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Queering activism through the lens of the sociology of everyday life

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Abstract

The approaching 30th anniversary of the introduction of the 1988 Local Government Act offers an opportunity to reflect on the nature of lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) activism in Britain. The protests against its implementation involved some of the most iconic moments of queer activism. Important though they are, these singular, totemic moments, give rise to, and are sustained by small, almost unobtrusive, acts which form part of LGB people's everyday lives. In this paper, we aim to contribute to a re-thinking of queer activism where iconic activism is placed in a synergetic relationship with the quieter practices in the quotidian lives of LGB people. We interrogate a series of examples, drawn from three studies, to expand ideas about how activism is constituted in everyday life. We discuss the findings in relation to three themes: the need to forge social bonds often formed a prompt to action; disrupting the binary dualism between making history and making a life; and the transformative potential of everyday actions/activism. The lens of the sociology of everyday life i) encourages a wider constituency of others to engage in politics; ii) problematizes the place of iconic activism.

Keywords: everyday life; quotidian activism; queer politics; equality; rights.

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Iconic activism's role in the struggle for LGB political and civil rights

As we approach the 30th anniversary of the implementation of the 1988 Local Government Act, it is worth reflecting on the nature of LGB political activism in Britain. Although in many countries worldwide, we live in a period of unprecedented rights for LGB people, the recent past has shown that such rights may be summarily withdrawn or breached. Reflection on the *means* of achieving social and political rights can help to identify future strategies in potentially turbulent times. Clause 28 of the 1988 Act, known subsequently as Section 28, originated as a kind of backlash to the 1967 Sexual Offences Act which partially decriminalised 'homosexuality'. The 1988 Act, introduced at the height of the HIV/AIDS pandemic and in statute for 15 years, created a climate of fear stifling the development of sexual minorities' equalities work across public and voluntary sector services. In its abrogation of rights, the 1988 Act characterised homosexuality as both a 'pretended family relationship' and a diseased identity and explicitly prohibited discussion in schools. Clause 28 galvanised sexual minority communities to take action to reduce the sway of institutional power in almost every aspect of their lives. The 'Stop the Clause' protests - which saw unparalleled demonstrations of over 20,000 people in Manchester - hold talismanic status in the collective consciousness for many older LGB people in the UK, not only as emblematic of their resistance, but also of their willingness to challenge the political elite and state institutions. Mass protests together with direct action, (for example, the storming of the BBC 6 o'clock news and abseiling in the House of Lords to protest the legislative passage of Section 28 – both protests led by lesbian and bisexual women), constitute widely shared beliefs about activism (Tufekci, 2014). Their Goffmanesque (1990) dramaturgical quality leaves a representational legacy which acts to sustain sexual minorities ideologically and emotionally. Direct action conjures heroism and danger, while protest activists themselves risk censure, arrest or imprisonment. Iconic activism thus (rightly) holds revered status in movements for social justice; moreover, the achievement of political goals and civil rights are often attributed to them (Bernstein, 2003). During the subsequent three decades, legislative developments have included an equalising in the age of consent (Waites, 2003), parenting rights (Fish and Williamson, 2016), and equal marriage (eg Monk and Barker, 2015). Yet despite these legal protections, social change for sexual minorities is uneven, partial, complex and contested: witness, for example, the rise in

homophobic hate crime in the wake of the EU referendum vote (Townsend, 2016) or the rolling back of LGBT rights in the USA following the election of President Trump (Siddiqui, 2017). In this paper, we aim to contribute to a re-thinking of queer activism¹ where iconic activism is placed in a synergetic relationship with the quieter practices in the quotidian lives of LGB people. As Abrahams (1992; 327) has noted, this approach could enhance inquiry into the connections between 'daily life and structural and institutional systems of power relations'.

Introducing the sociology of everyday life

Using the lens of everyday life to interrogate activism is a contested endeavour. Sarah Pink argues that everyday life and activism are often studied in isolation from each other (2012; 4). While activism takes place in public - it is explicit, explosive and political - the everyday is associated with the private, the hidden and often the banal. Piotr Sztompka (2008) contends that the sociology of everyday life constitutes a paradigmatic shift: it is a perspective which treats seriously such topics previously considered trivial, such as love or friendship, Christmas lights, shoes, fashion or pop music. He proposes that everyday life is not synonymous with private life as opposed to public life. Instead, this 'third' sociology is located at the interstices between the first sociology of social organisms and systems and the second sociology of behaviour and action: bridging the divide which sees that our lives are entirely shaped by factors which are beyond us, and on the other hand, beliefs about our exceptional selves and the power of individual autonomy. Thus we would suggest that the sociology of everyday life holds particular resonance for conceptualising small scale activisms, located as they are, in the quotidian. We propose that iconic activism targets the macrostructures, organizations and institutions of society, while everyday activisms embody the social change that people want to experience in their lives as they are lived. For Sztompka (2008) a central concept in the sociology of everyday life is *social existence*:

..this embeddedness of human beings in the relationships with other human beings occurs nowhere else but in our everyday experiences... All other aspects of society: macrostructures, macro-processes, cultures, civilizations, technological systems, organizations, institutions – in fact exist not somewhere outside, *but inside our social existence and permeate from within the simplest everyday events in which we routinely participate* (italics added). They last only as long as people take actions toward others and establish bonds and relationships of various forms. Society lies not outside ourselves but within us (Sztompka, 2008; 30).

It is this location at the juncture between individual daily lives and the structural context in which they are lived which makes the sociology of everyday life such a useful lens to explore

small-scale activism. Quotidian activism quietly, but powerfully, works alongside the explicit, political moments in our history. As Neal and Murji (2015; 811) argue, 'the realm of the everyday brings the structure-agency knot directly into view, but more than this it brings close the immediacy and intensity of being in and part of social worlds'. This location enables exploration of how people make sense of society's norms and values and of the ways in which they resist the structural and institutional forces which often determine how life can be experienced (Byrne et al. 2016).

Research we have undertaken involving aspects of LGB lives over the past two decades have made us aware of connections and linkages in the everyday as 'moments of translation and synthesis in which the big folds into, shapes and is concretized in, but also co-constituted by the small' (Neal and Murji, 2015; 813). Rather than seeing activism as distinct and separate from the everyday, we conceptualise these paradigms of practice as sustaining movements towards social change. Section 28 served as a rallying point for direct action to protest the abrogation of queer rights. Thirty years after the implementation of the 1988 Act, LGB people enjoy equality before the law, but social rights and cultural norms such as access to education, health and other public services may require different tactics and approaches to embed and sustain change in social institutions (Bernstein, 2003). While there is an emerging body of work that considers the everyday in relation to feminist, environmental and anti-poverty campaigning (Martin et al. 2007; Pink, 2012; Chatterton, 2006, Horton and Kraftl, 2009), there is little which explores how the sociology of the everyday life can be used to interrogate quotidian activism in the lives of LGB people.

Methodology

In this paper, we want to make sense of the narratives that people shared with us about the ways in which they addressed *personal woes*, including mental health, physical health, specifically cancer diagnosis and treatment, as well as in our work on lesbian parenting. In the following sections, we interrogate a series of examples, drawn from our research (see endnote below), to expand ideas about how activism is constituted and performed in everyday life. We are interested in the ways in which individuals seek to embed change and by engaging with others begin to see these experiences as *public problems* (Plummer, 2003; 81). By paying attention in this paper, to the commonplace activities of daily life, the kind of attention usually accorded to extraordinary events, we seek to learn about them as 'phenomena in their own right' (Garfinkel, 1967; 1).

The paper draws on qualitative data collected from 61 people who self-identified as lesbian, gay or bisexual using personal networks and LGB self-organised groups. In developing our conceptual framework we held several skype conversations and shared our

data paying attention to similarities and differences in the findings as a whole. Thematic analysis Braun and Clarke (2004) was utilised to make sense of the meaning-making of participants in an iterative process.

Forging social bonds often formed a prompt to action

The motivation to do *something* was often spurred by the need to find commonality with others and lend meaning to their situation through shared experiences. Norman is a 52 year old gay man with a diagnosis of prostate cancer. When he told other people of his illness they 'sort of fell to pieces' and his response was to look for a support group for (presumed) heterosexual men, Norman expected his needs to be met through this mainstream cancer support group. But he was unable to express his own concerns about his diagnosis, partly because some conversations were off limits and partly because the other men took their wives to the group. Yet despite these experiences, Norman said he didn't feel discriminated against at all. His prompt to action was not motivated by a sense of injustice, but rather from a need to find or set up a forum to be able to speak freely about sexual concerns and relationships with other gay and bisexual (GB) men with prostate cancer (Study 1, LGB Cancer Project). In his words:

"But I didn't feel like I do now when I am in the [GB men's group]. I can go oh bloody hell you know what it's like when you really want to pick up a bloke and you want to do this and you want to do that. And all the other guys in the group say, I love coming to this group because I can just talk the way that it is." (Norman, Study 1).

While the generation of 'affective solidarity' has been noted in the interpersonal relationships of those engaged in direct actions (Brown and Pickerill 2009; 33); men in the GB men's cancer support groups talked of affective bonds of loyalty, friendship, love and sharing common experiences. Norman increasingly recognises that his identity and sexual relationships cannot be bracketed out of the treatment for prostate cancer:

"It's like think of something you can't think of and that's what I am missing. Because I have never experienced it, I can't ask for it. So when I pushed for psycho-sexual counselling I said I am a gay guy and this is what happens, [the doctor said] oh that's interesting, oh we have not talked about that before, [Norman]: *oh ok*. (Norman, Study 1).

Although absence and silence do not lend themselves to articulation as political goals, they have functioned as a source of oppression for LGB people (Fish, 2006). Looking for information on prostate cancer as a gay man, Karl found he was 'forever trying to pick out

the bits that don't apply and do apply'. Tim talked about the experiences of one of the men in the support group he attended who identified as a bisexual man:

So he always says my wife comes along with me to appointments and of course ...who would know that he was bisexual unless he said. And his wife doesn't, as far as he knows, his wife doesn't know that. So I can see that the problem he has and people like him have that the health professionals make a reasonable assumption...what they see might not be what is actually there and that there has to be a way which encompasses any possibilities of sexuality...information ... has to be all encompassing to cover people whose sexuality is not obvious (Tim, Study 1).

Norman tentatively recognises that there is an absence ('something is missing'); his low key response is a tacit acceptance: 'oh ok' and could be construed as the antithesis of protest activism. All three men have awareness that GB men do not have equal access to cancer services, despite the existence of equality legislation which offers protection from unfair treatment. In the GB men's cancer support groups, they do not express strong grievances, but recognise that treatment which is the same as that for other patients does not ensure their health needs are met. Through the groups, they develop a sense of connectedness with others. In this respect, the forging of social bonds and relationships with others locates their talk and behaviour in Sztompka's (2008) third sociology which takes as its object of inquiry 'human action in collective contexts' (2008; 25). We draw similarities between these motivations and behaviours to other public service including volunteering, self-help or self-advocacy, where the focus is largely about changing one's immediate environment for oneself or proximal others by sharing common problems, making connections with others or having more control over one's health or life.

In study 2 (author), women set up lesbian parenting groups in spaces where nothing else existed to reflect back on their own experiences and form their own support networks:

What we do is every year we try to have Baby Pride because we know so many lesbians with kids who don't want to go to Pride, well what's Pride now ... the first year we did it, it was great I mean we had like 40 kids in the garden, it was just lovely, it was really good, really good...I don't know what we'd do now if we were just starting out, I have no idea (Rebecca, Study 2).

Through parenting, lesbian respondents (Study 2) reported becoming more visible through their everyday lives. This was identified as important in a number of ways - showing they were 'just like any other mum' and demonstrating being out and proud of their family.

In carving out new routes to parenthood, access to information about lesbian mothers was not always easy to find (pre-internet).

Feminist theorising has drawn attention to the role of collective consciousness in creating the building blocks for social change. Informal groups constitute a way in which people make sense of what is happening to them: the transition from feeling that an experience is not an individualised occurrence, but is shared more widely by others. Gay men have been, in the past, obliged to live privatised lives (enforced by the 1967 Act); historically, women's lives were also relegated to the private sphere (and for many women continue to be). While same-sex relationships between women were not made illegal, social sanctions imposed a form of control: such as the very real risk of lesbian women losing custody of their children in the 1970s and 1980s. Support groups offer a space in which the individualised and privatised experiences of eg living with cancer or a lesbian parenting group become partly public and articulated as an area for concern. By becoming visible in their use of public services in midwifery, mental health, cancer care, or in schools, LGB people become role models for other service users to see or emulate.

How then does their activity mirror or differ from that of health/social care consumer groups and other forms of community volunteering? Allsop et al (2004) highlight similar prompts to action where an individual experience of illness or bodily event led to the identification with others in a similar position. The mainly middle-class white women involved in such groups were considered by Allsop et al (2004) to be activists who wanted to support others and draw attention to shortcomings in healthcare. Their actions were considered political when they engaged with formal institutions of the state and lobbied policy-makers. In second wave feminism, activists and scholars articulated women's health, not as an illness experience, but as a wider political construct (eg Doyal, 1995). One legacy of Section 28 is that it characterised LGB people as occupying diseased identities: in the context of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, it politicised LGB health². Moreover, by characterising LGB families as 'pretended family relationships', LGB people's very social existence came under threat. The social and cultural characterisations of LGB health throughout the 1980s and 1990s were profoundly political (eg the infamous AIDS tombstone advert) and inequality was embedded in broader social structures that denied GB men access to sexual healthcare. Our definitional boundaries locate self-help, advocacy and volunteering, such as those described by Allsop et al. (2004), outside of the boundaries of activism even though such groups may lobby government for increased resources. We would argue that queer health activism (in this example) shares some commonality of purpose with women's movements for health and in the explicit location of the problem in wider social structures and state institutions. Active engagement in the quotidian (making oneself visible or redressing inequalities in services

which are not meeting needs) has the potential to transform the social lives of LGB people and help to bring about political or social change as part of a continuum alongside forms of iconic activism. Later in the paper, this recognition is reflected in notions of same sex parenting – changing our conceptions of what and who a family is and extending understandings to include families of choice. This nascent activity then was not explicitly recognised (by participants) as having connections to philosophical movements, but may constitute a precursor to everyday activism.

Disrupting the binary dualism between making history and making a life

Activists are often seen to be in the vanguard of history. This may be seen in claims of ‘I was there’ at a juncture in time: eg being part of the Greenham Common peace protest. Many social movement theorists maintain a distinction between ‘making history’ and ‘making life’ (see Abrahams 1992). While this dichotomy has often obscured the political acts of women (Abrahams, 1992; 328), it also may not reflect the experiences of sexual minorities who have been obliged to find alternative means of making a life outside of the institutions of the state. The transformative potential of the quotidian is illustrated in data from the study of lesbian parenting:

... when I didn't have a child and I was single and it was the late 1980s – I was just I was involved in loads of political action and stuff... when you become a lesbian parent you don't have the opportunity or the time to be as involved in kind of like sexual politics.... But in fact what I have found is that being a lesbian parent is so inherently bloody political. Every day of your life is political...just turning up at school, every single day you're putting yourself on the line because you're there both parents ... And you'd had to be on a different planet not to figure that we are lesbian parents really. So, and every time you fill in a form or you walk down the street together, you know you just walk out the front door ... we're just there being visible' (Jan, Study 2).

Jan's narrative highlights the epithet the personal is political. She constructs her actions as political by 'putting herself on the line'. At first, she dichotomises her previous activism from her current life as a parent (where there is no time to engage in political activity). Illustrating Neal and Murji's (2015; 813) caution against the separation of the 'ordinary from the extraordinary', her subsequent reflection integrates politics in 'every single day' in such mundane activities as walking down the street together, go[ing] out [of] the front door or filling in a form. It comes at a personal (potentially exhausting) cost of everyday being 'so inherently political', yet she is also somewhat self-deprecatory: we're *just* there being visible. Her activism is connected with people and context and embedded in everyday life. Such insights may

contribute to a queering of activism; she, and her partner, made particular choices about how they live their lives, (openly as a family), not concealing or hiding their relationship. There is a dramaturgical quality to her narrative when she moves out of the privatised space of her home into the streets which exemplifies what Chatterton (2006; 271) has described as ‘an embeddedness of micro-political tactics .. and a notion of the revolution not in the future but in the everyday’.

Coming out in everyday life has often been conceived as a quintessentially queer political act. Unlike Ellen Degeneres, who came out to the world in a single moment, many LGB people experience the closet as an encroachment on everyday life where the ‘deadly elasticity of heterosexist presumption means that ... people find new walls springing up around them’ (Kosovsky-Sedgewick, 1993; 46). It is possibly an Ellen Degeneres moment that Noel is thinking of when he says that he does not announce that he is gay when he enters a hospital waiting room (healthcare remains a closeted experience for LGB people Fish and Williamson, 2016). He contrasts his own quiet behaviour (‘raise to it,’ ‘in an appropriate manner’) with what might be conceptualised as the queer political act of visibility: he does not go into waiting rooms and make a public announcement that he is gay. Instead Noel hedges his words with contingent, hesitant, almost reluctant language, as if he wanted to distance himself from activism; the repeated use of the word *comfortable* is suggestive of Les Back’s (2015) concept of making life livable. In the final sentence, he recognises that any ‘kind of challenge’ he faces is not a *private woe*, but ‘a society thing’ and the responsibility for responding to *public problems* also lies with the institutions of the state, in particular the health service:

“And don’t get me wrong I ain’t talking about miracles or anything but I really do think it’s (i.e. being out) had a very positive impact in that I feel *comfortable*, like I don’t go into waiting rooms and say I’m gay that kind of thing. But I feel *comfortable* enough that if there was any kind of challenge that I could raise to it without, in an appropriate manner put it like that....I mean in one way it’s a society thing but also I’m sure that the health service could do more to facilitate people feeling more *comfortable*” (Noel, Study 1).

The lens of the sociology of everyday life also enables attention to language and performance which are ‘decisive’ mechanisms for shaping everyday life (Kalekin-Fishman, 2013; 715). Iconic activism, perhaps reflective of its perceived status in performing the work of change movements, uses military terminology: battle, struggle, liberation, revolution (or class war). Social movement organisers sometimes evoke rage, anger and fear to sustain new members in a cause: ‘high levels of emotional energy’ are required for participation over the long term (Brown and Pickerill, 2009; 26). By contrast, everyday activism uses somewhat mild language

and emotions (eg *comfortable, appropriate manner*), performing deeds which are implicit, they 'proceed with little fuss'; 'small acts of kindness' constitute the underlying emotional energy (Horton and Kraftl, 2009; 14). In the extract above, Noel talks about his willingness to challenge discrimination (I could raise to it) and explicitly recognises that being out becomes a possibility, not only for himself, but for others too. Here, he is conscious that the responsibility for coming out is not confined to the LGB individual, but it is a society thing, the health service has a duty to facilitate disclosure. Noel, Jan and others are engaged in developing what Chatterton (2006) has described as a moral language or a structure of feeling which is a crucial task in countering traditional discourses on health or parenting.

Transformative potential of everyday actions/activism

Drawing on Martin et al.'s (2007) proposition that small acts can transform social relations and have the potential to foster social change, we argue that everyday activism is distinct from other commonplace behaviours in its potential for public good. This potential is acknowledged by Sara:

'... so things like I'm the Chair of (our son's) Adam's school Parent and Teachers' Association (PTA) and we'll go to the PTA social as a couple and dance together ... it's not about huge big actions, but it is still about making statements. What it says is look, here we are, we're a couple and a family involved in our school community and hopefully it *becomes more commonplace over time*' (Sara, Study 2).

Sara's (apparently) mundane behaviours such as volunteering for the PTA or dancing with her partner may be a form of quiet heroism. Exploring the minutiae of social behaviour can reveal understandings of wider social relations (Crow and Pope, 2008). They (as a couple) are making non-verbal statements about visibility, *look, here we are*, and she explicitly recognises that seeing them as a family may translate to acceptance for others over time.

Planning and then having children in the 1990s, lesbian parents in Study 2 often spoke of themselves as pioneers by living out the possibility of having children and parenting together:

We were the first lesbian couple in (name of town) to get a joint residence order; it was quite a big deal, we were pioneers in a way (Kate, Study 2).

I wish it (being a lesbian parent) was easier but I don't mind being a pioneer, in fact I don't mind being the most 'out' person of (name of town); that's come with being a parent (Jayne, Study 2).

By using the term pioneers, Kate and Jayne both see themselves as charting a new course through life that will ultimately benefit others. Their trailblazing does not consist of a single action, but a day in, day out living out of what we describe as quotidian activism.

In data from the third project (see Author, 2016), study participants emphasised the mutuality and reciprocity in their everyday practices of care. Two gay male participants who described themselves as "best friends" for over 25 years and had previously lived together, although both now had new partners with whom they lived (Study 3, Intersections project). At the time of interview Alec was 68 years old and had been in poor health. He had lived with diabetes for most of his adult life and in more recent years had developed a lung condition. Peter was a 59 year old former nurse and carer and had also experienced health problems, particularly around mental health. They met in the late 1970s and became friends and a few years later rented and then bought a house together. At this point in time Alec described himself as "not good, physically I was falling apart, Pete helped with that". Indeed, Peter had a well-paid job in marketing at the time and he supported Alec physically, emotionally and financially. "If he hadn't taken me to [private health clinic], I wouldn't have been as good as I am now – and that's not good!" (Alec, Study 3). Peter nursed Alec when he was particularly ill; he helped him cope with the psychological stress of his chronic illness; and when Alec had to retire early on health grounds, Peter continued to support him financially.

Whilst we may view this relationship as a unidirectional care relationship, whereby Peter had for many years taken the role and identity of being Alec's carer especially since by this point in the mid-1980s Peter had retrained as a nurse in response to a health scare of his own and he went on to work in AIDS care; hence care had become part of his professional identity. However, when examining their narratives in more detail, about changes in their lives and their current situation, a different, more complex representation was revealed; a representation that locates their care practices in a wider context of LGB rights and social change.

Peter and Alec met at a local Lesbian and Gay Support Group. Although most of their adult lives had been lived after the 1967 Sexual Offences Act, both men had grown up and been socialised in a more homophobic climate. Peter described his family and friends as:

Totally homophobic. They just couldn't comprehend. I felt my father looked at me with real hatred at times" (Peter, Study 3).

As a result of this and the stress it caused him, Peter was advised by his GP to attend an LGB support group where he met Alec who helped Peter to accept his sexuality. Viewed through this lens, he could be seen as caring for Peter psychologically, whilst Peter tried to support Alec with his chronic illness. In the context in which Peter was living, participating in the LGB support group was a radical act. It was a form of self-care which led to unintended effects: meeting others led to his involvement in HIV/AIDS support. Such groups existed in several large cities in the UK and often involved a system of buddying: attending health appointments and home visits alongside the more activist focus of campaigning for better treatment, improved care, recognition of rights and combatting discrimination.

In contrast to Alec and Peter, Judy was living alone at the time of interview and was not in a relationship. Although from a town, she now lived in a rural community, was 59 years old and worked part-time as a health professional. She was aware that she felt attracted to women at young age:

A couple of times I fell in love from a distance, once I did do something about it, but you know women round here are usually straight (laughing), the whole of the town was straight (Judy, Study 3).

But with an awareness that she was also attracted to men (although she did not at any point in the interview define herself as bisexual), she had married Ben in her early twenties who she met whilst at medical school and shortly after graduating had become a mother, eventually having three children. Judy had spent the early years of her adult life caring for her children and towards her forties she began caring for her parents.

Through a series of events, principally the suicide of a gay work colleague, Judy 'came out' as a lesbian to her husband (they later divorced) and shortly afterwards she met Moira, who was a few years older than her, and they started a relationship. Moira's own mental health was poor and it was at this point that Judy became actively involved in setting up a network to provide mental health support for LGB people in her area. She regarded this as an extension of her work identity – she did not see it as a form of activism – although she recognised that it wasn't, in her words, 'your everyday, run of the mill stuff for an old lesbian!' Judy also became more involved in raising issues about sexuality at work, once taking a senior colleague to task for his heterosexism:

I think, he was very, very sheltered, quite blinkered actually, I mean I think, I mean they would say things like ... we don't know anybody who's gay, well they do (laughing) they know lots of people who are gay... I did find his remarks quite senseless (Judy, Study 3).

In the data in this theme, there is implicit, and sometimes explicit, recognition of involvement of broader movements for change. Alec had volunteered with a local LGB network and had used the awareness he had gained to support Peter through his psychological distress at his father's rejection. Sara, Kate and Jayne believed that their actions would enable the ordinariness of same-sex parenting to disrupt traditional conceptions of family. Judy had set up a group to support the mental health of sexual minorities. With all six individuals, actions that they had undertaken at various points in their lives, had contributed to social justice for a wider community of LGB others.

Discussion and conclusion: towards a queer theory of everyday activism

While there is a rich social scientific literature that documents queer protest movements (Shilts, 1987; Denenberg, 1997; Epstein, 2003), we would argue that the *everyday* work of sustaining social change for LGB communities has typically been unnoticed. By conceptualising actions within daily life as forming part of progressive struggles for social justice, some might argue that this will lead to a dilution of activism. At the core of iconic activism are its unconventional politics, its civil disobedience and its radical roots. These, we would argue, are fundamental to bringing about social change. But alongside this passionate politics, we believe there is space for the quieter actions in the quotidian. Mass protests and campaigns of civil disobedience came to epitomise one of the archetypal campaigns for social justice, the US civil rights movement; yet the Black Panther Party also set up a community programme of free breakfasts for children and community health clinics. This synergetic relationship was outward facing to raise awareness and change wider public opinion in addition to being community focussed, addressing inequality and injustice in the everyday. Activism around HIV/AIDS took a similar public and community facing focus. The thirtieth anniversary of the implementation of one of the most pernicious pieces of legislation in LGB people's lives offers an opportunity for reflection on movement strategies. It is often assumed that mass mobilisation and direct action are always successful in achieving progressive political goals. Yet, up to thirty million people, in one of the world's largest global protests, failed to stop the war in Iraq. Tufeki (2014) argues that the outcomes of mass mobilisation are not always proportional to the size and energy they inspire. Moreover, the social world is not in stasis: new forms of oppression and social injustice require us to engage, in Angela Davis' (2016) words: 'freedom (a)s a constant struggle' and to envision and articulate new strategies for movement building.

Struggle, whether it is struggle *for*, such as mass protest activism or struggle *against*, such as organised rebellion, constitutes the visible, iconic and dynamite protest which

challenges injustice and inequality. But in James C Scott's (1985) seminal work on peasant resistance, he powerfully argues that while resistance is often equated with principled, intentional and organised insurgence, it does not always bring about a new social order. Instead, he highlights the everyday forms of peasant resistance, which stop well short of collective outright defiance, but enable understanding of what oppressed peoples do in between revolts. It is a social movement he argues with 'no formal organisation, no formal leaders, no manifestos, no dues, no name and no banner' (Scott, 1985: 35). What everyday forms of resistance share with the more dramatic public confrontations, he contends, is that they are intended to mitigate or deny claims made by the privileged and powerful. What everyday forms of activism share with direct action and mass protest, is that iconic activism is the dynamite, while quotidian activism steadfastly chips away at the edifices of the state.

The lens of the everyday highlights the embeddedness of small-scale actions for change in a synergetic relationship with iconic activism. Our analysis proposes that forging social bonds, making life livable and the transformative potential of everyday actions for public good contribute to social change. In their narratives, participants talk of making small changes in larger social structures, bringing their politics into their everyday lives and transforming public perceptions (eg about what a family can be).

The data make us aware of other benefits that quotidian activism (QA) brings: i) encourages a wider constituency of others to engage in politics; ii) problematizes the place of iconic activism as straightforwardly the most strategic and effective form of activism. These are discussed below:

i) QA encourages a wider constituency of others to engage in progressive struggles

There is a common perception that progressive struggles are a separate and distinct activity performed by particular actors (eg Martin Luther King or Nelson Mandela), and involve-certain kinds of activities (Blackstone, 2004). But Davis (2016) argues that it is 'essential to resist the depiction of activism as the work of heroic individuals in order for people to recognise their potential agency as a part of an ever-expanding community of struggle' (p.2). The key moments of iconic activism might contribute to emphasising this separation: it is something that happens over there, not here, in our midst. This notion of particular actors or the 'perfect standard' places the label of activist out of reach of many of those living out their activism in their daily lives (Bobel, 2007; 147). The lifeblood of activism is social movement. Quotidian activism can build on collectivities that exist in the everyday. If we see politics as part and parcel of our everyday lives, then the vignette that Jan provides illustrates the routine nature of turning up at school, being totally visible and the embeddedness of her politics in her daily life. To return to Abrahams (1992), Jan makes connections between her daily life and institutional power relations.

- ii) *QA problematizes the place of iconic activism as straightforwardly the most strategic and effective form of activism.*

In their discussion about the nature of feminist activism, Martin et al (2007) include examples of civic engagement the first of which is *individual activism* such as making donations, signing a petition, boycotting goods; while the second is *contact activism* which involves contacting someone in authority and thirdly, *collective activism* such as a demonstration or a protest. They caution that such acts only become activism when they are linked overtly to political activities aimed at changing larger social structures. But models of civic engagement implicitly suggest that collective forms of activism are located at the pinnacle; it also obscures some of the shortcomings of protest activism. For example, the strategies and priorities of iconic activism are partly informed by the need to communicate a complex message simply, to mobilise broad based support across a number of constituencies and by the social and political priorities of the time. Some of the narratives in Study 2 drew attention to the lack of support by a queer lobbying group in the struggle for same-sex parenting rights. Respondents mentioned that this campaign group closed a lesbian parenting group on the grounds that it was not 'politically active enough' and thus did not fit in with their agenda. Parenting rights were possibly competing for space with campaigns for the removal of the ban on LGB people serving in the armed forces, recognition of homophobia as a hate crime and the reduction in the age of consent. Social justice campaigns are often influenced by political expediency, harnessing and changing public attitudes and the representational potential of the protest. Everyday activism is likely to address issues in the here and now as they are experienced. Political outcomes may also require different strategies than those needed to achieve cultural or social outcomes such as lesbian parenting or equality in healthcare. Bernstein (2003) argues that discursive impact, which structures the ways in which the social world is accorded meaning, is integral to 'contentious politics' (2003; 357). By living out their lives openly, the lesbian parents in this study contributed to meaning-making about the nature of family.

It may be argued that iconic campaigns have brought about equality in the civil and political rights of LGB people: the Equal Marriage (same-sex partnerships) Act 2014 finally constituted legal parity for LGB people (Richardson and Monro, 2013). The tendency to focus on large scale moments obscures the day to day individual or collective actions that people engage in to bring about change in public perceptions or in social relations, nor does the enactment of legislation guarantee equality in everyday life. Forms of discrimination may be so normative that they often go unnoticed or so minor that we do not feel able to counter them. Everyday actions may be quietly heroic and constitute activism through their transformative potential to embed social change and social justice.

Endnote

Study 1 was funded by Hope Against Cancer, a regional cancer charity, and was conducted in 2014-15. It explored the treatment, care and support needs of LGB people with cancer. Eighteen interviews were undertaken with service users and their carers. Details can be found in Fish and Williamson, 2016.

Study 2 consisted of doctoral research with data collected 2000. It was a qualitative study investigating motherhood and family life in the context of female same sex relationships. 20 couples across rural and urban areas in England were interviewed together and separately. Further information and publications: Almack, 2008.

Study 3 draws on data collected between 2007 and 2010 concerning caring relationships amongst older gay men (over 50) and the experiences of LGB people who lived or worked in a borough of a large British city. Details can be found in Author, 2016.

Footnotes

1 The data we draw on are from participants who identify as LGB people. We use queer to describe forms of activism and note that queer is often used (by others) to denote iconic activism.

2 This conceptualisation was reflected elsewhere, for example, being LGB was listed in the World Health Organisation's, International Classification of Diseases, and only removed in 1992.

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