

VOICE OF THE COMMUNITY? REFLECTIONS ON ACCESSING, WORKING WITH AND REPRESENTING COMMUNITIES

by Fiona Cosson

When we approach and work with a community on an oral history project, whose voices are heard? Whose stories are we recording and can they ever adequately 'represent' a community? This article explores how "communities" participate in, contribute to and are consequently represented in oral history projects. The article refers to West Yorkshire Archive Service's recent oral history project, which worked with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered people, funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund. Using this case study, it reflects on the project's approach to identifying, accessing and involving so-called invisible or hard-to-reach communities in an oral history project along with some of the problems and achievements arising from this attempt to capture the oral histories of a historically-hidden, traditionally-excluded, and often socially-invisible, group of people.

ABSTRACT

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When we approach and work with a community on an oral history project, whose voices are heard? Whose stories are we recording and can they ever adequately 'represent' a community? Is *community* still an appropriate or useful vehicle to indicate and approach a social group in oral history?

The West Yorkshire Archive Service (WYAS), which preserves the historical documents of Wakefield, Bradford, Calderdale, Kirklees, and Leeds, received funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund in 2007 to create community archives for so-called marginalised groups in the county. Using the theme of 'cele-

brations and festivals', it aimed to create oral histories to supplement and enhance items in the archive. The project targeted the Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual community (through documenting Pride), the Irish community (through a history of St Patrick's Day), the African-Caribbean community (through a history of Carnival) and the Asian community (through their religious and cultural festivals). This article will focus on the most successful part of the project, which recorded the oral histories of almost forty LGBT people in West Yorkshire, in order to illustrate some of the issues and achievements arising from this attempt to capture the oral histories of

a historically hidden, traditionally excluded and often socially invisible group of people.

COMMUNITY

Community is perhaps the most over-used yet under-defined word of the twenty-first century, its use more wide-ranging than ever to indicate local, political and social responsibility, interaction, empowerment and engagement. The word 'community', Kevin Loughran commented in 2008, is used without clear meaning and quite unthinkingly.¹ In 1955, George A. Hillery Jr found ninety-four definitions of the word 'community',² and his only firm conclusion was that all definitions of the term dealt with people.³ Poplin suggested there are three main sociological definitions of community: geographical or territorial, social organisation or group, and psycho-cultural.⁴ The geographical place of community accounts for the location, universality and persistence of community,⁵ whilst understanding community as a social grouping explained how communities operate as a social system of people with membership, roles and norms creating cooperation, competition and conflict.⁶ Finally, understanding community as a psycho-cultural unit of common bonds explains the role of community in creating a sense of security and identity. However, since the 1970s and particularly with the advent of the so-called *digital age* of electronic communications, traditional definitions have been further confused by the non-geographical nature of many social groupings, such as interest-group, leisure or employment networks, which can span regions and countries, and on-line internet groups and associations, which are global in nature. Despite such definitional ambiguity, it is still possible to understand 'community'- whether geographical, on-line or other forms of categorisational organisation – as a basic social unit of social interaction within which people identify and gain a sense of identity and security⁷

The LGB (Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual) or LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) community is even more complex. It can be both geographical and non geographically-bounded. It is both a politically conceived community in terms of sexual politics and also a social community; those within it often feel bound to a sense of belonging, identity and togetherness with other LGBT people by their sexual orientation and marginalised status from heterosexual society. There are many people, of course, who identify as being Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or Transgender person but who do not feel part of a community or feel any particular sense of cohesion with those of the same sexual orientation. And already the first hurdle in even

discussing, let alone accessing, the LGBT community (as if it were a single entity) is not without problems.

For the purposes of this project the LGBT 'community' in West Yorkshire was conceived to be people living within the county who considered themselves Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or Transgender. A consultation commissioned by WYAS was carried out prior to bidding the Heritage Lottery Fund for funding with a group of LGB people in Bradford, via a newly-established LGB community centre. At this well attended meeting, there was clear enthusiasm and support for the project, as well as suggestions of individuals and groups who may want to be involved. Encouragement and pledges of volunteer time were gained locally from sexual health organisations for Gay and Bisexual men and nationally letters of support were received from previously successful LGB history projects.

APPROACHES

The Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual aspect of the project was initially only one quarter of a four-part project to record memories and experiences of people in West Yorkshire based around the theme of celebrations and festivals. The LGB community was to be interviewed about Gay Pride celebrations. The link to other projects was through West Indian Carnival (and its role in the African-Caribbean community in West Yorkshire), St Patrick's Day (and its role within the Irish community) and Asian Cultural Celebrations (and their role in the communities of Asian origin). This thematic approach proved successful with the funders of the project, Heritage Lottery Fund. It was a neat way to frame a twelve-month project and target sectors of the population in West Yorkshire who did not use or engage with heritage institutions such as archives.

However, as soon as the project got underway it was clear that these headings were clichés and disliked by many individuals in the communities they were designed to access. People did not want to be pigeon-holed yet again by stereotypes of Carnival, 'paddywackery'⁸ and Pride; there was a lot more to these communities than their annual 'day in the sun', the only day, some would argue, when those outside of those communities acknowledged the existence and presence of such social groups in their localities.

Indeed, not only was there a danger of creating and perpetuating stereotypes, but it became clear that there was also a risk of reproducing elements of previous local and regional oral history projects, such as Leeds City Council's *Sonic City* and the multiagency *Moving Here* project. Whilst the overlap between oral history projects conducted by different organisations,

particularly if months or even years have elapsed between them, does not seem immediately problematic, it can create fatigue amongst those who are being targeted for interviews, scepticism within communities as to how previous interviews are being utilised, and even doubts about the motives of organisations who are running such projects. The impression may be created that endeavours are simply box-ticking exercises, particularly when the groups are classed as marginalised.

In light of these developments, the project and its interview framework were altered to reflect the 'experience' of growing up, living and being a Lesbian, Gay or Bisexual person in West Yorkshire, rather than the project being limited only to the experience and significance of Gay Pride celebrations. This allowed interviews to be wide-ranging and very much interviewee led. The content of the interviews tended to focus on childhood and coming out, relationships, the fight for gay equality, the gay scene in West Yorkshire, everyday life, Pride celebrations, and the wider history of LGB people. Widening the scope of the project in this way not only made the breadth and depth of the interviews more interesting and enlightening, but also enabled greater participation from LGB people. Interviewees did not feel obliged to talk at length or only about Pride, but could instead reflect on the wider issues they felt were relevant to identifying as an LGBT person living in West Yorkshire.

PARTICIPATION

As with any oral history project, encouraging and enabling as wide a spectrum of individuals as possible to participate in the project was crucial to creating a community archive which reflected the LGB communities of West Yorkshire. The project was well received following its launch, and various marketing measures that were taken to publicise it amongst the LGB communities in West Yorkshire. Announcements and press releases made their way onto websites of a variety of LGB organisations, such as university student societies, LGB council networks, and other local heritage websites. Notices also went into the local gay papers and on the noticeboards of various gay pubs and shops.

One of the most effective ways of publicising the project, and accessing and recruiting potential interviewees to contribute their life, was through the so-called gay scene, mainly in Leeds. The gay scene – that is clubs, pubs, bars – provided an excellent and welcoming route to speak to people about the project. In some ways it provided one type of snapshot of gay life itself – an environment where two men or two women kissing was not unusual, and one that



was warm and welcoming. Indeed, one interview was carried out in a quiet room in a gay pub in Leeds, a setting where the interviewee was comfortable to be interviewed, and since the interviewee was a 'veteran' of the gay scene in Leeds, quite apt too. Utilising the gay scene in West Yorkshire to recruit interviewees was also tricky. It potentially reinforced the view that to heterosexual society, Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual people were only to be located and addressed through the dimension of the gay scene. A significant percentage of interviewees, who numbered almost forty by the end of the project, were drawn directly and indirectly from the use of LGBT communication networks within the district councils in West Yorkshire. The networks, set up to represent the interests of LGBT people working for local councils, proved an excellent way to access a range of people who went on to contribute their oral histories to the project.

A major development in capturing the voice of the LGB community in West Yorkshire came within the first few weeks of the project's launch, when two different people directly challenged the project's definition of the Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual community and accused the project of leaving out the 'T', that is, the story of Transgender people. They argued that LGBT (as opposed to LGB) was not only a political identity but also a social one and that to exclude the word 'trans' from the project reinforced the wider exclusion of Transgender people from the gay scene and gay politics. After some consultation within WYAS, it was decided to take on the task

Leeds Student Newspaper, 1988.



Clause 28 t-shirt.

of documenting trans peoples' stories if they were willing to share them. The project was duly changed to be an LGBT history of West Yorkshire, and two trans women were interviewed. Their interviews were some of the most interesting, natural and personal interviews in the project.

'OUR HISTORY'

It was perhaps inevitable that within the West Yorkshire area there were to be found several other gay and lesbian history projects in action. The presence of a community history project in the region was positive in that it showed an appetite and enthusiasm for researching and preserving the history of the lesbian, gay and bisexual experience in West Yorkshire. It also potentially offered opportunities for collaboration. The fact that organisations were aware of each other's projects and remits is indicative of the lack of information sharing by funders, resulting in projects being completely unaware of each other's existence, which can stifle scope for partnership working.

The first LGBT history group which we stumbled across was a Lesbian History Group in Bradford. I met them very early on in the project and discovered they had carried out oral history interviews with distinguished women plus a range of other research. The group was welcoming of WYAS's project but extremely cautious about the idea that the project might

'take away' what they had already achieved. They had researched and interviewed, but had no platform to publish, and so the possibility of collaborating on projects was discussed and initially they were keen to put their work on the project's website. However, later they confirmed they wished to keep their research in their own form.

It emerged that similarly there was a particular group of older gay men who were keen to preserve the history of the Gay Liberation Front (GLF), a fairly short-lived but radical UK gay rights group of the 1970s that had been particularly active in Leeds and Bradford. The project was able to conduct several interviews with men who had been members of the group as well as obtain copies of various manifestos and posters from the movement. However interviewees revealed that there were many more documents related to various GLF protests, members wanted to keep these within the group, and 'not let some sociology student get their hands on them'. This was despite the fact that the archive service was in an excellent position to protect and preserve paper items of historical value. The group felt a history of GLF should be written by GLF itself, and not an outsider. Certainly, they felt the WYAS project was an outside body.

Thus, from these encounters it was obvious there was a strong sense of ownership and protectiveness of the history of the LGBT experience, struggle and everyday lives. Given the sensitive and often personal nature of much of this history, this defensive stance was completely understandable. In addition, the West Yorkshire Archive Service is a relatively unknown body and this added to the sense of outside interference in local and personal histories. The result, then, was a mixed success: whilst the project was able to capture some of the story of the GLF, it was not able to build the type of relationship that would have facilitated more cooperative working between existing history groups and make possible fuller histories.

It was a significant weakness of the project not to capture more ethnically diverse LGBT experiences. There were no participants from the African-Caribbean or Asian communities, two significant communities in the West Yorkshire area. This was the consequence of a lack of access to potential interviews and perhaps, by extension, a failure on the part of the project to understand, access and capitalise of networks that may well have existed in the county. Some contact was made with gay Asian men through a drop-in session at an LGB centre in Bradford. Despite assurances of complete anonymity, the men were reluctant to be interviewed. The lack of participation by Black and Asian LGBT people, however, should not necessarily or only

be seen as a failing of the project, but understood in the wider context of 'double discrimination'; cultural homophobia may also prevent Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) people from participating in activities linked to the gay community.⁹ However, the lack of interviewees from BME groups meant that, for this project at least, the oral histories that were recorded reinforced the exclusion and invisibility of Black and Asian people from the LGBT narratives of West Yorkshire.

STORIES

As with many oral history projects, it is those with a particular experience or tale to tell, be it positive or negative, who are often the most willing to come forward to contribute their story. Certainly, getting the message over to those who believe themselves to be *ordinary* that they are in fact *extraordinary* is a constant battle for project workers everywhere. In the case of the West Yorkshire Archive Service LGBT history project, many people who contributed their memories and experiences to the project did so for particular personal reasons, mostly because they had in some way been politically active in the fight for gay rights in West Yorkshire and the UK. These people were particularly keen to have their stories heard, feeling that they should show a younger generation how rights were fought for and won. Many participants also said they felt a sense of empowerment and validation by telling their stories to the project, similar to that which many oral history interviewees experience. In terms of capturing the voices of the LGBT community, it was soon clear that the project was often recording a particular type of voice: one that was out, proud, currently politically active through employer networks and/or enjoying the gay scene. Accessing those who were the opposite of these characteristics, for example, someone working in the private sector, not particularly open about their sexuality, and not having been involved in any form of gay politics or frequenting the gay scene, was incredibly difficult.

Despite such hurdles, in the course of the project, there were several stories that came to light that were very much 'untold' stories. They reflected the need of the project to be flexible in their approach to community-based oral history projects, especially when dealing with sensitive issues such as homophobia and discrimination. One of these untold stories, from a middle-aged gay man in Leeds, came not in the form of oral history interview but in written form, following the building of communication and trust by telephone and email. There was no physical meeting between the project worker and the contributor.



However, his input revealed an unknown story of the fight against institutional homophobia at Leeds College of Music in the 1980s.

Leeds Pride 2007.

THE UNMARGINALISED?

It was a significant, perhaps surprising, feature of the LGBT stories that several gay men asserted they had never had experienced discrimination as a result of being in public, same-sex relationships. Such narratives appeared to contradict a common assumption that being openly gay, even today, would inevitably lead to at least *some* experience of marginalisation or discrimination in a society that until 1967 outlawed sex between men.¹⁰ In one case, a gay man in his forties, residing in a traditionally working-class area and working in unskilled manual jobs, said he had never experienced *any* negative reaction on the basis of his sexual orientation. He was not involved in any LGBT politics and believed Gay Pride to only have a social role.

There may be more to this narrative, however, than simply the story of living free from discrimination, and this should concern us as oral historians. The danger was that the interviewee, aware that the project was recording the LGBT history of West Yorkshire and was in many ways a celebration of that history (perhaps as opposed to a 'warts 'n' all' approach), was painting a portrait of his experiences as a gay man which he wanted the project to record and publish: that someone could be gay, politically apathetic to LGBT rights and fights, and live free from discrimination. In fact, during the same interview, the interviewee had described his father's disapproving reaction when the interviewee revealed his sexual orientation at the age of seventeen. Negotiating the potential meanings of interviewees' testimonies is a difficult business, and for community projects such as this, these sorts of narratives go largely unexamined.

EVERYDAYNESS

A strong element of the project revealed the *everydayness* of LGBT life and community. At the same time as being 'special' and 'different', being gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender is also routine and not out of the norm. Many interviewees who stressed the ordinariness of being an LGBT person living within West Yorkshire also made reference to the discrimination and oppression of LGBT people in other countries, a point which could perhaps be interpreted as a signal of a globalised LGBT community. The *everydayness* of gay life was succinctly expressed by Harry, a gay man in his seventies from Dewsbury, West Yorkshire. His interview was a rollercoaster of emotion, filled with love, comedy and tragedy. Reflecting on life as a gay man, he explained:

If you've got a partner, or when you get married or live together or whatever, what is life like for you? It's not one continual sex. It's the washing, the cleaning, the ironing, the cooking, the paying the mortgage, paying the bills, and that's the same in any gay relationship. I mean, everybody seems to think it's something that is unusual, but you see if you're living together, then there's usually this thing where one becomes the female side if you like and one becomes the male side. And that is just something that happens. You do take it in turns at doing things, but normally one will have more of the house-keeping, washing and cleaning to do that the other you see, but the other one probably, er, I mean, in our case Steve couldn't boil a bloody egg so I was left to do all the cooking and things. But if we had a party, he would float around looking like a prima donna with glasses in his hands serving everybody drinks and all the rest of it but I'd done the hard work in the kitchen before they came!¹¹

In contrast, on more than one occasion, people approached within the LGBT community, through networks and events, had expressed explicitly but politely their disinclination to be interviewed for project because they did not want to be selected for interview only because of their of sexual orientation. They expressed that they did not want their sexuality to be the overriding and decisive factor in their sense of identity and self. It was important then that whilst the experience of being a lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender person was central to the interview, that alone should not allowed to define the interviewee, or the entire interview to the exclusion of other experiences or stifle the scope of the interview. Interviewees were thus

free to reference other memories which rather naturally fitted into their narratives, such as children and family, politics, education, and work.

In addition to individual oral history interviews, the project also undertook group work in the form of reminiscences and discussions with several LGBT organisations in the West Yorkshire area, including some youth groups. This was in part an attempt to incorporate young people into a project they might otherwise have felt left out of, potentially feeling they were being of an age where they were not able to reflect at length on life experiences. The contribution of the younger people to the project was also important in listening to the voice of the younger section of the LGBT community, for their insights into how *they* viewed LGBT community and the history of gay people in West Yorkshire. In Bradford, a youth worker [YW], himself a gay man from West Yorkshire, and young gay man [YGM] who regularly attended the youth group, talked about feeling disconnected from gay history:

YW: I think in some respects people want to forget about all that... Although it is very much my history, I identify very much as a gay man, have done for years, there's still something about all that that doesn't feel like it's mine, because I wasn't around. It all happened long before I...

YGM: I guess part of it is like telling stories down isn't it? We all know about the war and stuff because your nan and granddad or whatever pass those stories down to you. Unless you've got a gay relative, you're not going to know that... These groups are relatively new [LGBT youth groups] so unless you've got someone to talk about that with, it will be forgotten I guess.¹²

Later the same young man, in response to a group discussion about the existence and nature of an LGBT community in West Yorkshire, questioned the very idea that there was any sense of community amongst LGBT people, particularly across age:

I think perhaps some people might say that it is a bit shallow that the only thing we have in common is our sexuality and therefore we should talk to each other. There needs to be more than that to bring people together.¹³

In conclusion, what can we learn from the LGBT community archive project? In terms of community, sexuality alone was not enough to create and sustain a community and such a notion was challenged by some of the youngest of (and thus the newest to) the LGBT commu-

nity of West Yorkshire. But this project was never about sexual identity alone. It was about recording the life stories of people who identify as LGBT who live, work, love, laugh and cry within the county borders of West Yorkshire. In many cases, the incidence of sexual orientation was secondary to the human stories of isolation, despair, grief, lust, romance, tragedy, recovery, empowerment and contentment.

With regard to approaches, community oral history projects, especially those reliant on funding from bodies such as the Heritage Lottery Fund, are agenda driven in terms of education, participation, conservation, hitting targets and deadlines. But a flexible approach is key. Through sensible alterations, WYAS made the LGBT the focus of the entire community archive project, even jettisoning to a large extent the other three elements, turning them into smaller, self-contained projects. In terms of participation,

enabling a sense of ownership of project from the point of project conception through to execution is paramount. It not only ensures there are sufficient participants, but allows the project to gain a good reputation within the target groups, encourages wider participation and creates potential pathways for the sustaining of the project post-funding. In this sense, projects tend to benefit from being developed and executed in conjunction with partner organisations, bridging heritage institutions with community bodies.

It is impossible for community projects to capture everyone's history, everyone's voice, everyone's experience. Such a project would not only be unfeasible but questionable in its value. But we should make efforts to understand the partiality of the agendas we are set and the projects we create. We must recognise whose voices we are failing to capture, and in turn, make efforts to redress this gap.

NOTES

1. Kevin Loughran, Author Interview, *The Idea of Community, Social Policy and Self*, <http://www.apjpublications.co.uk/publ/comm/interview.htm>, August 2008, (Accessed 19 May 2010)

2. G.A. Hillery, 'Definitions of community: areas of agreement', *Rural Sociology*, vol 20, 1955, cited in Colin Bell and Howard Newby, *Community Studies: an introduction to the sociology of the local community*, London: Unwin, 1971, p 27

3. Bell and Newby, 1971, p 27.

4. Dennis E. Poplin, *Communities: A Survey of Theories and Methods of Research*, New York: Macmillan, 1972, p 9.

5. Poplin, 1972, p 9.

6. Poplin, 1972, p 9.

7. Poplin, 1972, p 26.

8. This was the term used by some of those approached by the author to be involved in the St Patrick's Day oral history project. It is understood to refer to the stereotypes commonly associated with Irish people, and particularly Irish festivities, without recognition of wider Irish culture or history. See, for example, <http://paddywhackery.urbanup.com/1069464>, (Accessed 6 July 2010)

9. 'Cultural homophobia' refers to the ways in which homosexuality is either ignored or presented negatively throughout a culture. www.mind.org.uk/help/people_groups_and_communities/lesbians_gay_men_and_bisexuals_and_mental_health (Accessed 6 July 2010).

10. The 1967 Act legalising sex between males aged 21 and over and 'in private' did

not, until 2000, legally acknowledge the existence of sex between females.

11. Interview with Robert Smith (pseudonym), recorded by Fiona Cosson, in Dewsbury, West Yorkshire, 2008. Available at <http://www.nowthen.org/everydayness>, (Accessed 6 July 2010).

12. Interview with LGB Youth Group, recorded by Fiona Cosson, in Bradford, West Yorkshire, 2008. Available at www.nowthen.org/gay-history-passed-down, (Accessed 6 July 2010).

13. Interview with LGB Youth Group, recorded by Fiona Cosson, in Bradford, West Yorkshire, 2008. Available at www.nowthen.org/gay-history-passed-down, (Accessed 6 July 2010).

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