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# Editorial – Using sexual identity labels to move beyond them

Roshan das Nair

**T**HIS IS THE first issue of the *Psychology of Sexualities Review*. As mentioned in my previous Editorial, this change in name reflects the change made to the Section's name, following a ballot of the Section's membership. I trust that the papers in this issue are a testament to the Editorial Team's promise to continue the legacy of the *Lesbian & Gay Psychology Review's* of publishing high quality papers. In this Editorial I focus on the idea of using sexual identity labels, which have served us well and continue to do so, to move beyond them. I must clarify that by suggesting movement beyond these labels, I am in no way implying that we discard them, but permit a flexibility to incorporate other labelled identities and label-less identities to the fold. This plurality and inclusivity, I believe, forms the spirit of the *Psychology of Sexualities Review*.

When thinking about plurality and inclusivity related to sexuality, two landmark judicial judgments in the recent past come to mind, perhaps because of their personal relevance to me, both from my own subject-ship and from those of some of my clients I see in therapy. The first, the Delhi High Court's reading down of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, a section which criminalises private consensual sex between adults of the same sex (reported in the papers as 'India decriminalises gay sex', Mitta & Singh, 2009); and the second, the UK Supreme Court ruling related to 'gay asylum seekers' ('Gay asylum seekers', 2010). There is no question about the importance, the worthiness, the triumph, and the desperate need

for both these judgments. A close reading<sup>1</sup>, however, examining the language used in the official judgments and the English language newspaper reporting of these, exposes a certain conservative economy of terms that both reports employ. This is particularly pertinent as both judgments are related to minorities from India, and 'gay asylum seekers' from Cameroon and Iran, countries where some sexual minorities<sup>2</sup> do not identify as 'gay' or even 'homosexual'.

The collapsing of sexual identities (and associated labels) into seemingly 'neutral' terminology employing behavioural categories of 'men who have sex with men' (MSM) and 'women who have sex with women' (WSW) is also problematic. While such usage has almost become the mainstay of epidemiological and public health studies (since the 1990s), social constructionists have highlighted the limits of such terms, but have also critiqued the use of identity labels such as 'gay', instead arguing for a 'more textured understandings of sexuality that do not assume alignments among identity, behaviour, and desire' (Young & Meyer, 2005, p.1144). My argument is that just as terms such as MSM and WSW tend to obliterate self-determination regarding sexual identities, terms such as 'gay' and 'lesbian', when applied indiscriminately or as global categories, can be as alienating; obfuscating text and subtext of sexual identities, desires, and practices. These terms then have the potential to become essentialist concepts.

One theme that runs through most of the papers in this issue of the *Review* is the diver-

<sup>1</sup> It is beyond the scope of this Editorial to present a full close reading of these documents, however, I use these cases merely to illustrate a point.

<sup>2</sup> Even the term 'sexual minorities' is perhaps problematic here.

sity of sexual identities: how they are constructed, produced, deployed, measured, their relative importance to those who embody these identities, and how they map onto sexual and other behaviours.

Three papers in this issue connect directly with the focus of this Editorial. Toni Brennan and Peter Hegarty's paper, 'Man seeks Man', examines the narrative and interpretative resources that 'gay' men employed in constructing their online sexual identities. There are certain points raised in this paper, which connect to Adam Jowett's paper, 'Just a regular guy', where he explores the dilemma his participants faced in producing masculine and homosexual identities. Both papers connect to the notion and performance of 'camp' by men, and the possible 'othering' that such a performance may bring; largely through a cyber-interactive space in the case of the former paper, and through physical embodied spaces in the latter. Both papers comment on 'doing masculinity', with Adam's participants claiming the space occupied by 'regular' guys, and some of Toni and Peter's identifying as 'straight acting'; and both suggesting some form of othering of camp men. Esther Rothblum taps into some of these ideas in her exploration of the gender/sexuality interconnectedness of femme and butch women. Her study, 'The complexity of Butch and Femme', examines the perceived importance of these labels, and how they map onto people's (sexual) identities, sexual and other activities of daily living, and the connection between these labels and the ethnicity of her participants.

The 'complexities' and 'dilemmas' raised in the previous papers are also expressed in Sakura Byrne's paper 'Stripped', where she highlights the 'tensions' between experiencing subject and object positions in women working in exotic dancing industries. This study examines these tensions from a non-pathological and non-deviant perspective, and attempts to demonstrate how the dancers' positions and tensions can be related to those that women in patriarchal society generally experience. Moving from

the dancer-client interactional space to another intimate space, James Lea et al. investigate therapist self-disclosure (of their gay identity) to their clients. In 'Gay Psychologists and Gay Clients', James and his colleagues document the views and experiences of gay male clinical psychologists disclosing their sexuality to gay male clients. Inherent to this study are some of the tensions, dilemmas, and complexities discussed in the previous papers, when therapists consider whether or not to disclose their sexual identity, when, how and why to do this, and the potential impact such a disclosure will have on the client and the therapeutic relationship. Finally, in an attempt to quantify some of the constructs raised in the previous papers, Henrique Pereira et al. report on 'Measuring sexual orientation of a Portuguese gay, lesbian and bisexual internet sample'. This paper deals with issues such as categorisation of sexual identity labels, and highlights the dynamic nature of sexuality and sexual identities.

I believe what all these papers do is to offer a more nuanced understanding of sexual identities that go beyond trite and simplistic notions. Large, all encompassing terms have the potential to homogenise sexuality thereby creating a critical mass or a (louder) unified voice, but in doing so also risk disenfranchising other minority positions and voices. Therefore, I trust you will enjoy reading these papers, and that they will engender discussion and debate in future issues.

Finally, my tenure as Editor of the Review has come to an end, and I am certain the incoming Editor, Dr Kristoff Bonello, will continue to steer the publication of the Review in a manner befitting the history of the Review while keeping abreast contemporary developments and dialogues in Psychology and Sexualities studies. I'd also like to take this opportunity to thank the British Psychological Society, the Section and the committee for all their help in seeing us through this transition from the Lesbian & Gay Psychology Review to the Psychology of Sexualities Review.

## References

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