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Hidden in the small ads

Researching working-class lesbians

Abstract

This article will consider strategies and difficulties in attempting to conduct research on a 'hard to reach' group, working-class lesbians, in the United Kingdom. It is based upon my PhD research which reports on the life biographies, identities and everyday experiences of women who identify themselves as working-class and lesbian, achieved through fifty-three interviews with women living in a range of localities: the Highlands, Edinburgh, Glasgow in Scotland and Yorkshire and Manchester, England. The particular difficulties of researching lesbian lives have been outlined by many (John and Patrick, 1999; Kitzinger, 1987) but I would argue that problems of exclusion are compounded by class, given that working-class women are often absent from support networks and scene space, as well as research agendas. I illustrate the difficulties, and pleasures, both practically and theoretically and include quotes from interviewees as a way of demonstrating these issues. I end with a discussion on reciprocity or irrelevance to those 'excluded' participants, the 'usefulness' of my research, and the in/competence of the 'authoritative', 'reflexive' researcher. While my research is situated within Sociology/Women's studies, I believe that the questions raised, in terms of conducting qualitative research, finding a sample and establishing rapport (or otherwise) with interviewees, are more broadly applicable across disciplinary boundaries. Issues of class inequality and sexuality are relevant across the social sciences and indeed across society as everyone occupies these categories, although only some are 'marked' by them.

Finding working-class lesbians

I write this essay from the position of having found my research sample, thus perhaps solving the dilemma of how to locate working-class lesbians. But the practical difficulties including financial, spatial and time constraints and the emotional costs, for both my research participants and myself, are worth highlighting in order to cast light on these issues. The socially excluded are not so easy to locate or recruit but failure to 'find them' certainly results in further exclusion from academic agendas.

Research into lesbian lives often rests upon access into scene spaces or 'key informants'. These approaches, although still utilised, worked less for my research – often I was advertising in the 'wrong' places, where inclusion rested upon 'knowledge', commercial savvy – and gender. Yet I knew that working-class lesbians were 'out there' and, in fact, everywhere. So where did I find them? Valentine (1995) asserts that lesbian spaces are there 'if you know what you're looking for', suggesting that while lesbians may not have recognisable spaces, they are not without location. However, 'recognition' and 'location' differs across class contexts. I believe that my own identifications enabled me to understand where working-class lesbian may be but most of my research methods used have involved guesswork (hard work) and 'risk' – these 'risk' have been borne by interviewees too in, for example, the lack of a safe space.

The problems of recruiting research participants were highlighted in my very attempts to utilise pre-existing lesbian and gay infrastructures and support groups. I forwarded details of my project to an organisation established for lesbians and gays with disabilities and to other groups and voluntary agencies, including several that provide support for those who experience homelessness. While some groups had an explicit welfare agenda, others were more implicit; often social functions merged with more practical and pragmatic purposes and in these groups I was looking for individuals who inhabited a different kind of 'scene' space, other than commercialised venues. But, to my disappointment, generally the confused response when contacting specific groups was that they did not think they 'had any working-class lesbians'. Contacting organisations raised both issues of access and whether or not working-class lesbians were included in

their networks; networks with clearly inclusive agendas still seemed to be somewhat classed, through the absence of working-class participants. Yet there is a limit to the assumptions I can make here given that I was not an 'insider', I was, to some extent, an intruder and in this respect was occasionally met with a degree of suspicion. Concern about my research request seemed motivated (justifiably) by issues of confidentiality and protection, as well as perhaps fear. One group stated: 'Obviously we have to respect our young people's and volunteers need for confidentiality and privacy and so we do not participate in research projects.'

The problem of participant recruitment, maximised when trying to reach certain groups and individuals, has been managed in various ways by different researchers. Adler and Brenner (1992), for example, were grateful to lesbian organisations that enabled them to use their mailing lists whilst maintaining the confidentiality of their membership. This perhaps raises questions about the varying 'authority' of different research projects. Still, my own desire to research seemed somewhat unimportant when considering the limited resources, both in terms of time and finances, such groups had.

I continued my search for respondents by regularly advertising in the lesbian and gay press. I drew up an advertisement in which I gave some brief personal details, outlined my research subject and my intentions and offered assurances of confidentiality for potential participants. As well as using national media, such as 'Diva' [1] and the Libertas newsletter,[2] local newsletters and organisations were also contacted. An advertisement was placed in 'Centrepoint Magazine', which advertises lesbian and gay events in Glasgow, the Glasgow Women's Library newsletter and in the newsletters of the Rural lesbian group, the Older lesbian group and the Manchester lesbian group. All three groups finally participated in this project.

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[1] UK lesbian magazine.
[2] This newsletter, distributed throughout the UK, operates from the women's bookshop, Libertas, in York and was a convenient way to begin my search.

Advertisements acted as a preliminary facilitator but more effort was often required.[3] I continued writing in the lesbian and gay press, believing that short articles would perhaps offer more appeal and generate more interest than research requests alone. I wrote two articles that appeared in 'Scotsdyke' (a page within the 'Scotsgay' magazine), and in 'Diva', while considering the affordability and accessibility of such magazines and consequently, their potential audience/buyers. Nevertheless, these methods did generate interest, which I followed up with phone calls and meetings.

To a great extent, I replicated the methods used by Adler and Brenner when identifying areas of 'lesbian concentration', while remaining aware of the potential to generate exclusions in the research sample. In their study, Adler and Brenner used: (1) informants from the lesbian community; (2) the location of lesbian social spaces; (3) the location of lesbian businesses, professional services and social services; and (4) two mailing lists of lesbian organisations. I wanted to elicit responses that were not drawn from such places alone, a strategy which perhaps finds very particular people in particular locations, for example, those who self-identify as lesbian and are involved in the 'community' in some way.[4] Such strategies also reinforce the tendency to concentrate on the urban at the expense of the rural due to the lack of such extensive infrastructure and scene spaces within rural locations (Binnie and Valentine, 1999). Attempts were made to generate a rural sample, in particular a focus group was carried out in the Highlands with the Rural Lesbian Group.

Thinking that more people would see the research request if it was on a poster, I produced posters and distributed them in lesbian and gay cafes, bars and community spaces in Edinburgh, Glasgow, York and Manchester. However, despite repeated visits, I noted the near absence of women from more commercial venues: the problems of recruitment were daily experienced as I visited such places. Some places seemed rather 'cut off' perhaps as a result of where they were situated, thus ensuring that only 'insiders'

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[3] Producing advertisements was a relatively inexpensive, though time consuming, process and was quite effective in generating initial responses. Unfortunately there was a £50 charge for advertising in one magazine – its rates for business advertising were considerably more favourable.
[4] Nevertheless, Dunne and Patrick (1999) found this a productive method in investigating the extent and impact of poverty and social exclusion on lesbians and gay men in Glasgow.

knew of their whereabouts.[5] I did worry about the effectiveness of (and possible arrogance in) placing posters on walls, claiming space for myself. But several 'women's spaces', only had lesbian events once a month: what spaces could be claimed? Nevertheless, posters remained where I placed them throughout the research period, which was important given that there was often a gap between respondents initially seeing my poster (and articles) and then making the decision to get in touch, as Sally exemplifies:

> 'I've been down to Mardi Gras, the first one that I'd been to and was going into these stalls and things and I picked up a leaflet and your ad was in it. I didn't respond to it until months later. It's quite a few months away, 'cause I just started reading it again.'
> (Sally, 37, Manchester)

Contact seems accidental, almost a matter of 'luck'. But in was in the repetition of such 'lucky' encounters that I generated a sample. While Valentine (1993) found that 'snowballing' research participants was an effective research strategy this was not very effective in my case, perhaps due to a reluctance to 'out' potential candidates. Nevertheless, meeting certain 'key informants' was both fortunate and beneficial.

Margaret, the organiser of the Rural Lesbian Group, indicates the difficulties of conducting research into a sensitive issue with a 'hard to reach' group. The group venue was chosen as a location so far free from homophobic violence but safety and comfort in this environment was not felt by all; instead classed discomforts were generated. Sexuality and class combine to reduce possibilities and are the categories through which possibilities, such as meeting, socialising and supporting, must be managed. Margaret believes that location and environment contributed to the absence of working-class lesbians from the monthly meetings of the Rural Lesbian Group. Such exclusion is particularly significant considering the difficulties faced by such a group. As Margaret outlines:

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[5] Location is constrained by finances and concerns about visibility and safety as voiced by Glasgow Women's Library, which is situated in a back alley.

'The venue for our monthly meetings has been described as "posh". It's also safe, which is the main thing, but it can be a bit of a culture shock ... I am concerned about working class lesbians in [the Highlands], I know there have been homophobic assaults on them and I have heard that some women are getting into prostitution, but some working class lesbians are scared to come out in their lives and to the group. It's very difficult.'

Margaret highlights not only the difficultly in reaching certain people but also the near impossibility of doing so when there are no apparent spaces to 'come out': the situation described by Margaret is a very difficult one. When presented with the idea of taking part in my research, via Margaret, many women in the group were reluctant, leading Margaret to be concerned about the usefulness of such a meeting:

'There were nine women at the meeting last month and they didn't say very much about the idea of having a working class lesbian focus group. Four of them are very new to the group. Someone else was asking how are you defining working class... I don't want you to have a wasted journey …'

'Wasted journeys' were a frequent occurrence as potential interviewees failed to materialise in agreed locations, dates were changed at the last minute to be changed again and forgotten. Generating a sample required numerous phone calls, meetings, chasing dead ends, hanging around appropriate environments and social settings (and hours and hours of conversation and interaction). I am not resentful of 'wasted journeys' and 'dead ends', especially as my perception of such events was that people were agreeing to participate in a partial way, given that this could be fraught with tension: coming out on the one hand but fearing what that could entail on the other.

In the end, I conducted interviews with fifty-three women from Scotland (the Highlands, Glasgow and Edinburgh) and England (Yorkshire and Manchester). Three cities and two regions are included in my research as a result of my desire to represent the urban and the rural, and motivated by ease and convenience as well as by my eagerness

to generate a Scottish sample. I knew Glasgow and Edinburgh very well, Yorkshire and Manchester fairly well, but admittedly did not now much about the Highlands. These locations represent my attempts at including and managing the familiar and the unfamiliar.

Focus groups were conducted at the usual meeting place of the group. The majority of individual and 'paired' interviews were conducted at interviewees' homes, several were conducted in cafes and four interviews were conducted in my own house. I realise this may not be a recommended strategy but I felt that I perhaps should be willing to 'risk' as much as interviewees.[6] The issue of where and when to do the interview raised concerns for myself and for interviewees. There was a need for a 'safe space' but room hire was too expensive to be considered, leaving homes, cafes and libraries as make-shift interview sites.

Perhaps surprisingly, lesbian and gay venues and cafes were often 'uncomfortable' places to conduct interviews. I would have to repeatedly ask if the music could be turned down as I was recording, which generated feelings of annoyance as I felt I had a claim on that space. My immediate response was to consider the presence and consequent tensions of lesbians using predominantly gay male space. While I believe this is still an issue, on reflection I can see why my presence as a researcher was problematic: an 'outsider' coming in to gather and extract 'interesting' information.

Issues of in/accessibility and the financial constraints upon both lesbian organisations and myself hindered attempts at generating inclusive participation. These tensions also highlight the difficulties in 'coming out' without access to 'community' infrastructures – whether that be accessing scene space, taking part in lesbian groups, or participating in research projects.

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[6] However, the number of abusive (and curious) phone calls I received will act as a deterrent to complacency when considering issues of safety and danger.

Insider status or 'those kind of people'

My call for participants required identification with 'lesbian' and 'working-class', often problematic categories, regularly used as an insult, or are seen as a stigma. To accept a working-class identity, Reay suggests, is to accept a 'spoilt identity': 'dis-identification' from being working-class is another facet of managing a stigmatised identity, indicating reluctance to become known and placed through the markers of class (see Frazer, 1989; Reay, 1996; Skeggs, 1997). I had to 'risk' using these terms, in order to present my research honestly, rather than attempting to create conflict, as one email correspondent argued: 'How do u define working class?? If we all work then we're working class rnt we??? I think u r trying 2 create problems that dont exist the term working class is old hat as r the unions they no longer have a place in our society 2 day we've now moved on thanx goodness.'

This statement perhaps reveals more about the continued relevance of class given the emotional response provoked here, although it also illustrates the sensitive and controversial environment in which to explore continued class inequalities. Significantly, it is the demise of class analysis, and a corresponding 'language' to describe class inequalities, which left potential interviewees feeling uncertain, hesitant and reluctant. Here, Mandy speaks of the difficulties in coming forward as 'one of them':

'When I seen the advert for working-class lesbians I actually didn't think, I actually thought I'd be the only person…I mean I don't know how many people you got but I actually didn't think you'd get that many because thinking about it I was actually the only definitively, like I'm so obviously working-class, but I don't know, maybe people hide it better than me (laughs). I do notice people's appearances but it's not something I judge then on 'cause I wouldn't like to be judged on myself because I can often look rough.' (Mandy, 22, Yorkshire)

Mandy's statement points to the negative connotations of being working-class (e.g., looking 'rough'). Respondents had to be 'out' about their class position as well as their sexuality. Being 'out' in multiple social positions, rather than sexuality alone is rarely

considered in research into lesbian life experiences. However, the limitations in asking people to 'out' themselves needs to be considered in relation to the gains of so doing: many women had both positive and negative experiences, associations and identifications with being both lesbian and working-class.

Of course, there will always be those who remain excluded. A painful part of my research has been in coming across a (perhaps) permanently 'excluded', 'lost sample' as one woman wrote:

> 'As a working-class lesbian in my teens I didn't realise that such a thing existed. I'm now in my thirties and it's taken me that long to get to grips with the idea. At school we all knew about gay men but gay women, I mean, it was never discussed unless in terms of disgust ... I married and had three children, just as a nice working-class girl does and now I'm a nice working-class woman with a husband and a lonely heart.'

But just because this woman's particular experiences and feelings are not covered in my research does not mean she is 'lost'. I am aware of the way that I have constructed a group for the purposes of my research and also of the ways that this 'group' exists outwith my own agendas.

Like my interviewees, I often felt ambivalent about 'outness' – especially when 'advertising' my lesbian and working-class 'credentials' on notice boards and in newsletters (even in 'friendly' spaces). Nevertheless, the effort made was 'worth it'[7], although I'm left to consider the often harder efforts made by interviewees, such as Lynn:

> 'I felt that I had to try and overcome that, to get back in there, I felt that I had to become more involved and face up to this and maybe work through it. I made a decision, I mean I heard your thing was going to be the last time, I though I'm *definitely* going to go in,

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[7] The effort was worth it in terms of being able to produce a PhD – but the costs involved are indicated through the limitations of this alone, the limitation in producing an academic account rather than effecting material changes.

definitely, I'll make an effort and speak to this woman and say "Right I'm prepared to do this 'cause I feel like I need to take a step." I know I need to.' (Lynn, 44, Glasgow)

While Lynn is motivated by personal concerns, Sharon's motivations seem more politically orientated, her lesbian status seems less 'problematic', she knows what she wants, even if steps still have to be taken to get there:

'…[I] think we need to encourage the development of gay and lesbian, of what the issues are for gay and lesbian people. There's still a lot of problems out there, access to health care, to resources, to venues that aren't just about alcohol, that are family orientated. There's so much still needs to be done.' (Sharon, 47, Glasgow)

Identification with research participants is generally seen as positive, providing an 'insider status', where the spaces for lesbians to speak about their lives are often very limited.[8] I see my own identifications as consequential, as respondents often cited my 'sameness' as a reason for responding, a way of, as Sharon suggests, getting things said and done. For Fiona, the fact that I identified as working-class does not generate suspicion and doubt but instead provides the possibility of understanding:

'Em, I was reading your article, that sort of made me have a sense that yeah, the fact that you identified as being working-class as well made me think you were likely to be coming from a more intelligent, for want of a better word, perspective on it all.' (Fiona, 29, Edinburgh)

Identifications were made by interviewees (and myself), on the basis of 'sameness', including sexuality and class, as well as age and accent. For example, Angela's desire to participate was influenced by our shared location; 'It's important to me to help you,

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[8] There are many studies that make this point, for example: Dunne, G.A. (1997) *Lesbian Lifestyles. Women's work and the politics of sexuality*. London: Macmillian. Weeks, J., B. Heaphy and C. Donovan, C. (2001) *Same Sex Intimacies: Families of Choice and Other Life Experiments*. London: Routledge. Weston, K. (1997) *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship*. New York: Columbia University Press.

particularly when you said you were from Glasgow!' Identifications were motivations and these came to light in the research processes itself as well as in recruiting.

I imagine both respondents and myself were using our stories to 'check each other out', in terms of 'sameness' as well as 'difference'. In Scotland, often where I come from (Drumchapel) became the 'evidence' of my working-classness and enabled trust. However, in Manchester and Yorkshire this was often not equated in the same way and the subtleties of accent as a signifier was also perhaps lost. As Sally notes:

'Well, when you spoke to me on the phone, I was judging you and I didn't think that, when I met you, you looked different to what I perceived on the phone … I just got this different idea of you and I couldn't, I could hardly tell what you said.'
(Sally, 37, Manchester)

Sally's comments are not just about class – but the possibility of expecting one thing and seeing, hearing and meeting another can be effected by the visual, spoken and embodied signifiers of class.

There were difficulties in communicating even with the commonality of shared location. Becky also came from Drumchapel and it was difficult to talk about the specific social and economic meaning of that space when so much of our conversation was punctuated with 'I know what you mean'. Interviewees also offered challenges to the meaning (worth?) of my classed location, which provoked (unstated) defences within myself, proving that I was neither detached from nor immune to 'negative' emotion. Here, Sharon's statement changes in response to knowing where I am from:

S: 'I think we should try and stay in a working-class area to try and bring, to keep the standards up, you know. Try and keep it, I don't know what area in Glasgow you come from?'
Y: 'Drumchapel.'
S: 'Within Glasgow there's very much pockets of deprivation. As soon as people get the chance to move out they should move out.' (Sharon, 47, Glasgow)

The reasons for escaping and 'investing' in location can be classed and there may be classed discomforts in locating ourselves. I am not reproducing this statement in an attempt to challenge or humiliate my interviewee but rather to show how the processes of class operated within the interview itself and to suggest that interviewees should not be positioned as passive in this respect. For Sharon, getting out of Drumchapel is understandable, even recommendable and her investment in 'staying put' shifts to a pragmatic desire to escape that which is not valued. But if I argue that Drumchapel is a place of worth, a place where I come from and belong, then does this inevitably put me into a classed conflict with my interviewee with whom I must try to establish rapport? If one's 'home' is also seen as a 'pocket of deprivation' then how can classed embarrassment and defence, following from such positioning, be avoided and perhaps even reconciled?

Sayer (2002) discusses why class is an 'embarrassing' subject to discuss. However, working-class homes, 'lifestyles' and 'displays' were not inevitably 'embarrassing', nor was talking about these factors inevitably awkward. Conducting interviews in women's homes did raise questions of (classed) dis/comfort: occasionally apparently embarrassed interviewees would apologised for the 'mess' of their houses, these places then becoming devalued signifiers of class position. Yet, mostly I felt 'at home' in these settings, including when I was in fact at home. Issues of sameness and 'insider status' were relevant to interviewees' motivations in participating in my research, and these appeared in interviews through shared references points, even shared 'embarrassment'. 'Differences' also had to be negotiated in the interview context both between individual women and myself and amongst interviewees, in the case of focus group and paired interviews, highlighting the difficulties – and ease – in talking about class. Rather than seeking to reconcile and avoid class positioning I would like to make these processes more apparent, to talk about class in the interview context.

'So tell me a little bit about yourself …' Talking about class

Instead of presenting a monolithic notion of class, questions were constructed to investigate how class permeated the women's lives in the context of growing up, schooling, job opportunities, family, community and sexuality. Interviewees were asked to discuss their own experiences at the beginning of the interview but more abstract questions were asked towards the end, such as 'What does class mean to you?' Savage, Bagnall and Longhurst (2001) view the strategy of asking questions on class at the end of the interview as advantageous, highlighting that some research may be criticised for using loaded questions, which then prompt them to reply in 'classed ways'. This, however, again illustrates the particularly contentious nature of researching class. There is often an assumption that the researcher has a (unjustified) pre-set agenda, whereby beliefs are rigid, inflexible and imposed. Through prior reading of advertisements and/or articles, all women who took part in my study knew that the central focus of my project was to detail the life experiences of working-class lesbians.

Having introduced class up front was neither negative nor predetermining of the agenda and outcome. Nevertheless, aware of such criticism, I made a concerted effort to discuss their own stories rather than beginning with the more abstract questions, further away from their concrete lived experience. I do feel that working-class women's accounts of what class is, means and does are vitally important as it is not just the prerogative of academics to decide what a proper 'intellectualised' meaning of class is – or to decide upon whether it exists or not. The term 'working-class' is prevalent throughout the women's accounts and I do not believe that it would have been used so extensively to describe their own experiences had it been imposed.

Interviewees were also encouraged to expand on particular areas that were of interest to them, without feeling that they were required to provide the 'right answer' or that they had to fit in with stereotypical expectations of what a lesbian should be: 'I was hoping you wirnae going to ask how I ended up wi' a bairn and you never!' (Jill, 28, Edinburgh). In responding to my (end) question: 'What did you think I would ask?' (asked as a way of bringing up issues that we had perhaps missed out), May states:

'Eh, I don't know, I didn't have much idea … I think financial questions you know and stuff like that but it's been a nice surprise. I thought it might be more focused on class and not as personal.' (May, 23, Yorkshire)

This points to the pleasure, and surprise, as well as difficulties, encountered by respondents and myself. For example, there is a 'problem' of how to express emotions and feelings attached to class and sexual identity when as Liz remarks:

'I don't know how useful my answers have been. I think it's more a subconscious thing, a subconscious way of identifying. It's kinda so much ingrained up here it's difficult to verbalise, it's hard to make what you feel into words that make sense.'
(Liz, 23, Manchester)

For Liz discussing class and sexuality is something which is felt, something known and experienced at an emotional level, yet at the same time it is hard to communicate, precisely because of its 'obviousness', something which 'just is'. The answer is clear, yet ambiguous, certain yet doubtful and this makes discussion difficult. Discussion is also difficult if you speak in fear of 'bad mouthing' yourself: not conforming to what a lesbian should be, not earning enough and not speaking enough.

There were 'interruptions' to the structuring of interviewees' answers as well as my questions. I also experienced difficulties in 'expression', but I do not feel these difficulties render the process a failure. I do not want to emphasise the coherence or flow of the interview at the expense of the more 'creative' moments as well as pauses and silences (which could be characterised as mistakes and seen as negative):

M: 'I don't remember what the last question was?'
Y: 'No, neither do I.'
M: 'Bloody hell!' (laughs). (Mavis, 52, Edinburgh)

These incidents were in fact part of having a relaxed conversation. Mavis' laughter indicates pleasure, and perhaps relief, rather than uncertainty and confusion. Similarly,

interviewees' responses, questions and interventions challenged my position as 'authoritative' researcher.

It is important to illustrate the ways that interviewees were not lacking authority or opinion within the interview situation itself:

> Y: 'Are people ok to carry on?'
> C: 'Carry on, if we're bored with you we'll tell you!' (Cathy, 37, Manchester)

Cathy and her associates make clear that it is for them to decide when they are bored with me, which will ultimately end the interview. Authority is consciously recognised and played with, so that the classed dynamics are somewhat destabilized. The irony in Fiona's comment 'I don't know how this relates to class, but it's you that's doing the PhD darling!' (laughs) can hardly be missed.

Interviewees also challenged each other, apparent in paired interviews and in focus groups. Consideration was given on whether to interview couples together or apart – ultimately the decision rested with participants (see Valentine, 1993). While Mansfield and Collard (1989) warn of the tendency of couples to produce 'consensus accounts', whereby one member takes the lead and the other then seeks confirmation from the other, there is also a counter view that these can produce conflict rather than consensus. I certainly heard numerous disagreements and discomforts, as well as agreements, within focus groups and paired interviews, as demonstrated by Kelly and Lisa. The first example illustrates the difficulties of relating personal and emotional events and feelings to an audience and the second demonstrates the competing voices within this:

> K: 'It's really weird being interviewed, I'm going to get all embarrassed (laughs), I think it's 'cause you are here as well.'
> L: 'Do you want me to disappear?'
> K: 'No you're alright. It's just that it's really *personal* to me you know.'

And later:

> K: 'This is why I thought we better not have an interview together, I'd just dominate it all.'
> L: 'She hasn't dominated at all, has she?!' (laughs) (Kelly, 23, Lisa, 23, Yorkshire)

Class, for Kelly, is a personal matter and also something which could potentially be embarrassing when voiced and heard, yet Kelly is determined to make her opinions count, even if this means dominating the interview: silence turns to communication, which in turn 'silences' Lisa.

The issue of domination and silence was also apparent within the four focus groups. All of the (pre-existing) groups had member(s) who identified as middle-class – I did not separate out members into 'middle-class' and 'working-class' as this would have been unnecessarily divisive, perhaps more so in the young person's group.[9] But there were certainly tensions as the class differences of respondents were played out and conflicts, disagreements and re-definitions all occurred:

> K: 'Well I think we're all in the same position, whether you're middle-class or working-class or upper-class or lower-class.'
> D: 'Yeah, but you're middle-class.' (Kay and Doris, Manchester Focus Group)

Kay responds to the 'accusation' of being middle-class by asserting her present lack of money, as well as outlining her own attitudes – a middle-class position is rejected when she states she is not a 'snob' but Kay does not claim a working-class identity or position, she merely tries to diffuse the importance of these 'differences'. Often members of all focus groups asked more demanding questions of each other, which were generally positive and well received, than I could/would have asked of them. But this very issue

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[9] Also, as someone entering into their meeting space, I did not have the authority or desire to do this.

created some tension around class positions and feelings, especially in the Rural Lesbian Group, leading to the disintegration of the focus group session.

Class can be a very emotive issue and can generate a lot of hostility. In the Rural Lesbian group some members felt and voiced resentment at others, including myself, based on perceived class positioning and classed 'advantages' were accusingly highlighted and rebutted. While Margaret, the group organiser through whom my request for respondents had gone, 'warned' me of the potential lack of response, given that group composition and membership varied from month to month and that, in her opinion, the venue was a 'posh' one which excluded working-class lesbians, I did perhaps enter the setting quite naively and unthinkingly. Before I had a chance to establish rapport I found that I was being reminded that not all middle-class people have an easy time they, for example, 'have mortgages to pay'; my flyer preceded me and the call for 'working-class lesbians' seemed to be read as an exclusion of experience and potential contribution. I had to re-state what my focus was and why, as it would have been dishonest to do otherwise. Having travelled for three hours to get there to interview 'willing' respondents, arranged via Margaret the group organiser, and facing a three hour return journey, this was rather difficult to do in an impartial manner. The effect of this was that the group split into two – Elaine and Fliss wanted to participate while the rest did not. Despite such problems, I do believe all four focus groups were extremely worthwhile: there are inevitable conflicts generated in such situations. The focus groups differed from individual and paired interviews because of their more interactive nature, and in all situations the discussions were enthusiastic and the process was inspiring, as well as challenging.

In an attempt to overcome tension, carried through to the point of division, I adopted a different strategy for the Young Person's Group. Discussions were facilitated by the drawing of 'maps' to chart feelings of belonging across different spaces: visual displays were made of, for example, home space, leisure and group space with labels attached which described members feelings for, and associations with these locations. Drawings were used to initiate dialogue about what they represented and I believe this generated a sense of comfort in knowing that I was genuinely interested in hearing, and

seeing, their experiences, positions and feelings, rather than launching into what may be felt as interrogation.

Frazer (1988) and Phoenix and Tizzard (1996), note the intense discomfort experienced by the young people of their research; their respondents' struggles to talk about class were characterised by ambiguity and hesitancy. However, in agreement with Qvartup et al. (1994) I would argue that young people should not be positioned as immature, unreliable or unsafe research subjects – I adapted my methods to avoid such positioning, but also to avoid 'class conflict', which is somewhat ironic given that my research aim was to uncover such 'conflicts'. Interviews were conducted with my own fears and desires in mind, as well as those of participants, a theme which was often re-visited and re-negotiated.

Why I did what I did: Standing up for class

I began my research with an awareness of the depth and diversity of debates surrounding methodological issues in feminist research. Although I offer a brief overview of the insights that I feel are pertinent to my project, I will not attempt to produce an extensive review of feminist methodologies as these have been, and continue to be, well documented and debated. Nevertheless, as Skeggs notes, 'To side-step methodology means that the mechanisms we utilise in producing knowledge are hidden, relations of privilege are masked and knowers are not seen as located' (1997: 17). Such a side-step also fails to acknowledge the cultural, economic, social and educational capitals central to the production of knowledge, a point that standpoint theories try to uncover.

Feminist standpoint theory centres on the claim that knowledge derives from experience, experience of oppression then engenders particular knowledge (Smith, 1987; Stanley and Wise, 1993). Standpoint theorists argue that women's experiences entail particular knowledges because women are placed in a position of gender inequality and in this way they attempt to displace the focus on 'transcendental' and 'objective' research

which is a 'partial and perverse perspective available from the ruling genders' with a concern for women's concrete, materially grounded experiences (Harding, 1987).

There are many and varied sources of discontent with feminist standpoint theory; not only is it seen to equate ontology with epistemology, emphasising identity and experience over political practice but it is seen to neglect the ways in which people are members of multiple dominant groups and multiple subordinate groups. By privileging gender, other socially salient categories of experience are ignored or underestimated. Consideration still has to be given to middle-class position of many knowledge producers, as standpoint theorists typically did in relation to gender, in order to situate these 'truths' as similarly 'partial' – and perhaps even 'perverse'.

Fuss (1989) claims that standpoints are generative of 'epistemic privilege'; only those with the appropriate experience of oppression are able to voice it. She argues that this grants an authority and hierarchy to certain groups whilst silencing others. I do want my research to be read, received and even validated but I do not believe this should be conceptualised as "hear my difference" power play' (Probyn, quoted in Skeggs, 1997). There is a hierarchy of experience already at play whereby some women's experiences are accorded more visibility and validity than others, bringing into question the effectiveness, or even possibility, of developing a working-class standpoint.

Jackson (1998) warns of the dangers of privileging 'pure' experience thus loosing sight of the interpretative processes that shape and construct it: interpretative processes, narratives and 'stories' utilised by both researcher and researched can also come under scrutiny. Everyone draws upon culturally available discourses to interpret and tell their experiences, although some stories do not easily 'fit' (see Plummer, 1995). In this respect working-class 'stories' are again silenced, as they do not match the hegemonic narratives of 'normal' middle-class existence. Although I accept research accounts as being inevitably socially constructed, more important questions are: Whose story can be told? What ones are heard and seen as worthy (or 'interesting') ? Returning to socially situated and materially located standpoint theories, I believe accounts do speak certain 'truths' about people's (located) lives. But whose life? The researcher's life or the lives of the researched?

What you see is what you get – but what's that you're looking at?

Jackson (1998), amongst others, advocates reflexivity as an 'innovative' research strategy, proposing that researchers turn their 'analytical gaze' inwards on themselves, thus challenging the demands of objectivity which places the researcher outwith her data, 'sanitised' from the text. But as Code (1995) argues, it is impossible to be completely self-aware and to realise our, often unconscious, motivations. There are also structural impediments to this. The ability to be 'reflexive', via others, is a privilege and a manifestation of cultural and educational 'capitals' and, accordingly, a classed resource. Proclaiming 'reflexivity' can also serve to authorise one's own account – if only you are reflexive enough. Adkins (2002) notes that the perceived division between good/bad research is increasingly based on the self-reflexivity of the researcher with more 'reflexive' accounts being more positively positioned. Yet, the 'reflexive self' is also a particular classed self: welfare requirements repeatedly force working-class people to tell their (deserving) 'self' in certain ways, further suggesting that the idea of self-reflexivity as fully realisable is an issue of privilege (Skeggs, 2002).

My research is politically and personally motivated but it is still wrong to think that the problems of power, privilege and perspective can be dissolved by 'asserting one's self into the account' (Adkins, 2002). I have charted my identifications as 'working-class' and 'lesbian' in an attempt to demonstrate how these were consequential to the research process providing an 'insider status', as well as 'outsider' status, based on difference. While Walkerdine et al. (2001) may argue that my identification as working-class is a painful defence against my movement away from the women I interviewed, I would claim that processes of class are still painful – I have not moved away from this.

But I ask how much personal detail I should present to convince – and what forms this can take? The 'telling of a story' is not an innocent event; in previously providing evidence of my working-classness (to middle-class disbelievers) in order to persuade and convince I have come away, not satisfied in proving respective differences, but dissatisfied and upset by the lack of legitimacy accorded whatever is revealed. I do not

want to objectify myself, disclosing all that I can be measured by, just as I strive not to objectify interviewees.[10]

I do care about my research, not just because of literature gaps – but 'reflexivity' alone cannot capture this. Reflexivity, on my part, also leaves out a consideration of the feelings of the 'researched'. McRobbie recollects her experience of interviewing a young women who, close to tears, recalled her difficult life, while she was 'almost enjoying the interview, pleased it was going well and relieved that Carol felt relaxed and talkative' (1982: 55). I too am guilty of this. As many women I interviews spoke, I became excited that I had some 'proof' of the existence of class, via their statements: the desire to convince remains. There is, however, a distinction between identifying emotionally with respondents and aligning yourself with them in order to elicit emotional response – enabling confidence which is then exploded (see Finch, 1984; Kelly, 1988).

The interview process was often very moving, with several respondents crying during the course of the interview. I do not want to exploit this fact to make my research more 'interesting' but I do want to draw attention to it. While some feminist methodologies seek to incorporate personal experience and emotion into the research process,I am left wondering about the place and acceptance of 'negative' emotions felt by researcher and researched, such as anger, frustration, pain and envy. Morely (1992) speaks of re-cycling hurt and anger into creative energy for change and Jagger (1989) points to the place of 'outlaw emotions', conventionally unacceptable feelings, in feminist methodology: 'Only when we reflect on our initially puzzling irritability, revulsion, anger or fear may we bring to consciousness our "gut level" awareness that we are in a situation of coercion, injustice or danger' (Jagger, 1989: 161). But with class, anger and emotion can be very individualised, often representing a working-class 'chip on the shoulder'. I did feel both relieved and unsettled by interviewees' tears: knowing that they felt able to cry in front of me, I also wanted to end or 'solve' it. While a frustration occurs through the realisation that ultimately I lack the ability to intervene in the women's lives, other than to

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[10] Luke (1994) illustrates the use of silence as a politics of resistance, a refusal to confess and expose the self. I may claim this but my thesis could not be produced without the narratives of participants.

produce an academic account, I am amused by my imagined response of interviewees to this issue – I somehow don't imagine that intervention would be welcomed.

But this brings up the question of the usefulness of academic research and issues of reciprocity or irrelevance, which is highlighted in the following response:

> '...you're not doing anything useful you're writing (or trying to write) an essay. Last I heard was that it hadn't saved anyone's arse from anything and certainly does nothing to ease anyone's class struggles.'[11]

Attempted enhancements on the 'use value' of research are apparent in approaches where researchers share interpretations with interviewees. However, caution has to be exercised when considering the assumptions underpinning this, i.e. that respondents would have the time to read such analysis. Many of my respondent's lives are too busy to allow for this – the interview itself being an interruption to their everyday lives.[12] As Sacks writes: 'to ask those with whom I was working to share in my research was easier and more democratic in theory than it was in practice … for most workers this project had very low priority and they hadn't the time for it' (quoted in Armstead, 1995: 631). Armstead (1995) claims that she overlooked an important aspect of academic life when interviewing working-class women, that it is irrelevant to those outside university. I would hope to overcome this, although I am aware of the huge efforts still needed. I do not think issues of accountability are addressed solely by re-presenting interpretations to interviewees.

Motives and means – methods and methodologies

I began this article by demonstrating the difficulties in finding a 'hard to reach' group, illustrating how research into lesbian lives often rests upon access into scene spaces, 'key

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[11] I am somewhat in agreement with this respondent (received via email) but my agreement perhaps undermines my own academic claims and authority.

[12] 'I'll be honest with you I haven't even thought about it there's just so much going on in the last few weeks in my life. I didn't give it much thought.' (Mavis, 52, Edinburgh)

informants' and the lesbian and gay press, and suggested that this strategy has a propensity to exclude, including those who are already, to varying degrees, included. However, it strikes me that my criticism of this still necessarily invokes it, I had to work with what was already out there and was out there shaped what I could and could not do and say. The same is true of my critique of reflexivity, reciprocity and usefulness, the structures and concepts which I still invoke and which I still make use of – even if this use is supposed to challenging. In the reading of reflexivity as situating the author through their engagement with others, this article may in fact be described as a 'reflexive' piece of work but I have resisted claiming the tile of 'reflexive researcher' for myself.

Some of the issues and constraints outlined may seem obvious, and indeed inevitable, to many experienced researchers. But I feel it is worth outlining my own struggles and uncertainties, especially as I now consider what to do with the women's experiences, voices and challenges and how to covey the complex processes of researchers' involvements and identifications – outwith and within higher education. I hope this is an issue that can be debated across disciplines to yield effective responses and enhance graduate research. 'Working-class lesbians' may be 'just' one 'hard to reach' group but I think the matters raised in this article are not exclusive to researching this group. Positioning and being positioned, accessing and being accessible, representing and being represented are all interdisciplinary concerns.

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