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The BPS Psychology of Sexualities Section Annual Conference 2017

Eric Julian Manalastas

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The British Psychological Society's Psychology of Sexualities Section held its 2017 Annual Conference on 8 December 2017 at the BPS London Office, with the theme 'Innovations in Psychology of Sexualities'. The programme featured six oral presentations, five posters, four Pecha Kucha style presentations, and one keynote address. As a relative newcomer to the UK context with a background in LGBT psychology from a different country context (i.e., the Philippines; Manalastas & Torre, 2016), I participated in the conference for the first time with a mix of curiosity, excitement, and the standpoint of a 'friendly outsider' (Greenwood & Levin, 2007). As such, I aim to not just offer a summary of the conference but to 'reflect back' (Greenwood & Levin, 2007, p. 125) on the event as a whole.

The conference kicked off with a keynote address by Professor Rusi Jaspal of De Montfort University on HIV among gay and bisexual men in current times, i.e., in the era of anti-retroviral therapy. Using frameworks from social psychology, namely social representations theory (Moscovici, 2001) and identity process theory (Jaspal & Breakwell, 2013), Professor Jaspal presented a multi-level model of sexual health and well-being during HIV that incorporates social representations, social stressors, identity threat, and coping. He argued for the contribution of psychology in examining the social and psychological impact of HIV, especially for sexual minority populations like gay and bisexual men and other men who have sex with men (MSM). He also highlighted the role of LGBTQ psychologists in prevention, treatment, and stigma reduction around HIV, which has been around since the early 1980s and even predates the BPS Psychology of Sexualities Section's official founding in 1998 (Jowett & Semlyen, 2016). At first glance, it seems the topic's inclusion in a 2017 conference on LGBTQ psychology is a bit anachronistic, harking back to a time when HIV/AIDS was labeled a 'gay-related' illness (Fee & Krieger, 1993). However, as Professor Jaspal clearly and lucidly presented, HIV has evolved and persists to the present time; biomedical and psychological perspectives and practices need to keep up in response to it. The fact that

an estimated one out of seven gay and bisexual men in London (and one in 25 in the rest of England; Kiran et al., 2016) are living with HIV is a sobering reminder and call to action for those of us committed to LGBTQ well-being.

The morning session continued with oral presentations that featured a diverse array of methodological approaches to LGBTQ psychology research. Katharine Rimes and colleagues from King's College London analysed clinical records of 10,791 lesbian, gay, bisexual, and heterosexual adults receiving IAPT (Improving Access to Psychological Therapies) services in London to discover that sexual-minority women showed poorer clinical outcomes compared to other women seeking treatment. Jo Lloyd of Goldsmiths, University of London shared preliminary results from an ongoing longitudinal panel study of 920 transgender and gender nonconforming adults' experience of minority stress and the protective role of psychological flexibility in buffering stigma's impact on well-being. Finally, Periklis Papaloukas, of De Montfort University, presented findings from ethnographic research and interviews with gay and bisexual men and other MSM who frequent saunas as sexual spaces and their views on sexual safety and sexual health promotion. These presentations advanced a common theme of LGBTQ health and well-being, using both quantitative and qualitative approaches in various subpopulations of the LGBTQ spectrum.

Poster sessions took place during the lunch hour and this part of the programme left me wanting more. Because of the relatively small size of the conference (about 50 participants), there was more than enough time to view posters and engage in conversation with the scholars behind them. Highlights included work by Ligia Orellana of the University of Sheffield on the salutary effect of reading fiction featuring transgender characters for transgender readers, and Henny Bos and colleagues from the University of Amsterdam on how negative parental relationships longitudinally predict sexual minority youth's risk for depression.

Re-energising and resuming conference activity after a buffet lunch can be a challenging task, so the conference organisers are to be lauded for inserting a session featuring Pecha Kucha presentations. This style of presentation features a short, carefully planned, automatically timed sequence of visually rich, story-based slides (Lucas & Rawlins, 2015). The format is nontraditional and challenging, as many of the presenters commented as a preface at the beginning of their presentation. However when done well, it served the dual

purpose of rousing audiences from a post-lunch lethargy and delivering research findings in a very friendly, engaging format. I was also struck by how the Psychology of Sexualities Section audience seemed very warm and supportive, acknowledging the challenge of the format and cooperating with the four presenters with attention, humour, and immediacy. All four presenters took on the PechaKucha format gamely; of particular note was the presentation by Ashleigh Hillier of the University of Massachusetts, both for deftness of presentation and for innovativeness of topic — the intersectional experiences of queer and nonbinary adults navigating life with autism.

A second set of oral presentations rounded out the one-day conference. Topics included: queer youth masculinities and everyday prejudice (Sam Martin of Anglia Ruskin University), clinician reflections on working with gender-diverse youth (Jos Twist and Kirsten Stewart-Knight of the Gender Identity Development Service Tavistock), and the positioning of sexual and gender diversity in UK education policy (LJ Potter, Coventry University). These last three presentations drew attention to important contexts where LGBTQ psychologists can continue to promote rights and well-being: schools, clinical settings, and the policy sphere.

Closing the event was outgoing Section Chair Elizabeth Peel of Loughborough University, who invited participants to the Section's 2018 Conference (5-6 July) — a special milestone marking the twentieth anniversary of the Psychology of Sexualities Section. I look forward to this special two-day event, which no doubt will be an opportunity to collectively reflect on the history and contributions of LGBTQ psychologists in the UK over the past two decades and to chart new directions for the challenges that remain and the challenges that will come.

As a relative newcomer to British LGBTQ psychology, I found my first BPS Psychology of Sexualities conference to be welcoming, informative, and memorable. The specificity of the event — an entire day of LGBTQ psychology! — was a comforting, powerful space, especially for those of us who are based in UK psychology departments where we may be only one or two individuals working on LGBTQ topics. The venue was easy to locate, food and refreshments ample; a more accessible poster space, without tables getting in the way, would create a more engaging experience. Likewise, designating gender-neutral toilet facilities would be keeping in spirit with the conference.

I recognise this conference also as a geopolitically privileged space — in many other countries and national psychologies, dedicated, sustained opportunities for LGBTQ psychologists to come together remain elusive (see, for example, Ojanen, Ratashevorn, & Boonkerd, 2016, for the Thai context; Zervoulis, 2016, for the situation in Greece). The organisers were a small team but were warm, friendly, and accommodating; one had the impression that at the core of the conference was a team of collegial and dedicated LGBTQ psychologists who were keenly interested in inviting others into the fold.

Finally the conference space, like other modern conference events, extended beyond the confines of the BPS London Office, courtesy of the Twitter hashtag #PoSConf2017. Visibility matters and continues to matter for the promotion of positive LGBTQ modes of living and being, even in so-called ‘developed’ nation-states like the United Kingdom where anti-discrimination laws and legal partnership recognition sit side by side with HIV and other health disparities, minority stress, and everyday prejudice. Events like the BPS PoS Annual Conference serve as an important community gathering and collective action space within British psychology.

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