Reflection from the Field

NEGOTIATING RESEARCH WITH/ON/IN SENSITIVE AREAS: RELIGION, SEXUAL DIVERSITY AND YOUTH

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Introduction

"What brings you to Seattle?"

"A conference."

"What's the conference about?"

"Religion."

[*PAUSE*]

"ALL religions??"

No doubt the form of this exchange is familiar, even if the content varies slightly. I admit that more often than not, I would prefer to avoid the taxi cab (customs/small talk-at-social-events) conversations about my work. I have tried to find ways to create general responses that are honest but which I also hope will avoid inevitable debates about: religious freedom (and who should be allowed to practice/wear/evoke particular forms of religiosity in public); what the individual I am speaking with has decreed is acceptable sexual diversity; the reach (and limits) of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*; and so on. On rare occasions, the conversations become spaces for the individual to discuss their own beliefs, values, nonbelief. Those are the conversations I welcome. More often, though, the introduction of religion, sexuality, law (and any combination of those three) transforms into a lengthy (frequently one-sided) series of claims about all three categories, informed primarily by misunderstanding about issues as represented in public discourse and/or media.

I say all this by way of introducing my reflections because I don't see what I have been doing as a researcher as having changed significantly over the last several years; what has changed, and what I reflect on, is the broader perception about what research on religion, sexuality, law and human rights means to the general public. Media coverage about contemporary debates related to religious freedom, human rights, equality rights, the *Charter*—all are laden with misrepresentations and oversim-

plifications and perpetuate mistaken notions about identity challenges in law. My reflections from the field considers "the field" as understood by outsiders.

I first reflect on the representation of my work to other experts who are not necessarily in my field; specifically, how I navigate the presentation of sensitive research to ethics boards. It is critical for researchers to be aware of ways our framing of our research subjects—whether through an ethics application or through dissemination of findings—can perpetuate the cycle of disadvantage. Specifically: if we insist on representing groups singularly as disadvantaged or vulnerable, we are ignoring the ways giving voice to underrepresented groups and communities can serve to challenge and eradicate those systems of disadvantage.

This will lead into my second reflection: that as much as I'd rather avoid debates with strangers about religion, sexuality, human rights and diversity, engaging in the conversations—unpleasant or not—is a part of the field I have chosen and how I have situated myself within the field. I will consider how public perceptions about the field have evolved, informed primarily by public controversies, legal disputes and media coverage of these issues. This convergence of received information by the public tests our capacity to engage with the issues we study from the lens of the outsider.

Navigating sensitive issues: sensitive to whom?

My core research interest reflects on the relationship (negotiation, conflict, cohabitation) of religious and sexual diversity in their lived dynamics, and also to consider the limitations placed on that relationship in law, public and policy debates. In the process of examining these subjects, including conducting surveys, interviews, and focus groups, what I have also been (unwittingly at times) examining is how research about sensitive subjects is viewed—by research ethics boards, by participants, by individuals peripherally engaged in the debates.

When applying for ethics approval at both Queen's University and the University of Ottawa for a pan-Canadian research project entitled "Religion, Gender and Sexuality among Youth in Canada," led by Pamela Dickey Young at Queen's University, Young and I would compare notes about the ethics processes at both institutions—being particularly interested (frustrated/bemused) by the very different concerns the two boards expressed about the research and the research subjects. The construction of vulnerability, for a project aimed at eighteen-to-twenty-five year olds who are therefore above the threshold for age-related vulnerability (in theory), was both very helpful and also downright puzzling. Ensuring that our subjects are protected from the possibility of being identified, especially when discussing aspects of their identities which might not be known to their family or friends, is incredibly important and the insights that have been offered in this project and others to offer that security to

our research participants is gratefully received. What was confusing, at times bemusing, and a little frustrating was the unwillingness of at least some members of the different committees to consider the agency of these subjects to share their narratives—even with assurances of anonymity.

If the requirement of anonymity is secured through secure data access and storage, use of numerical indicators or pseudonyms, etc., it would seem at least unnecessary for ethics committees to admonish researchers to follow their own protocols. And yet, in our responses we were required to reiterate that the protocols *we* had detailed were in fact the protocols we would follow.

Similarly, when conducting research with Ontario high school students (aged thirteen to eighteen) about student experiences of religion, gender and sexuality in the wake of a recently revised sex education curriculum, the ethics review board was concerned that asking questions about sexuality could be seen to expose vulnerable youth to topics that could make them uncomfortable. Not one comment was made by the committee that young people might be uncomfortable discussing religion. The concern that young people might be uncomfortable discussing sexuality—which is a component of their curriculum, which they had therefore already been learning about and been tested on—seemed lost on the committee members. Let alone that their exposure to sexualization occurred long before the topics were introduced in the classroom. And, as I had thought might be the case and as demonstrated in the interviews, high school students found religion to be the most challenging of the three subjects to talk about (2016). While some students acknowledged that trans students have a hard time because there is little awareness about being trans, and certainly students saw/received (or expressed) casual homophobia in the school environment, when asked about religious identity and practice, participants said being religious was not something they would talk about with their friends.

To be clear, there should be extra cautions to ensure research participants are protected. But committees frequently over-estimate their knowledge of these subject areas—and in some cases, the protocols are viewed as having a negative impact on research and research subjects (Taylor and Snowdown 2014).

Talking shop: who are we as researchers?

As I mentioned at the outset, casual conversations about religion, sexuality, equality, human rights and law—or any combination thereof—is fraught with misunderstanding and over-generalizations. Representation of religion in the media problematically misses the nuance and complexity of lived religion as it also makes stark the relationship of religious individuals to social justice or human rights issues. A call for the recognition of intersectional analysis for people experiencing disadvantage across mul-

tiple marginalized identities, for example, has moved the needle forward in the acknowledgment that a racialized woman's experience of gender inequality is not the same as a white woman's experience (for example) (Crenshaw. 1991). But the implementation of intersectional awareness across multiple categories—religion, sexuality, disability, socioeconomic status—these nuances are lost in legal disputes and in the reporting of controversies in contemporary media (Knott *et al*. 2013).

So if our field—or where I find myself in the field—continues to be misunderstood by external experts and members of the public, my question is: what is our job as scholars of religion? When and how do we speak out and challenge these misunderstandings? At the final conference for the Religion and Diversity Project,[1] Linda Woodhead considered the future of the field by asking a series of questions about what religion scholars do: Are we social justice warriors? Are we storytellers? Are we archivists? Are we journalists? And so on. As you read this, some of you are saying yes to some, yes to all, no to all. Who we are as researchers in this field is as much about the field as it is about how we place ourselves in the field. Working within communities that experience systemic discrimination and disadvantage, as well as perceptions about vulnerability, can both serve to ensure communities are not exploited, but they can also miss the strength and resilience within groups and communities who challenge those systems of disadvantage. As a researcher with interests in social justice, equality and human rights, my responsibility to the research and to the individuals who agree to share their narratives with me, is to engage in those uncomfortable conversations at customs, in taxi cabs, and at social events, not to avoid them. Taking our awareness to taxi cab conversations and small-talk-at-social-events might just be the grassroots discussions we need to expand our understandings about identity, diversity and inclusion—and to challenge assumptions and oversimplifications that lead to harmful stereotypes and mistreatment.

If you'll indulge me what might seem a bit tangential, but which is a reflection that continues to inform my thinking about harm and our assumptions about "knowing" where to find harm: CBC used to host an online magazine called *CBC Radio 3* (which has since been transformed into a different CBC online program). In a 2003 article, visually impaired photographers in Toronto were given disposable cameras to capture spaces, experiences and obstacles in their day to day lives in the city. Ryan Knighton's photo of a hanging planter on a lamppost was captioned: "the problem with the cane as a navigating technology is that it assumes, in its minimalism, that dangerous objects are attached directly to the ground" (Knighton 2003, Image 7).

1. Led by Dr. Lori G. Beaman, hosted at the University of Ottawa, funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). www.religionanddiversity.ca

The problem with the continued misrepresentation of issues related to social justice or human rights relies on minimalistic assumptions about both the content and location of harm: if we assume that harm to women is caused by religion, are we not also responsible for ignoring the forms of gendered violence that have no relationship to religion or belief—but are based on misogyny, patriarchy and systemic disadvantage (Sheehy 2012)? If we assume that the harm to LGBTQI* communities is religion, are we part of the systemic failure experienced by LGBTQI* communities who experience violence and denial, and whose experiences of violence are ignored or undermined by systems of authority intended to protect the vulnerable (Harris 2018)? If we represent our research subjects without agency, do we perpetuate cycles of disadvantage that ignore resilience and capacity within those communities? If we avoid challenging stereotypes, assumptions and misrepresentations—even if only in conversations at airports—are we allowing those stereotypes, assumptions and misrepresentations to stand as "fact"?

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