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An Interview with Norman Anderssen

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Norman's office at the University of Bergen

Norman Andersen: My name is Norman Anderssen; I am a professor of social psychology at the *University of Bergen*. I have had two main research topics: Health behaviors using standardized and survey methods, as well as statistical procedures, etc., and gay and lesbian issues.

My research themes have been connected to the experiences of ordinary people regarding gay and lesbian issues. Not the experiences of gays and lesbians themselves, but that of the majority, so to speak. I have been interested in how gays and lesbians navigate or live their lives within a norm that is both positive and negative towards homosexuality.

CM: What is the specific emphasis of this research?

NA: The research question is: What are the typical attitudes in Norway regarding gays and lesbians?

CM: Considering that Norway is such a progressive legislative environment, it is a place in which gays and lesbians have rights that are not even a dream in other countries, what are the attitudes in society towards the LGBTQ community?

NA: On one level attitudes are very positive. Most people in Norway are positive towards gays and lesbians as persons and towards their legal rights: Family relationships, the opportunity to get married and the right to adopt children. Most Norwegians want to be positive; they know that if they are to be updated persons, they are supposed to be positive. If we ask general questions, people really seem to support gays and lesbians; but if we ask more detailed questions, many might have second thoughts. For example, young gays and lesbians in Norway hesitate to tell their parents or their friends about their sexual orientation. Obviously, there are some barriers still standing against full openness.

CM: How do these negative attitudes manifest? What are the grounds for these types of attitudes? Is it a general sense of heteronormativity in society?

NA: Within queer theory, if you talk about gender or sexual categories, the clearer you make these distinctions and the more you thematize them, the easier it is for people to have certain opinions about some of these categories. It is a kind of logic, whereby the more you insist that there are homosexuals, bisexuals and heterosexuals, the more you let people have opinions

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about these groups. To really dissolve negative attitudes, we need to dissolve our concepts and notions of sexual distinctions, including gender. This is a very radical position in line with general queer theory: As long as we have these very strong categories, we will also have negative attitudes.

CM: Is there some work been done at a governmental level or in any of its institutions, to promote the dissolution of these categorical distinctions, for example at the level of education?

NA: Within the Nordic countries, there are some researchers doing classroom work. They emphasize, for example, various ways of performing gender within the classroom, which are not necessarily connected to biological sex. The schools often listen to them. In some of the regulating guidelines within the curriculum for example, there are phrases that open up the possibility of dissolving categories. But at the same time, all cultural expressions and activities are connected to gender dichotomies. Consequently, although there are some efforts, even official efforts to dissolve categories, ultimately they count very little.

CM: What is the historical timeline within the gay and lesbian movement, say from 1950 onwards, and what has been the evolution in regard to this particular issue of attitudes and social behaviors? Homosexuality was decriminalized in 1972. I suppose that there must have been a radical shift in the way that the homosexuals or the LGBTQ community was perceived back then.

NA: As a psychologist, I am not able to point at the huge societal transformations, which prepare the ground for these kinds of changes. There are economic reasons involved: Norway is a rich country, which means there is gender equality regarding economic status, at least in comparison to many other countries. Therefore, there are some strong societal forces that make these changes be possible. There are also some cultural norms stating that people should be allowed to do what they want to, but at the same time that is really not the case. We can point to other issues where people have prejudices, so I really don't know why this has been possible. I guess that what happened in the United States has meant a lot for us. Within psychiatry for example, the *American Psychiatric Association* took the disease label away about five years before the *Norwegian Psychiatric Association*. In many respects, Norwegian norms regarding homosexuality have followed the ways of dealing with these issues in California.

CM: However, it seems like in the legislative context, Norway is far ahead to the United States today. What is the relationship between the impact of the law, as a kind of ground for equality of rights, and an individual's psychology in society?

NA: I have the feeling that at a governmental level, the integration of new ideas has come quite far because there have been clever lobbyists who have managed to implement rights and laws for the protection of LGBT people. But this is actually more advanced than what goes on among the general public. Laws make it possible for organizations and single individuals who fight for LGBT people to have moral and legal support. I think the law comes before the changes in Norway.

CM: How long does it take for the law to actually manifest itself in the social environment? How does it start to puncture the psychological fabric of society?

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NA: I don't know, because you might be talking of generational differences: What your generation thinks and experiences might be different from what my generation or my parents' generation experience. There are some very slow forces going on and living their own life, so to speak. But then the law comes along and affects the schooling, for example, quite quickly: Within two or three years changes might happen within the school system. For instance, the decriminalization of homosexuality passed in 1972, as you said, which was 37 years ago. It was followed by homosexuality being removed from the list of pathologies. Later on we had legal protection against discrimination and so on. Today, two women or two men can get married and adopt children, so the environment is one equality. I think the law takes years to come into social effect, two years to ten years...

CM: You have also been doing some work about civil unions and domestic partnerships in Norway. Could you speak about that?

NA: I know that you spoke to a colleague of mine, Tone Hellesund, regarding those issues, and we did some work together. To us, the whole discussion regarding domestic partnerships and adoption is centered on the nuclear family as a typical model. Whether you are for or against gays and lesbians, you can use arguments about the nuclear family. For instance, if you support gays and lesbians, you can say that they can be as good parents as any other parents, and if you oppose gays and lesbians, you can use the opposite argument. About 20 years ago, there were quite strong discussions within the gay and lesbian community about the nuclear family. Many thought that gays and lesbians should not model their lives on the nuclear family, since there are so many negative associations connected to it. But those kinds of discussions are totally over, for the time being.

CM: What has prompted that change? This is in fact an international pattern: In the 1970s, there was a strong rejection towards replicating the heteronormative norm when it came to marriage, for example. But it seems that today the fight is focused on replicating those standards in many ways.

NA: It might be because the activists and the organizations act strategically, but I am not sure if that is the only cause. There is also a general climate in Norway, and in other Western countries, where activist movements have been downplayed: The Peace Movement, the Women's movement, etc.

CM: By strategic you mean that the organizations want to play safely so that they can develop a successful legal platform? But once the legal platform is in place, what is the work that needs to be done? Or do we need to be content with that heterosexual norm?

NA: That might be the issue for Norwegian society today: Even though the legal status is very good, LGBT people are considered a minority group. And as a minority we confront issues of prejudice similar to the ones other minorities face: the Roma people, disabled people, etc. But you also have a queer theory-type of debate: Are we happy with the gender and sexual orientation categories that we are utilizing today? There are many researchers and activists who really want to oppose, in a Foucauldian sense, these very disciplinary distinctions.

CM: Is that what is referred to as "innate qualities of gender"?

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NA: Yes.

CM: Can you explain that?

NA: It is a typical way in which many (social) scientific disciplines and many cultures, view human functioning. We think that people possess certain abilities, which we are interested in. We try to find out what they are and how stable they are, and we categorize people according to them very quickly, we do that all the time. When we do that, we might overlook other interesting things about our fellow human beings. An “innate quality” means a view that people are permanent beings, in some sense; and that their minds, their mentalities, subjectivity, personhood or self are clear and consistent entities. It is not necessarily bad to view humans like that, but it has consequences. Some people think the consequences are limiting, while others think that these distinctions reflect nature. This is a huge scientific discussion within many fields: Sociology, psychology, pedagogy, etc.

CM: Within the field of queer studies, what are the consequences of these categories?

NA: When I write and do my research, I have a double view on it all the time. Categories are there, people utilize them, my colleagues utilize them, I do it myself, but at the same time I question them and I am interested in the consequences of having them. Consequently, I have to deal with wanting to dissolve them, and also to utilize them.

CM: Would this be a foundational element of a heteronormative logic: If gender is categorical and these qualities are innate, as a result, things should be replicated along those lines?

NA: I am not sure if they should be replicated, but I think they are. And I contribute to that myself. In my position as a professor here, I could do much more radical work on gender or sexuality; I could do research that goes one step further, utilizing this way of thinking not to reinforce these categories, but I am not there yet.

CM: How could your work be more radical?

NA: For example, last year I conducted a national survey regarding people's attitudes towards LGBTs. I phrased the survey questions and the fixed-response alternatives, and now I am writing a report on that survey. When I use in the phrases and questions words like *men*, *women*, *transsexuals*, or *bisexuals*, I am, in a way, reinforcing the categories. That is kind of a paradox. It is not a very bad paradox, and many people have talked about it for 30 years at least. It is not a new thing, but it is there constantly.

CM: The radicalism for you lies in redefining language?

NA: The radicalism does not lie in creating a new language, but maybe in trying to have access to people's experiences in a more open way, aiming at getting behind or below the categories. This would mean using another research methodology.

CM: Using categories is simply the way we learn: there is man, woman, etc. What would be the challenge to change that logic? Is some of that work taking place practically in Norway?

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NA: I don't know of any official strategic efforts to change that, and I don't have a prescription myself, because as soon as we have it, the prescription itself becomes a kind of limiting process. I also have the feeling that the societal changes that we are going through in Norway, and in countries like ours, are difficult to analyze. There might be some structural or language changes that we really don't understand yet.

CM: I would like you to speak about the notion of sexual citizenship and its implications in political terms, which entail equality and rights, full participation, etc.; but also a more subjective understanding of citizenship, in the sense that I might be able to vote, but does my vote really count? I am talking about the more porous angles of citizenship.

NA: For many citizens in Norway, their sexuality is not a big issue when it comes to voting, economic rights and things like that. For most LGBT people that is not the main issue either. Nonetheless, in some cities, like Bergen and Oslo, the two largest cities in the country, they have decided, at an official level, to have what is called an Implementation Plan regarding LGBT issues, whereby they want to implement legal status so that LGBT themes don't remain invisible in the work place; for example, in a nursing home, it shouldn't be invisible for the patients or the employees. Thus, in a way, the LGBT theme is more highlighted now than it was five years ago, and that might lead to a process where sexuality or identity might have a stronger status, so to speak, regarding citizenship. It might be easier to speak up and say: "I am a 'T' person and I want to fight for it," and others might say, "Yes you are entitled to do that."

CM: Could you speak about the process of adoption of children by gay and lesbian parents? There is a common perception that this could have a negative effect on the raising of children, I know you have come to the conclusion that it is not so.

NA: We have our cultural notions of what is good for a child, which are partly based on prejudice and partly on psychological and pedagogical research. What do we want children to have as they grow up? We don't want them to freeze and we want them to have enough food. And what do we want for them from a psychological perspective? We probably want them to have stable relationships, to be alert and to be positive towards life, etc. For me, the issue of gender and sexuality is disconnected from that. Therefore, sexual orientation and gender as we know them today do not have any logical connection to what we want for small children. What I am saying is that gays and lesbians should be allowed to raise children. These discussions should be connected to what you want children to accomplish, not to the gender or sexuality of their parents.

CM: In Norway, gay and lesbian families can adopt and raise children. What was the process like in terms of its reception in society and its representation in the media? What was that of battle like?

NA: Gay and lesbian parents and their supporters say that, for instance, two women who raise daughters will obviously expose them to male role models, like their brothers and uncles, because they are *nice* parents. But you might also ask: Is it that important to have male role models? Maybe it is. I am not sure about that. I find it interesting that so few activists have argued that our wish to model our lives on the nuclear family is the wrong path to go. We should develop our own ways of establishing communities or families, but of course, I can understand people who strategically do not argue that way.

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CM: What are you working on now?

NA: I am writing a report on the attitudes of the Norwegian population towards transsexuals. By transsexuals, I mean here, those persons who want to go through a sex change operation. It also includes people who are gender benders. It seems like the Norwegian population has open-minded attitudes about this; but these issues have not been debated publicly that much. People are not so familiar with this in the way they are with the adoption debate, for example.

CM: Why do you think that it is not publicly discussed?

NA: Because the experience of the 'T' people has not been considered as important among the general public. It has been a medical concern for many years, but only in the last ten or twenty years these groups have started to come up as an issue.

CM: What is the emphasis of the report that you are working on?

NA: The emphasis would be that people are generally positive, similarly to the way they are positive about gays and lesbians. I want to discuss in the report the fact that when people are asked simple questions, they tend to report positive attitudes.

CM: What methodology do you use in your research? And, when you speak of "the people," whom are you talking about?

NA: A standardized type of poll. People from all over Norway of all ages, with various educational backgrounds. It is a representative sample. They are asked questions such as: What is your general attitude toward bisexual women? And they have to tick off one of the five categories. Within this frame, it is a totally fixed survey.

CM: Do you play a role in the phrasing of these questions?

NA: Yes.

CM: And what is the logic behind asking such a question? How do you phrase a question like that?

NA: We have a notion that people have attitudes about things. Within my research community, there is the notion that there is a mental *thing* in humans that we might call "attitude;" and if we have a notion of attitude, a notion of sexual categories, one might argue that it is interesting to ask: What are these stable mental *things*, either positive or negative, regarding the valuing of some objects; for instance, bisexual people. As I said earlier, phrasing a question like that is really not going beyond the categorization at all; it is reinforcing it. I am aware that when I am phrasing the questions, I am reinforcing the categories. At the same time, when I write my report, I am able to problematize this by reflecting about it.

CM: Would there be a way of radicalizing the method by a different way of posing the questions? What holds you back from doing that, is it an institutional concern?

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NA: You can use other methodologies, like observing conversations, within psychology. When I use a certain method, it is because that is what I am trained to do and that is what my field is good at. I have thought that maybe I should not utilize methodologies like that, because they are not really getting behind the phenomena; but at the same time, a good survey might be useful. For the time being, I believe that it is possible to do this kind of research, while at the same time being aware that there are other methodologies that might shed another light on the same type of things.

CM: Methodologies that you will eventually employ?

NA: I don't know. The research groups I am a part of are open-minded, but their expertise is quite traditional within psychology. They utilize quantity measures and so on.

CM: Is that a conflict for you? Do you struggle with methodologies and institutionalized procedures?

NA: Yes, in a way. However, in my position here at the University, I can choose what to do, nobody stops me. Therefore, what holds me back is more that my expertise is within certain methods. It is not easy to put your methodological training aside.

CM: But it is healthy to question it, I suppose?

NA: Yes.

CM: From the perspective of this specific field of expertise, the perception of the general public on issues of sexuality, can you speak about what the greatest challenge is at the moment for the LGBT community in this country? What is the current battle? What is it that people here should be fighting for? What are you fighting for as a personally, for example?

NA: It is a difficult question. As a researcher, I am interested in shedding light on the social processes that enforce categories. That is an interest that is applicable to other types of categories that we deal with: Alcoholics or non-alcoholics, for example.

The challenge within this field is theoretical: How to deal with categories and their dissolution or reinforcement? But when it comes to the LGBT groups in Norway, one important concern would be to expose harassment and the other difficult matters for them. Although their their legal status is very good, it is important to show that there is still considerable inequality in face-to-face interactions. Many LGBT people hesitate to talk to others about their identity. Why should they hesitate? There must be some kind of face-to-face interactions that make it difficult, and it is important to expose that.

CM: In the few weeks that I have been here, I have met several gay men and lesbian women that are not 'out.' I have been very surprised because I actually thought that being the law so progressive and the public so open-minded coming out would not be a problem. Why are people concealing their sexual identity when the legal climate is so healthy?

NA: I think it might be a mixture of three things First, a fear of harassment or rejection. You don't risk going to jail, but people might move a little bit away from you. Second, an issue of shyness.

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And third, a kind of queer sensitivity: The moment you reveal your identity you are trapped in it, so to speak. All your friends and family will see you that way, you will see yourself that way as well, and you might not like being categorized as such.

CM: Two things come to mind when you say that. One is that there is a slight contradiction between the seemingly positive attitudes of the general public in relation to these issues, as the polls show it, and what clearly shows that it must be otherwise: If am fearful to tell my family, it must be because I perceive that it is not that open after all.

NA: That is how I view this landscape too, because in the polls people report positive attitudes, and they are not lying or pretending. They do want to express positive attitudes, but those are attitudes concerning abstract situations and abstract people. When concrete LGBT people deal with other people, the situation is completely different. That is what I wanted to thematize before: Maybe we need another methodology to capture these concerns.