

University of Dundee

## Using Creative Methodology to Explore Life-time LGBTQ+ Love and Relationship Experiences

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**USING CREATIVE  
METHODOLOGY TO EXPLORE  
LIFE-TIME LGBTQ+ LOVE AND  
RELATIONSHIP EXPERIENCES:  
TOWARDS POSITIVE  
INTERGENERATIONAL  
EXCHANGE**



The Citadel Love stories

Dr Mei Fang, School of Health Sciences, University of Dundee



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

## Academic

- Mei Fang (Lead, School of Health Sciences);
- Judith Sixsmith (Co-I, School of Health Sciences);
- Michael Gratzke (Co-Lead, School of Humanities);
- Rayna Rogowsky (Researcher, School of Health Sciences)

## Community

- Ryan McKay (Youth Worker, Citadel Youth Centre)
- Pat Scrutton (Lead, Intergenerational National Network)

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# IDENTITY POLITICS: PARADIGMATIC SHIFT

*“Identity politics is no longer a minor phenomenon, playing out only in the rarified confines of university campuses or providing a backdrop to low-stakes skirmishes in “culture wars” promoted by the mass media. Instead, identity politics has become a master concept that explains much of what is going on in global affairs.” - Francis Fukuyama*

*“Unless such liberal democracies can work their way back to more universal understandings of human dignity, they will doom themselves—and the world—to continuing conflict.” - Francis Fukuyama*



# DIGNITY

- Identity – a social conceptualisation deeply rooted in Western political thought and forms the basis of most contemporary social science – yet leaves out what classical philosophers realised was crucially important: **the craving for dignity**.
- Socrates – dignity as “third part” of the human soul
- In Plato’s Republic “Thymos” –dignity as our spirit



# BACKGROUND

- Changes in notions of identity, identity politics, ideology began with notions of emancipation and human rights, towards more open and free expressions of gender and sexual identity
- Love and relationships experiences have become a backdrop
  - marginalised accounts of love and relationships
  - experiences that deviate from sociocultural norms and/or dominant societal views

# COMMUNITY-BASED PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH APPROACH

- Working jointly with our community partner, Citadel Centre, key focus was to prioritise participants' voices
- Concepts and ideas for the proposed project created at the outset with Citadel staff
- Intersectional feminism and principles of transitions theory guided conceptual development and provided an analytical frame to unpack life experiences and opportunities
- Storytelling via both narrative and creative writing mechanisms used to:
  - enable intergenerational knowledge exchange
  - explore LGBTQ+ love and relationship phenomena across sociocultural and environmental contexts
  - humanise diverse experiences by enabling a self-reflexive process when witnessing, exchanging and/or co-constructing of stories





**AIM**

- *Explore social and health outcomes associated with younger and older peoples' LGBTQ+ love and relationship experiences using creative intergenerational storytelling*



# STORYTELLING

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- *Individuals construct the world through stories* - Bruner (1990)
- Storytelling is a method that can be valuable for acquiring deeper understandings of ourselves and our everyday lives
- By exchanging stories, we can learn about how people construct their sense of self and how they attach meanings to situations and environments (Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1977; Polkinghorne, 1988; Bruner, 1990)

# WORKSHOP 1: STORY CONTENT



**STORY CONTENT “IDENTIFYING TOPICS AND ISSUES”:**  
2-HOUR WORKSHOP BROUGHT TOGETHER YOUTHS (N=5), ADULTS (N=2), AND OLDER PEOPLE (N=3) TOGETHER TO IDENTIFY SALIENT LGBT2QI+ LOVE AND RELATIONSHIP TOPICS AND ISSUES.



**ACTIVITIES:** (A) BRIEF OVERVIEW OF PROJECT; (B) STORY SHARING VIA DELIBERATIVE DIALOGUE – A METHODOLOGY THAT PROVIDES AN INTEGRATED FRAMEWORK FOR ENGAGING PARTICIPANTS, CONCURRENTLY GENERATING AND UNPACKING AND SYNTHESISING NEW KNOWLEDGE.

# IDENTIFYING TOPICS & IDEAS

## TOPICS

Connections



Friendships with other LGBTQ+ people



Explore NOT being in any boxes



Polygamy



Express what you want in relationships

social situation



LGBT relationships in school

**COURAGE**

THIS is who I am



Home

Being single

Adjusting to 'REAL LIFE'



Community

relationships

IDEAS



Culture



LOCKDOWN

Privacy & intimacy versus Out & public



compromise

LOGICAL family

BIOLOGICAL family



FIND the others



safety

friends

HISTORY



Non-heteronormative

NOT taught in school



Dating apps

Sports teams



Lockdown bubble

## TIPS FOR STORIES

★ ANYTHING is possible

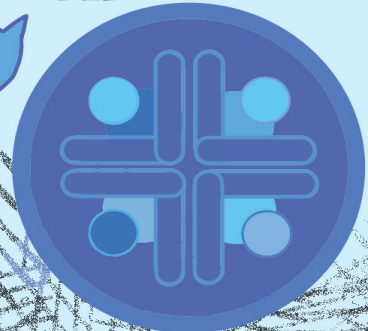
★ Try to AVOID stereotypes

★ ANY genre

★ Think about ETHICS

★ All love & relationships are valid

SHOW DON'T TELL



# WORKSHOP 2 – STORY FORMING



*Story Forming “Exploring Mechanisms for Nuance and Context”*: 2-hour workshop whereby participants explore creative writing practices for bringing nuance and context to address complex emotions associated with LGBTQI+ love and relationship topics and issues.



*Activities*: (A) brief overview of creative writing mechanisms (incl. zine making); (B) Led by Sixsmith, deliberative dialogue discussion of creative mechanisms for contextualising complex issues.

# EXPLORING NVANCE & CONTEXT

2021 compared to 1991  
 Past lives / present  
 Different uses  
 Set ranges 20-25  
 I might miss a nice 26 yr old!  
 Way to get in a room  
 Dating apps  
 School  
 Natural to meet people  
 1st meetings

Dates  
 Relationships  
 Write a collection  
 Before 1980s  
 Anonymise?  
 Situations

Renaissance  
 Tension

Friends grow closer  
 Relationships  
 Seen differently in different countries & cultures

TRANS  
 Gay  
 I'll support you  
 Self harm & suicide  
 Good & bad days

Self isolation = IRONIC  
 1980's = isolated  
 can't control love  
 Why would you not deserve the love of more than one person?  
 Sensual Reach out  
 Love is scheduled to the hour & minute

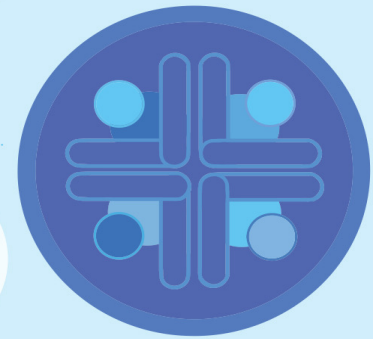
Melissa  
 Still best friends

She is Golden -  
 only slightly afraid to hold her hands in public  
 We are open  
 Paralysed

Dad... I'm gay  
 Too young to know  
 RANT!  
 Friends

Conspiracy - invented by men  
 Lessons to come  
 Attitudes will change  
 Age

I can't hold hands in public  
 Things happen  
 Different Now



# WORKSHOP 3 – STORY PRODUCT

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- *Story Product “Writing stories for Social Change”*: participants engaged in creative writing as a mechanism to reflect, generate awareness and bring to light the complexities of LGBTQ+ love and relationship across generations, and its impact on health and wellbeing.
- *Activities*: Blocked time for creative writing and story sharing; post-session check-in (challenges, successes, overall thoughts, next steps).

CITADEL LOVE  
STORIES ZINE

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# Dear Reader,

This *little zine* contains the stories participants wrote in the summer of 2021 during three creative-writing online workshops co-organised by the Citadel Youth Centre in Edinburgh and researchers from the University of Dundee.

It all began with storytelling between people of different ages but with an inclusive attitude towards love and relationships. The youngest storytellers were in their mid-teens and the oldest in their early sixties. Many identified as belonging on the LGBT2QI+ rainbow. Some single, some in a relationship and other in polyamorous romantic relationships.

The online format was an excellent way to bring people together across both remote and rural parts of Scotland. We shared our story ideas together and gave each other feedback, until by the final workshop, we had produced our own finished versions. Some wrote their stories down, others told them verbally. The latter we transcribed in full. This zine contains many of those stories which we hope you will enjoy!

The full-page illustrations (and snippets of them throughout) were made by the visual facilitator Clare Mills of 'Listen Think Draw' who took part in the workshops. The front and back cover illustrations were commissioned later - created by Ashling Larkin. The design and layout was created by Juliet Neun-Hornick.

Co-Editors of the little zine are Dr Mei Lan Fang and Prof Judith Sixsmith, School of Health Sciences; and Prof Michael Gratzke, School of Humanities, Social Sciences and Law - all from the vibrant Dundee City Campus of the University of Dundee.

This project was funded by the Institute for Social Sciences Research at the University of Dundee. We would like to thank project team members: Pat Scrutton, Ryan McKay, Divya Jindal-Snape, Rayna Rogowsky, Ashleigh Ward and Martin Purcell for their support throughout the project.



Institute for Social Sciences  
Research (ISSR)  
University of Dundee

## Ash's Story by Ash

When my friend was 15, he came out as trans, and then a few months later he realised he was gay as well as transgender. His name is Andrea and he had felt like this since his younger years, but never quite knew how to come out. So, he went for some food and then we started to chat and then he came out to me, and I said, 'I will support you in the best way possible,' and that he could come to me whenever he wanted a chat or even a shoulder to cry on.

When he was 12, he started feeling low moods and started to use self-harm as a way to cope with his feelings and emotions and then a few years later he started to attempt to take his own life. And it seemed to me that I was the only one who could be able to talk him out of taking his own life. And once he was 15, he got put in a secure unit within Edinburgh and his low mood was getting worse, not better, than a year on. And he is now out of secure,

and he is living in Fife but still struggling to cope with his safety and his risk-taking behaviours and is still struggling to this day and is an extremely close friend.

I'm still looking out for him, and so is his boyfriend, and he is slowly getting better. Day by day, with the odd bad day and good days, but more recently he's had more harder days than easy days, but he's getting stronger. Every time we meet up or see each other on Facetime calls.



## Phil's Story by Phil

Being told to self-isolate sounds so ironic to me. Thankfully I've yet to receive the text or phone call to be told to 'duck and cover'. I came out and fell in love in the 1980s, when even expressing my need for human affection had to be covert. It's both ironic and I use that term advisedly because nuclear war preparation and the state sponsored image of the family was promoted as normal then.

My passions still flamed brightly, and I was reminded regularly that I was pretty far removed from typical normality. I learned the hard way to understand the need for compliance. I often employed 'stealth mode', silent running, to be and yet not to be in my collusion, collision and frequent

experience of social catastrophe. I have to admit, though sometimes it was kind of thrilling. Thinking of myself as being a type of outlaw.

So tell me about isolation; its cold silence and its petty exclusions. The sin, guilt and rejection are just blows to the bruises and gay bashing I've received in what already feels a long half-life. There's also nothing new in these current political times of systematic greed, petty ridicule and the erasure of self-identity.

I'm familiar with such state and media love-ins which fine-tune the bigotry with slippery tentacles to snare, silence and shame us. So rehashed, so familiar... so retro.



***ROLE OF  
TECHNOLOGY IN  
FACILITATING  
AND HINDERING  
LOVE AND  
RELATIONSHIP  
EXPERIENCE***

- Technology as a facilitator and hindrance
- In discussion about the age filter function on dating apps, one participant wondered, “...*there’s 10 years between us and it got me to thinking how would we have met in this day and age? Would we have met?*”

**MAKING  
CONNECTIONS  
WITHIN LGBTQ+  
COMMUNITIES THAT  
ARE NOT ROMANTIC**

- *“You can create friendships with other LGBT people that like, like you would never be in a relationship with them just because you don’t really want to. But you can like have really good connections with them in that sort of way as well. Like for me, I know a lot of other LGBT people and it’s like nice to be able to relate to things”*

## **MOVING BEYOND LABELS AND SILOS TO ENHANCE OUTCOMES RELATED TO LOVE AND RELATIONSHIP EXPERIENCE**

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- *“I’d like to be able to create an environment where it’s not just LGBTQ+ go in one social and then everyone else would go into another. I want it to be more of a natural environment in which everyone feels safe enough to choose what they want out of a social situation, rather than just being like, oh I have to go to a social with only boys or only girls, to be a real mixed environment.”*

***IMPACT OF COVID-  
19 ON LGBTQ+  
LOVE AND  
RELATIONSHIPS***

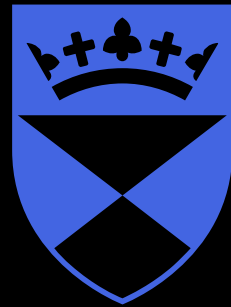
- For some, relationships mitigated isolation and lockdown expedited milestones as with another participant who moved in with a partner which served to “improve” the relationship.
- *“I’ve done a lot of kind of reflection during lockdown as well on what my set up is like and how loving relationships are so important to me”.*

***CREATING ONE'S  
OWN COMMUNITY  
(LOGICAL  
VERSUS  
BIOLOGICAL  
FAMILIES)***

- Allies were recognised as important to love and relationship experiences, as one participant reflected in response to hearing a story, “...we’re *part of these wider constellations of people*”.
- Sense of belonging with having allies was particularly important in the context of acceptance of rejection by biological family

***STORYTELLING AS  
BENEFICIAL FOR  
UNDERSTANDING  
ONE'S OWN  
EXPERIENCE***

- Participants conveyed that storytelling allowed for hearing one's own voice and sharing hoped-for norms about LGBTQ+ love and relationship experiences. For example, choosing a historical setting for a story and empowering characters with unattainable experiences for that setting was deemed meaningful: *"...where she set it, that world that she has chosen, you know, two girls just would not be able to do that yet, she is able to describe that whole experience in such a positive way"*



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