

Issues in Normativity

This review will examine a qualitative research project by Ng et al. (2019) that looked at the points of view of youth on the topic of LGBTQ issues and heteronormativity. The authors spoke to youth from three different regions in British Columbia: The North, Vancouver, and Abbotsford. Each areas points of view were reviewed and assessed for similarities and differences. A deep dive into their work is included within this review which will summarize the totality of the project and its findings as well as critique its overall procedures and aims. There will also be an examination of the paper in how well the authors were able to clearly identify the fundamentals of their research and their utilization of the participants and the community with which the study directly affects. Their quality and ethical perspectives will be evaluated to determine the relationships that were developed within the study and how well they were able to remain consistent throughout their work. The overall quality, ethical implications and how they conducted the experiment will be considered in the context of a qualitative study.

The paper by Ng et al. (2019) discussed heteronormativity within 3 different regions across British Columbia. The authors clearly state their aims as looking to determine how youth in these regions view LGBTQ issues and the over arching themes about the topic within each community. They used a mixture of the Foucauldian Discourse Approach (FDA) and Citationality to help interpret their data. They used “NVivo 10”, which is qualitative research software, to help in coding and organizing their interview data. They describe the FDA as a method that uses discourse as a means to legitimize power and common sense. They describe Citationality as people’s understanding and repetition of past experiences as knowledge of existing norms. These methodologies meshed well with their questions and structure of

interviewing. It facilitated a useful segue into interpreting their data and determining the thematic concepts within each of the interviews.

The results of the paper showed four distinct categories emerging from the interview data. These were libertarianism, liberalism, homonormativity and egalitarianism. They determined these categories based off of 15 themes that were found when studying the interviews. The arms length position of those in the libertarian category viewed LGBTQ issues as their own and something that did not affect those who were not in the LGBTQ community. There was an apathetic approach to their views that could, according to the authors, give way to homophobia. The liberalism category saw individual differences as a part of humanity and not moral in nature. They desired inclusion of all peoples, including those within the LGBTQ community. Homonormativity was an interesting find, in that it reflected a heteronormative view but within the LGBTQ community as only some types of homosexuality was viewed as acceptable, or at least more accepted within society. This category appears to rest upon typical social norms and how homosexuals might mirror those norms in as close an approximation as possible. None of this was explicitly stated, but tacitly acknowledged. The egalitarian category emphasized queer theory and directly challenging heteronormativity. Normative power structures within society were questioned and a desire to see widespread change with respect to gender, sex, and sexuality were prominent. Most of this discourse came from the larger areas, Vancouver and one participant from Abbotsford. A somewhat controversial conclusion was presented from the authors based on this observation which is discussed later in this review. Overall, the authors state that the findings have helped to illuminate LGBTQ acceptance in the school system and how multiple different perspectives have shown to be common amongst the chosen regions.

Research & Research Aims

The initial aims of the study did not appear to change throughout the research project as they did not state any alteration from their initial thoughts in focus or direction. They appeared to have a set goal in mind and looked to pursue that goal through the methodologies stated above. In the introduction of the study the authors outlined several other studies that helped inform their aims and helped to develop the questions that they asked the participants. No further explanation was given in how or why they chose the project that they did, nor if anything changed during the process of developing and creating the paper. There did not appear to be any prior evaluation period to help develop the questions they used within the study or to help develop the concepts prior to it being executed. The question if this paper was more idiographic or nomothetic is an interesting one as the definitions of both approaches can be viewed to support either case. There does appear to be more evidence for the idiographic approach, as there is more subjectivity and personal experiences involved to gain the required knowledge for this paper. The curiosity lies in the fact that nomothetic has been described as an “approach emphasizes group norms and general explanations” (Monks, 1995). The questions that were asked within this study were to individuals, but they were very much about norms and general explanations. Thus, perhaps a combination of the two is a more accurate statement. Monks describes the combination of both approaches as “psychological biography”, coined by Thomae in 1968 (Monks, 1995). The combination of both approaches seems a better fit, especially considering the description of psychological biography as “nomothetic objectives and idiographic completeness” (Monks, 1995).

There is very little information from the authors with respect to their ontological or epistemological assumptions. They state their framework and the direction they chose but do not expand beyond what the theoretical frameworks entail. There is some discussion on how

Citacionality helps to inform the data by seeing the discussion around gender norms as performative, which can illustrate a means of knowing through analysis of discourse and past knowledge. This does frame the knowledge collection in some context, but there is, unfortunately, little else to expand upon. The choice of these two frameworks to analysis the information is interesting. There is something of a “perfect fit” that goes along with the results and the analysis. The aims themselves are not looking to pursue an agenda but they do look to enhance the field of study. Although, the way both the data and data analysis go together does appear very fitting, I suspect that the tools they chose to use were later utilized to analyze the data instead of thought of prior to the project starting. There isn’t an issue with this, but if it is indeed the case, it should be included in the discussion, methods or introduction.

Quality, Trustworthiness and Goodness

There is no specific discussion of any of the quality, trustworthiness or “goodness” of the research, leaving one to guess at some of these aspects within the study. The authors were aware of the potential biases that could exist in an isolated community when asking about the LGBTQ issues. They attempted to compensate for this by going into three distinct communities across a large province. Each one was quite different from the next, which allowed for a greater appreciation for the data points that overlapped and those that did not. Of concern with respect to these concepts is the lack of detail. There was very little comparison data within each category. They spoke of responses across communities, but not necessarily how much variance occurred from community to community. If there was a general higher regard for each theme that was identified in any given community, it was not necessarily made clear except within egalitarianism. This one exception was quite valuable and more information of this type would have been preferable. The lack of emphasis on area specific differences has taken away from

some of the positives that can come from doing research in fairly different communities. Thus, the idea of utilizing different locales is diminished and the quality of the results is also diminished. The authors did however establish some baseline information about the schools, such as the existence of any Gay/Straight Alliances (GSA). That information may have helped to enhance an understanding of both the differences and the similarities of those communities in the self containment that they can often find themselves in had they chosen to focus upon them in a relational sense.

The lack of connection may have been due to a lack of reflection within their work. The failure of reflection in this paper is apparent in the lack of analysis of the researcher and the researcher-participant dynamic. There is nothing in the paper that makes it clear that there was any growth, failings or development from the perspective of the researcher. Much of the research, in fact, reads like that of a quantitative paper. That is perhaps a bit of a shot across the bow to quantitative research, but it is also most often truer than not. The lack of inventory taken by the researchers makes one wonder how the analysis went and how the authors approached, or perhaps changed their approach, at each stage of the paper. The methodology appeared to be more data driven than research or participant driven. The use of the software that was employed could have added to that false sense of validity in their work, and the confidence in their analysis. The rigidity of the end result and the flow of the paper all lead one to assume that reflection was not an important aspect of the research.

Ethics, Relationships & Harm

The ethical underpinnings of this paper start off quite strong. They concern themselves with the safety of the youth through anonymity and not disclosing data that could provide identifying information. However, once the initial ethics are dealt with, there is little else said.

As stated previously, much of the analysis is given in a very quantitative manner. The categories are laid out and the information is provided that supports that category, but there is a lack of depth to the piece that often touches on the surface of the discourse and does not dare delve into the underpinnings of meaning and understanding. As the paper goes through each category, there is little else included in each section other than a few quotes and a small discussion on how those chosen quotes emphasis the category. There is nothing about how that part of the interview process went or what they learned from it, nor any consideration for potential ethical issues. There is often nothing differentiating the experiences in Vancouver, the North or Abbotsford. This lack of depth into the participants themselves and entirely missing the value of reflection makes the nature of the paper less compelling than it may have been otherwise.

The lack of connection to the participants is an on-going theme in this paper, but to be fair to the authors, they did bring up one aspect of the participants that may (or may not have) altered the participants answers. The researchers chose not to ask the participants about their sexual identity, a factor that could have added some depth of understanding to given answers. They state that the loss of that data point meant that they could not compare how each participant answered questions and how their lived experiences may have affected those answers. Conversely, if they did not ask the participants about their sexual identity and the participants did not feel like they needed to give an answer, then perhaps that means that it was not an important question to them. These two possibilities are both interesting, but they are also assumptions from a lack of data that may be important to the underlying discussion at hand, which could be construed as a failure to develop a more valuable relationship with the participants.

The relationship with the participants was not the only aspect that suffered in this paper, other than determining if there were GSA's in the schools, not much else is discussed with

respect to the LGBTQ community. How heteronormativity has impacted that community and how they would like it to be addressed are both issues that could lead to developing better questions to ask the participants and how it could be more relevant to society in general. There did not seem to be consideration for how their study could impact that community either with the material they obtained or in the manner in which they obtained it. The potential for any “harm” was not taken into consideration and the only potential that was discussed was how their study could benefit others as it helped to describe the current understandings of youth and the complex nature of homo- and heteronormative social ideals. It could be argued that this study was about general perceptions of the LGBTQ community and not about them specifically but the perceptions about that community directly affects them. If they are not considered within the framework of the study, then real harm could be done to the community as it is unable to represent itself as a meaningful agent in the process.

A controversial standpoint about the LGBTQ community that the authors did take was how affluence and LGBTQ acceptance was easier because there are fewer concerns within that area (Vancouver). With less concerns they are more able to accept those that do not fit within a standard norm. This is a controversial conclusion and one that could negatively affect not only the LGBTQ community, but also those within the North and Abbotsford areas that feel as though they are just as accepting, even if they are not as well off. There is a combination of communities that could be affected here and neither appears to be of any concern to authors. This is especially concerning seeing as how these researchers were very much “outsiders” in this context. They were not from the communities under study and they are not youth. The power dynamic in this situation means that these participants were very much *under* study as opposed to a *part* of the study. There was little to no collaboration that is apparent within the study itself and no feedback

or reflection was provided in any of the dialog. When utilizing the theoretical work from Teo (2010) with respect to the subject, object and action, it can be said that “othering” was almost inherent within the study. The discussion was around the LGBTQ society but never with them. The participants often did not see those within the LGBTQ community as others, but the study inherently excluded those who were the subject. By doing so, it created that “othering” simply by the usage of the language and the research techniques involved.

Conclusion

As the answers were discussed in the paper, it is obvious that most of those within these communities had very little issues with those who do not identify as heterosexual and the authors do highlight that fact in a number of ways. However, a disservice was done to the participants and the LGBTQ community as the question was more about heterosexual feelings on the community than on the LGBTQ community itself. This creates a disconnect that is itself harmful to the participants and the LGBTQ community. The way the authors chose to find answers to their questions lacked an understanding of connection to the participants and to the LGBTQ community. It created a disconnection that put the LGBTQ community on the outside, when they are central to the questions posed. They did appear to try and broaden their data by using several different types of communities, which could have provided for richer cultural comparisons but with very little comparative analysis in the paper it made the whole endeavour moot. A better representation of the data on each community and how they overlapped and differed with each other would have allowed for better understandings of each chosen community and a better understanding of how the similarities may refer to a more universal, or at least, Canadian, acceptance of the LGBTQ community and of heteronormativity in general. This aspect makes the exclusion of the LGBTQ community that much more concerning. Had that community been

able to provide input and an initial direction to the study, it could have given more credence to the paper. If one were to simply look at the paper as a quantitative paper that used data points to prop up a hypothesis, then it did quite well in that arena. It had correlative data for each category and it backed it up with several data points. There is value in that aspect of the paper, but the lack of depth and reflexivity within it makes this a bit of a disappointment overall. I would highly suggest starting with the community or communities that the subject matter involves instead of just talking around them. By talking with them it would have helped to solidify a better launching point. It could also help to mitigate any potential epistemological violence that could occur in the process. The inclusion of the LGBTQ community and a more participant enmeshed study would go a lot further in helping to answer the questions at hand while also giving respect where it is needed most.

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