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# Researching LGBTQ+ homelessness and building social justice in the UK & the US: methods, ethics, recruitment

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## ABSTRACT

LGBTQ+ homelessness research is an emerging area growing in importance in the UK, the US, Canada and Europe. Research to date indicates that methodology and participant recruitment are particularly challenging for this group. Sexual orientation and gender identity, as well as homelessness and poverty are taboo topics that are often stigmatized. Homelessness for LGBTQ+ people is therefore under-reported both by third sector organizations and governments. The scale of the problem is difficult to determine, resulting in the de-prioritization of support, funding and policy change. Drawing on research outcomes from projects in England, Scotland and the US, this paper explores possibilities for conducting research into LGBTQ+ homelessness can happen, and why such research is vital to world-building and epistemic justice. We consider the delicate question of whether we can accurately and ethically produce data on LGBTQ+ homelessness, what the repercussions are for those currently experiencing homelessness, and whether it is still important to pursue such research given the potential harms.

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## Introduction

To understand and address a social problem, we must define it and analyze both its geographical distribution and its temporal persistence. This necessitates methodologies that not only provide quantifiable data but also elucidate the ontological realities underlying its existence. Intersecting social disadvantages belong to the category of hidden work, related to hidden populations, which places it in a precarious ontological position. Politics of vulnerability and marginalization add to the complexity of conducting research in these areas. In the UK and the US these issues have been discussed under the banners of ‘woke wars’ or ‘culture wars’, referring to the contentious debates and conflicts between those advocating for social justice,

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inclusivity, and awareness of systemic inequalities, and those who criticize these movements as excessive or detrimental to free speech and traditional values. This contention surrounding equality and diversity make it even more relevant to find 'hard evidence' that some groups in society need more protection and support than others due to historical and ongoing structural inequities, as debates often sway towards the erasure of needs, favouring a neoliberal and individualist agenda. This article examines methodological re-considerations for research into stigmatized topics (Irvine, 2018). Homelessness is embedded in a polarized political landscape which generally speaks of people experiencing homelessness due to personal faults or through the failings of societal structures (Fitzpatrick, 2005). Research that speaks to the disadvantaged groups that are more likely to experience structural failures, societal contempt and dissolution, often seeks to challenge individual blame-culture (Feldman, 2004). We seek to contest how we can make long-lasting and transformative social change for socially disadvantaged groups, through discussing methodological challenges within a 'hidden' social issue, namely Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Queer/Questioning (LGBTQ+) homelessness. This group is subject to intersecting double stigma and oppression, as sexual and gender minorities and as homeless denizens (Turner, 2016). Irvine (2014) calls sexuality research 'dirty work', meaning that whilst such work is necessary, it is also highly stigmatized even *within* academia. This means that limits are imposed on knowledge-production relating to sexuality – a taboo subject, and when we look at the bigger picture the consequence of stigma in research is epistemic injustice. The current, volatile climate for genderqueer and trans individuals in both the US and the UK and beyond also limits access to knowledge about gender and sexuality, actively discouraging gender theory (Butler, 2024). We argue that research into sexuality, sexual orientation, gender identities and homelessness is the kind of work that is needed for radical change to happen within our current political contexts. Engaging with taboo and stigmatized topics will allow for political worldbuilding (Zigon, 2017), designing a world where homelessness is not a common outcome for people identifying as LGBTQ+ (Carr *et al.*, 2022). This in turn requires the kind of vision promoted by Escobar (2018) in a concept he calls the 'pluriverse'. The pluriverse, according to Escobar's vision, is a world that is *designed* to include social justice from the onset.

Placing LGBTQ+ homelessness research in this complex system of politics, ethics, and stigmas and finding methodologies that will enable research is a challenge. As researchers of social justice, policy, anthropology, law and social care, we here engage with some of the barriers and solutions to researching LGBTQ+ homelessness. In doing so we discuss the perils and tribulations of finding participants in the online sex-market, trust-making through ethnography, deceptions and power dynamics of working within an organization, and whether co-production and working with 'experts by experience' can provide the answer to ethical pitfalls in research with vulnerable, hidden and invisible populations.

Our three substantive sections and contributions of this paper address recruitment to research, methodologies and ethical concerns. Firstly, we present three independent studies from England, Scotland and the U.S. where the authors have completed research into this topic. We then broadly discuss the available literature and projects that have addressed limits of quantitative data for LGBTQ+ homelessness research.

The next section contains our empirical findings that outline challenges and possible solutions in participant recruitment, qualitative and participatory methodologies and co-production. Lastly, we consider the ethical considerations of conducting research with vulnerable and hard-to-reach populations that experience multi-layered forms of stigma. Our discussion and conclusions consider findings from the projects and our explorations with methodologies and recruitment, and what these mean in the context of worldbuilding for people experiencing LGBTQ+ homelessness and intersecting disadvantages. Our leading question in this paper is: considering the potential harms of research with LGBTQ+ people experiencing homelessness, is it something we should do?

### **Locations and studies**

In this paper, we draw from three studies on LGBTQ+ homelessness; one from Scotland (Matthews), one from the US (Shelton) and one from England (Tunåker). These were independent studies, all focussing on LGBTQ+ homelessness at different times and locations and have been brought together here for the purposes of comparative discussions of completing research on the topic. Our discussions revolve around the methodologies used, rather than the outcomes of the projects.

Matthews' research took place in Scotland, UK, in 2016–2017. The project had a wider goal of understanding homelessness and housing among LGBTQ+ people (Matthews & Poyner, 2019; Matthews *et al.*, 2019). The project design had envisaged using social media (Facebook and Twitter) and contacts with homelessness, housing and LGBTQ+ organizations to recruit participants for semi-structured interviews. The project team leader had been working with a national LGBTQ+ organization to facilitate this. However, when fieldwork commenced, these recruitment methods were quickly found to be unsuitable, leading to more creative participant methods. Overall, the ethical approach of the research was overseen by the General University Ethics Panel of University of Stirling.

Shelton's study was conducted in the US in 2019–2020. The purpose of the study was to investigate homelessness prevention and diversion from the perspectives of both young adults with lived expertise of homelessness as well as homelessness service providers. The research team included three young adults with lived expertise, an employee from a national organization working on LGBTQ+ youth homelessness, and a university-based researcher. The initial study design included two anonymous digital surveys, one for young adults and one for service providers. Survey development was led by the young adults on the research team, and all members of the team came to a consensus about each item before the instrument was finalized. While the digital design 'worked' for service providers, in that a relatively large sample from diverse geographic regions participated, this strategy was not effective in engaging young people. This was surprising, seeming antithetical to data demonstrating young people's connectivity, even when unstably housed (Heaslip *et al.*, 2021). Because the perspective of young people was critical to this project, the research team pivoted to virtual focus groups as a primary mechanism of data collection, utilizing existing networks for recruitment.

Tunåker's research took place in England in 2012–2013, with follow-up interviews in 2020 and a full review project in 2024 (Tunåker *et al.*, 2025). The majority of the original research was completed in a one-year ethnographic study within youth homelessness hostels (supported accommodation), where the researcher also worked as a support worker and later as a manager, over a ten-year period (2008–2018). In this case, the university-based researcher was also an employee of the charity that worked with youth homelessness, and as such the field work carried out also formed a part of the daily activities of support work within the charity. This gave excellent insights, but also posed considerable ethical and practical challenges, as we discuss later. For the follow-up projects, mixed-method approaches were used, combining analysis of existing datasets, new surveys and semi-structured interviews, focus groups, a co-production youth panel and ethnographic field visits.

### **Review of data collection in LGBTQ+ homelessness research**

In conversation with organizations that collect data on homelessness, both from the State and the charitable sector, admittedly any data that relates to systematically marginalized groups is patchy and incomplete (Abramovich *et al.*, 2024). There is a drive to understand how certain groups who experience inequalities resulting from societal disadvantage are also subject to unequal access to housing and security (Clark *et al.*, 2022; Fraser *et al.*, 2019), yet we are lacking the infrastructures to obtain such data. Both governmental and non-governmental organizations gather data on homelessness, but social disadvantage is challenging to measure, and particular group identities suffer from barriers such as stigma and ostracization that prevent accurate depictions of social problems. One of the most prevalent methods for collecting homelessness data are point-in-time (PiT) counts, also known as rough sleeper counts or street homelessness counts. The general idea is to send teams of professionals and/or volunteers out to count people who are visibly sleeping rough, reporting numbers of people found, their gender and various other characteristics, depending on the practices prevalent in each country or region. Counts have been hotly debated, both hailed for their effectiveness (Teixeira & Cartwright, 2020) and critiqued for missing important aspects of rough sleeping and homelessness (e.g. Richard *et al.*, 2024). Counts only include rough sleeping, not other forms of homelessness such as sofa surfing, inadequate or precarious housing, unsuitable/unsafe homes or overcrowding for example. Critics have also raised that the counts are not adept at finding and renumerating marginalized groups such as women (Wright *et al.*, 2024) and LGBTQ+ populations (Abramovich *et al.*, 2024) and have experimented with ways of including more robust data for these groups.

Some of the issues we have encountered in our research projects include inaccurate counting, and systematic exclusion of marginalized groups in government data, not noting down or having information on marginalized characteristics and not wanting to share minority data for political reasons. We have also found when using household data that minorities in general are not counted very well, for example due to stigma or family violence where minority identities are hidden and oppressed, and that government data simply does not include questions on certain marginalized characteristics. When efforts have been made to gather additional data

for minoritized groups, these are likely to focus on groupings and categories in silos, rather than understanding the intersecting nature of disadvantage (Fraser *et al.*, 2019; Carr & Tunåker, 2024; cf Crenshaw, 1989, 2017; Nash, 2019). For instance, Black LGBTQ+ people experiencing homelessness are not only impacted by and experience challenges related to cis/heterosexism, but are also impacted by and face challenges related to systemic racism and its effects, such as racial microaggressions, racial profiling, harassment by community and law enforcement (Gattis & Larson, 2017; Shelton *et al.*, 2018). Homelessness service systems often do not possess the ability to identify and competently respond to the needs of people whose lives are negatively impacted by intersecting oppressions rooted in racism, classism, ableism, cis/heterosexism and anti-trans bias (Olivet & Dones, 2016). The problem with social disadvantages based on individual characteristics is that they are likely to have varied levels of impact on the person's relationship to home and homelessness, and likelihood is that if one disadvantage has been listed as a driving factor or causation of homelessness, this will overcloud other, smaller factors that have contributed over time. Social disadvantages are the result of structural oppressions that can not only be difficult to quantify but may also not be the priority of investigations among researchers, governments and funding bodies.

There have been some efforts of governments collecting more data on LGBTQ+ populations. Within the UK, from 2003, the Scottish government pioneered asking sexual identity within the 'demographic grid' of surveys (the basic questions at the beginning asked of all research participants (McManus, 2003). The proliferation of this practice across the world reveals that around 2 to 5 percent of the population are non-heterosexual, with substantial variations based on age. The production of such data has led to wide debate about why the data is being collected and its usefulness (Guyan, 2022). These reflect concerns informed by queer theory that such data collection instruments impose definitions of sexual identity onto people that have their roots in systems of codification, domination and oppression (Browne, 2010).

Data collection in the US has been similarly challenging, with inconsistent findings across governmental efforts and only few studies from non-governmental organizations. For example the Voices of Youth Count (VoYC) examined LGBTQ+ homelessness on a national scale in the US using a broad definition of homelessness, including both street homelessness, shelters and transitional housing, as well as those precariously housed (i.e. doubled-up, couch-surfing). The count found that LGBTQ+ youth are over twice as likely to report experiencing homelessness than cisgender heterosexual youth and the likelihood was even greater for Black LGBTQ+ youth (Morton *et al.*, 2018). One limitation with the LGBTQ+ data in this study is the conflation of sexual orientation and gender identity. Findings are reported for LGBTQ+ youth, without disaggregating transgender youth from sexual minority youth. True Colors United and the Williams Institute's study used a national survey of youth homelessness service providers to better understand the service landscape for LGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness (Choi *et al.*, 2015; Durso & Gates, 2012). While this survey research was critically important in laying the foundation for continued national advocacy, it relied on reports from service providers rather than the experiences of young people. Because many service providers collect data

in myriad ways, the estimates we achieve need to be contextualized within the absence of widely agreed upon methods for obtaining information about sexual orientation and gender identity. National targeted surveys can present a useful alternative to data collected by government and non-government organizations. However, it is worth taking into consideration what McCormack (2020) argues, that it is widely known that charitable organizations are 'claims-making' in their presentation of research findings, which means they are promoting an issue as a social problem to utilize it for campaigning purposes. Moreover, their methodology for collecting data is almost exclusively online surveys distributed *via* social media, which makes sampling and participant recruitment biased and less reliable. As such, 'statistics cited by claims-makers are often based on little evidence or flawed research' (ibid: 8). If there are no social science peer reviewed research findings to back up statistics from charitable organizations, it is likely that these statistics will be used in media campaigns, but also academic advocacy to back claims for required social action.

There are also increasing concerns that this data is being collected merely because they feel they should, without necessarily considering whether it is useful to know such data about the populations they are engaging with (Guyan, 2022). This is particularly the case with data on transgender people, where questions can be intrusive or inappropriate (Guyan, 2022). Statistical analysis is increasingly used to understand homelessness, and particularly the causes of homelessness (Bramley & Fitzpatrick, 2018). However, as only small proportion of the population experience homelessness, and the intersection of this with the even smaller proportion who identifies LGBTQ+, meaningful statistical analysis is difficult for marginalized groups. Consequently, we are at the risk of not knowing enough about the causation and experience of homelessness for people with intersecting characteristics. With all of this in mind, we can deduce current statistical data does not accurately represent the issues prevalent in LGBTQ+ homelessness and we must look to diversify and improve data collection and availability cross-nationally to be able to build social justice.

## **Recruitment and methods for data collection**

### ***Finding a needle in a haystack: recruitment and research with hidden people***

Finding, recruiting and working with participants experiencing LGBTQ+ homelessness is challenging for several reasons. In EU legislation for example, sexual identity is classed as 'special category data' under the General Data Protection Regulations, which means that organizations are wary about sharing LGBTQ+ identity data. Within non-LGBTQ+ specific organizations people are wary of 'outing' people using their services. With these challenges in mind, how do researchers recruit participants for projects, and why should we insist on 'un-hiding' them for this purpose? Here we discuss different strategies and concerns that have arisen in three different projects, and our motivations to persist. First, we discuss how to recruit for research with LGBTQ+ participants, and then we review our use of different methodologies for data collection, including ethnography, participatory methods and co-production.

Since finding and recruiting hidden and invisible people for research purposes is difficult, data on such populations is patchy and inconsistent at best. Among people who experience homelessness, and those who research and support them, 'hidden' is used frequently when referring to those experiencing homelessness who are missing from sight, missing from data and not receiving support (Pleace & Hermans, 2020). Many of those belonging to the category of 'hidden' homeless are minorities based on age, gender, sexual orientation, race, and disability (Carr & Tunåker, 2024). 'Hidden' or 'invisible' individuals can also refer to those not being counted or accounted for in statistics, or to not fit with the stereotypical image of a 'homeless person', such as rough sleepers, people begging, substance misusers and those living in poverty, therefore circumventing the 'presumed' and stigmatized images of a person experiencing homelessness (Hall, 2003; Tunåker, 2015). A further challenge is whether individuals will self-identify into the two categories of interest: experiencing homelessness and identifying as LGBTQ+. For example, many young people experiencing homelessness or insecure housing, particularly in-line with broad schema such as the FEANTSA ETHOS typology in Europe, may not view themselves as homeless. The pervasiveness of the image of a rough-sleeper being 'homeless' (Dean, 2015) means that often young people experiencing domestic abuse or violence, living in overcrowded accommodation, or sofa-surfing either do not identify as, or are not willing to identify themselves as 'homeless' (Littman *et al.*, 2022), and LGBTQ+ populations are twice as likely to experience this type of 'hidden' homelessness (Tunåker *et al.*, 2025 forthcoming).

Homeless shelters that specifically support LGBTQ+ people are few and often located in metropolitan areas. Therefore, having access to 'mainstream' homelessness services can sometimes be the only way to identify research participants, *if* they have enough trust in the organization to be 'out'. Another limitation of using hostels and supported accommodation for recruitment is that many LGBTQ+ individuals may not feel confident to seek support from mainstream services for fear of rejection and homo/trans/bi-phobia. Another solution to finding research participants *via* organizations can be through multi-agency working with local charities that do support LGBTQ+ populations and building a network *via* this route or attending LGBTQ+ specific events that enable snowball sampling (Sadler *et al.*, 2010), but the purpose of such events is often for support and researchers need to be sensitive to exploiting events that are meant to provide a safe haven. Furthermore, recruitment strategies that use social service programmes (or similar) for people experiencing homelessness may prove insufficient for reaching LGBTQ+ participants as they render LGBTQ+ people invisible through marginalizing policies and practices that assume they are heterosexual and/or cisgender (Shelton, 2015). Homeless service systems also perpetuate cis/heteronormativity through exclusionary paperwork, a lack of inclusive anti-discrimination policies and inadequate training for staff, and an overall lack of knowledge regarding LGBTQ+ people and the social context within which they exist (Shelton, 2015). Abramovich (2017) details the ways in which the systematic enactment of homophobia and transphobia are normalized in shelter settings, creating barriers to service acquisition. As an example, a qualitative examination of LGBTQ+ adults experiencing homelessness ( $N=17$ ) in a Canadian city revealed the negative impact of social, structural, and physical environments,



including discrimination and dangerous social environments within the shelter system (Bardwell, 2019). Furthermore, not everyone is willing to openly identify as LGBTQ+, particularly in 'official' situations. Many may be 'out' to friends or family, but will not state their identities on monitoring forms, thereby rendering official monitoring unrealistic. Sampling from LGBTQ+ communities can be difficult, as marginalization happens even *within* such communities. McCormack argued (2013, p. 4, and see also Hartman, 2011) that finding a marginalized group within an already marginalized group is like finding a needle in a haystack. The likelihood is, therefore, that our samples of LGBTQ+ communities are not representative of the plethora of identities and accompanying challenges that exist. An example of the challenges of participant recruitment is through Matthew's project in Scotland.

### ***The perils of participant recruitment through the Grindr dating app***

An increasingly common method of recruitment is the use of social media to locate participants. This has the immediate benefits of being mostly low-cost and potentially attracting participants who might be missed through more traditional offline methods, specifically those not in contact with homelessness support organizations, housing providers, or LGBTQ+ support organizations. As a recruitment method it also easily allows potential participants to self-identify into the sensitive categories of LGBTQ+ and of experiencing homelessness, but it comes with serious ethical and safety considerations.

In Matthews' research, the dating app Grindr, an online platform for men who have sex with men (MSM), was used for participant recruitment. Following approval from the ethics review board of his institution, Matthews set up a profile on Grindr using the photograph used on his institutional profile. When creating the profile most of the fields were left blank, apart from age, sexual identity and gender. In total, over 50 people got in contact during four months of using the app. However, Grindr is a dating app; moreover it is an app for men to engage in casual hook-ups with other men in their local area (Bonner-Thompson, 2017; Licoppe *et al.*, 2016; Miles, 2017). This was the experience of using the app for participant recruitment in this research. Our account received many unsolicited photos of erect penises. Similar experiences have been noted by other researchers who have used dating apps for participant recruitment (McCormack *et al.*, 2013). The messages were simply deleted with no response. However, this *is* sexual harassment and could be experienced as such.

Because of this, using dating apps for participant recruitment has to be an informed choice by a researcher, and include significant ethical considerations for the safety of both the researcher and the participants. It would be wholly inappropriate for a research leader to request a research team member to set up a profile on such a service without their full consent to put themselves at risk of such harassment. It could, rightly, be argued that accessing gay men in other spaces, such as gay bars or public toilets, would also put a researcher at risk of unwanted sexual advances, and seeing sexual acts and nudity. But, as with our concerns with the use of Grindr, we would not expect a researcher to have to access such places as part of their job and that such engagement would be entirely voluntary. Considerations of moving into a sexualized space for participant recruitment therefore have a more

troubling safety aspect. There are risks for those utilizing the app in being exploited or unaware of consequences of taking part in research. Many people experiencing homelessness also use dating apps to find a place to sleep for the night, 'survival sex' or sex work, and are in a position of extreme vulnerability (Fraser *et al.*, 2019).

Although Grindr, and similar online spaces, can provide a useful and productive means of recruiting participants, these are not spaces for the recruitment of people for homelessness research; they are spaces for sex and dating. Recruitment is one of the barriers to ensuring representation and variety in the people that partake in research. Next we discuss some of the challenges in the methodologies used for LGBTQ+ research and the use of different qualitative methods for data collection.

### ***Ethnographic approaches for 'hard-to-reach' populations***

Ethnographic approaches enable researchers to spend a prolonged period of time with people experiencing homelessness, which allows for constant critical reflection and analysis of our own research data, methods and relationships (Godelier, 2010). Fieldwork in anthropology and other disciplines traditionally entails immersing oneself entirely in a group, society or community, for an extended period of time (Geertz, 1988). This can be particularly apt for research within the homelessness sector and with vulnerable, hard-to-reach populations such as those experiencing LGBTQ+ homelessness. Complete immersion and long-term fieldwork can however be difficult to achieve in the currently financially restrictive climate in Academia, and barriers such as access, pandemic implications, family commitments and precarity. Recent developments have therefore promoted a 'patchwork ethnography' (Gökçe *et al.*, 2020). This approach takes a feminist and decolonized stance to how we approach long-term fieldwork, promoting it as 'ethnographic processes and protocols designed around short-term field visits, using fragmentary yet rigorous data, and other innovations that resist the fixity, holism, and certainty demanded in the publication process' (Gökçe *et al.*, 2020, p. 1). As Tunåker found through her most recent project in 2024, spending time in settings that homeless individuals experience, even if in fragmented parts, can allow for deeper understandings of lived experience, and can break some of the barriers that stigma creates through creating trust and friendship. Speaking with other staff members in these settings can also bring deep insights, through the overview they often have of recurrent issues.

Nevertheless, how we gain entry to these settings can be challenging. One solution is to work or volunteer for an organization that provides supported accommodation or outreach services, which provides access, but can bring its own set of complex power relationships. Being employed in a shelter/supported accommodation setting/outreach service means having daily interactions and forming relationships. Some of the power dynamics that emerge may be imagined and others imposed by the organization's rules, policies and regulations. Anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod calls this 'diametrically opposed processes of self-construction through opposition to others - processes that begin from different sides of a power divide' (1991, p. 139). The way we form relationships in research depends on who we are, both to ourselves and to our interlocutors; in this case working as a staff member can have direct impact and some power over current lives as residents in the hostels, such as

conduct warnings, rent regulation and evictions. Furthermore, the researcher's own gender identity, sexual orientation, class, age and ethnicity are constantly in a dialogical relationship with the characteristics of research participants. Borneman & Hammoudi describe how 'if the ethnographer invests in a long-term relationship with others, and over time manages to bridge some of the cultural differences and achieve a level of trust, then the relations between power and the depictions of reality are likely to be highly nuanced and contradictory [...]' (Borneman & Hammoudi, 2009, p. 6). Although shaped by the power relationships, the staff/resident relationship can also simultaneously create the level of trust necessary to conduct participant observation.

An example from England (Tunåker, 2017) of using key-working as an ethnographic approach within an organization revealed that the disadvantage of being a staff member was that inevitably hostel residents would not share some things, precisely because the researcher held an advantageous position over them (see also Hall, 2000). For example, certain things were hidden from staff members (albeit not always successfully), such as drug and alcohol use, late night-extravaganzas and other rule infractions of the hostels. In this example the researcher completed a key-working session with Jake (pseudonym), a young person staying at a supported accommodation hostel, where weekly support sessions with a key-worker formed a part of the accommodation offering. The session started out with him stating that he was unable to pay his rent, progressed to reveal a lot about his feelings about experiencing homelessness and living with the label 'homeless'. Despite that he was already five weeks in arrears and had signed a contract stating he would pay back £35 at his next benefit payment; he had made no payments. He eventually told his key-worker that he never received the benefit payment, but he was reluctant to say why. Consequently, the key-worker phoned the Jobcentre to ask them, and learned that he had missed three appointments and was sanctioned. After explaining to them that he was a young vulnerable person with learning difficulties, at risk of becoming street homeless if he did not get his benefits, they finally agreed to one last meeting. We walked together to the meeting, during which he shared he feels the Jobcentre treats him badly, lies about him missing appointments and generally 'are a bunch of idiots'. Once there they showed evidence of the appointments and various calls to him and gave him one last chance to 'sort himself out' and attend appointments, otherwise he would be sanctioned. On the way back from the Jobcentre, Jake opened up more about what the real problem was. He said that the reason he did not attend the appointments was because he is lazy and a frequently high on weed and 'can't be bothered to go'. The key-worker asked what he thought the reason was for his laziness and for smoking so much cannabis, and he said it was because he did not think he was good for anything else. He did not think he was clever enough to do a job or to go to college. He had no skills and therefore no prospects in life, so why should he bother with anything at all?

Key-working to some extent limited the remit of conversations, however, it also instigated conversations outside of the scope of daily casual interactions. Jake used to try his very best to appear 'clued up' and as someone that did not need help, and a lot of his formal key-working sessions gave very little about his feelings of his situation. Nevertheless, there were times, as in the scenario above, where he would

open up about his life and his aspirations in a way that felt closer to his reality and emotions. Other activities that also formed a part of the key-working process such as, doing sports, cooking or art, or just walking to appointments together, made for conversation starters and gave opportunities to talk in a more informal setting. The researcher found these moments very useful for participant observation and for finding conversations (Hall, 2000) about their lives and inner thoughts that would probably not have arisen in unstructured interviews or casual conversation.

Abu-Lughod called for ethnographies of the particular, since we too soon turn to generalizations and tend to homogenize and ‘flatten out’ the people we study, when we rather need to acknowledge the particulars; groups are not discrete, bounded entities and one cannot generalize about the people within them. According to Abu-Lughod, if we turn our focus to particular individuals instead and how they relate to one another, then we can ‘subvert the most problematic connotations of culture’, which she identifies as ‘homogeneity, coherence, and timelessness’ (Abu-Lughod, 1991, p. 476). From our research into homelessness, we have come to realize that what Abu-Lughod has identified is a prominent issue. The general public, policy makers, the State and to some extent researchers of this topic (e.g. Ravenhill, 2008) tend to assume that ‘the homeless’ were a homogenous group that belonged to a timeless and coherent ‘culture’. The implications of these overarching misunderstandings of homelessness are problematic because they lead to misguided policy and funding decisions, and they work to further ‘invisibilise’ disadvantaged groups within the homeless population, such as queer people. However, whilst key-working as a research method might mean that we gain invaluable insights into the lives of people experiencing homelessness, it also comes with delicate and complex ethical concerns and considerations, as we discuss in our final section. First, we discuss the value of participatory methods and co-production.

### ***Co-production and participatory methods***

How do we locate ourselves in time, space, place and as active or passive participants in the lives of LGBTQ+ people experiencing homelessness? Clifford and Marcus’ words, which in many ways reflect a range of methodological and epistemological considerations beyond text, bare some weight here: ‘Every version of an “other” wherever found, is also the construction of a “self” and the making of ethnographic texts’ (Clifford & Marcus, 1986, p. 23). Here we discuss how co-production, participatory methods such as film, photography, and mapping create unique data that are integral to understanding experiences of LGBTQ+ people experiencing homelessness, whilst acknowledging our ‘selves’ and our positionality, or social location, within the production of knowledge.

The authors of this paper have experimented with different ways of engaging with, participating in and enjoying time spent with LGBTQ+ ‘research participants’. In Tunåker’s most recent project in 2024, virtual interviews *via* Microsoft Teams, alongside co-production discussion panels and in-person qualitative interviews. Matthews’ project also used telephone interviews, which worked well with the particularly vulnerable group of participants recruited from online dating platforms. The researchers have also used various visual methods, such as for example

photovoice, photo or video elicitation, or mapping methods, and have found these to also be a good way of broadening participation and engagement with research. Visual methods are a form of arts-informed research, a qualitative inquiry that honours diverse ways of knowing and invites research participants to be active members in the creation and advancement of knowledge through the arts (Knowles & Cole, 2008), challenging epistemic assumptions. The traditional interview privileges language as the primary mode of knowledge transmission, our daily lives are layered not only with language, but also with visual and sensory meaning. Not all knowing is easily translated into words (Bagnoli, 2009), particularly the knowing which is associated with stigmatized experiences and/or stigmatized identities. In our various projects, participant created visual representations generated interpretative material that could be revisited by both the participant and the researcher throughout the research process for reference or clarification (Bagnoli, 2009; Fine & Sirin, 2007). Photos evoke deep emotions in people and therefore may elicit more information than would ordinary research. Using photos as tools and vehicles for knowledge and creating narratives around research participants/co-producers constructing and considering content for future photos, made for excellent research interviews. Photographs can build bridges between strangers and also be starting points for discussions. Pink calls this 'participatory and collaborative photography' (Pink, 2007, p. 75–78) and we believe this method has a valid place and potential to inform research with disadvantaged populations. As Jhala (in Pink, 2007, p. 185) reflects, 'Photographs serve to unlock tongues and enable and facilitate discourse'. Tunåker's project also made use of participatory filmmaking - a form of co-production. The idea was for the film project to elicit ethnographic content, with the final product reflecting the aims that the participants involved set out. Filmmaker Rouch (2003 [1974]) advocates for 'audiovisual reciprocity', where the participants are a part of the process, from start to finish, something we could imagine to be co-production of research through filmmaking. The young people that took part in this project had a say in what the film should ultimately convey; they 'staged' the reality that they wanted to portray publicly.

Of course, co-production of knowledge can take many forms. Shelton found from their co-produced project working together with LGBTQ+ youth in the US that authentic engagement and collaboration is integral to research processes (see also Ferguson *et al.*, 2011; Gomez & Ryan, 2016; Kennedy *et al.*, 2019; Wu *et al.*, 2016). Shelton's project involved working with a small team of young adult researchers with lived expertise of homelessness, and they found that the work of building a participatory research team is arduous and it needs to be intentional and flexible. Shelton had been working on a research team with a larger, multi-city group of young adults for two years prior. They (Shelton and the young adult researchers) had already established relationships, developed various modes of communication and collaboration, and experienced the process of co-creation in the research realm. It was important to involve young people in every step of the research process, as well as centring those most marginalized by social systems and building infrastructure for youth-led advocacy (Adrian *et al.*, 2020). Adhering to these values is antithetical to the capitalistic norm of production and the academic pressures of constant generativity.

In their study with transgender and gender expansive youth, Shelton also used mapping within the context of the qualitative interview as a way for participants to document their journeys of housing instability and gender identity assertion. Though underutilized, mapping has the potential to produce rich qualitative material about identity and the social, structural, and relational aspects of people's lives that contribute to the shaping of identity (Fine & Sirin, 2007). Mapping as method suits homelessness research, especially when considering the person in environment, a key theoretical approach of social work practice that recognises the relationship between an individual and the environment in which they exist (Germain & Gitterman, 2008). Shelton found that the act of generating their own maps enabled LGBTQ+ people to illustrate their worlds, as they see them, and communicate how they see themselves within those worlds. The purposefully vague prompt (*'using the materials provided, please map your journey from the time you left home until now'*) enabled participants to identify the most salient aspects of their experiences without trying to fit them into the scaffolding of pre-existing interview questions. Many documented their journeys as it related to gender assertion, because that was the most salient aspect of their experiences since leaving home. Creating opportunities for participants to reflect on the multiple 'journeys' of their homeless experience revealed key aspects of their experiences that were not included in the interview guide and would not have emerged otherwise. Presenting mapping exercises to understand one's path (from home to street, for example), as opposed to the more traditional timeline model, frees the participants from the confines of the linear sequencing of events, and allows for the possibility of dynamic and reciprocal exchanges between their experiences over time (Powell, 2010).

For all of our research projects, we have found a combination of different qualitative methodologies to be important to capture experiences and engage with daily lives of people experiencing homelessness. There is no one method that stands out as 'better' or more effective, and flexibility is key. All projects used co-creation to various extents, which again comes with a whole range of ethical considerations. Through all identifying as queer researchers, we found, as Lewin and Leap found in their reflections of 'being out in the field' (1996), that this also facilitates 'access' to engagement, mutuality and shared experiences.

## **Ethical challenges in LGBTQ+ homelessness research**

### ***'Being there' and dilemmas of power***

As we have discussed, finding opportunities for in-depth understandings into lives of people who experience homelessness, and particularly those who are LGBTQ+ is restricted by the double stigma of the labels 'homeless' and LGBTQ+. This means research participants are not just hard to find, but also difficult to foster trusting relationships with (cf Cloke *et al.*, 2010; Tunåker, 2017; Valentine *et al.*, 2001), and in addition to this the statistical data available from States is inconsistent. Ethnography and working in an organization can be one solution, as we have considered above. This method of gaining access on the one hand, aside from finding participants, also enables researchers to foster those personal relationships, through key-working and daily

interactions, and gain insights into daily lives and patterns (Gibson, 2011; Hoolachan, 2016; Valentine *et al.*, 2001). However, being associated with authority, as staff members or workers often are, can counteract the ‘neutrality’ of a researcher and prevent the social immersion that ethnographers strive for. The benefits of working or volunteering in an organization are clear, but can we ensure that this approach is open, transparent and ethically sound? Access to interviewees through working with organizations is commonplace, and often involves giving of incentives, such as shopping vouchers. As in Tunåker’s recent project, where participants received a voucher for taking part in 30 min interviews. The vouchers were gratefully received, but what are the ethical implications of exchanging knowledge for money, especially when the giver of knowledge is experiencing homelessness and most likely in a precarious financial situation? There is an exploitative element to the offer of money in the exchange of knowledge.

As seen by the examples above, research with people experiencing homelessness is rife with moral and ethical dilemmas of safety, intentions and representation. The foundation of ethical research is that we owe full disclosure of our research goals, methods and sponsorship to our interlocutors, that participation is voluntary and that we ensure anonymity and confidentiality to our participants to make sure we do not put them at risk (SFAA, 2014). Informed consent is the pillar of qualitative research, and it is our responsibility as researchers to not exploit the potential naïveté of our research participants; in other words our research should be carried out openly, without deceit and without misrepresentation (Jorgensen, 1971, p. 328). A challenge in researching with ‘vulnerable’ populations that receive support from charitable organizations or social care, is that information can be disclosed for the purpose of support and key-working, rather than for research. As such, informed consent is a notable challenge. Van Willigen (1993, p. 46) states that the remedy for overcoming this hurdle is to actively and conscientiously consider the interests of the informants when designing the research, but how do we distinguish between information we gain in various roles as given freely and openly, for the right intents and purposes? The aim of qualitative research with LGBTQ+ people experiencing homelessness is often to find out the stories that many would not share on a form. For example, numbers of people who are LGBTQ+ and using homelessness services are reportedly low, but through head-counts by staff members in organizations we can glean an entirely different figure (Tunåker, 2017).

Although our intentions for research may be in the interests of the people that we worked with, their circumstances as ‘disadvantaged’ or ‘vulnerable’, poses a substantial ethical challenge. In our project in England, even if the researcher repeatedly explained that she was an anthropologist (‘a what did you say?’) and that she was conducting research *as well as* being a staff member, this could easily be forgotten during a key-working session or in daily interactions. Informed consent was renegotiated on a regular basis, but even so, the capacity of interlocutors to grasp the outcomes and consequences of someone being a researcher and ethnographer (‘now you’re just making words up!’) was not always possible. According to Alexiades and Peluso (2002, p. 221), obtaining prior informed consent from interlocutors hinges on the ability of the researcher to communicate the kind of abstract and intricate ideas that the research itself involves, and this needs to cut through cultural boundaries. Therefore, prior informed consent can only be obtained through translating

these complex notions to informants in an intelligible manner. Furthermore, Alexiades and Peluso argue that structural inequalities and power relations also play a vital part, which was certainly relevant for our researcher, who was a staff member holding certain powers over the hostel residents. Van Willigen (1993) argues that through building rapport with informants, we erode their ‘...tendency to protect their private personalities’. In his opinion, it is ‘...probable, that with the development of rapport, informants provide information that could be damaging to them, if not properly protected’ and that ‘one might even argue that “rapport-building skills” are in fact the most insidious deception’ (43). As such, prior informed consent can only ever be partial, and the only way to overcome this is to always have the interest of our research participants at heart, treating them with genuine respect and responsibility. As Tunåker in the aforementioned project was working with ‘service users’ in accommodation units, she built rapport over time and gained their trust and found that for those she considered key participants, informed consent was easily gained. She would continuously talk to them about the research and explain what it entailed and what the possible outcomes would be. Important to note here is that prior informed consent is not an individually isolated event, but rather a continuous process (ibid: 222). All of the key-informants and those that were interviewed signed consent forms and were sent transcribed material, so that they could agree to which parts could be used publicly. Indeed, narrative approaches or life history approaches allow people to self-identify their own experiences of homelessness. However, the experiences the researcher had with other young people residing in the hostels, but were not key-informants, and who she worked with daily also contributed to the ‘totality of experience’ (Okely, 1994). Peluso, in her discussion of ethnographic research within organizations says; ‘It is one thing for anthropologists to assure confidentiality and anonymity and quite another for his or her interlocutors to actually trust that such anonymity will be respected or sufficient’ (Peluso, 2017, p. 14). The process of entering an organization, gaining trust from research participants within it, and navigating this ethical landscape is a process that requires training, intuition and continuous reflection.

### **Discussion: building social justice through data?**

Research evidence is critically important in creating new possibilities and opportunities for marginalized groups, holding the potential for instigating change and making visible the struggles of populations that otherwise will not be known. Research is integral for building social justice, producing ‘evidence’ to a cause that decision-makers and politicians can translate into policy and legal change. Yet collecting data with vulnerable, hidden and socially stigmatized groups is challenging in all stages of research, from ethics applications to recruitment and participation, as well as methodologically. Knowing what we do know about the serious and concerning possibilities for ethical and moral dilemmas and repercussions of research with people who identify as LGBTQ+ and as homeless, should we still pursue it?

Our three examples of working with LGBTQ+ people experiencing homelessness, despite their different geographical and legal positions, have threads of commonality. For example, the barriers and challenges that researchers in this field need to contend



with to find participants, to gain access, to gather quantitative data and to produce ethically sound research. Matthews' work in Scotland showed the ethical challenges of recruitment for research through the online sex-market and the serious ethical implications of this for both the researcher and the participants involved. Shelton's work with LGBTQ+ youth in the US navigated the complexities of co-production and the issues involved in finding statistical evidence from both the State and the voluntary sector. Tunåker had the balancing act and the ethical considerations of being an ethnographer within supported accommodation in England and being employed as a key-worker in the organization. In different ways, all of our experiences as researchers in this field show that shields of stigma affect the potential for data collection and knowledge generation for (and of) LGBTQ+ people experiencing homelessness; a group that is globally socially disadvantaged in rights (yes, still), access to safety and support, and protection (Tunåker, 2023). Gathering evidence for this group has become more important over the past decade, in the growth of counter-narratives and increased hate-fuelled discourse about gender binaries, transphobia and genderqueer identities. Judith Butler recently wrote that 'gender' has become a 'phantasm' that represents fear and anxiety about sex, functions of bodies, sexuality and relationships (Butler, 2024). Subsequently hate crime and discrimination towards the LGBTQ+ community is rife and growing. LGBTQ+ homelessness appears to be increasing and in many places options for support are simultaneously decreasing. However, in asking ourselves whether we should continue to pursue research with LGBTQ+ homelessness, we must ask ourselves whether the toll it takes on research participants and co-producers is worth it for the sake of research outcomes and reliable data. Research with LGBTQ+ people experiencing homelessness can be painful, for participants and researchers alike. It has the potential to uncover traumas and to bring up conversations that are riddled with pain that comes from constant discrimination and invalidation from society. Being insiders of the LGBTQ+ community means many traumas are shared, but social location, power and privilege still influence knowledge production and exchange.

Anthropologist Kirin Narayan in her famous article on 'native anthropology', discussed whether researchers can distinguish between an insider and an outsider among the people we study, reflecting that the axis of people we study, and our own selves, is constantly in flux. She argues that the potential outcomes of research, which is often theory, are at odds with the voices and stories people tell us, stating that 'It seems more urgent than ever that anthropologists acknowledge that it is people and not theoretical puppets who populate our texts, and that we allow these people to speak out from our writings [thus] enacting theory' (1993, 680–681). Social theory, research outcomes and data collected can hold the power to instigate change, but epistemic injustice is a constant peril. It is therefore important that when we do research, whether as partial insiders or as co-producers, we have an astute awareness of each person's social location, past and present experiences and motivations for partaking in the research.

Creating long-lasting and transformative social change for socially disadvantaged groups, including LGBTQ+ people and intersecting social locations such as neurodiversity, disability, race, class and others, requires radical queering and remodelling of knowledge. Building on principles of design theory, Escobar (2018) writes about how we might translate insights of a relational ontology into politics of transformative

change, and he calls this the building of a ‘pluriverse’. To him, design is not just about objects or concepts, it refers to ‘diverse forms of life and, often, contrasting notions of sociability and the world’ (2018, p. 3). Design is about creating cultural meanings and practices, and it is something that we all do (*cf* Manzini, 2015). He argues that through ‘autonomous design’, we can draw focus away from current capitalist patriarchal design, towards a more collaborative and radically interdependent existence. In our reading of the pluriverse, the role of our research is to help think about the world in different ways, to collaboratively communicate alternative realities and to make public the otherwise hidden lives of LGBTQ+ people experiencing homelessness. Manzini (2015) also argues that design is for social innovation, and this is what we need at this juncture. Experimental and open-ended research can contribute towards this.

## Conclusion

Despite evident barriers, we would like to encourage more studies that collate data broadly on intersecting social disadvantages, both statistically and qualitatively, utilizing innovative methodologies and co-production. Whilst we realise the potential limitations of participatory methods and co-production, as well as pitfalls in statistical data collection, we argue that all are essential in LGBTQ+ homelessness research. To capture the imagination and *action* of policymakers and practitioners alike, and shed light on this issue, ethnographic research and personal stories, combined with statistical evidence and co-production is needed. Following on from Escobar’s work, we contend that to encourage radical change and to rebuild an inclusive world where LGBTQ+ homelessness is not a *thing*, we need to re-imagine, and to re-imagine we need to re-consider the methodologies, recruitment strategies and collaborative force of our research participants.

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