

When Ethnography and Sexuality Clash

Having studied a gay and lesbian organization, which only a decade ago emerged in Portugal, and its connections to the City Council in Lisbon, I was faced with countless situations where I was forced to negotiate my position according to the different groups I intended to reach: in some cases being perceived as a member of the association (towards the outside), sometimes being seen with distrust for not having cleared my sexual orientation (inwards – as I have presented myself as a researcher). By the time I began my research the Portuguese media was only starting to address gay and lesbian issues and mainly due to the constitution of ILGA-Portugal (founded in 1995), an international gay and lesbian association, which was in fact Portuguese (despite using the English sigla). The strong support ILGA seemed to get from the City Council was frequently quoted. It was this apparent successful relationship, so intriguing for the Portuguese media that caught my attention, and drove me to volunteer in the Association hoping to understand the ways in which the city was granting visibility to a minority which the Parliament repeatedly ignored.¹

The year long work as a volunteer in this Association gave me an insight of its organization that I am sure I would hardly have had if I was just passing by as an observer. At first not all its members were comfortable with my regular presence for I was just a researcher and not everyone was favourable of my engagement in issues which I wouldn't clear out as being my own. But time granted me the trust needed to reach all the other volunteers and it became clear at some point that not everyone was fighting their own cause (for example, the leader of the Youth Group – the one which helped young gay and lesbians – was an heterosexual girl who has never hidden her sexual orientation). The more I became involved in the work of the association, no matter how insignificantly political it might have been, the more I became one of them, to those outside ILGA. It doesn't take many Gay Pride Celebrations, Gay and Lesbian

¹ Throughout this research, which was undertaken between 1998 and 2000, PS (the Socialist Party) held the majority in the city council – together with the communist coalition (CDU) – and ruled the National Parliament on its own – from October 1995 to April 2002.

Film Festival presences, and one or two Conferences on the subject to reveal one's sexual orientation without ever having shown up in a relationship with anyone. Obviously, some informants do become friends and my sexual orientation was never a secret, but neither was it an issue, and therefore there was nothing to agree or refute. At some point people were positioning me in some category which I couldn't deny or assume for it was only implicit and I didn't want the work to be about myself.

As I took part in several meetings between the City Council and the Association joining the representatives of ILGA, it was not easy to reappear wanting to interview the members of the autarchy detached from the label that was unwillingly given. It could not have been an issue, but the fact is that for a city determined to respect its differences and with a speech of tolerance and cosmopolitanism, the respect for the sexual difference was an important issue. I often felt like I was told how much I was respected as part of a sexual minority, instead of learning in which ways a political instance such as the government of the city explains its support for a civil organization defending rights of people which the city itself is not allowed to grant, for it is not within its power.

At the end of the research and having defended my dissertation on the subject, ILGA often invited me to take part in events which requested some kind of expertise. By that time I was one of the academic voices who could speak on their behalf with a scientific certification. At that point the Association knew what I was working on and whenever I was to be invited to some event. With the political changes in the governance of city however both my research and its conclusions became oblivion due to the failure of the project the city was committed to implement (cf. MOZ, 2001). But I remained some kind of "gay expert"...

I had presented myself as a researcher, as an ethnographer, as someone who had once been closer to the people and therefore **could talk about them** – and since I never assumed being one of them it could certify my distance towards the object. Soon the media became aware of my existence and asked me for statements in the written press and even to sit in some television shows. So far I took part in two of these TV shows and in both cases the issue was only generally within my field of research.

The first time I was asked to sit in a live cable news network show was after the Vatican had issued a statement declaring that in the future anyone who desires to become a priest has to undergo some kind of psychological evaluation to rule out the dangers of him being gay. My first reaction was to refuse the invitation. I am neither an expert on religious issues, nor a psychologist to position myself regarding such evaluating procedures. I explain to the producer of the show that my presence was absolutely useless since what I was entitled to say was nothing but mere common sense statements regarding the general confusion between homosexuality and paedophilia, which seemed to be the underlying worry of the Catholic Church, faced with scandals of priests sexually abusing children. They explained that there was a priest invited as well and I could represent the other side – which one? The children's? The gays'? The absurd of the situation's? The producer did her job so well and called me that afternoon so many times that finally I agreed to go, after all I could talk about how being gay has nothing to do with being a sexual offender. It was a very pleasant afternoon sitting next to a priest with whom I agreed on every single point: the sexual abuse over children should be addressed in different ways; if a Catholic priest is expected to be a bachelor his sexual orientation becomes meaningless, for he's not supposed to have sex at all. For the rest of the show – a bit like a tennis match – the priest and I were answering all kinds of live phone calls of people who either wanted to question the priest about the politics of the Catholic Church or question me about the gay issues, even though they might have been as absurd as why were gays so determined to becoming priests – even though that was never at stake. Both of us “experts” were totally incapable of answering for those we were supposed to represent, and yet the TV station was grateful for our contribution, which – they said – gave the programme some sort of seriousness.

The second time, I was in a same sort of programme, on a different news channel. I was invited to talk about the case of the two women that had requested to get married to each other. The case was largely covered and I was there with a Law expert to talk about gay marriage. This time the subject was closer to what I had been studying although then I didn't know these two women. Again, I had to answer telephone calls which kept coming in during the live show some of which weren't even questions but live demonstrations of people's homophobia to a large audience, some of them directed

towards me – even though the producer of the show told me at the end that she had tried her best to block some of the calls whenever she suspected they would be aggressive.

In the meantime, I started my PhD on same-sex families and initiated contacts with the Association with which I had worked before. The fact that I was known to have studying ILGA represented a short-cut to reaching most of the families I am currently working with. It wouldn't be easy to find these families otherwise even though by recruiting them through a lesbian and gay association I am incurring in the snowball-sampling trap which has been used to try and discredit some of the works in this field. But families can not be found in each corner and less if they are organized in non-traditional ways. There is just no way to go around and knock on their door without having found them first, for they are not even registered as same-sex families and are officially non-existing.

Methodologically this is not an easy research either since observing and studying families implies both entering people's private lives and bringing them out of their homes. These in particular are characteristically very private family arrangements where secrets play an important part. My approach to these families has to be negotiated and I need to explain the importance of my work in order to come close to their privacy. Those who agree to collaborate, however, are mostly aware that it is important to grant some visibility to their situation, since they live a "non-existing" family arrangement. Their participation is perceived as an opportunity to allow others to see how much they resemble to any other family. The doubts are usually related to having someone observing them and eventually exposing their secrets. The research has a limited space between what can be said and shown and what needs not to be seen.

From the beginning of my research the hardest part has been to schedule my visits. It hasn't been easy to find my way into people's lives, but so far I haven't had anyone refusing to participate although in some cases I have had to wait quite a long time for an answer. It is generally agreed by both researcher and informants that this work can bring some insight into an invisible subject and influence policy-making – for as far as these people are concerned there is nothing unusual about them.

Some time ago I met a Brazilian anthropologist, Érica Renata de Souza (2005), whose PhD research was on maternity among lesbian women both in Campinas, a city on the interior of the State of Sao Paulo, in Brazil, and Toronto, in Ontario, Canada. Her work focus many of the issues I intend to study in Portugal and both of us were interested in knowing how easy it had been to find families in each of our countries – in Brazil, gay marriage is forbidden and same-sex families aren't officially recognized as such, despite some few recent successful adoptions by gay couples. She told me that, much to her surprise, in Brazil, where these families live in some sort of secrecy, the approach had been much easier than in Canada where she found it very hard to approach the lesbian community:

When introducing myself as researcher willing to discuss the connection between female homosexuality and maternity I realised that the reaction and the interest of the “other” in collaborating with my research reflected some of the characteristics of the identity movements in Brazil and Canada. (SOUZA, 2005: 27 – my translation)

While in Brazil, according to Érica Souza, the opportunity to become visible through the academic work of an anthropologist determined the participation of lesbian mothers despite her being lesbian or not, in Canada her approach was obstructed by the refusal to disclose her sexual identity, which was perceived as her not positioning herself into some known category. The researcher describes her experience in Canada as being very difficult and somewhat frustrating, far from what she had expected from a country where civil rights in general and LGBT rights are so much respected (at the time, though, in 2002, marriage was not yet available to same-sex couples, but there was already the possibility of engaging into a same-sex civil unions.)² She was frequently asked if she was a lesbian, and once in order to participate in a Congress of Humanities and Social Sciences, in a panel organised by the Canadian Association of Gay and Lesbian Studies, she had to become a member of this Gay and Lesbian Association even though she wanted to participate as a researcher on the matter (SOUZA, 2005: 30-31). During the Congress she could take part in panels debating questions such as “can a hetero do queer research?” As it seems, the problem had to do, they agreed, with the impossibility of the hetero researcher to **speak for** the gay and lesbian community; by

² Same-sex marriage is available in Canada since 2005.

not belonging to the community, such researcher would only be allowed to **speak about** them. As Souza remarks, the legitimacy of the researcher can not be solved in the dichotomy queer/non-queer – a term where a lot of different categories fit to begin with – but also because anthropologists know they don't speak for anybody.

But the fact is that by using anthropological knowledge in their behalf some groups have felt the need to draw a line limiting how much they are allowed to tell. And this seems to be even more evident in a country like Canada where gay and lesbians easily access their rights. If Érica wouldn't present herself as lesbian, nor as a mother, why did she want to take part in lesbian mother's events? Presently, Canada is one of the countries in the world with more equalitarian laws, and probably there wasn't much they could gain from the research Érica Souza was doing. In Brazil, however, anthropological knowledge is still needed for the cause. In Brazil there are still rights to achieve before those involved can simply live their lives and dismiss the researcher.

In Portugal, according to my experience, the situation is closer to the Brazilian: it is easier to negotiate the research with the informants in this field. Yet the sexual identity, though not asked, lies there as a doubt, as if knowing the researcher's sexual identity would make a difference. Often we can feel how intriguing our sexual identity is. But why should it matter? Even if sometimes it can be pure curiosity, the fact is that by disclosing one's sexual identity we can be opening space to people hearing what we are saying as if we are **speaking for** or **about** the gay and lesbian community. The same way as during both TV shows while I was supposed to **talk about** some reality, most of the phone calls expected me to answer as if I was **speaking for** those in question.

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