a way of thinking that is realistic perhaps. I mean I don't know about you, I don't expect life to be all flowers and sunshine and bloody wonderful. I'm okay with it being boring sometimes and I'm okay with it being shit sometimes, a bit. I kind of wouldn't want it to be like that all the time, but you know. So I do like the concept. It feels meaningful and honest'*

Project Workshop 7, UK

Shelley is not aiming for 'life being completely wonderful' (a state to be achieved) but instead takes a processual sense of life, a matter of constant negotiation to make life 'more liveable' (a 'realistic' approach to understanding life as it is lived). There is a sense of incompleteness here, that life may never be entirely or categorically 'liveable', but instead this is a negotiated and temporary position. This also means that 'flowers and sunshine' can co-exist with liveability – rather than instituting a new and unsupportable binary framework of 'happiness vs liveability', we recognise that happiness can exist as part of a liveable life. But crucially, while considering this negotiable and contingent understanding of a life that is liveable, Shelley does imply that things need to be done to improve her life. While she is 'okay with [life] being shit sometimes' she qualifies this with 'a bit' and states that she 'wouldn't want it to be like that all the time'.

Drawing on these excerpts, we can see that developing the concept of liveability to explore and critique the complexities of happiness/unhappiness does not seek a retreat from

activism and work around LGBT issues. All of the respondents are consciously and critically aware of their situations – be they happy or unhappy periods. Ronette and Respondent 3 demonstrate how this critical awareness can be actively connected to sexuality, while Leland and Shelley connect it to everyday practical implications ('choices' and 'negotiating'). These 'struggles' entailed in living and creating liveable lives that are marked as different in terms of sexual and gender norms, is where we now turn.

##### 5. **The Importance of Challenge, Struggle and Fighting**

The intertwined feelings of happiness and unhappiness discussed in the previous section were not only created by other people, but also shared with them. A respondent to the online surveys was asked which other people made life liveable:

*Respondent 14: 'Friends from the community who share the joys and sorrows, challenges and struggles of a life and politics that defines and constitutes our bonding and camaraderie.'*

Survey 3, Website (India)

Respondent 14 centres liveability not around 'joys' or 'sorrows' in and of themselves, but primarily around those who are there to share them, perhaps to experience them together; and secondly around the 'challenges and struggles' involved in developing these kinds of bonds. Here the challenges and struggles are framed as crucial in making life feel liveable through their role in in/forming the 'life and politics' around which these bonds cohere.

Moving from happiness to struggle enables an exploration of the place and importance of challenges. However, challenges are 'hard':

Lil: *Well when you get yourself into that corner [a place or situation where Sylvia can disconnect or retreat from society and the world at large] almost, it's hard then to-*

Sylvia: *It's hard to come out of it. That's true. But there are advantages to the corner as well [laughs].*

Lil: *What are the advantages?*

Sylvia: *You don't get hurt. You don't go through the dramas and the traumas [laughter] or heartbreak or the guilt of breaking someone else's heart. You avoid all of that stuff, but yeah it's not really living. It's not really. You don't feel any joy either.*

Sylvia: *You're just kind of-*

Lil: *Surviving.*

Sylvia: *Yeah. Just kind of flat-lining [laughter].*

Project Workshop 1, UK

Sylvia highlights the avoidance of some difficult events – 'dramas', 'traumas', 'heartbreak' and 'the guilt of breaking someone else's heart' – as one of the 'advantages' of retreating from life. Living for some LGBTQ people involves troubling and traumatic events, however the alternative for Sylvia, 'flat-lining', evokes nothing short of death itself. At best this image suggests a kind of relentless monotony, with no change, no cardiac spikes upwards or downwards. Nothing to make the heart beat. Although 'the corner' might be a place where

life's challenges can be successfully hidden from, then, it can result in, according to Sylvia, not a life.

For some, then, a life that feels like living is not one devoid of challenges. A liveable life, then, could be one in which challenges occur, one in which there is struggle and fighting. Indeed some of our UK participants suggested that it was precisely the perceived lack of a clear 'struggle' or 'challenge' which can make life feel less liveable:

*Josie: I think the things that have started to come in place in terms of change of legislation and equality and all that kind of stuff, actually in a sense, it's just passed me by and part of that is because I spent most of my early life having something to fight against and in a sense now we've got to the equality part, 'Oh well I've got nothing to be angry about [laughs] in terms of being a lesbian, not in terms of everything else which I'm still very angry about, but do you know what I mean? For my own personal thing and I think part of who I am has come from having to fight the establishment and I'm a bit scared now in terms of for my own personal sexual orientation and my own personal view, is that I've not nothing left to fight about for me in this country.*

Project Workshop 7, UK

The purpose and meaning derived from opposing/'fighting against' have been shown to be key to LGBTQ activisms (Browne and Bakshi, 2013). The fighting Josie engaged in particularly in her 'early life' is central to own subjectivity and elsewhere in the discussion she spoke with tremendous, infectious passion about these struggles. Josie argued for the importance

of this fighting, which does not matter **more** than the changes in legislation, but it is **counterposed** to it. Josie experiences life as in some ways less liveable because of progressive changes.

Building on this, legislation and wider perceptions of acceptance for LGBTQ people in the UK may lead to difficulties in engaging positively with the struggles that can make life feel like life:

*Denise: 'I do agree that you can walk down the street and nine times out of ten nothing happens at all, but... I feel like that opens up opportunity for a different type of prejudice... Because overall people think that it's fine and particularly the straight community think it's fine now, that absolutely lets undercurrents of stuff happen.*

*[Legislative change] impacts that hugely both positively, I hasten to add. Like massive positively because of the community and the people I've met, Pride, the experiences I've had, gay marriage coming through. All of those are just fantastic. Like amazing experiences I'll never forget, all of them, and kind of the struggle you go through and coming to terms with knowing who you are and all of those things are just amazing. They really shape you.'*

Project Workshop 3, UK

In this workshop participants discussed the undercurrents Denise refers to, everyday language and 'microaggressions', minor but not infrequent incidents which infuriated them, made them question themselves or others, made them feel suspicious or paranoid – all of

which connected to a feeling of reduced liveability. Linking to Ahmed's (2010b) figure of the 'Feminist Killjoy', participants throughout this Project Workshop noted the pressure they felt not to make a fuss about perceived instances of sexism, homophobia generally, lesbophobia specifically, coming from straight and cis as well as LGBTQ people. Thus, although perceptions might suggest that the UK is 'fine' and the growing acceptance of LGBTQ people was welcomed as creating (political, social, affective) connections with other LGBTQ people, at the same time it could be seen as rendering participants' engagement with LGBTQ struggles as more difficult – a struggle which was not connected to a sense of liveability but, rather, was experienced as fearful and frustrating, neutralised through the widespread assumption that 'it's fine' now denying the legitimacy of the struggle. Rather than removing challenges from UK LGBTQ people's everyday lives, supposedly progressive legislation may be experienced as making it more difficult for LGBTQ people to take up and engage with the struggles in their lives in a way which contribute to a sense of liveability.

Josie and Denise experience their lives as less liveable due to the complexities of grappling with LGBTQ struggles in 'the world we have won' (Weeks, 2007). In contrast a focus on Section 377 in India, meant that for some struggles were closely connected to other people fighting the same or similar battles. Place and being in close proximity to these battles can hold an import. When asked 'Can you think of a place that makes you feel that as an LGBTQ person, your life is or could be liveable there?', one respondent replied:

*Respondent 14: Psychologically, emotionally, philosophically and socially -*

*a) When I am with my loved ones*

*b) When I am with my mother/sisters/close family members*

*c) When I am with my friends*

*d) When I am in activist spaces*

*e) Among comrades - while ideating, conversing, interacting, protesting, in togetherness*

*f) Community spaces/collectives that work for a cause (Dalit rights/women's rights/queer rights/disability issues/environmental rights) and is always questioning authorities.*

Survey 2, Online (India)

Respondent 14 connects not just struggles or challenges, but *the people collectively engaged in them* as those things making their life liveable. They speak of activist places, of being among 'comrades' highlighting that struggle and challenge can indeed be a central part of liveability if liveability involves a form of collective struggle. Across the different legislative contexts of the UK and India, then, challenge and struggle emerge as a central part of liveability if they involve a form of collective struggle.

Relationships can become the backbone of one's negotiation through these stressful times.

As one participant from Project Workshop 5 districts surrounding Kolkata said:

*Anonymous Participant: 'I am living and surviving through my unwellness. But my queer relationships do have the potential to make me forget momentarily the pain of a life that discourages my existence on a daily basis.'*

Project Workshop 5, India



This participant used the Bangla phrase *'bhalo na thaka'* which we translate as 'unwellness', referring to a state of emotional unwellness which highlights their difficult life. When participants understood LGBTQ liveability as beginning with a reflection on the challenges in their own individual lives, linking with others was key. This could develop into an understanding of oneself as positioned within a society with specific links to other lives:

*Audrey: The personal is political. It starts from the individual to make things change and happen and then other people come on-board and think, 'Hold on. I was treated badly as well. What can I do about that to make it change? How can I get support from other people?', and then the more people that get involved, the more power you've got to make things change.*

Project Workshop 3, UK

Liveability can mean moving away from the individual and onto understanding and placing one's self within a wider society. Indeed connections are forged, in Audrey's account, through the recognition of lives being liveable or not. This recognition was a moment of realisation brought up regularly in the Project Workshops and in the online questionnaires. While liveability may at first seem a personal or individual circumstance ('it starts from the individual'), once others 'come on-board' their involvement in this apparently individual matter can lead to the realisation that it is in fact a collective or group struggle, as one recognises one's own poor treatment ('I was treated badly as well') through supporting another person. This 'hold on' moment of realisation suggests that holding on personally can become more possible with others, and indeed create or make visible a shared struggle.

The development Audrey describes here, from one individual recognising a shared struggle with another, to the 'more people that get involved' and the subsequent 'power... to make things change' points to a possibly wider aspect of LGBTQ liveability, whereby the individual connects to other spaces and challenges through recognition of a shared struggle for liveability. As with Audrey's excerpt above, reflecting on liveability encouraged some participants in this research to overtly articulate a recognition that one's life, and perhaps more importantly what makes one feel alive, is not just about 'you'. Furthermore, these struggles need not be about LGBTQ struggles alone. Participants are often connected, for example, to wider gendered or classed struggles. Here Susan describes helping her father during the 1984-85 Miners Strike in the UK:

*Susan: 'I was very young but having a sense that other people struggle and a sense that yes they were other people but this had something to do with me and that... it was worth trying to do something in relation to it, that it was worth my dad going out shaking a tin around all the pubs on the avenues was really, was a very life-changing kind of thing and... if you have opportunities to have those kinds of experiences, it informs you... I was about ten or something, but I can remember giving up my pocket money [laughs] to my dad's collection tin, but it was a massive, massive deal because it gave me a sense that there's a bigger picture and that politics is complicated and ugly often, but that doesn't mean that it doesn't matter or that it's not worth engaging with.'*

Project Workshop 7, UK

In exploring these wider political implications of liveability, Susan connects her childhood support for her father to ‘a sense that there’s a bigger picture’. Even noting the worse aspects of politics as ‘complicated and ugly’ Susan still derives ‘worth’ from taking part in these activities, making her life feel more liveable. We could derive a sense of optimism from Susan’s statements here – the optimism, perhaps, that change could happen. The optimism here appears less cruel than Berlant’s critique of cruel optimism as an attachment to particular forms of nostalgic, heteronormative and neoliberal imaginaries of ‘the good life’ (Berlant 2011). Susan’s optimism seems to be aimed at achieving a life which is liveable through the very process of *struggling for that change*, as described in various ways by our other participants.

Audrey and Susan both articulated a recognition of the need for shared struggle, and feelings of LGBTQ liveability and fighting for change for LGBTQ people that may centre around the optimism of enacting change in the future. At many points within the data emerges not optimism nor even pessimism, but instead what participants described as the need to ‘push on’ in spite of what may come:

*Malobika: ‘Let’s say I have to fight on and on. There were four more people with me when this started, then they left for various reasons, and I knew I had to persevere for Sappho’s<sup>iv</sup> future. There have been many ups and downs since then, now perhaps this is the very essence of community organization that if it has been any other organization, I could not have talked about it. This is not any other minority community like the disabled, but it’s the only one of its kind [here] and I had to go on,*

*you see? One day, we would not be there anymore, but the effort must go on. These challenges keep me alive through the pain.'*

In-depth Interview 26, India

In this excerpt, Malobika develops this idea of challenges promoting a sense of living, not in a sense of creating happiness or even ameliorating pain, but rather a need to keep going and to stay alive. The connection with her LBT organisation and the people in it are what keep her alive. These shared challenges, then, may account for feelings of a 'liveable' LGBTQ life in spite of unhappiness, hardship and lack of optimism for the future. These are not just personal challenges, but are connected to wider struggles. Staying alive 'though the pain' is made possible for 'Sappho's future', the organisation and the self are intertwined in ways that need 'effort to go on', but that mutually constitute each other.

Engaging with the concept of liveable lives enables a conceptualization of liveable lives beyond happiness, with, and through, struggle. This is not to suggest that liveabilities require or necessitate struggle, or that struggle is to be valorized or celebrated in and of itself. As Malobika reminds us, there is pain but this pain does not preclude liveability.

### **Conclusion**

*Srija: 'With my work, with the daily violence, discrimination that we face, and the ability to fight back keeps me well.'*

In-depth Interview 6, India

It has long been argued that seemingly 'progressive' social change for LGBTQ people, such as same-sex marriage, is not desirable for all LGBTQ people, nor is it necessarily moving towards sexual and gender liberation outside of normative structures (Conrad, 2014; Duggan, 2003; Warner, 1993). Concurrently calls for happiness and 'the good life' through normative and universal structures have been heavily critiqued (see Ahmed, 2010; Berlant, 2011; Davies, 2015). Instead of comparing 'happiness' in India and the UK, this paper has used liveabilities to further question normative happiness and offer new engagements with sexual and gendered lives, through transnational thinking that disorients national comparisons and Global North/Global South hierarchies. The transnational approach has allowed us to focus on the voices around the question of liveability - in this case its relation to the normative idea of happiness across the India and the UK. An exclusive focus on legislation within a comparative frame would have not only been severely limiting, but also reproduced progress/backward narratives. Transnational thinking allowed us to bring out the nuances around the question of liveability and its connections to happiness. Ideas of normative happiness are tied to legislative advancements and simultaneous progress/backward narratives. This paper, by bringing in the nuances around happiness through a liveability frame and a transnational approach, has complicated normative happiness in LGBTQ lives.

While happiness is not a singular, homogeneous phenomenon (as evidenced by our participants' variety of ways of articulating it), in this research LGBTQ participants have deviated from Ahmed's critical descriptions of the happy script, and some were conscious of leaving happiness behind to pursue sexual and gendered lives that they know would lead to rejection and marginalisation. By putting critiques of happiness and liveabilities into dialogue, this paper has shown that happiness and what Ahmed terms aliveness, or what

Butler (2004; 2009) terms liveability, are not dependent on each other (though neither do they rely on the other's absence). In other words, a liveable life, a life that is a life, may not be a happy life or even a good life as defined through heteronormative and/or neoliberal lenses, including those that are tied to progress/backward narratives around legislative advancements. Liveability can be about pushing back and thriving not only in spite of, but also *because of*, the challenges experienced. This may have relevance not just for LGBTQ lives, but for other lives too, and speaks well beyond the specific contexts of the UK/India.

Shared struggles may make some lives more liveable. Challenges – particularly (though not only) those which are perceived to be shared with other LGBTQ people – can actually be important in creating the feeling that one's life is a life. These challenges and LGBTQ people's responses to them can develop and enhance feelings of liveability – this means that even if life is 'boring' or 'shit' it can still be felt to be worthwhile. Moreover, when keeping 'me well' is a shared endeavour of contesting that which makes us unwell, LGBTQ liveability becomes a fundamentally activist proposition. When we say that liveability is not necessarily equal to happiness, we do not mean that happiness is never a referent. In fact it often is and is linked to a sense of worth, a sense of meaning, a sense of fulfilment that is not necessarily devoid of challenges and struggles. Indeed, this paper has shown the imperative to consider creating liveabilities outside of the ties of normative happiness. Happiness is not necessarily absent in this endeavour, it can come from a collective orientation around friendship, activism, and struggle.

In closing, we are mindful of Shelley's warning at the end of section 3 of this paper - that we must continue to concern ourselves with times when life is 'shit', that the work is with 'daily violence'. In refusing to locate violence against sexualities in the Global South and

safety/freedom in the Global North, liveability developed through transnational thinking can encompass that which is negative, challenging, difficult, or a struggle. But incorporating and understanding challenges within a framework of liveability should not *preclude* happiness nor does it signal a 'cop out' from work around gender and sexual liberations. Instead the complexities that we are suggesting that purpose and meaning may not be based in happiness but can through struggle, particularly where marginalisation, exclusion and othering are part of everyday lives.

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<sup>i</sup> We use this delineation understanding that identities named within these categories are limited and that not all use these categories. We are, of course, aware of the global limitations of these identity categories that can reflect global north hegemonies that can reiterate particular normativities within the global north, as well as being inappropriately used in global south contexts. Here we use them in India and the UK to recognise that naming continues to be important and labelling non-normative sexual and gender identities is still a political act. However, we do so tentatively in ways that understand that they are subject to refiguration and contestation by those they seek to represent.

<sup>ii</sup> While Butler uses the spelling 'livable', in this paper and the project from which it developed we use spelling 'liveable'. While we articulate a reconceptualisation of 'liveability' in this paper to Butler's original, we do not use this difference in spelling to denote a 'new' or 'better' understanding but merely to adhere to different writers' linguistic usage.

<sup>iii</sup> The UK has now seen more than a decade of legislation to promote and defend lesbian, gay, bisexual and (to a lesser extent) trans\* (LGBT) rights. As of 2016 LGBT people in the UK can serve in the military, can enter into marriage or a civil partnership, and are protected from discrimination in the provision of goods and services. Private and public sector organisations in the UK are subject to a wide array of legislation and associated duties regarding LGB and many trans\* people, brought together under the Equality Act 2010. Consequently the UK consequently is often seen as one of the 'most advanced' countries with regard to LGBTQ legislative equalities (ILGA 2017). Conversely, India is often seen as one of the 'least advanced' countries in this regard (ibid.). In India, the anti-sodomy colonial law, Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) criminalised 'carnal intercourse against the order of nature', interpreted as sex between people of the same gender (Sebastian, 2017) and which was therefore used to criminalise same-sex sexual relations (Sanders 2009). Section 377 was read down by the Delhi High Court in the Naz Foundation v. Govt. of NCT of Delhi on July 2nd 2009. However, it was subsequently reinstated by India's Supreme Court on December 11th 2013. On 6th September 2018, the Supreme Court of India, in the Navtej Johar and Others. v Union of India case read down Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, in effect recognizing consensual sexual acts other than peno-vaginal ones. While enforcement was limited in the later 20th and early 21st centuries, Section 377 was nevertheless used as a tool of harassment of sexual and gender minorities - as individuals and as organisations - and left them in a state of ongoing legal peril. Despite this legislation sexual and gender minorities continued to live, organise and build communities throughout India. For further information on the Indian context see Sappho For Equality, 2016. For a critique of this ranking of countries by LGBTQ-related legislation see Browne et al, 2015.

<sup>iv</sup> Sappho is a support group for Lesbians, Bisexual women and Trans men (LBT) based in Kolkata, India. Some members of the group's activist forum, Sappho For Equality (SFE), were partners in the Liveable Lives project.