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**Title: TALKING SEXUALITY ONLINE —TECHNICAL, METHODOLOGICAL
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TALKING SEXUALITY ONLINE —TECHNICAL, METHODOLOGICAL AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS OF ONLINE RESEARCH WITH SEXUAL MINORITY YOUTH

ABSTRACT

While Internet-based tools are gaining currency in social work teaching and practice, social work researchers are tapping into the development of computer-mediated methods for research with dispersed and hard-to-reach populations. This paper is a reflective commentary about the opportunities and challenges of using computer-mediated methods in a qualitative inquiry about young people's (18-26 years) experiences of negotiating lesbian, gay, bisexual and queer (LGBQ) identities in Australian workplaces. The research used two Internet-based methods of online interviews and web-based surveys to capture young people's experiences of disclosing and discussing LGBQ identities in past and current work environments. In this commentary, I explore the technical, methodological and ethical challenges and tensions presented by using online tools in qualitative research. To conclude, I discuss wider applications of computer-mediated communication for social work practice and research with hidden and hard-to-reach populations.

KEY WORDS: Computer-mediated communication, web-based surveys, online interviewing, sexuality, young LGBQ people.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade the Internet has began to influence how qualitative data is collected and interpreted through cyberspace. The expansive use of the Internet is a critical trend in a technologically-saturated society, making it ideal for reaching out to new research fields and populations (Robinson, 2001). Through Internet-based communities, instant messaging, bulletin boards, email and web logs (or 'blogs') a new network of human

relationships 'online' has emerged (Mann and Stewart, 2000). This new mode of electronically relating is constructed through text and discourse and privileges the significance of visual text over other human senses (Markham, 2005). The social interaction between online personas produces equally fruitful data for social researchers as off-line communication methods. As Bowker and Tuffin (2004: 229) argue '...cybertextual data provides an extensive landscape for interpreting social experience' in qualitative methodologies. Online mediums rely on interaction between two or more online personas as a sense of Self evolves through text-based interactions. As Markham states 'I am responded to, therefore I am' (2005: 795). Written text is the primary unit of analysis for computer-mediated communication which strengthens the suitability of online methods for qualitative research.

Internet-based tools are gradually gaining currency in social work teaching and practice. The Internet is an invaluable portal for accessing empirical and practice-based knowledge and as resource for information exchange (Schembri, 2008). Similarly, the utility of Information Communication Technologies and 'Web 2.0' have been harnessed for advancing approaches to social work education and practice (Hunt, 2002; McAullife, 2003; Parrott and Madoc-Jones, 2008). For example, Hunt (2002) explores chat rooms as a forum for online counseling with young people. Web-based teaching environments present opportunities for enhancing student's engagement with reflective writing and for developing interpersonal skills through virtual communication (Huerta-Wong and Schoech, 2010; Ouellette et al, 2006). Computer-mediated communication such as email has been applied as an interviewing tool for capturing the perceptions and social experiences of vulnerable adults (Egan et al, 2006; McCoyd and Kerson, 2006). More recently, social work commentators have waded into critical discussions about the 'digital

divide' and the socioeconomic divisions sustained through inequitable Internet access and usage (Steyaert and Gould, 2009; Wong et al, 2009).

In this commentary, I focus on the application of two online methods, online interviewing and web-based surveys, for collecting qualitative data about young lesbian, gay, bisexual and queer-identifying (LGBQ) people's life worlds. This paper is a reflective commentary about the pearls and pitfalls of using computer-mediated methods in a qualitative inquiry into young LGBQ people'sⁱ (18-26 years) experiences of the workplace. There are two key aims. The first aim is to explore the application of online methods for research with 'hidden' social groups, such as young LGBQ people who have limited opportunities to discuss non-normative sexual identities in heterocentric environments. The second aim is to outline some of the procedural, methodological, and ethical challenges of using online methods in qualitative inquiry. Research examples are drawn from a social work research project into how thirty-four young people negotiated LGBQ sexual identities in workplace relationships and cultures across Australia.ⁱⁱ

The 'Sexualities@Work' project aimed to explore young LGBQ people's experiences of workplace participation as paid employees and to learn how young people negotiate non-normative sexual identities in organisational environments. A secondary purpose was to develop a detailed understanding of how broader organisational arrangements affect social and sexual relationships within the workplace. An overarching objective was to make a contribution to the growing body of social work and social care knowledge dedicated to advancing the rights and interests of sexual minority youth in Western societies (Anderson, 1998; Brown, 1998; LaSala, 2007; Morrow, 2004; Trotter, 2001, 2006; Van Leeuwen et al, 2006; Scourfield et al, 2008). Young LGBQ people are seldom given the opportunity to speak safely of their experiences as non-normative subjectivities

in an affirmative environment (Valentine, Butler & Skelton, 2001). Prior to their emergence in the 1980s as an identity cohort, young LGBTQ people have historically been perceived as either non-existent or rightfully hidden within social sciences and youth studies (Cohler & Hammack, 2007; Miceli, 2002). The use of online research methods is an ethical strategy for amplifying the voices of young LGBTQ people as a hidden population.

This paper is divided into three sections. In this first section, I outline current literature about the opportunities and limitations of using online methods. I then outline the research process and online methods applied in my research with LGBTQ young people. This leads into a discussion of the procedural, methodological and ethical challenges encountered in using online methods and the solutions applied in remedying these issues. The final section touches on wider applications of online methods in social work.

ONLINE RESEARCH METHODS: OPPORTUNITIES AND LIMITATIONS

Literature on computer-mediated communication in social research stresses numerous advantages to both the researcher and research participants. Computer-mediated research tools increase autonomy in participation by providing a private and user-friendly setting, typically at participant's homes, and delivering a high degree of flexibility for users in when, where and for how long they participate (Mann and Stewart, 2000; Mustanski, 2001). Participants can swiftly exit the interview setting with one click of a mouse button without having to explain their absence (Bowker and Tuffin, 2004). Online communication brings greater assurance of anonymity for online participants as well as the space to construct an online persona that is preferable to the participant beyond the boundedness of the physical body (McCoyd and Kerson, 2006). Furthermore, online

participants may feel greater comfort in disclosing their life-stories without having to engage with the researcher in person (Bowker and Tuffin, 2004).

There are no geographical limitations to communicating through the Internet - it provides an expansive electronic field for social researchers seeking to access geographically dispersed populations (Mann and Stewart, 2002). This places responsibility on the researcher for setting clear boundaries for their inquiry; as Markham reiterates “boundaries are not so much determined by ‘location’ as they are by ‘interaction’” (2005: 801). Email and instant messaging tools enable speed and immediacy for communication while ensuring both researcher and participants have ample time for reflection and consideration of responses (Bowker and Tuffin, 2004; Selwyn and Robson, 1998).

Internet-based methods create opportunities for socially vulnerable groups to participate in research. Bowker and Tuffin (2004) argue that online technologies widen access for participants living with disabilities, providing a more equitable method of participation while addressing concerns about visibility and social stigma. Computer-mediated communication is also a useful medium for accessing ‘hard to reach’ populations who are not readily visible in the public arena (Mann and Stewart, 2000). This is particularly pertinent for young LGBTQ people who do not wish to publicly identify as non-heterosexual or do not feel safe to discuss same-sex attractions and relationships in heterosexist and hostile environments (Hillier and Harrison, 2007).

Despite the notable prospects that online methods bring to qualitative research, there are several limitations that need to be assessed in research design. The Internet is not an equal playing field – access to the Internet can be shaped by social location across divisions in gender, ethnicity and socioeconomic status (Liamputtong and Ezzy, 2005; Wong et al,

2009). In Australian households the percentage of homes with Internet access has almost quadrupled from 16% in 1998 to 60% in 2005-06, heightening the Internet as a rapidly growing media (ABS 2006-07, cat. no. 8146.0). However, this has not delivered universal access to the Internet or overcome divisions in socioeconomic status. In 2006, 35% of Australian households in the lower-income bracket had private access to the Internet in comparison to 90% of households in the highest-income bracket (ABS 2006-07, cat. no. 8146.0). Online participation is restricted to respondents having a reasonable skill-level in computer and information literacy (Mann and Stewart, 2000). Computer-mediated communication cannot capture the spontaneity of face-to-face interaction or convey non-verbal cues, at least not without considerable investment in sufficient software and bandwidth (Liamputtong and Ezzy, 2005; Mann and Stewart, 2002).

In my research with young LGBQ people, I considered online methods to be highly appropriate because of the compatibility between the research population and the technology. Between 1998 to 2005-06 Internet access for 18-24 year old Australian residents dramatically increased from 58% to 85% of young people (ABS 2006-07 cat. no. 8146.0). Furthermore, earlier research suggests that the Internet is a prominent technology in the socio-sexual lives of young LGBQ people living in Australia (Hillier and Harrison, 2007; Hillier et al, 2001). The Internet offers an alternative space for forging new friendships and intimate relationships online, rehearsing coming out to others and practising cyber-sex safely while learning about safer sexual practices. This is particularly important for young people for whom there are limited spaces available for safely expressing LGBQ identities (Hillier and Harrison, 2007).

OVERVIEW OF ONLINE METHODS IN THE RESEARCH DESIGN

Three methods were used for data collection – online interviews, web-based surveys and face-to-face interviews. Multiple methods ensured that young people had options and flexibility in how they chose to participate and that findings could be compared and corroborated across methods. The overall research design was informed by a constructivist methodology. This approach locates the researcher as actively and subjectively engaged in the generation of findings while acknowledging the co-construction of interview data between researcher and participants (Charmaz, 2006). This standpoint was compatible with the use of online methods; the interaction between two Internet-based users through text and linguistic conventions was privileged to generate detailed accounts of participant's working lives.

Thirteen young people participated in a series of online interviews using a free-to-download instant messaging programme. Instant messaging (IM) involves the synchronous exchange of messages between two or more users simultaneously in real time (Mann and Stewart, 2002). Online interviews required a longer period of engagement than face-to-face interviews because of the requirement to respond through written text. It was a time-consuming process that could occur day or night, depending on participant's availability, and typically ran for two to three meetings over several hours in length. However, this was outweighed by the advantage of producing immediate transcriptions and negating the need to transcribe lengthy interview recordings. As most interviews were spread across several meetings, a number of participants stated a preference to continue discussion the next consecutive day. This short gap between interviews allowed sufficient time for both parties to reflect on their responses and for follow-up and clarifying questions to be composed between meetings.

Online interviews were led by a focussed, active interview approach (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995; Liamputtong and Ezzy, 2005) to generate in-depth reflections about participant's previous and current experiences of organisational environments. Interviews commenced with a broad statement and question that was conducive to storytelling: '*Tell me about your experiences of the workplace...What it like is as a non-hetero / not straight worker in your workplace?*' This then led into a recursive series of questions guided by a list of topics from a theme list. Themes were developed from topics prominent in the workplace literature and from two pilot interviews, including an online interview with a gay-identifying volunteer. Topics in the themes list included *formal /informal roles, disclosure at work, perceptions of organisational cultures, significant relationships within work, relationship to members of management, and life/work balance*. The web-based survey contained open-ended questions adapted from the same list for consistency across methods.

The web-based survey contained open-ended questions that were drafted from the theme list and uploaded onto a central research website. This type of survey can be an attractive option for online participation while simultaneously providing researchers with a consistent format of data for response comparison (Mann and Stewart, 2002). Participants were provided with a text-box layout under each question to enter their responses. Text boxes expanded to accommodate longer, more detailed narratives. Drop-down menus with fixed-responses were used to gather basic demographic information including current age (range 16-26 years), current location of workplace ('rural', 'regional' or 'urban') and home state/territory location. There were no more than eleven questions listed to prevent respondent fatigue. Participants were asked to provide an email address if they were willing to participate further. This option created opportunities for asking further clarifying and probing questions and flesh out original responses through email

dialogue. The majority of participants were willing to continue their discussions about the workplace; four young people elected to participate in additional online interviews.

Data generated from both methods were analysed through coding techniques that included open and theoretical coding methods in line with the constructivist ground theory approach detailed by Charmaz (2006). Codes were organised through the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis program *NVivo7* (QSR, 2006) to produce a transparent audit trail. Thematic frames were developed through stages of initial, focussed, axial and theoretical coding (Charmaz, 2006). Trustworthiness in the findings was raised through – 1) returning transcripts to participants as a process of member checking to ensure the scripts were fair and accurate accounts; 2) inviting feedback from participants on initial themes; and, 3) presenting initial findings to local, national and international audiences through conferences and seminars to determine whether themes appeared credible to external audiences.

CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS IN USING ONLINE METHODS

Using online methods brought a number of distinct procedural, methodological and ethical challenges and tensions to the research process. In this section, I separate these issues into procedural, ethical or methodological challenges. However, these are not intended as mutually exclusive fields but rather overlapping considerations in research design. For example, the issue of authenticity online brings to the fore ethical concerns with protecting participants' right to remain anonymous balanced against methodological issues in verifying the identity and suitability of participants for the research.

Procedural challenges and considerations

There were several procedural hiccups which interrupted the flow of data collection. Technical hitches with the instant messaging programme and Internet access presented occasional hindrances. It was not always possible to log on to the messaging programme first attempt when it was inundated with other users. Scheduling online meetings with participants in other states required taking into consideration time differences across three Australian time-zones; earlier commencement of daylight savings in one state created an additional headache when arranging meeting times. While I had access to a high-internet speed on campus, several participants were reliant on much slower dial-up speeds which frequently dropped out and interrupted interviews. This illustrates how inequities in Internet access and use can detrimentally impact on the interview process and further expand the social and economic schism between the researcher and participants.

Language use and building rapport online

It was not always easy to establish rapport with online participants when depending entirely on text-based communication and without being able to observe non-verbal cues (McCoyd and Kerson, 2006). It was difficult to read the self-presentation of young people without the presence of typical markers of identity and socio-cultural background such as dress, vocal pitch, accents, and mannerisms (Mann and Stewart, 2002). Both participants and I used emoticons as a way of injecting a more humanistic element into our interactions, for instance ☺ for smiling/ happy or ☹ for sad/ upset. Other abbreviations such as 'lol' (laughing out loud) and 'OMG' (oh my god!) were also useful in what Mann and Stewart (2002: 614) identify as 'linguistic conventions' in computer-mediated communication. These conventions assisted in maintaining emotional connections with participants and for signalling interruptions, such as 'brb' (be right back) when requiring short breaks.

After the first few interviews I became adept in using text-speech as or what Mann and Stewart (2000) refer to as electronic paralanguage. Both participants and I relied on abbreviated forms of text-speech to hasten the speed of typing responses and replying, such as 'ppl' (people) or 'btw' (by the way). This vernacular reflects social and cultural practices in online communities (Mann and Stewart, 2002). The symbols and text people use in computer-mediated communication represent how participants construct and perform their selves in a disembodied digital space or, in this instance, how young people chose to be perceived and interpreted by the researcher (Markham, 2005).

The following excerpt from an interview with Pearson illustrates the appearance of abbreviated text as 'paralanguage'. Pearson (22 years, flight attendant) is recounting how to signify the 'best passenger on board', and in the process, relaying the sexual dynamics of his work-environment:

Paul says:

when are times when you'll (crew members) all talk about your sex lives?

Pearson says:

all the time lol [laugh out loud]

Pearson says:

crew rooms on standby, walking to carparks, downtime in terminals, galleys of the aircraft

Pearson says:

locker banging for BOB's lol

Paul says:

huh?

Pearson says:

lol BOB - Best on Board, and Locker Banging is where we tap the locker above hot people on the plane

Abbreviated text and paralanguage sometimes required clarifying questions to help build shared understanding between researcher and participant and to remove ambiguity in

meaning. Likewise, it was important to unpack the descriptors online participants used to describe how they perceived their sexuality. Stein (1997) employed a similar line of questioning when inviting lesbian women to share their ‘self-stories’ of how they perceived their sexual subjectivity. I integrated some of Stein’s questions into online interviews and the web-based survey, such as ‘how would you describe your sexuality?’ and ‘what do these words mean to you?’ (1997: 208). One participant, Frankie (20 years, office administrator), used the following string of words to describe his sexuality in a survey response: *‘Complex, relatively dangerous and unknown’*. In a proceeding online interview, Franky elaborated further as to why his sexuality could be construed as ‘dangerous’ within his Italian community and extended family network:

Franky: Dangerous- I still have to hide it from my family as within my ethnic community being gay is enough to get you killed but also complex because at this stage A) I’m not interested in a sexual relationship and B) I am still learning about who I am and who I can trust with regards to disclosure.

This example highlights first, the ambiguity and multiple meanings attached to language use in computer-mediated communication and second, the varied meanings attached to LGBTQ sexualities depending on social and cultural location. Being able to respond to these ambiguous statements through additional questions helped clarify uncertainties and indeterminate meanings. Franky’s response also reiterates the dangers of assuming a shared vocabulary with participants on what is meant by ‘sexuality’ as each young person’s sexual narrative has its own distinctive elements (Kong et al, 2002; Savin-Williams, 2005).

Silence is not useful in synchronous or real-time communication as it is open to being mis-read as absence or non-participation. I adopted various ways for maintaining rapport

with participants and signalling my attentiveness to their responses - by conveying enthusiasm and appreciation for participant's contributions; reiterating my patience and reassurance when having to wait for elaborate and long responses; and, by encouraging each participant to preview the survey questions listed on the website as a way of orientating their thoughts to the topic area, as suggested by Mann and Stewart (2002). To maintain trust and transparency I invited participants to ask questions about the project and about myself. I also uploaded a brief autobiographical account of my own work history as a gay-identifying man onto the research website. This was to help alleviate the power differential between the researcher and the researched and to signal a degree of commonality between us.

Methodological challenges and considerations

Authenticity in the virtual

Authenticity is a thorny issue in online research that raises questions as to how researchers determine that online users are who they claim to be (Binik et al, 1999; Flicker et al, 2004; Markham, 2005). When using online methods, it is impossible to remove the risk of 'identity fraud' online. It can also be argued that this risk remains a potential problem in 'off-line' methods including surveying and telephone interviewing. There is always the possibility of embellishment and poetic licence in the recounting of personal experiences (Mann and Stewart, 2000). Verifying participants' identities raises further anxiety about how researchers obtain informed consent from online participants (Rhodes et al, 2003). Seeking to verify participant's online identities also generates methodological tensions in assessing the level of trustworthiness of qualitative findings.

Social science frequently privileges positivist representations of the Body as the 'true' site of authenticity and validity in knowledge-construction (Markham, 2005). From a

relational perspective, Markham argues the existence of online participants is based on 'direct or perceived interaction with others' (2005:795), meaning that online identities are frequently created and sustained through text-based processes of sending and receiving text. From this position, the validity of accounts shared online should be assessed by the credibility, coherence and consistency of text-based accounts, and not through ascertaining the 'true' embodied identity of online personas.

Suggested measures for addressing identity fraud include requesting proof of identity from participants to verify identities or asking similar questions across multiple formats to ensure consistent, and supposedly reliable, responses (Flicker et al, 2004). As the researcher I did not have the legal authority to request formal identification from young people. Neither did I wish to make such a militant request that would have compromised young LGBQ people's autonomy and abandoned anonymity as an ethical strategy. These kinds of 'reality checks' could be experienced as alienating for some participants, particularly for young people who were concerned about information sharing and disclosing their sexual orientation.

To strengthen trustworthiness in the findings, I accounted for three factors in the research design. First, the websites, email lists and organisations selected for distributing project information were youth-based and focussed on sexuality-related issues. This helped diminish the risk of deception from Internet users 'external' to these electronic networks and sites. Second, I sustained a prolonged engagement with online participants through continuous emails or across several meetings online, which assisted in building cohesive and credible accounts of young people's working lives. Third, young people's accounts documented in face-to-face interviews corroborated with the experiences and issues shared through online accounts, indicating consistent threads across the three methods.

Ethical challenges and considerations

Confidentiality online

Ensuring confidentiality can be difficult with online communication, particularly when using shared computers that save temporary files. Email listservs can be hacked into by unwelcome visitors if left online over a period of time or when stored on a shared PC. This was a danger I had to forewarn other young people of when discussing how to protect their privacy online or when using a computer in a shared space (McAuliffe, 2003; Riggle et al, 2005). For example, one participant had used the reception computer at his work while fielding phone calls in a busy workspace. To protect the privacy of participants' responses, all data was saved on a portable drive and deleted from email and instant messaging programmes.

For some young people, online communication was an empowering forum for exposing grievances and mistreatment in some organisations, for example instances of homophobic abuse or group exclusion. Several online participants requested me to 'name' their former workplaces in the transcriptions and later reporting of findings. This was chiefly in regards to large retail corporations where young people had recalled exploitative or homophobic conditions and sought justice through 'naming and shaming'. After careful reflection, I decided to go against their requests in accordance with university ethical requirements and because of two primary concerns. My first concern was that once findings had been circulated or published there would be little scope for participants to later retract their initial request. My second concern was that there was no way of predicting how this information would be received by others, for example by the employers named, and what ensuing legal or procedural action could arise.

This decision jarred with my personal and professional commitment to using social research as a vehicle for giving voice to socially marginalised and invisible populations. An overarching objective in social research is to generate knowledge that will assist to ‘achieve social justice and improve the social conditions of individuals, groups and communities’ (D’Cruz and Jones, 2007: 30). This decision also brought to the surface the political dimensions of knowledge construction in social work (D’Cruz & Jones, 2007). As researchers, we hold higher authority in curtailing what level of participant’s personal information and experiential knowledge is disseminated to wider audiences.

Support provision to young people online

The lack of visual and audio cues in computer-mediated communication can complicate attempts to provide interpersonal support, especially when not being able to see or hear participant’s distress and discomfort. Before advertising the project I uploaded a list of LGBQ and youth-related support services onto the research website for participants seeking interpersonal support. Arguably, the researcher’s ability to make appropriate referrals for participants is always limited through online dialogue (McCoyd and Kerson, 2006). The majority of the time I was reliant on participant’s responses of ‘*Feeling ok*’ or ‘*Yep I’m fine*’ as outward indications of their wellbeing. When attempting to provide support I encouraged each person to signal if they needed to halt or terminate the interview. While at face-value these exchanges were reassuring, they were not definitive indications of each participant’s emotive state, especially when young people were sharing painful accounts about homophobic actions witnessed and experienced within the workplace. Mia (24 years, health promotion worker) was one of twenty young people who had previously witnessed the exchange of homonegative humour at work:

Mia— ... we had a team meeting and my manager (male, 65) made a joke about AIDS in a context of health promotion and eating etc... I was pretty hurt by this as my dad has AIDS and also I felt that these people have no idea of the things some people go through—it's not a distant thing to everyone and of course if he joked about that, what would he say about or think about me being queer.

Potentially traumatic and distressing stories from the workplace warranted extended contact with participants post-interview – the relationship between participant and researcher did not end at the conclusion of each interview. Accordingly, I contracted with each participant to have post-interview contact through email or telephone, as a way of debriefing after the data collection process.

While online communication can enhance the autonomy of participants, the researcher's control over the interview process can diminish. One participant chose to abruptly exit our third meeting online as the interview was concluding and did not respond to any further correspondence. This limitation in support provision has to be weighed up against the autonomy of participants to make their own decisions about withdrawing from the research. In another case, support extended beyond the boundaries of the research topic as one young person, Nick (18 years, computer sales assistant), used our second online meeting as a means of debriefing about recent turbulent events in his family life: *...and my dad found out I was gay last night...he still thinks I'll be able to get treatment, or an injection, or anything to "change me back"*. This led into a lengthy discussion about Nick's immediate support needs and short-term solution thinking. Nick's poignant disclosure highlights the challenges of maintaining focus in online communication. In another light, it throws up opportunities for immediacy in support provision to young LGBTQ people and for debriefing and rehearsing coming out stories online.

WIDER APPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

Computer-mediated communication brings a number of opportunities for enhancing social work practice with socially marginalised groups and communities. A significant opportunity lies in the application of online communication for research with hidden and socially marginalised populations. Vulnerability to social oppression and discrimination may result in LGBQ people carefully regulating the sharing of personal information to external and professional audiences. LGBQ-identifying youth may be reticent to discuss issues of sexual identity and same-sex relationships in fear of encountering heterosexist attitudes and actions. Internet-based tools can facilitate research and practice-based dialogue with silenced and invisible voices along the social spectrum of sexuality, for example, lesbian and gay carers whose social care needs are rarely considered or actively overlooked. Similarly, online communication may facilitate safer exploration and assessment of stigmatised dimensions of human relationships, such as gathering information about older people's sexual health needs and relationships for the provision of domiciliary and residential care services. An alternative means of gathering data about the social world without direct interaction with service users and carers is through accessing online journals or public blogs. Selected bloggers may also be invited to share more focussed dialogue about their journalised experiences (Hookway, 2009).

In practice, the immediacy and speed of real-time communication can increase the frequency of contact and support provision to service users and carers, and compliment face-to-face meetings and assessment processes. It also circumnavigates the physical barriers encountered when accessing human services in remote and rural areas. Online tools can expand choices to service users about they wish to engage with service providers, and increase access for carers who may be home-bound or for people with restricted mobility and limited access to transport. For social workers and practice

educators, online methods may be useful as an evaluation tool for unobtrusively (and anonymously) gathering service user and carer feedback about service planning and development or about the performance of student social workers on placement. Chat-room forums and virtual portals such as Second Life can be accessed by small groups and learning communities for educative as well as therapeutic purposes. Finally, the methodological approach of Stein's (1997) self-stories has wider application for person-centered practice with sexually diverse service user and carer groups. The strength of this method is the emphasis given to clients' understandings and descriptions of their sense of self and sexual identity. This approach helps avoid taken-for-granted assumptions about individual's sexual narratives and life-history and captures the heterogeneity of sexuality beyond the binary division between heterosexuality and homosexual identities. In doing so, this method compliments anti-oppressive perspectives in social work practice.

CONCLUSION

A number of insights can be gleaned from my reflections about the challenges and tensions inherent in using computer-mediated communication in research with young LGBTQ people. Online methods such as online interviews and web-based surveys generate opportunities for lengthy and in-depth research with young LGBTQ people as a too-frequently invisible population. These methods bring immediacy and ample room for reflection to the data collection process. Ethically, online methods enhance the autonomy of participants in extending control over the research process and the level of personal information they wish to share. These methods can also be accompanied by technical difficulties, such as inequalities in Internet access, and ethical concerns, such as ensuring authenticity and providing adequate support, which can be ironed out during the research design phase. Cost efficiency and effectiveness are two criteria emphasised by organisational and institutional funders - online methods are one effective platform for

practitioners and researchers to readily access and utilise extensive data sources and information online from office locations. More importantly, it provides a powerful mode for amplifying the voices of socially marginalised communities.

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ⁱ The terms lesbian, gay, bisexual and queer (LGBQ) are used in line with the preferred identity descriptors specified by the research participants when invited to share how they would describe their sexuality.

ⁱⁱ The research was conducted over a six month period during 2005-2006 and was funded through a Research Higher Degree Scholarship at the University of Tasmania. The sample group (18-26 years) were spread across all Australian states with no participant responses from the two territories (Australian Capital Territory and Northern Territory). There was an almost equal number of men (n=18) and women (n=16) and most young people (29) identified their current residential location as 'urban' while discussing former work-experiences in rural and regional areas in many cases. The sample encompassed a range of occupational groups with the following identified work industries as the four most frequently reported - customer service and retail, health and human services, clerical and administration, and hospitality and service work. Patterns of employment varied between either casual employment or fixed-term part-time and full-time employment.