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ABSTRACT

This paper describes how an ethnographer proceeded in a study of group identify, voice, and participation in the greater culture of gay and bisexual college men at a large research university. The researcher, himself a heterosexual man, conceptualized the investigation as a crossing of cultural borders. The investigator initially attended several meetings of the campus Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Student Alliance (LGBSA) and realized that this community would not authorize his research and that he must claim the right himself. This raised the question of how to proceed with respect and sensitivity for the cultural differences involved. Through the research experience the researcher concluded that ethnographers should provide opportunities for the voice of the participants to dominate when representation rests on complex points of interpretation. A final question concerned the role of the ethnographer in dealing with issues of identity. In response, the investigator created an advisory panel of homosexual individuals, had students review transcripts from interviews, and asked all key characters to review descriptions and interpretations of their lives. (Contains 9 references.) (JB)

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REPRESENTATION, VOICE, AND STUDENT IDENTITY: An Ethnographic Study of Gay College Students

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This paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education held at the Doubletree Hotel, Tucson, Arizona, November 10-13, 1994. This paper was reviewed by ASHE and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with the research of higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC collection of ASHE conference papers.

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Introduction

Cultural borders serve to divide people: they separate "us" from "them," black from white, straight from gay. Yet, at the same time, borders enable people to connect, to identify with others in a similar position. For those individuals who exist within what Gloria Anzaldua (1987) terms "borderlands," building associations, building community, is imperative to group struggle and engagement in the politics of identity. In terms of sexual orientation, the border I focus on in this paper, a sense of group identity is crucial in order to achieve cultural change.

Michel Foucault (1978) points out that the emergence of a homosexual identity was largely the by-product of modernity and reflects the need for societies to control the behavior of anyone who drifts from the norm. The result has been large scale oppression of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people. At the same time, as Steven Epstein argues, the construction of a homosexual identity has made it possible for people who identify with same-sex attraction to organize around their marginality.

The task then is to transform individual interest "into identities of community interest... from a class-in-itself to a class-for-itself" (Sears, 1991, p. 420). For educational ethnographers who explore issues of sexual identity, we must continually examine how our

representations contribute to community building and emancipatory aims.

Liberation theorist Allen Young (1972) once argued that because he is a leftist, gay white male living in New York City he could not speak for other gay people from dissimilar backgrounds. As Young notes, "There are other homosexuals--Third World People, lesbians, transvestites--about whom I can say little. They speak for themselves" (p. 5).

In giving up any claim to speak for other gay people around the world, yet at the same time claiming the right to speak for leftist, gay white men from New York City, Young falls prey to the essentialist trap: a belief that with-in group differences are negligible and across-group differences too severe to comprehend. Essentialism rests on a view that cultural borders are concrete and static. When we essentialize identity, we confess to an inability to understand difference and run the risk of constructing impermeable social barriers.

In this paper I take issue with Young and others who argue that we cannot speak for social and cultural groups different from ourselves. Instead, I maintain that all writing about someone else represents otherness, and therefore, necessarily speaks for others. Writing, like other forms of discourse, depends on representations. The voice we use and the words we choose all convey images of others to someone else. When we write about students in a

classroom, villagers in the Sudan, or urbanites hanging out on a street corner, we speak for them.

Discussion/Three Key Questions

As educational ethnographers engaged in the politics of identity--the struggle with self and otherness--we must continually cross cultural borders. Our goal should not be to whitewash difference as we move through unfamiliar borderlands. Instead, we ought to engage research participants as collaborators in the construction, deconstruction, and in some cases, the destruction of cultural meaning... However, we need to be cautious, and thoughtful, border crossers. As bell hooks (1992) warns, we must continually interrogate our perspective in order to avoid recreating the "imperial gaze--the look that seeks to dominate, subjugate, and colonize" (p. 7).

Our task is not an easy one: crossing cultural borders brings with it serious responsibilities and important questions must be answered. Who authorizes our research? How do we go about our work with respect for and sensitivity to difference? And, what role do we play in the struggle for identity and community? These questions guide the remainder of this paper as I call upon my own experience in exploring issues of gay student identity.

Question # 1

This paper is based on an ethnographic study of gay and bisexual college men at Clement University, a pseudonym for a large research university. An important facet of the study relates to my own sexual identity. Yes, by today's conceptions and social categories I am a straight man. I don't know why I'm straight. I just am. I say this tongue in cheek but you cannot imagine how many times I had to apologize to my gay and bisexual research friends who seemed to have a hard time understanding why I am not gay. I jokingly accused them of being "homosexists."

Like other borders, sexual orientation is one that must be treated with respect, yet nonetheless, must be continually challenged. It is a border whose exploration calls out not only to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer researchers, but to straight researchers as well. We have much to learn about ourselves and about others in terms of how sexual identities get created and re-created.

When I began my study of the gay student community at Clement University one of the first steps was to attend a meeting of the Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Student Alliance--LGBSA for short. To say that I was overwhelmed by the intensity and politics of that first meeting is an understatement. I remember asking myself as I sat in one of the chairs encircling the room, "Who am I to conduct a study

of gay students?" What right do I have to intrude upon their lives?"

I attended several meetings before I got up enough nerve to finally speak. By this time I had made a close friend in a queer student named Tito. From Tito I learned an important lessen about life: "No one gives anyone else the right to speak. You must claim that right."

Most sensible people will agree that an individual does not become gay or bisexual simply through association, yet I believe to this day that a bit of Tito's queerness rubbed off on me. After attending several LGBSA meetings I had an epiphany: "No one in the gay community was going to authorize my study. No one was going to give me that right. It was a right I had to claim."

With my queer friend Tito as a role model, I claimed the right to research the experiences of gay and bisexual men at Clement University and in so doing the right to speak for them. It is a privilege that I cherish and one that has come with a tremendous responsibility. I turn now to the issue of responsibility as I discuss my second question: How do we go about our work with respect for and sensitivity to difference?

Question # 2

Research of gay and bisexual college students is a representation of these same students and therefore

contributes in one way or another to theories of sexual identity. A concern must be exhibited for the significance of one's representations since theories of sexual identity are so politically charged and at a point in history where liberation is so central. As Cindy Patton (1993) maintains, "whether we like it or not, the crucial if now somewhat contradictory battles for civil rights and for destabilizing the homosexual signification... still depend on theorized and deployed notions of identity."

Throughout my research I was keenly aware of the implications the study could have for how gay college students might be represented and in turn understood. In analyzing the data I decided to focus on several students who would appear as key characters in a book I was writing entitled Coming Out in College: The Struggle for a Queer Identity (1994). This raised significant ethical issues that I had to resolve. While I cannot detail all these issues here, suffice it to say, that students approved of my characterizations and descriptions of them.

In my portraits of students, I was often torn between the reality of providing fuel for someone else's exploitative fire and my own sense of commitment to queer politics. Two key characters in my book are Tito, who I already introduced, and Roger, a senior at Clement University and founder of a campus group committed to forcing the ROTC program off campus. In my book I discuss

the lives of Tito and Roger in great detail and highlight significant life events that both students believe are fundamental to how they view themselves and others. I frequently discuss Tito and Roger in the same context since both are committed to queer politics and both identify as queer men. But Tito and Roger have more in common than their queerness.

Both were sexually assaulted as children. This posed a major dilemma for me: Is this fact one that I should leave out of my analysis and writing even though both students preferred that I discuss it? My concern was with how others, how various readers, might interpret representations of Tito and Roger as victims of sexual abuse and as queer men. I use the following discussion with Tito to highlight my own struggle over this issue and to suggest a way of dealing with similar concerns of representation.

Rob: *I'm reluctant to introduce Roger and you in the same chapter since both of you were sexually abused as children. I could see someone saying, "Oh, that's why they're queer."*
Tito: *Why don't you talk about that assumption: that sexual abuse is or is not a factor that "makes" someone gay. You interviewed other people who were not sexually abused, right?*
Rob: *Only a few students told me they were abused as children. But you've heard the theories: that boys who were*

sexually abused by men or who had distant fathers are more likely to be gay. I even interviewed a couple of students who buy into that.

Tito: Why does it matter? Yes I was a victim of sexual abuse and yes I had a distant father. But the fact is I'm a queer activist and that's a way for me to be happy. Who cares why? This is what I am.

Rob: But some people do care why.

Tito: No one is Beaver Cleaver happy. Maybe sexual abuse does contribute in some way to sexual orientation. Maybe it doesn't. But the fact is that straight people also were sexually abused. Straights also had distant fathers.

Rob: Yes. But no one is saying, "Oh, that's why he's straight."

Tito: No. It's only those people who don't fit certain norms whose lives are scrutinized. The so-called "normal" people do not have to explain who they are. Or why they are the way they are. So it wouldn't surprise me at all if more queer people report being sexually abused than straights.

Rob: What do you mean?

Tito: If you're fucked up, as in not normal, then you're more likely to try and figure out why you're fucked up. When someone doesn't fit into society's definitions they are more likely to examine their lives, to think about their childhood in serious terms. They are more likely to turn up sexual abuse. Remember, many people who were sexually

abused as children suppress those experiences. What I'm saying is that it may be the case that queers are more likely to uncover their sexual abuse.

In this brief conversation, I appear as a character in my own book and the voice expressed is necessarily different from that used throughout other portions of the text. Tito is the voice of authority and I am the student. His voice resonates above my own and conveys his own sense of power and being. I suggest here that ethnographers, that writers, provide greater opportunities for the voice of research participants to resonate, especially when issues of representation rest on complex points of interpretation such as that discussed here.

Question # 3

I want to move on to my third question which relates more specifically to identity issues: What role do we, as ethnographers, play in the struggle for identity?

During my conversation with Tito, the voice I expressed was that of "student": Tito was the authority and I was the inquisitive understudy. At other points in the text, a different voice is heard: that of researcher or scholar interpreting what I have observed, interpreting issues of identity. In these instances issues of voice and representation become even more difficult since as "expert"

we run the risk of "finalitizing" what in actuality are only our "interpretations." To highlight this point, I introduce a third student named Ben whose notion of queer identity I challenge.

Ben describes himself as a queer man. For Ben, queer signifies a sense of pride in his identification with his same-sex attractions. Queer is seen as a source of power in that many lesbian, gay, and bisexual people, like Ben, have taken a word that in the past has been used against them and have given queer a new meaning. The expropriation of queer as signifier is seen as a way to construct a positive lesbian, gay, and bisexual identity.

But Ben also describes himself as bi-cultural in that he has learned to modify his behavior depending on his social context: If he is around other lesbian, gay, or bisexual students then he acts one way, if he is around straight students he acts another way. As Ben notes, "When you're queer you know you have to make an adjustment and be bi-cultural at times."

When Ben claims to be queer and then describes himself as bi-cultural, there is a bit of inconsistency. For Ben, bi-cultural means knowing how to act and survive in a straight world. Others within the gay community at Clement think of queer more in terms of <u>not</u> assimilating to heterosexual culture: If there is any social or cultural

adjusting to do, then straights will have to adjust, not visa versa.

Ben is not alone in his conservative expropriation of the term queer from other more radical gay activists. At least five of the students in my study who consider themselves queer are in secret societies and/or fraternities. This is indeed queer as in strange, but is it queer?

My point here is to raise questions about students' self-representations of queerness. In Frank Browning's (1993) The Culture of Desire he describes queer as a degree of "rage" toward heterosexism. Many of the students in this study describe being queer as an "in your face kind of attitude" toward the heterosexual world.

In challenging Ben's and others' self-representations of queer identity, my goal is not to shatter students' understandings of who they are. Instead, I want to encourage students to critically examine how their own identities are constantly constructed and re-constructed through language and representations that are often highly contentious.

How can we challenge self-representations when we ourselves are not of the group whose identity we question? There is no easy answer but a possible solution lies in what Yvonna Lincoln and Egon Guba (1986) refer to as "member checks." Member checks relate to the idea that research

participants should play a role in the creation and interpretation of research and findings. In the case of my research, I accomplished this in three ways. First, I created an advisory panel that helped shape the study, analyze data, and provide feedback on interpretations and written materials. Second, I had students review transcripts from interviews to make sure the phrasing was accurate and also to give them opportunities to add additional comments or explanations. And finally, I asked that all key characters review my descriptions and interpretations of their lives.

Ben, for example, read descriptions of how I interpreted his notion of bi-culturalism and its inconsistency with how many people speak of queer identity. Ben did not object to my analysis, and in fact, admitted that he was forced to re-think what it means to be queer and that he may not, as of yet, be completely comfortable with his own sexual identity.

Conclusion

Language changes with social and cultural contexts. The same can be said of representations of identity. As Stuart Hall (1990) maintains, "Cultural identity... is a matter of 'becoming' as well as 'being.' It belongs to the future as much as to the past" (p. 225).

As educational ethnographers exploring student lives and identities, be it in postsecondary or K-12 settings, we must continually examine the role we play, the voice we use, and the representations we offer in discussing and describing students. We must walk a fine line between critically exposing what students reveal about themselves, and at the same time, avoid the "imperial gaze." In reality, it is not a fine line at all. It is more like a high wire act: a high wire that crosses cultural borders and connects social identities.

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