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Disclosed and Willing: Towards A Queer Public Sociology

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ABSTRACT *This article contributes to recent debates on ‘public sociology’, expanding the notion and interrogating its utility for those who simultaneously carry out activism and scholarship. The idea of public sociology has underpinned the conviction that knowledge can contribute to inclusion or exclusion, depending on how it is used. This article argues that commitment to public sociology implies abiding by the guiding principles of accountability, intersectionality, reciprocity and reflexivity, and further represents commitment to activism, embracing politics as an intended effect of knowledge production. Building on personal experience as researcher and activist in the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender movement in Portugal, I also explore the epistemological and ethical impacts of taking on the role of scholar-activist. This offers a ‘double agency’ through which one may build and disseminate empirically grounded knowledge whilst maintaining a sense of social responsibility and political engagement. Bringing these ideas together, this article advances the notion of a ‘queer public sociology’: a critical framework that accounts for sexual diversity, and that acknowledges its politically situated character at the same time that it contributes to the dismantling of sexual prejudice and exclusion.*

KEY WORDS: Public sociology, knowledge production, scholar-activist, queer

1. Introduction

Despite being highly contested, the legacy of positivism in sociological thought is still pervasive today. This legacy is mirrored by the ways in which sociology frequently operates according to dominant ways of thinking and doing, rather than being proactively engaged in tackling inequality. The notion of public sociology, initially advanced by Herbert J. Gans (2002), was crucial in moving away from positivist approaches within mainstream sociology. Drawing on the notion of public sociology, and inspired by feminist and queer perspectives on knowledge production and the research process, this article considers the importance of disclosing the inevitable political engagement of sociological work to render it more plausible, accountable and, ultimately, useful.

In the first part of the article, I expand on the notion of public sociology (Gans, 2002; Burawoy, 2004a, 2004b, 2004c, 2005). Underpinning the idea of public sociology is the conviction that knowledge can contribute to processes of inclusion or exclusion, depending on how it is used. As feminist methodologies also suggest, the ultimate purpose

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of knowledge production should be to reach audiences who are not necessarily related to academia (Harding, 1991, 2004; Haraway, 2004).

Considering my personal experience as a researcher and activist in the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) movement in Portugal, in the second part of the article, I explore the epistemological and ethical impacts of being a disclosed activist and academic in LGBT and queer issues. I argue that this type of ‘double agency’ offers the opportunity to build and disseminate empirically grounded knowledge whilst maintaining a sense of social responsibility and political engagement.

Finally, against a positivist understanding of science, in the last part of this article, I advance the notion of a ‘queer public sociology’ (QPS), i.e. a critical framework that accounts for sexual diversity, and that acknowledges its politically situated character at the same time that it contributes to the dismantling of sexual prejudice and exclusion. I sustain that it is time to interact politically with a world whose realities of social exclusion and inequality demand a proactive role from academics, particularly in the intersecting field of sociology and LGBT and queer studies.

2. Public Sociology in Social Movement Studies¹

Alain Touraine’s sociology of action suggested that the researcher should become what might be interpreted as a Gramscian hybrid of the traditional intellectual and the organic intellectual (Gramsci, 1971). This would be the role of the intellectual who, without abandoning their ivory tower, aims also to solve the hermeneutic and communication gaps between actor and opponents, promoting what Touraine labels ‘permanent sociology’ (1981, p. 148), which would cast light upon problems deriving from collective action. When one reads these early writings of Touraine, there is an almost inescapable sense of a scholar who is, albeit unwillingly, patronising social movements and activists, as if science, or indeed scientists themselves, were (necessarily) particularly enlightened. Such an approach is indeed hard to sustain when one recognises that all knowledge is situated (Haraway, 2004; Harding, 2004), including that which is produced in academic contexts.

The sort of privileged role that Touraine ascribes to academic knowledge has been under siege for a number of years, particularly by feminist, LGBT and queer authors who argue that the interventions of scholars also contain the potential for distortion, bias and error, inasmuch as other forms of knowledge do (Harding, 1991, 2004; Haraway, 2004; Ahmed, 2006). In 1987, Frigga Haug co-edited a book on the uses of memory work as a method that could counter the shortcomings of non-agentive positivist science. She then suggested that we searched ‘for possible indications of how we have participated actively in the formation of our own past experience’ (1987, p. 35), as a way to abandon what she perceives as ‘the usual mode of social-scientific research, in which individuals figure exclusively as objects’ (1987, p. 35). Accordingly, by generating empirically grounded knowledge, memory work was, as Anne-Jorunn Berg phrased it, a ‘suitable method to help bridging the gap between social theory and experience’ (2008, p. 215). Memory work, parallel to autobiographic and other narrative methods, was introduced by feminist scholars who felt discouraged by the excluding *modus operandi* advanced by positivist models (Oakley, 1982; Stanley, 1991).

The desire for more permanent ways of bringing academia closer to everyday experience has also inspired the notion of public sociology. As initially advanced by Gans, public sociology is an alternative to the notion of the public intellectual:

A public sociologist is a public intellectual who applies sociological ideas and findings to social (defined broadly) issues about which sociology (also defined broadly) has something to say. Public intellectuals comment on whatever issues show up on the public agenda; public sociologists do so only on issues to which they can apply their sociological insights and findings. They are specialist public intellectuals. (2002, p. 2)

Public sociology was originally presented as a theoretical approach that acknowledged the highly contingent framework of scientific production as well as science's responsibility in liaising with other actors to develop reciprocal and non-hierarchic learning processes.

Drawing on Gans' work, Michael Burawoy suggested that:

The bulk of public sociology is indeed of an organic kind—sociologists working with a labor movement, neighborhood associations, communities of faith, immigrant rights groups, human rights organizations. Between the organic public sociologist and a public is a dialogue, a process of mutual education. The recognition of public sociology must extend to the organic kind which often remains invisible, private, and is often considered to be apart from our professional lives. The project of such public sociologies is to make visible the invisible, to make the private public, to validate these organic connections as part of our sociological life. (2005, pp. 7–8)

Several aspects in this excerpt deserve further commentary. First, Burawoy's definition of public sociology seems to imply a bilateral (or even multifarious) process of exchange, 'a dialogue' that aims at enhancing reciprocal chances of learning. Second, such process involves academia, but also the wider society ('a public') that is expected to be recognised by sociologists as equally important interlocutors in this dialogue. Third, Burawoy's arguments contain an implicit call for politicised action: sociologists have the power, and the duty, to intervene in the social sphere to enhance visibility, participation and inclusion. As such, political engagement is not merely an unintended consequence of sociological work; it is rather a process of willing disclosure through which sociologists become engaged political actors. Furthermore, such engagement is clearly influenced by feminist writings and demands that have been ground-breaking in advancing the notion that the personal is political, and the private should be public (Oakley, 1982; Lister, 1997; Harding & Norberg, 2005; Ryan-Flood & Gill, 2010). Finally, public sociology is not a mere 'add-on', something external to the sociological work itself, but a vital part of it.

Such politicised understanding of sociology is sustained on several occasions in Burawoy's work (2004b, 2005). According to him, sociologists

constitute an actor in civil society and as such have a right and an obligation to participate in politics. [...] The 'pure science' position that research must be completely insulated from politics is untenable since antipolitics is no less political than public engagement. (2004b, p. 1605)

In other words, it is time sociologists interact politically with a world whose realities of exclusion and inequality demand a proactive role from academics and from sociologists in particular. In accordance with this rationale, knowledge production should be concerned with audiences beyond academia, investing in outreaching initiatives that disseminate

research findings in an accessible language and engaging different types of social actors during the process of knowledge production (Ackerly & True, 2010; Taylor & Addison, 2011). One example may better illustrate this. Writing in 2004, Charlotte Ryan described her successful joint experience with anti-racist organisations regarding local TV news stations in Boston. There were concerns about crime reports reinforcing racist perceptions. Sociologists and activists worked together, campaigning for news coverage to put crime in economic and political contexts. According to Ryan, ‘it represented public sociology at its best, synergistically linking uncommon partners to deepen knowledge and equalize social resources’ (2004, p. 112). This example highlights how grounded theory can be a crucial sociological tool ‘to prove that there are other things to be known through other ways of knowing’ (Widerberg, 2008, p. 113). Perhaps more importantly, such intersection between academia and civil society is the condition to achieve social and cognitive justice (de Sousa Santos, 2006). It also starts to pave the way for the inclusion of intersectionality² as a fundamental aspect of politically engaged research, particularly in the field of feminist and LGBT and queer studies (Valentine, 2007; Cole, 2008; Davis, 2008; Shields, 2008; Taylor *et al.*, 2010).

Social movement studies offer sociologists the opportunity to strengthen mutual intelligibilities between academics and activists. Indeed, sociology emerged from the need to understand how societies operate and change, and how people respond to—*intervene* in—that change. It was the transformation introduced after the industrial revolution that prompted scholars such as Auguste Comte, Harriet Martineau, Henri de Saint Simon, Max Weber and Emile Durkheim, to name a few, to start a new discipline that regarded change as a social fact. Without this symbiotic element of change and intervention, sociological inquiry would be fundamentally voided and there would not be much left to be discussed in or examined by sociology or even, more generally, by the social sciences. Burawoy has referred to this by alerting that ‘the professional temptation toward insularity and abstraction threatens to cut off sociology’s lifeblood that comes from connection to the concrete world beyond (2004c, p. 105). William Gamson has phrased this necessary link along similar lines: ‘public sociology has helped to keep my professional sociology grounded in the real world’ (2004, p. 107). These lines of thought are clearly inspired by feminist epistemology and ethics regarding the research process (Haraway, 2004; Harding, 2004; Harding & Norberg, 2005; Ackerly & True, 2010; Ryan-Flood & Gill, 2010).

Given the above observations, it seems rather obvious that the social sciences in general, and sociology in particular, are historically depended on elements such as participation and change, rather than being intrinsically connected to processes taking place exclusively within academic institutions. Despite this evidence, professional sociology remains largely wary of compromise, co-production and interdependence, which has impacted the way sociological theory is used by activists. Studying the topic of relevance of social movement studies, Dick Flacks’s findings are of interest to my argument in this article, particularly when he concludes that activists do not engage with the existing literature on the sociology of social movements, opting instead for reading history, biographies and memoirs (2005, p. 59). If this is indeed so, the relevance of current studies of social movements is undoubtedly compromised. Rather than dismissing such findings with a quick shrug, perhaps it is more useful to address the interpretative gap between the cognitive horizons represented in academic and activist discourses, and try to counter it. In fact, recognising this lack of mutual intelligibility may constitute a first step towards new, less closeted forms of knowledge, more widely available, informing bottom-up

dialogues and enabling reciprocal learning processes between academics and advocates. Ultimately, it may even persuade activists to pursue their studies and academics to engage in militancy. Flacks examines the advantages associated with investing in joint work gathering activists and researchers. According to him, this would strategically enhance the scope and efficiency of the knowledge available to both parties (2005, p. 54). And, indeed, it might lead to what Bevington & Dixon (2005) call a ‘movement-relevant theory’.

A similar approach has been suggested by Boaventura de Sousa Santos, who advanced the notion of ‘ecology of knowledges’ as a way to foster mutual intelligibility and cooperation between academic and non-academic institutions and people. According to him, this ‘advanced form of action-research’ (2006, p. 78) represents an epistemologically revolutionary departure from the conventional ways of knowledge production. Drawing on critical theory approaches, de Sousa Santos continues to argue that mainstream academic knowledge has often disregarded a vast array of sources and interlocutors, causing ‘the impoverishment of human experience and diversity’ (2006, p. 81) as well as compromising both social and cognitive justice.

A commitment to public sociology necessarily represents a shift in the research ethics underpinning epistemological and methodological choices to the extent that contributing to social justice becomes a central aim of knowledge production. This is particularly relevant when the topic of research has historically been subject to discrimination and inequality, as it is the case with LGBT and queer issues. Methodologically, this would imply favouring plural data generation methods and analytical techniques—triangulation—as a way to benefit from different perspectives and analytical insights, rather than making knowledge production dependent on single, top-down contributions. From an ethical point of view, a commitment to public sociology implies abiding by the guiding principles of accountability, intersectionality, reciprocity and reflexivity, which will be detailed later in the article. It would also represent a commitment to activism as a significant part of citizenship and an embracement of politics as an intended effect of knowledge production. It would, ultimately, lead to a willing disclosure of the political engagements of scholar-activists, i.e. those who are simultaneously academics and activists. The implications of such disclosure will be discussed in the next section.

3. Disclosed LGBT Activism Within Academia

Activism can be defined as a voluntary engagement in struggles for recognition and/or redistribution (Fraser & Honneth, 2003). It is always a political act because it implies a public commitment to a cause. As such, activism must be about public participation, even when this intervention is virtual and mostly mediated by electronic devices (mobile phones or social networks, for instance). This form of politicised intervention often takes the shape of collective action in organisations or social movements. However, it can also consist of sporadic mobilisation for particular purposes, in particular contexts, such as protest (Della Porta & Diani, 1999; Goodwin & Jasper, 2009) or simply ‘everyday acts of defiance’ (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000, p. 283). Regardless of its more or less regular character, activism is about citizenship, in the sense that it draws on the right to intervene and to be recognised. The notion of activism, as explicated above, does not seem to be incompatible with scholarly production in the realm of sociology (or any other, for that matter), precisely because social intervention sits at the core of sociological inquiry.

If this is indeed the case, should we, as researchers, sacrifice acknowledging our political standpoints for the positivist sake of retaining an allegedly value-neutral objectivity, which is after all a ‘weak objectivity’ (Harding, 1991)?³ Arguably, sociology benefits from disclosed political engagements, to the extent that sociologists are, themselves, actors in processes and facts under sociological scrutiny. What seems artificial, then, is the alleged distinction between science and politics, as if a strict boundary, however fake and precarious, could secure scientific accuracy. I suggest that what is wrong in this equation is the premise of neutrality, which disregards the fundamental fact that all actors, including sociologists, are situated subjects.

To the extent that context informs people’s standpoints—from which, then, sociology is produced—it is not possible to escape a knowledge that is inextricably bounded and situated. Then, the next logic step, it seems, would be to recognise one’s political standpoint and to strive for a ‘strong objectivity’, defined by Harding as ‘a commitment to acknowledge the historical character of every belief or set of beliefs’ (1991, p. 156). Harding underlines the inescapability of ‘historical gravity’ by saying that

Political and social interests are not ‘add-ons’ to an otherwise transcendental science that is inherently indifferent to human society; scientific beliefs, practices, institutions, histories, and problematics are constituted in and through contemporary political and social projects, and always have been. (1991, p. 145)

Speaking as a standpoint theorist and arguing against the ‘conventional view ... [that] politics can only obstruct and damage the production of scientific knowledge’ (2004, p. 1), she correctly points out that

The more value-neutral a conceptual framework appears, the more likely it is to advance the hegemonous interests of dominant groups, and the less likely it is to be able to detect important actualities of social relations [...]. The ‘moment of critical insight’ is one that comes only through political struggle. (2004, pp. 6, 9)

Wylie takes the argument of the usefulness of political engagement a step further, writing that ‘considerable epistemic advantage may accrue to those who approach inquiry from an interested standpoint, even a standpoint of political engagement’ (2004, p. 345). Though an extended debate about standpoint theory and its critiques is beyond the scope of this article, I want to emphasise the importance of political engagement within academia.

As Harding eloquently put it, standpoints are ‘toolboxes enabling new perspectives and new ways of seeing the world to enlarge the horizons of our explanations, understandings and yearnings for a better life’ (2004, p. 5). In this context, ‘double-agency’—understood as the politically engaged role of scholar-activists within academia—becomes not only legitimate, but desirable. The possibility of a desirable role for scholar-activists within academia is clearly informed by the notion of public sociology, as discussed in the previous section.

The acknowledgement of interdependence and the call for intersectionality between academia and civil society represent a new ethics of research, committed to the willing disclosure of researchers’ political engagement. In the field of LGBT and queer studies, such engagement is politicised to the extent that the choice of topic is already political. In a context in which discrimination represents invisibility, oppression and violence,

sociologists who study LGBT or queer issues are certainly expected to use relevant knowledge and resources to counter the effects of such discrimination (Santos, 2006a, 2008). Discrimination heightens the call for sociologists to become scholar-activists. As noted by Halberstam, ‘The academic might be the archivist or a co-archivist or they might be a fully-fledged participant in the subcultural scene that they write about. Only rarely does the queer theorist stand wholly apart from the subculture, examining it with an expert’s gaze’ (2003, p. 322). Therefore, disclosing political engagement within academia becomes not only a possibility but also a duty in relation to the dominant framework of sexism, heterosexism and homo-, bi- or transphobia.

In his book, *The Unfinished Revolution*, Engel offers an example of a study situated at the junction between academia and activism. Engel states that his participation in Washington’s candlelight vigil for the murder of the young gay man Matthew Shepard in October 1998 made him ascribe a new meaning to his research, as he realised that ‘an emotionally emptied account of this movement fails to do justice to the individuals who work every day so that gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgender people can live safer and happier lives’ (2001, p. 3). This event impelled Engel to write a book with a pragmatic goal: hoping that the evolution of social theory on social movements would allow for a deeper understanding of gay and lesbian movements. He believed that ultimately such a task could help LGBT movements to learn how to benefit from political opportunities, so that homophobia and heterosexism would finally be overturned. Engel’s stated purpose of the usefulness of his research reveals the potential for engagement between academia and activism. Furthermore, it highlights that, rather than seeking to minimise one’s impact, one should self-reflexively acknowledge it.

Another example of LGBT activism within academia is currently presented by most Portuguese scholars who do research on LGBT and queer issues. Despite being a relatively recent field in the country, there is an interesting overlap between the roles of activist and academic, with the majority of published material being written by authors who are publicly known to be both academics and LGBT and queer activists (Cascais, 2004, 2006; Santos, 2005, 2006b, 2008; Carneiro & Menezes, 2007; Almeida, 2009; Carneiro, 2009; Oliveira *et al.*, 2009; Nogueira & Oliveira, 2010). Such overlap can be partially explained by the story of LGBT activism in Portugal. This story is almost as recent as the academic field of LGBT and queer studies, and it dates back to the 1990s. After 48 years of dictatorship and in a country highly influenced by Catholic morals, the movement presented a late, but steady, development. The country’s legislation on LGBT rights is amongst the most advanced in Europe, including a *de facto* unions law (since 2001), an anti-discrimination constitutional provision (since 2004), equal ages of consent (since 2007), protection against same-sex domestic violence hate crimes (since 2007), civil marriage (since 2010) and a gender recognition provision (since 2011). These changes were to a great extent accelerated by the LGBT movement—including engaged academics—and influenced by wider processes of modernisation and Europeanisation. Throughout the 2000s, the movement was able to make use of supportive journalists, politicians and academics, fostering the sort of engagement that granted political legitimacy and social acceptability to the movement’s demands (Cascais, 2006; Carneiro & Menezes, 2007; Santos, 2008).

LGBT political engagement of academics impacts upon epistemological and ethical choices because struggling against discrimination becomes a permanent concern, a personal commitment and a fundamental aim in any research process. Such engagement

has also contributed to community-building and mutual academic support, which is particularly relevant in a country where LGBT and queer studies still face hostility and scepticism within mainstream academia. A personal story may add to this argument. I entered the realm of LGBT studies via academia, when I was preparing a thesis for a degree in Sociology in the 1990s. By the time I had finished writing the thesis, I was already a regular participant in LGBT events and a few years later I co-founded a queer youth organisation. Since then, participating in LGBT collective action has been as important as other academic commitments. There were uncountable personal and professional gains resulting from this double agency, and I have always tried to focus on those to counter the occasional setback along the way.⁴ Many of my colleagues share the same experience. There is indeed empirical evidence of the common perception that ‘we need not—indeed, must not—choose between “good politics” and “good science” [...] for the former can produce the latter’, as Harding suggests (2004, p. 6).

A central point of this article is that our multiple belongings impact on our knowledge production in ways that are always political, whether we acknowledge it or not. As Stephen Pfohl puts it, ‘our own personal and institutional locations within matrices of power always partially shape what we see and what escapes our sight. [...] We are never simply ourselves alone, but always also complex social personae, enacting cultural scripts not entirely of our own making’ (2004, pp. 114–115). The previous examples highlight the multiple, and often conflictual, belongings of social actors.

By revaluing the notion of standpoint, rather than attempting to shield science from politics, scholar-activists are contributing to a significant sociological turn, one that reinvents sociology as a socially and politically relevant field of studies. This turn presents opportunities, as well as challenges, stemming from the epistemological and ethical implications of political engagement.

Scholar-activists are in a privileged position to access target groups—including policy and law-makers, politicians and the media—that can be crucial agents for enacting social, legal and political change. More specifically in the field of LGBT and queer studies, scholar-activists are invested with the trust and hope of social actors who experience the ongoing effects of daily discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. This equips scholar-activists with the ethical duty of producing science that is accessible to a general audience and disseminated amongst groups and institutions that have the power to counter discrimination. Arguably, this willingness to disclose oneself as a politically engaged academic will make sociology more socially and scientifically accountable and, equally importantly, more relevant for countering inequality and discrimination, within academia and beyond.⁵

This sociological turn also presents challenges. Stephen Pfohl refers to these as a terrible lesson and a curse, ‘the curse of no longer being able to easily exercise white, heterosexist, or class-based privilege without pangs of conscience’ (2004, p. 115). Arguably, the sociological turn brought about by the disclosure of activism within academia highlights the need for a new critical framework within sociology. I shall return to this topic in the last section of this article.

4. Towards A Queer Public Sociology

Just as ‘Sociology is born with civil society and dies with civil society’ (Burawoy, 2004b, p. 1615), early lesbian and gay studies were inspired by the development of LGBT

organisations, particularly in the USA. Such connection between activism and scholarship expanded to other parts of the globe (Altman, 1996). The emergence of LGBT movements, with visible and autonomous claims vis-à-vis the civil rights movement, provided content for the academic debates and theories of sexuality during the 1960s and the 1970s. In this regard, the events related to the Stonewall riots, for instance, gave a significant nudge to both academia and beyond.⁶ The LGBT movement itself had been inspired by other theoretical developments. Emerging in the western world during the 1960s, lesbian and gay studies were largely informed by the theoretical perspective of new social movement studies, which focused mostly on exploring the reasons underlying collective action (Foweraker, 1995, p. 2).

This connection between academia and activism in the realm of LGBT and queer studies has been explored by Medhurst & Munt, who ask, 'Is there something called Lesbian and Gay Studies? There cannot be such a thing without the lesbian and gay identities and communities which inform them and are simultaneously constructed by them' (1997, p. xiii). Drawing on the early lesbian and gay studies, Altman agrees with Medhurst & Munt and provides a historical context for such intersection: 'Like related works in sociology and political science these works were firmly grounded in the movement, and the first generation of gay and lesbian scholars were also activists' (1996, p. 4). A similar process took place in the UK, where many academics in the field of LGBT and queer studies were also active members of LGBT organisations. That was the case with Jeffrey Weeks, Ken Plummer and Mary McIntosh, amongst others, who were engaged in Gay Liberation, at the same time as they were engaged in their respective careers in academia (Medhurst & Munt, 1997).

Therefore, LGBT and queer issues have always connected academia and activism from the outset, under the premise that such connection was essential to provide accountability and accuracy to scientific knowledge (Irvine, 2003). Arguably, one could say that activism is the reality-check of LGBT and queer studies.

Considering the specific case of queer studies, these stemmed from the alleged inefficiency of feminist theory and early lesbian and gay studies regarding the politicisation of sexual-related issues characterised by their uncertainty, fluidity and elasticity (Santos, 2006a, b; Giffney & O'Rourke, 2009). The increasing complexity of social facts and phenomena, linked to the emergence of new identities and groups rendered sexually dissident, pushed academia into new theoretical tools from a range of disciplines. A new field of studies was born. As Noreen Giffney has described it

Queer has many centres. Just as no one discipline can lay claim to the pastiche that is queer theory, so too can no one theoretical discourse or mode of enquiry broadcast its ownership. (2004, p. 74)

Despite the interdisciplinary character of queer studies, the connection between sociology—particularly the perspective of public sociology—and queer studies remains scarce. According to Irvine, there is a reason behind the absent link between sociology and sexuality studies in general

I would like to suggest one additional reason why sociology tends to marginalize sexuality studies: it is a stigmatized subject casting suspicion upon those who study it. The history of sexuality research throughout the twentieth century has been one of

stigma. The topic is controversial, even disreputable to many, and researchers have been repeatedly warned against studying sexuality. (Irvine, 2003, p. 451)

Nevertheless, some authors acknowledge the gains of promoting a sociological input in LGBT and queer studies. That is the case of Steven Seidman, according to whom

Queer theory suggests to sociologists a more reflexive analysis of sexual categories and the ways these sexual meanings intersect with institutions to shape dynamics of order and oppression. Sociologists, in turn, have something crucial to offer: a rich tradition of social-structural and cultural analysis that can give empirical richness to the often literary or abstract conceptual analyses of Queer theory. (1996, p. 17)

After acknowledging both the sociological deficit of queer theory and the queer deficit of sociology, Ki Namaste suggested a queer sociological theory that would invest in the transformation of sexual politics to overcome the binaries that characterise dominant frames (1996, pp. 205–206).

In line with this strand of argumentation, I advance the notion of queer public sociology (QPS) to describe a new critical framework invested in changing public policy, law and political and cultural institutions as a way to tackle discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. QPS is proactively engaged in action research,⁷ methodological triangulation and ethical principles guided by the goals of accountability and reciprocity, intersectionality, reflexivity and sexual justice. According to this perspective, issues such as sexism, heterosexism, homo-, bi- and transphobia become a representational system, a social construction that demands to be studied to be overturned. Discrimination is a collective product that stems from unequal power relations, instead of an individual problem. Therefore, the focus is moved away from the (individual) victim to the structural system that enables and legitimises discrimination. QPS is inextricably linked to the duty to inform the struggle against such structural discrimination and, as such, it willingly embraces political engagement both as an epistemological and as an ethical choice.

The analysis of the mutual implications between sociology and LGBT and queer studies suggests a series of guiding principles regarding the ethics of queer public sociologies.

Accountability and *reciprocity* can be jointly considered as a first guideline, consisting of building rapport and respecting step-by-step agreements between the different participants in the research process. It also includes retribution of the input participants offer to the research outcome. This may imply service provision, voluntary work and sharing resources accumulated during the research process (e.g. media analysis, databases, annotated bibliographies, etc). An ‘ethics of care’ (Roseneil, 2004; Held, 2006) should therefore support the work of scholar-activists, particularly in situations that involve vulnerability and oppression, such as study and advocacy in the fields of same-sex sexuality and gender identity.

Second, *intersectionality* should be regarded as a fundamental resource of QPS, focusing on the explanatory potential of a range of identities, contexts and locations. An intersectional approach grants sociological inquiry transversal and interdisciplinary analytical tools that offer greater accuracy and validity to the research process as a whole.

Third, *self-reflexivity* understood as a vigilant and systematic exercise of self-critique that stresses the researcher’s responsibility and ethical compromise to reject sexually

biased—homophobic, transphobic, biphobic, sexist and/or heterosexist—projects. The principle of self-reflexivity must also imply an interest in meta-theory, theory and methodological triangulation as a way to advance a ‘power-reflexive methodology’ (Pfohl, 2004, p. 115). Despite the critique of reflexivity as a profoundly classed product of late modernity (Skeggs, 2004) as well as ‘potentially self-indulgent’, harmful and partial (Sanchez-Taylor & O’Connell Davidson, 2010), this principle can perhaps be more usefully understood as a practice, a ‘relationship [...] between being a sociologist and being a person’ (Gouldner, 2004, p. 383). Therefore, self-reflexivity as it is being proposed in this article is about *doing*, rather than *being*.

Finally, as emphasised throughout the article, a commitment to *sexual justice* implies political engagement beyond the walls of academia, an epistemological and ethical decision to counter the boundaries of otherness that imply a gap between so-called ‘science’ and activism. If the goal is sexual justice, then activism becomes a duty of the responsible academic under the critical framework of QPS. As such, social and cognitive justices become inextricably connected.

These principles may be interpreted as a minimum conceptual standard for studies under the critical framework of QPS. They are not mutually excluding nor overriding, and they should certainly be challenged and adjusted to the empirically based needs of each particular study or project. However dynamic this critical framework should remain, the most innovative aspect of QPS is the ability to reject claims of scientific political disengagement, replacing them with the legitimacy of willing disclosure as a non-negotiable ethical choice.

5. Conclusion

This article set out to explore the importance of an increasing articulation between science and activism, and the impacts of such political engagement regarding epistemological decisions and the ethics of research. It argued that political engagement should be not only embraced but also publicly encouraged and celebrated as a way to improve the quality of sociological input, as well as the accountability and relevance of sociological findings.

Writing in early 20th century, Emile Durkheim affirmed

The ideal society is not outside of the real society; it is part of it. [...] We cannot hold to one, without holding to the other. For a society is not made up merely of the mass of individuals who compose it, the ground which they occupy, the things which they use and the movements which they perform, but above all is the idea which it forms of itself. (1912, p. 189)

Likewise, the double ability to intervene as social actors and as sociologists should not be regarded as two poles that mutually repel each other, but rather as a necessary, dynamic and rewarding intersection.

To reiterate, academic production—whether research, lectures, presentations or publications—is always a result of situated knowledge. Rather than being almost embarrassed or trying to mask political engagement with the appearance of (always unattainable) neutrality, it is suggested that sociological theory will benefit from the multiple ways in which academia and politics intersect.

Disclosing one's double agency as scholar-activists is the necessary step to make knowledge production more relevant, as well as more transparent in its purposes and procedures. This seems to be particularly significant in the realm of LGBT and queer studies, in which issues of exclusion, discrimination and violence demand a sharp and informed intervention towards an inclusive future for all. QPS, as suggested in this article, is in a privileged position to contribute in a significant way to such important intervention.

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Notes

1. This section draws partially on Santos, 2006a.
2. Intersectionality can be understood as 'a tool for analysis, advocacy and policy development that addresses multiple discriminations and helps us understand how different sets of identities impact on access to rights and opportunities. [...] Intersectional analysis aims to reveal multiple identities, exposing the different types of discrimination and disadvantage that occur as a consequence of the combination of identities' (AWID, 2004, pp. 1–2).
3. According to Harding, 'Weak objectivity is located in a conceptual interdependency that includes (weak) subjectivity and judgemental relativism' (1991, p. 156).
4. For more on the topic of advantages and setbacks of being a scholar-activist in the Portuguese academia, see Santos, 2011.
5. Examples of LGBT and queer scholars coming out and making claims in and beyond academia include Davina Cooper, Zowie Davy, Ken Plummer, Diane Richardson, Sasha Roseneil and Jeffrey Weeks, amongst many others.
6. More information about the Stonewall events is available at <http://www.stonewall.org.uk/> (accessed 03/01/2011).
7. For details on the advantages of bringing queer theory and action research together, see Filax, 2006.

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