

Hard to reach youth online: Methodological advances in self harm research

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Youth suicide research programme

- Sexuality and gender identity
- Developing online qualitative research methodologies
- Collaboration with Dept. Psychology, University of Oslo
- Research funding
- McDermott, E. & Roen, K. (2014) *Queer Youth and Self Harm: Psychosocial Perspectives*. Hampshire, Palgrave Macmillan (forthcoming).



Background

- Lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) youth have elevated rates of suicide and self harm
- 4-8 times rate of suicide attempting compared to heterosexual peers (Haas et al., 2011)
- UK evidence-base very limited
- Over-reliance on quantitative methodology & psychology paradigm
- Sample bias – white, male, educated, ‘gay’
- Young people’s perspectives missing
- Social circumstances of emotional distress under-investigated

Methodological critique

‘To side-step methodology means that the mechanisms we utilize in producing knowledge are hidden, relations of privilege are masked and knowers are not seen to be located’. (Skeggs 1997: 17)

- Atheoretical research – ‘fixing identity’
- Ontologization of political identity categories (Brown, 2003)
- Minoritizing epistemology - systems of knowledge which enable some people to be known
- Power and Ethics



LGBT youth, self harm and online forums

Research questions:

- How do young LGBT people explain the role of gender and sexuality in relation to self-harm?
- In what other ways do young LGBT people account for their self-harm (and others)?
- How do LGBT youth respond to others self-harm ?
- What are LGBT youth experiences and attitudes to mental health services?
- What help-seeking strategies do LGBT youth employ regarding their self-harm?

Ethics

- Public internet spaces
- No interaction with online contributors
- No informed consent
- What constitutes public or private on internet?
(Kozinets, 2010)
- AoIR (Markham & Buchanan, 2012)
- Ethics inclusion/exclusion criteria:
 1. What are contributors' expectations of privacy?
 2. To what extent may observations harm contributors?
- Anonymity

Online data collection strategy

Table 1. Dimensions and parameters for data collection

Dimension	Parameters
Age	16-25 years old
Sexuality	Any label or category outside the heteronormative e.g. LGBTQ, pansexual, asexual
Gender	Any label, category in addition to the gender (male/female) binary e.g. trans, intersex, genderqueer
Self-harm	Any deliberate action against the body which causes harm including suicide attempting
Geography	UK primary but global limit
Temporal	2005-2011

Data collection

Table 2. Internet search terms

Dimension	Search terms
Age	Young, youth, adolescent, teenage, teen
Sexuality	Gay, lesbian, sexualit*, queer, questioning, bisexual, pansexual, homosexual, same-sex, sexual-minority, asexual, bi-curious.
Gender	Genderqueer, transgender, transsexual, intersex,
Self harm	Self-harm, cutting, suicide, hurting-myself, self-destructive, overdose, self-hate, mutilation, overeating, starving-yourself, killing-yourself, self -battery, hitting, electrocution.

- Final dataset

20 websites, 46 data excerpts (11 from blogs, 35 from discussion forums)

Approximately 260 contributors, aged 13-25 years old

Data analysis

- Thematic analysis
- Interpretative and reflexive reading (Blaike, 2000)
- Cross-sectional indexing
- Categories created from data, research questions and theoretical framework:
 - i) highlights youth perspectives
 - ii) has a non-pathological view of self-harm
 - iii) Queer theory (Sedgwick, 1993, Butler, 1993) approach to sexuality and gender.
- Coding schema (n=17)

Methodological results

1. Diverse sample in terms of sexuality and gender identities, and help-seeking
2. Different type of data, immediate and unmediated by researchers
3. Complex psychosocial emotional data

Diverse sample

‘genderqueer’, ‘trans’, ‘female, lesbian’, ‘female, bisexual’, ‘trans (biological female), bisexual’, ‘pansexual’, ‘pan-sapphic’, ‘possibly pan’, ‘female (genderqueer)’, ‘unsure (straight as a bent nail)’, ‘female (boyish)’, ‘heteroqueer’, ‘lesbian (not very straight)’, ‘female, bisexual, pansexual’, ‘female, gay’, ‘transgender, straight’, ‘male, gay’, ‘androgenous (leaning towards male)’, ‘male, bisexual’, ‘demisexual’, ‘asexual’, ‘polyamorous’.

Conclusion

Strengths:

- Complex, detailed data on emotions
- Diverse sample in terms of sexuality and gender, help-seeking

Weaknesses:

- Limited demographic detail e.g. class, ethnicity, geography
- Partial perspective i.e. not co-created via a researcher
- Sample skewed to computer literacy and internet access

Future research:

- Mixed method – online and face-to-face qualitative methods
Dept. Health Suicide Prevention Research grant
(PI with Profs. Hilary Graham & Simon Gilbody)

Publications:

McDermott, E., Roen, K. and Piela, A. (2013) Hard-to-reach youth online: Methodological advances in self-harm research. *Sexuality Research & Social Policy*, Vol.10 (2), pp.125-134. DOI: 10.1007/s13178-012-0108-z

McDermott, E., Roen, K. and Piela, A. (2013) Explaining self-harm: Youth cybertalk and marginalised sexualities and genders. *Youth and Society* (in press).

McDermott, E. & Roen, K. (2012) Youth on the virtual edge: Researching marginalized sexualities and genders online. *Qualitative Health Research*, Vol.22 (4), pp. 560-570.