

Approaching LGBTIQ-Police officers: an easy to reach group?

Paper for 5th European Conference on Politics and Gender (ECPG)
University of Lausanne, Switzerland, 8–10 June 2017.
Session on Researching Intersectionality and Exclusion

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Please cite this paper as: Zimenkova, T. / Molitor, V. (2017) Approaching LGBTIQ-Police officers: an easy to reach group? Paper for 5th European Conference on Politics and Gender, Session on Researching Intersectionality and Exclusion. ECPG, University of Lausanne, Switzerland, 8–10 June 2017

We (two experienced qualitative researchers) started our research on the political activism and sexual citizenship of LGBTTIQ-police officers in Germany hoping to collect a few semi-structured expert interviews, whereby expecting the LGBTTIQ-police officers to be a hard to reach group. Using the snowball procedure we were surprised by the number of people who were interested to be interviewed. The planned expert interviews turned into narrative talks, shifting the research focus from the expertise of the LGBTTIQ-activists to discrimination and exclusion experiences, the intersection of the profession, belonging to a specific authority, gender regimes, sexual citizenship and sexual identity.

Using qualitative methods changed our research frame, made us re-frame our identities as researchers as well as made us question our approach. From researchers we turned into LGBTTIQ-community members. Our interview partners turned us from observers into a medium of communication with the authority to be able to articulate criticism and claims without losing their loyalty towards the police. The research on this special group pushed us to our limits: limits of neutrality, limits of anonymity, for your interview partners refuse being anonymous and thus provide us with data, which has to be anonymized and secured in a very specific way. Furthermore, the data collected so far, points out discriminatory practices and the necessity of applying the research results. We as LGBTIQ-researchers cannot ignore this need.

The aim of this paper is to share our experience for a critical discussion and exchanging ideas on qualitative research methods in the field of gender and politics. This paper is a short summary of the central observations we made during our research and which are to be discussed methodologically.

Keywords: LGBTTIQ-identities, qualitative research, research neutrality, hard to reach groups.

1. Why and how do the interviewee-groups become easy or hard to reach out to?

During our research project on the LGBTTIQ-police officers in Germany¹ (held within and with support of TU Dortmund University (DoKoLL, Centre for Teachers Training) and the Centre for German and European Studies, University of Bielefeld, both in Germany), we conducted approximately 30 qualitative narrative interviews with police officers in 7 Federal States of the Republic of Germany as well as several group discussions with members of the police staff.

Our expectation of the group of the LGBTTIQ²-police officers to be a quite closed one and hard to reach (Shaghghi et al 2011), appeared to be wrong. Moreover, the LGTBTTIQ police officers themselves organized a snowball procedure for finding new interview partners before we even could ask them. For two years we are receiving emails from LGBTTIQ-police officers who are wishing to be our interview partners. Sometimes they provide the names of the people, who recommended them to us. Often we have not heard before of these names.

1.1. The question is why did we not expect that?

We expected people, organized within strictly hierarchical structures of the executive power to be quite reluctant to speak about their identity and the intersection of the LGBTTIQ-identity and profession because this intersection might result in exclusions. Moreover, we expected the LGBTTIQ-people within the police not to be very interested in becoming visible via our research.

Furthermore, speaking to police officers we were sure, that their awareness of data security would be the biggest obstacle to record the interviews and guarantee the anonymity and the security of the data collection to our interview partners. Having consulted the data security experts within our universities (Bielefeld University and TU Dortmund University, both in Germany), we were prepared to guarantee the security of data storage and usage (Rosenbohm/Gebel/Hense 2015; Gebel et al 2015 etc.) and able to approach our field. The field was surprisingly supportive and trusting in our ethics as researchers. Basically, they just trusted us. Something we did not experience before and were not ready for. This trust puts more responsibility on us as researchers.

1.2. Why are the LGBTTIQ-police officers easily reachable?

The easiest explanation is that they want to be heard. LGTTIQ police officers are experiencing exclusions. With our research they are given a forum to demonstrate the relevance of their LGBTTIQ-identity for their profession. They are pleased to see that there is interest in them as specific group and that this interest is external – at least in the sense that the researchers are not police officers and are not hired by the police authorities.

And here it becomes interesting: although they knew we are independent researchers, their communication with us followed the structure of the communication with the police authority. Many

¹ For detailed information on the project please see the paper: Molitor V./Zimenkova T. (2017): LGBTQI police officers going public? An interplay of gender regimes, LGBTQI identities, authority belonging and activism which is also presented at the 5th European Conference on Politics and Gender (ECPG) and the working paper: Zimenkova T./Molitor V. (2017): LSBT-Polizeiangehörige: Eine empirische Studie zum Berufsalltag. – Zusammenfassung der ersten Ergebnisse (<https://www.researchgate.net/project/Civic-activism-of-the-LGBT-police-officers>)

² We take this abbreviation while being aware of many more possibilities to address non-hetero and non-cis identities

sequences in the interviews show that our interview partners intended to participate in the project in order to share their experiences with the police authority. For example the interview partner, told us the story on how she was trying to change the conditions of her job, referring to “here” and “now” as if we were at her police station.

It does NOT work like this here [reference to the police-Z/M]³ NOT with ME (.) I used to have !SO! much passion >for this job⁴

Hence, our interview partners are easy to reach group because they have a message and they believe that the interview is an appropriate way to deliver this message. This can be seen in the process of recruiting, as the interview partners were looking for us:

I don't know anymore, what did I tell you [in the email, as he reached for us to give us an interview T/Z] how did I find you at all?

1.3. What message is there and what is our role within this message delivery act?

Answering the question of our interview partners' message which they want to deliver will also answer partly the question why are they not that hard to reach as a group.

Discovering the message absolutely changed our research design, our goals, and our self-understanding as sociologists.

1.3.1. The message:

If we extract the message our interview partners, it becomes clear that the main message is first of all “we are here”. It is a wish to pay attention to that there are LGBTTIQ-people within the police, the wish to be seen and perceived. At the same time there are experiences of exclusion, which the LGBTTIQ-police officers want to be heard of but via the third neutral party – in this case the researchers.

But the LGBTTIQ-police officers look for a chance to speak about their exclusion experiences while at the same time being loyal to their colleges. They want their exclusion experience to be addressed by the authority as well as to make use of their experience in order to improve the LGBTTIQ community's situation at the police. Therefore, the criticism originates from loyalty.

The importance of loyalty as a key category was an analytical result, at the core of our research. Moreover, this finding posed the question why this group is not hard to reach and why are they not obsessed with the idea to stay anonymous?

³ The references with square brackets [Z/M] are not parts of the quotation; these are our explanations of the interview context.

⁴ We keep here some of the transcription-marks (transcription was performed according to the GAT-rules, Auer et al. 1998) in order to make the markers and intonations visible. The translations are made by the authors. All interviews are originally in German. We refrain here from indicating the interview partners in order to maintain anonymity. The original German quotations can be asked for via email.

1.3.2. Research design and goals: changes through the message of the interviewees

As we have started the research we were interested in the intersection of the activism of the police officers, organized within the LGBT-Union of police officers (VelsPol <http://www.velspol.de/>) and the belonging to the executive power. Hence, we were interested in the (protest) activities of minority group representatives, intersecting with the power position of the executive power. It was supposed to become a study on citizenship and it turned into a study on *sexual* citizenship (Richardson 2000, 2005, 2015). The belonging to the LGBTTIQ was part of our original research design considered to be important as belonging to the minority group, but we did not expect this identity aspect to dominate our research that much.

During the research we encountered that the most important and challenging research topic are the *intersections of identities and belongings and try to figure out the mechanisms of actualization of different identities and the ways how the hierarchies of identities function within one person, and how they are being expressed. Activism became then the example of how identities are expressed, for identities are not just an example to observe the activism; they are possibly the reason activism takes place at all.*

Loyalty turned out to be one of the key categories of our research, loyalty as a boarder of identity articulation, as a mechanism, which shows, how the identity of the police officer might prevail over the identity of a LGBTTIQ person, fighting the discrimination.

Loyalty (which is described in the literature as one of the specifics of policing socialization and practice: Paoline/Terrill 2007; Van Maanen 1975; Behr 2008: 113) can be thus seen as a key aspect of activism/non-activism divide. Loyalty functions as a mechanism to construct the hierarchy of identities. Loyalty, which makes our interview partners talk to us, as they wish to improve their police authority in order to feel better within the police family. The following excerpt shows this clearly. Here the interview partner, criticizing a fellow police officer, who puts the police down:

[The interview partner reports in a dialog-form of her talk with the police representatives about the third person, a police-LGBTTIQ activist, who criticizes police strongly-Z/M] She talks badly about MY authority. What do you mean by YOUR authority? And then I said this is MY authority, I WORK there.

Hence, the very possibility, that we can do this research and get this very rich data, results from the *loyalty* of our interview partners towards their authority. Here we cannot reflect on what loyalty is, how they understand it, and why is it so important. Moreover, we cannot reflect on power structures within the police; as we intend to do in our other publications (Molitor et al 2017). In this case we just want to demonstrate how the expressions of the selves with respect to collective identity of our interview partners influenced the design and the developments of the research project.

1.3.3. Self-understanding as sociologists

Finally, the decoding of the message of our participants pushed us to the limits of our professional self-understanding as sociologists. Are we – can we still stay – neutral, as our interview partners chose us to be a platform to talk about their discrimination and exclusion experience? Are they using us just as a means to an end? Can we afford to comply or not to comply to these attempts?

It needs to be noted, that our interview partners seem to not know that we are neutral researchers. However, the expectation of the application of the research results, the expectation of the visibility of their experience, and finally the expectation to influence the authority and the openness, which might be a result of these expectations, makes it difficult to restrain from the application possibilities.

Furthermore, as members of the LGBTTIQ-community, we are confronted with the questions of rights and activism. At the same time, the police authority is interested in our results and we consider ourselves as trained neutral researchers capable of transmitting the messages.

At the moment we started a series of consultations with police authorities in Germany. Hence, the message of our interview partners changes our self-understanding as *neutral* researchers.

The understanding, that we are being used as a means to an end helped us to learn more about the professional dimension of the police. For example the importance of the corporate culture and of loyalty. We believe that the using as a means to an end is the only way for our interview partners to change the police culture without having to demolish the “police family”. Therefore, they make a rational decision. Our decision to follow this way brings about an absolutely new self-understanding as researchers.

2. *Researchers and research*

2.1. *Identity as LGBTTIQ- vs. Identity as researcher?*

As pointed out earlier, we as researchers are members of the LGBTTIQ-community. We considered it to be unethical *not* to come out to our interview partners, as they came out to us. So we introduced ourselves as member of the LGBTTIQ-community. The following brief dialog excerpt serves an example. Here we (A&B) discuss with an interview partner (C), whether it is understandable to us, why it might be problematic for a heterosexual female police officer to take a shower with a lesbian police officer. Important here are the (common) attempts to be sensitive to the fears of heterosexuals:

C: Somehow I can UNDERstand it, well, JES. It is truly DIFFERENT, if one takes a shower with a HETERO colleague or with a Lesbian [it is

A: [mhm (agreeing)]

C: simply [(.) DIFFERENT.]

A: [YES] But still [']

B: <<laughing> [but] I would never come to the idea.>

A: no. [Well] but you don't have a problem with it, do you? (laughing)

The coming out during the interview or the construction of the common insider knowledge (which took place implicitly and can be observed in the interviews) reveals some particularities, which have to be addressed here briefly.

2.1.1. Emotional relationship?

Coming out produces an emotional bond automatically, as it introduces a special condition of trust. It might influence the interview partners because they might develop more trust in our sensitiveness as researchers, in our sense of anonymity and capacity as well as motivation to create safe spaces for the members of the LGBTTIQ-community. This makes the interview partners more vulnerable and automatically generates more responsibility at the side of the researchers.

2.1.2. The traps of "Insider talk"?

Speaking about their sexual identity LGBTTIQ openly with the interview partners produces an implicit field of insider knowledge, which might, definitely, be not a really shared one, for the belonging to LGBTTIQ does not automatically generate identical experience. As long as context is not discussed the expectation of common insider knowledge might be disturbing for the interview context.

One of the questions within this insider talk context is why our interview partners still manage to not articulate their LGBTTIQ-identity within the interviews. The identity stays an insider talk within the interviews for quite a while (as it is in the following quote, up to 40 minutes, speaking about being lesbian the interview partner uses "it"):

For I am being open with it [my lesbian identity] , and then the others [LGBTTIQ-persons] notice it [my being lesbian] [5 minutes later] An in my case, everybody knows that, at least I always suppose, everybody does, (...) but I have no problem with it

Did we (unwillingly) create insider talk? Would they have articulated the LGBTTIQ identity in another way if they assumed the researcher to be not acquainted with it? Would have they spoken this way with a researcher, who is not a member of the community? Here we see some references to the methodological questions of postcolonial methodologies and epistemologies (Chilisa 2011, Smith 1999 and so many more).

Our in-depth sequential analysis (Wernet 2000, Oevermann 1979) performed in groups in order to reconstruct the case-specific and general elements of the case through reconstructing the latent meaning structures, underlying the communication (Wernet 2009) does not allow for this interpretation. The assumption that it is easier for the LGBTTIQ interview partners to stay implicit with respect to the LGBTTIQ-identity is „not economical“ (Wernet 2000:35) according to the method of interpretation. This means that it is more resource- consuming to avoid naming the identity (even within the insider talk) as to explicate it. We believe that the fact that identity is not being named is *especially relevant* while it happens despite of our coming out as LGBTTIQ-researchers and despite the snowball procedure of recruiting.

Still we cannot step into the shoes of hetero researchers, and our coming out influences our interpretation of results (e.g. silencing LGBTTTIQ identity even within the open and secure space of the LGBTTIQ community).

2.2. Semi-structures questionnaire changes into narrative

Starting with the research project we were expecting to conduct some semi-structured expert interviews. Our field changed that as well. Most of the interviews are at least partly narrative, some of them are completely narrative, containing no questions of the researchers, and most of them are autobiographical.

Sometimes while talking to us, our interview partners changed the mode and addressed directly the authority, as if they would believe the recording would go directly to the police director. In these situations they again changed the frame of the interview, as the following interview partner, who reports about her decision not to commit suicide despite the mobbing and who turns during the sequence from reporting to us to addressing directly the police authority. According to our interview partner, police authorities tend to frame the suicides of police officers as a consequence of private problems. During the interview the interview partner changes the mode of speech and asks the police authority (directly, despite they are not present) whether they really believe in this “private problems” explanation. At this point, the interview turns into a direct communication with the authority while the interview partner uses the recorder as a device of a direct communication to the authority, coming physically closer to it:

I remained true to myself, and they did NOT get me down, I (A: yes) did not go to a graveyard and just put my gun to my neck and killed myself (A/B: yes) and if ones follows it, how MANY POLICE officers are killing themselves - you don't believe it is just because of the private problems, do you REALLY believe this?

So the group, which we believed to be a hard to reach one appeared to be a group reaching for us to tell us their story, without letting us ask much questions.

3. Conclusion

The hard to reach group we were planning to get in touch with appeared to be an easy to reach one, reaching for us and spreading information about the possibility to tell their stories to the fellow LGBTTIQ police officers. This is a major research result we generated so far: There are many stories, which want to be told and cannot be told without an external neutral listener because telling a story is important/possible as long as it does not contradict loyalty. *Telling a story is ok in order to improve the authority, not in order to disturb its functioning.*

Our group appeared to be an easy to reach one as soon as we became a part of the group. We did not plan to do so. The message they had to deliver changed our research questions, our theoretical approaches, our research designs and our self-understanding as researchers.

We would be thankful for a discussion addressing the following questions:

- Which methodological limitations does this kind of research has?
- Is it problematic to establish insider talks?
- Can we guarantee that no insider context emerges?
- What is the best way to reflect on the insider context between the interviewer and the interviewee?
- Is our data more sensitive because of the contest? Or is it simply more open?

4. Who we are:

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