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Heterosexism in Focus Group Research: Collusion and Challenge

Virginia BRAUN

Like maleness, whiteness or middle-classness, heterosexuality has been, and continues to be, the assumed norm of psychological research and theorizing. Even feminist psychology, which has recognized, and challenged, the androcentric bias in psychology, has often failed to recognize, let alone challenge, heterosexist bias. Much feminist psychology continues to assume a generic heterosexual woman (Kitzinger, 1996), and lesbian women's experiences have usually been addressed either as a deviation from, or as identical to, this heterosexual norm. This assumption reflects our society as a whole: heterosexuality is normal, unquestioned, compulsory (Rich, 1980; Rothblum and Bond, 1996).

The term 'heterosexism' has been used, in preference to the term 'homophobia' (e.g. see Kitzinger and Perkins, 1993), to refer both to this assumption of heterosexual normalcy (e.g. Bohan, 1996), and to discrimination based on sexual orientation (e.g. Rothblum and Bond, 1996). In this paper I am concerned by what I refer to as 'everyday' heterosexism – the articulation of heterosexual norms in talk by (heterosexual) people who are 'tolerant' or 'liberal'. Everyday heterosexism is thus both insidious and pervasive. It is similar to the concept of 'cultural heterosexism', which,

entails the promotion by society in general of heterosexuality as the sole, legitimate expression of sexuality and affection. This includes . . . the tacit communication of this ideal via society's norms, institutions, laws, cultural forms, and even *scientific practices*. Cultural . . . heterosexism is so pervasive, so taken for granted, as to escape notice (Bohan, 1996: 39; emphasis added).

Livingston (1996: 20) noted that 'individually, each of us can act towards creating a future free of heterosexism'. As a heterosexual, I firmly believe she is right, and that heterosexuals must take this responsibility seriously. However, we can (and do) also collude in heterosexism, reinforcing the taken-for-granted,

normative nature of heterosexuality. Even heterosexuals who attempt to challenge their own (and others') heterosexism may collude in it in various subtle ways – through research questions (Herek et al., 1991) and research practices.

In this paper, I explore how heterosexual researchers (in this case, me) collude in heterosexism in focus group research. Focus groups provide a potentially challenging site for the (heterosexual) researcher aiming to prevent heterosexism, because participants interact with each other, as well as with the researcher, and might, as a group, interact to produce offensive talk (e.g. see Kitzinger, 1994a, 1994b). I will draw on data from 16 small focus groups I have conducted with women (most of whom were acquainted with each other, some of whom were friends) talking about the vagina. In eight of these groups, at least one participant identified herself (on demographic forms collected at the end of the focus group) as lesbian, bisexual or 'unsure'.

HETEROSEXISM BY COMMISSION

Heterosexism by commission – that is, through the *explicit* articulation of heterosexist assumptions – occurred in various, albeit related, ways in the group discussions. I will focus on three in this paper.

Generic Woman Equals Heterosexual Woman

One of the most common forms of heterosexism by commission occurred through talk about ostensibly *generic* women becoming talk about *heterosexual* women, thus explicitly excluding lesbian women. For example, I often asked about women making comparisons between their own and other women's genitals:

Extract 1

Ginny: like guys can compare with each other if they you know so choose
?: ((laughs))
Ginny: when they're at the urinal or when they're you know in a communal shower or something I know they're not supposed to look but you
?: mm
Ginny: I think they probably do
Tara: they do
((laughter))
Tara: of course they do
Julia: of course they do
Ginny: I mean I bet they do exactly um but you know know for women women don't have that kind of any kind of comparison

By assuming that women are not able to compare their own genitals with other women's, I am assuming that women do not get to see other women's genitals – a heterosexist assumption. While this maps on to the common-sense view that women's genitals are 'hidden' and men's are 'visible', it also assumes that the

only way women would see other women's genitals (and indeed men would see other men's) would be in a non-sexual context such as a communal shower. This formulation does not include the possibility that women might be having sex with other women.

Sex Equals Heterosex

A second way heterosexism by commission occurred was through questions about 'sex' (i.e. any sexual practice) being immediately translated into questions about heterosex (specifically coitus), and through reference to 'a partner' specifically becoming a *male* partner. In the following extract, the participants have been discussing interactions with doctors about gynaecological problems, and specifically thrush:

Extract 2

Ginny: i- if it was something to do with intercourse say then not- not thrush say but say you've been (seeing) would you ever use the term vagina with a doctor? (unclear) term

Kay: if it was hu- if it was specifically something to do with the vagina and the *vagina* was hurting and it was not to do with anything else then maybe

This is a more 'obvious' example of heterosexism in action than the previous one. In this extract, I employ the term 'intercourse' – popularly meaning penis-in-vagina – to cover *any* sex the vagina might be involved in. Such language immediately excludes lesbian sex. Ironically, it was a participant who identified as lesbian, Kay, who responded to the question, but ignored its hetero/sexual focus, restating it as a general 'vagina' issue. It may be that the refocusing of the question is itself a form of resistance to the heterosexism of the question.

Generic Man Equals Heterosexual Man

A third occurrence of heterosexism by commission was evident when talk about men assumed heterosexuality. In the following extract, the participants have been talking about internal examinations and smears:

Extract 3

Mia: I tend to prefer having a practice nurse doing it I mean I've had I've had doctors do smears before now and certainly internal examinations sometimes when you know when I've um certainly when I was pregnant um the consultant did an internal examination and I really f- afterwards just felt like saying don't you ever have sex don't you *know* the shape of the vagina y'know d'you *real-* 'cause he just kind of goes 'oh this is gonna be a bit uncomfortable'

'Having sex' relates to heterosexual sex, to 'knowing' what a vagina is like inside. The doctor might well be gay, and never have had sex with a woman.

In these extracts, I have provided examples that might not immediately be heard as heterosexist to the heterosexual researcher. They map on to common-sense ideas about what is 'normal' and 'natural' – uncontested. Heterosexuality is revealed as a core assumption in talk by heterosexuals in these groups. Within focus groups (and everyday life) where such assumptions are articulated, lesbian women (and gay men) are efficiently marginalized, and can be effectively silenced.

HETEROSEXISM BY OMISSION

Heterosexism also occurred through omission – that is, through the *lack* of disagreement with, or challenge to, heterosexist talk. This was primarily evidenced in two ways.

Lack of Challenge to Heterosexist Talk

Heterosexism by omission occurred through the lack of overt challenge to heterosexism. When participants produced heterosexist talk, I never challenged it, and other participants rarely did, even when there were 'out' lesbian participants in the groups. As moderator, I was only once told that the assumptions around a question were heterosexist. By failing to challenge such talk, the assumed heterosexual 'norm' is not highlighted (although it may well be experienced by people in the group), and so not problematized.

Failure to Follow up Lesbian 'Topics'

Heterosexism by omission was also evident in a less obvious way – through my failure, as moderator, to follow up questions relating to lesbian sex, sexual practices, experiences and so on. In at least four focus groups, participants raised the possibility (or actuality) of having sex with women, or being 'turned on' by women. I never questioned them further, but followed a heterosexual line of questioning. For example, in one focus group where all three participants were in relationships with men, one talked about buying an 'erotic' magazine for women (nb: this account initially assumes all women and men to be heterosexual):

Extract 4

- Helen: it it was like pictures of hands and the way they sat and the ah and I think it's different for men than it is for women women don't need to see this great big dick sticking out
?: ((laughs))
Helen: you know they they're happy to look at men's hands and the way they

- stand whereas men tend to want to see the pink flesh of of the women's vagina when they look at
Kate: ((laughs)) see the whites of our eyes
 ((laughter))
Helen: well yeah yeah um when they look at pornographic pictures those men that do
Kate: well (I'm) much more likely to get turned on by looking at a beautiful naked woman than
Helen: yeah
Kate: a guy
Helen: I get as turned on
Jan: definitely
: mm<br/
Kate: in a picture I mean
Helen: mm
Kate: I don't know about female alive but in a picture
: mm<br/
Ginny: do you think then I mean d'you think the penis then is erotic at all is it something that you would think of as a an erotic object

The contrast here between the women's talk of being aroused by images of female bodies, which they seemed willing to talk about, and my immediate retreat to the 'safe' (heterosexual) ground of penises, is striking.

Everyday heterosexism by commission and by omission work in parallel, sustaining one another. Both are insidious, operating at a mundane level of common sense. To tackle these issues effectively in our research, we need to move beyond an understanding of heterosexism (or homophobia) as negatively *intentioned*. Because everyday heterosexism operates as the articulation of assumptions, the speaker (who is not *necessarily* heterosexual) marginalizes lesbians, gay men and bisexuals without (conscious) *intent*. Heterosexism by omission is perhaps the hardest to conceptualize (and because of this, particularly worrying) as it occurs through a *failure* to act, rather than any action done – disregarding for a moment the idea of silence being an action. However, we should hold ourselves (and others) culpable for our failures to act, and consider how silence recreates the 'common sense' we may be silently disagreeing with.

CHALLENGING HETEROSEXISM

Because they draw, in large part, on 'common sense', such heterosexist arguments, comments, questions and so on are seductive, seemingly natural and do not need to be accounted for by speaker (or by hearer). They are not troublesome in the talk, and do not require work by the participants to bring them off successfully. It is these very features, which make heterosexism so prevalent in my focus group (and general) discussions, which also made it difficult to challenge – either as moderator or participant. To do so would disrupt the common-sense account being produced. However, heterosexism was not without

challenge, although the instances of challenge were few. I will briefly discuss one instance of challenge – which occurred in a group where participants knew each other relatively well – to demonstrate that it both can be done (in this instance by a lesbian participant), and that it might also actually be useful to stimulate individual change. The four participants have been discussing whether and how the vagina is important in ‘sex’:

Extract 5

- Jo:* oh well I see penetration as sex ()
- Ginny?:* (but is it)
- ?:* (how)
- Jo:* everything else I call foreplay
- Mary:* ((laughs))
- Kay:* ((laughing)) Jo ((horrified))
- Jo:* what? what the fuck is wrong with that
- Mary:* absolutely nothing
- Jo:* just tell me which *big* mistake I’ve made (to the)
- Kay/Mary:* ((laugh))
- Jo:* feminist experience
- Kay:* so I just do foreplay I don’t have sex ((laughs))
((pause))
- Jo:* oh what (pen) ((quietly))
- Kay:* ((laughs))
- Jo:* ah
((laughter))
- Jo:* (unclear) (give) an answer to that one
- Kay:* ((laughs))
- Jo:* but if I was gonna have sex with a *woman* I would still see fingers inside as penetration
- Kay:* ((laughs))
- Jo:* and you may well do that
- Mary:* but what about what about what about those women who refuse to have anything
- Jo:* ((laughs)) well I wouldn’t want to go with those women
- Mary:* ((laughs))
- Kay:* ((laughs))
- Jo:* they wouldn’t attract me one way or another

In this extract, when Jo produces a heterosexist statement that designates ‘real’ and ‘true’ sex as heterosex, and indeed coitus, she is questioned/challenged by me, and challenged by Kay, who outlines the heterosexist assumptions her talk is based on. While this is an example of a lesbian being responsible for challenging heterosexism, it does produce results – Jo’s ‘oh’ and ‘ah’ signal ‘recognition’. By highlighting heterosexism, the implicit assumptions the talk is based on become identifiable, explicit, allowing the speaker to (potentially) change their talk/assumptions then and in the future.

While such a direct approach might work differently in a group where participants do not know each other well, this extract demonstrates that heterosexism

within a group can be challenged, without the 'dynamics' of the group disintegrating – this group continued to discuss 'the vagina' for some time. A challenge to heterosexism might also allow other participants who had been silenced to talk, or others to challenge it.

HETEROSEXISM IN FOCUS GROUP SETTINGS – A CHALLENGE?

In this paper, I have tried to demonstrate how everyday heterosexism, both by commission and omission, has occurred in my research. I do not think my heterosexism would be particularly unusual among research conducted by heterosexual researchers that does not aim specifically to address lesbian experiences. I could have tried to excuse it, but it is better to confront our heterosexism (within our research practices), take responsibility for it and look for ways to eliminate it.

However, various features and demands of focus group research raise particular questions in relation to this issue, and are worth briefly noting. Focus groups offer the benefits of interaction and the possibility of challenging and changing talk and 'attitudes' (Wilkinson, 1999), but because of this, they also risk becoming another arena for the perpetuation of heterosexism in psychology. The very lack of control that the researcher has over the content of the group discussion may allow a group of individuals to collaborate with each other to silence or to intimidate particular participants, or to silence a particular topic or to produce offensive comments (Kitzinger, 1994a, 1994b; Wilkinson, 1998). The crucial issue of maintaining rapport with participants (O'Connell Davidson and Layder, 1994) – which can be exacerbated by sensitive or difficult topics, such as talking about the vagina – might be at odds with a desire to challenge what participants are saying. Where rapport seems tenuous, the desire (or indeed 'need') to continue to collect data might override any desire the moderator might have to challenge the heterosexism within a group. Researchers need to be aware of these potential problems, and think through how they will deal with them.

These concerns, which can partially account for heterosexism by omission from a (heterosexual) moderator, do not, however, account for heterosexist comments produced by that moderator. Just as it is possible to talk in non-sexist ways, so is it possible to talk in non-heterosexist ways (e.g. see Committee on Lesbian and Gay Concerns, 1991). As heterosexual researchers, we need to be particularly attuned to the possibility (indeed probability) that our research is heterosexist – even if, and I think this is an important point, our participants have been explicitly recruited as heterosexual. We shouldn't stop considering heterosexism just because there's no lesbian present to challenge us (as we wouldn't want men to be sexist just because no women were present to challenge it). Challenging and eliminating heterosexism is *everyone's* responsibility, not something that should just be left to lesbians or gay men. Moreover, heterosexuals need to consider that what we might not hear or recognize as heterosexist might be experienced that way by lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and some other hetero-

sexuals. Therefore, we need to look carefully for the possibility of heterosexism in our research practices and written output, and develop strategies to eliminate it.

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