

The Epistemologies of ‘Lockdown’: closets, vulnerability, and citizenship

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Abstract: This paper reviews current concepts from the social sciences and humanities through which to understand and interpret the sexual and gendered politics of the COVID-19 pandemic. We revisit Sedgwick’s ‘epistemology of the closet’ to think about the ways in which sexuality and gender have become known and understood in new ways through a different form of containment, the experience of COVID-19 lockdowns. This paper sets out a framework for rethinking sexual and intimate citizenship during the COVID-19 pandemic. We examine how the pandemic has impacted on the everyday negotiation of intimacy and highlighted material inequalities that impact on the lives of women and LGBTQ+ people.

Non-technical summary: This working paper provides an overview of concepts from the social sciences and humanities which might contribute to an analysis of the sexual and gendered politics of the COVID-19 pandemic. We draw parallels between the metaphor of ‘the closet’ to think about the ways in which sexuality and gender have become known and understood in new ways through a different form of containment, the experience of COVID-19 lockdowns. This paper sets out a framework for rethinking sexual and intimate citizenship during the COVID-19 pandemic. We examine how the pandemic has impacted on the everyday negotiation of intimacy and highlighted material inequalities that impact on the lives of women and LGBTQ+ people.

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Introduction

When we first devised this project and gave it a title, we were (of course) playing off Eve Sedgwick's (2008 [1990]) *Epistemology of the Closet* and the exploration in that work of how sexuality (and gender) become known through the metaphor of the closet and practices of closeting. We have always been wary of equating 'lockdown' (and its many synonyms) with 'the closet', but our work has explored the ways that the COVID-19 pandemic and the various forms of 'lockdown' enacted around the world in response to it have led sexuality and gender to become known (and contested) in a variety of new ways.

Our project brought together a group of interdisciplinary researchers from across the humanities and social sciences, based in India, Ireland, and the UK. Together we conducted a process of collective 'urgent witnessing' of the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted on women and LGBTQ+ people and reframed aspects of sexual and gendered politics at different spatial scales. Urgent witnessing involved collecting an online archive of policy documents and journalistic accounts as we went, and discussing emerging themes and observations collectively through our regular online team meetings. Although this was a pragmatic response to the pandemic, this approach also provided significant opportunities to rapidly develop collaborative practice between a dispersed research team and to appreciate the transnational impacts of the pandemic as we lived through it together. We also conducted small subprojects exploring these issues in England, India, Italy and Mexico. In that wider context, this working paper presents findings from a literature review of academic writing on themes of sexual/intimate citizenship, vulnerability and 'the closet' (and other metaphors of confinement) in relation to sexuality and gender.

Contextualizing debates about 'the closet' and sexual citizenship

Sedgwick's (2008 [1990]) *Epistemology of the Closet* explores how the metaphor of the closet conveys queer denial, erasure, and concealment (Brown et al. 2011: 125), and how it "has shaped gay life throughout the 20th century and continues to do so" (Brown et al. 2011: 122). Following Foucault, Sedgwick argues the closet, and the binaries it speaks to, such as privacy/disclosure and knowledge/ignorance, are a result of specific (eighteenth and nineteenth century) understandings of same-sex sexuality as an identity a specific type of person has, rather than acts they engage in (that are available to all).

The closet transforms over time and space and is structured by silences – "not a particular silence, but a silence that accrues particularity by fits and starts, in relation to the discourse that surrounds and differentially constitutes it" (Sedgwick 2008: 3). Prior to the widespread adoption of current uses of the closet metaphor in the late 1960s, "coming out" referred to a gay man

"[...] being formally presented to the largest collective manifestation of pre-war gay society, the enormous drag balls that were patterned on the debutante and masquerade balls of the dominant culture and were regularly held in New York, Chicago, New Orleans, Baltimore, and other cities" (Chauncey 1994: 7).

A pre-WWII configuration of 'coming out' therefore emphasised coming out *into* a communal like-minded "homosexual" society, rather than an individualized coming out *from* the closet. Since the 1960s, "the closet" has become the central metaphor in which 'coming out' experiences are most commonly articulated and understood (initially in the Anglophone nations of the Minority World¹ and,

¹ Rather than use the problematic terms 'Global North/South', we adopt a Southern epistemology (Alam 2008) to describe the global divisions of power. We, therefore, use the term 'Majority World' to refer to those nations where the vast majority of humanity live, in contrast to the 'Minority World' of nations that hold disproportionate geopolitical and economic influence, despite being home to a tiny minority of the world's population.

later, as a hegemonic understanding with global reach). As a spatial metaphor, the 'closet' does more than describe absence, but is a particular "manifestation of heteronormative and homophobic powers" (Brown 2000: 3).

Like all metaphors, however, its capacity to explain is limited. Firstly, writings on 'the closet' also tend to be writings on what the closet means and how it operates for white, western gay men. The concept of the closet has therefore been accused of being part of queer neo-colonial westernization, being inappropriately applied to regions and contexts where sexuality is experienced and articulated differently, and where homosexual activity is not connected to gay identities and politics in the same ways (see Massad 2002; khanna 2016). In the early 2000s, Seidman (2002, p.8), observed a 'disappearing closet' where the 'closeted' American men he interviewed described periodic and strategic concealments that "may be a source of anxiety and discomfort," but did not fundamentally or dramatically reshape their life-course. However, research (see Berg and Ross, 2014; Di Feliciano, 2020) on gay men living with HIV has shown how a "second closet" might operate for them, causing anxiety and distress, while also reproducing the social perception of HIV as something to be ashamed of. These imaginations, aspirations and material conditions are central to complicating the epistemology of the closet; and is something our project works to further realise. However, as our discussions progressed, we increasingly moved away from thinking with the closet metaphor, and focused instead on forms of sexual and intimate citizenship.

Sexual citizenship "is a multifaceted concept, understood in a variety of different ways" (Richardson 2017: 210). Sexual citizenship scholarship emerged in the 1990s from broader debates about 'citizenship', with its focus on borderings, belongings/exclusions, and rights/obligations. The development of the concept of sexual citizenship responded to critiques of how homophobia and heteronormativity operated in process of citizen-making, whereby gender and sexual norms were considered "prerequisites for membership in the nation" (Corber and Volocchi 2003: 15). This has been complicated by the emergence of homonationalism as a contemporary biopolitical regime, whereby "'acceptance' and 'tolerance' for some gay and lesbian subjects have become a barometer by which the right to and capacity for national sovereignty is evaluated" (Puar 2013: 336). Homonationalism manifests through geographically variegated forms of encounter between "state practices, transnational circuits of queer commodity culture and human rights paradigms, and broader global phenomena such as the increasing entrenchment of Islamophobia" (Puar 2013: 337).

The 'good' sexual citizen, then, is shaped, articulated and embedded within complex geopolitical power relations and through an alignment with the particular values and logics they produce. Seidman (2001: 323) argues that "gays have claimed not only to be normal, but to exhibit valued civil qualities such as discipline, rationality, respect for the law and family values, and national pride". This speaks (back) to the constructions of the good homosexual versus the dangerous queer, whereby "contemporary homophobia constructs the mythical figure of the 'good homosexual' and promises to include her within the 'normal' social order in return for her denunciation of her fellow queers" (Smith 1994: 69).

This conceptualization of sexual citizenship has explored rights and responsibilities through empirical issues, such as 'test tube babies' and 'lesbian and gay families' (Plummer 2001: 237; Bell and Binnie 2000). The concept of 'sexual citizenship' has frequently been used to explore the ways in which the market, legal system, and social norms shape the capacity of individuals and groups to claim (full) citizenship on the basis of their sexuality or sexual identity (Bell and Binnie 2000). In contrast, Plummer (2001) has argued for attention to 'intimate citizenship' over 'sexual citizenship' as it fosters a broader focus on everyday lives, interactions and discourses as opposed to a sole focus on sexual rights and a politics of equality (Richardson and Turner 2001). Both concepts are useful for our project, as the COVID-19 pandemic has enabled the erosion of 'sexual citizenship' for LGBTQ people in many national contexts; however, lockdowns and social distancing regulations have impacted on and reconfigured the intimate lives of a far wider layer of people, drawing renewed attention to the importance of interpersonal intimacy in underpinning 'liveable lives'. Of relevance to our project are the ways in

which the pandemic has brought sexual and gendered aspects of our personal lives into view, shifting the focus and intensity of the meanings, ethics and governance of parenthood, sexual health, gender-based violence, the body, and (embodied) pleasure.

Our research attends to the ways in which forms of sexual and intimate citizenship 'travel' and vary geographically (Richardson 2017). Like the concept of 'the closet', sexual citizenship has been accused of not accounting for articulations of sexual identity and experiences of intimate life in the Majority World. Much of the extant work on the sexual citizen has focused on 'the rights of citizens as consumers' (Evans 1993: 2), and while this is important and has traction in many parts of the world, it overlooks the ways in which claims to sexual and intimate citizenship are shaped by and entangled with a far wider range of economic and geopolitical relations (Smith 2020). Indeed, we would argue that sexual and intimate citizenship must be understood in the context of how citizenship is framed and contested in specific national and world-regional contexts. The *Epistemologies of Lockdown* project seeks to explore the geographical variance in the ways in which intimate citizenships have been (and continue to be) articulated and negotiated during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Formal legal equalities have defined debates about sexual citizenship in the 21st century, from those who see the world as being 'won' through these changes (Weeks, 2007), to those who have critiqued the new normativities produced by these legal gains (Duggan 2002; Richardson 2017). While work on intimate citizenship still considers the consequences of these legal equalities, it has developed a more expansive consideration of the links between the 'structural' and everyday intimacies. Le Feuvre and Roseneil (2014), for example, look at the ability of non-traditional family units to reproduce their livelihoods. They argue that low-income and precarious workers (particularly in underdeveloped countries and deregulated, highly gendered, economies, such as elder care) are faced with a perceived/actual material impossibility of living beyond the 'couple frame' (p.551). Our research seeks to continue expanding and elaborating the concept of 'intimate citizenship' to include vulnerability and liveable lives.

Vulnerability is popularly thought of as a feeling or a condition of potential based on the identity characteristics of a person, though during the pandemic, we have noted that vulnerability is often used to suggest individual medical comorbidities or (in the case of UK pandemic vocabulary) 'underlying conditions' as well as institutional vulnerability ("Protect the NHS"). To be 'vulnerable' is to be 'susceptible to harm', or 'open to attack' (Oxford English Dictionary 2020). In research, these particularistic understandings of vulnerability may work to (further) stigmatise our research subjects or participants (Virokannas et al. 2020). Since the early 2000s, scholarship has begun to complicate these individualistic and particularistic understandings, focusing on the (geo)politics, cultural (re)production, and interdependencies of vulnerability. Butler (2004a; 2004b) claims that all humans are vulnerable because of the social condition of life:

"The fact that our lives are dependent on others can become the basis of claims for nonmilitaristic political solutions, one which we cannot will away, one which we must attend to, even abide by, as we begin to think about what politics might be implied by staying with the thought of corporeal vulnerability itself" (Butler 2004a, pp.22-23).

With regards to the connections between gender and vulnerability, Virokannis et al. (2020, p.333) identify two dominant strands in academic literature:

"The first one emphasises social and economic conditions that cause vulnerability and affect women and men differently, while the other one studies vulnerability as socially constructed and related to discourses of femininity and masculinity."

Merging these two strains, the concept of the "liveable life" asks what conditions "must be fulfilled for life to become life" and what do humans need "in order to maintain and reproduce the conditions of [our] own liveability" (Butler 2004a: 39)? Though answering this is subject to contestation and unpredictability, such is the nature of collectivist democracy (Butler 2004a). In asking these questions,

the investigation of 'liveable lives' attends to both materialities and discourses: "Who 'we' are is a social construct (an ego, identity(ies)) which helps us survive in a world of complex relations, norms and political-economic structures" (Velicu and García-López 2018: 62). Studies of LGBTQ+ liveable lives in the UK and India have pointed to the importance of recognising the place of equalities legislations and also their limits in creating 'a life that is a life' (Browne et al., 2017). Moreover, liveability is intricately linked to survival and precarity in ways that demand a move beyond any binarised notion of survival/living. One can be both vulnerable and experience life as liveable, and the act of seeking bearable lives, through protest and activism for example, can make lives more liveable (Butler, Gambetti and Sabsay, 2016; McGlynn et al., 2020). There are temporalities and life course considerations in creating the conditions for liveabilities, and the pandemic brings various considerations of survival and liveabilities to the fore in considering how lives have been made less liveable, and for whom.

Pandemic Sexual and Intimate Citizenship

We argue that the imperative to lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic was an act of citizenship and produced particular forms of citizens in the process. The 'good citizen' was understood to observe public health guidance, while the 'bad citizen' did not. By extension, lockdown served to protect the 'good citizen' from others; while it attempted to contain the 'bad citizen' to protect others. The health of the body politic required the containment of the individual (leaky) citizen body, minimizing its contact with other bodies (Longhurst 2000). In the process, the body and its leakages came to be seen as a threat to society, and the practice of everyday intimacies became more dangerous and contested. This was combined with a process of rescaling: the folding in of the nation into the individual, through which the individual was impelled to take on responsibility for acting to protect the health of the nation. In attempting to maintain responsible social distancing, individuals were forced to question and reconsider everyday intimacies - who can I (safely) hug, and does that make me a 'bad' citizen? Even within the reduced contacts allowed by social distancing, expressions of greeting and farewell were reformed. In place of a handshake or a hug: the bumping of elbows, the empty hug, or the air kiss. Responsible intimate citizenship became a matter of public scrutiny (and public health), though as we argue elsewhere (Ashby et al, 2022), this exposed and produced new fault-lines between women and different groups of LGBTQ+ people and amplified existing tensions between legal equalities and lived experiences.

Such tensions were exposed early in the pandemic. In May 2020, as governments around the world had begun to issue laws and guidance around responsible intimate citizenships in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the UN and international human rights experts issued a joint statement (OHCHR 2020). It called on,

"[...] States and other stakeholders to urgently take into account the impact of COVID-19 on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and gender diverse (LGBT) persons when designing, implementing and evaluating measures to combat the pandemic"

The intervention also stated that measures should not "intentionally target LGBT persons and communities under the guise of public health", signalling the relevance of COVID-19 intimate politics, as well as its diplomatic importance (Brown 2020). In March 2020, a couple of weeks prior to this statement, 20 people living at an LGBTQ+ shelter in Kampala, Uganda, were imprisoned for COVID-19 negligence and disobeying the law. In searching the shelter, police confiscated HIV medication, test kits and condoms (Ghoshal 2020). Around the same time of the statement, in South Korea, where LGBTQ+ people are neither illegalised nor protected, the Protestant right accused Seoul's LGBTQ+ community of spreading the virus (Maguire et al. 2019).

The issues of "criminalization, stigma and discrimination" noted in the UN joint statement are not confined to the Majority World, but keenly experienced in developed, former colonial, and highly

neoliberal states. Indeed, the joint statement notes, “civil society organizations, which operated under duress before the pandemic, have been frantically working to fill the gaps left by States”. And, while there is less direct evidence of a link to COVID-19, over the summer of 2021 there appears to have been a marked increase in reported homophobic violence in public spaces in the UK (Syal 2021).

While the UN’s statement challenges acts intended to limit the citizenship of LGBTQ+ people, it also implies how the pandemic might open up space for new articulations of citizenship. Engin Isin and Greg Nielson (2008: 4) theorise ‘acts’ of citizenship as,

“creat[ing] a sense of the possible and of a citizenship that is ‘yet to come’. Without necessarily being ethical, such acts implicitly ask questions about a future responsibility towards others”.

We understand the civic act of lockdown as one that is rooted in the contemporary, but which seeks to ‘protect’ future citizenships. Lockdown, therefore, means that the contradictory and exclusionary work of contemporary citizenship on our gendered and sexual lives is, to borrow a word from the UK’s pandemic vocabulary, ‘locked in’ or ‘baked into’ future modes of citizenship.

We are mindful that the current pandemic (and the citizens and forms of citizenship that are produced in response to it) is entangled with the broader geopolitical moment; caught up with all the tensions surrounding citizenship exposed by heightening contradictions of the post-WWII globalized economy and liberal democracy. Through our analysis of sexual and intimate citizenship during the pandemic, our discussions have repeatedly returned to the ways in which lockdown responses have become entangled with broader geopolitical events (and the contestations of citizenship that they produce) in Trumpian (and post-Trumpian) USA, in Brexit Britain (or, perhaps, more specifically, England), on the Irish border, in a Mexico where parts of the country are embroiled in cartel violence, and in ongoing contestations of the Indian Citizenship Amendment Act (2019). These geopolitical events reveal a variety of faultlines in relation to citizenship.

Central to our project has been analysis of these (multiple) different faultlines that shape how sexuality and gender have become known (and policed) through the pandemic. By thinking expansively, across sexualities and genders (and not purely focusing on LGBTQ+ lives or specific subjectivities within that umbrella), we have considered the multiplicity of ways in which sexuality and gender become known across these faultlines and bordering practices. As such, we have not just considered sexual or intimate citizenship, but have attempted to think more expansively about some of the intersectional ways in which different forms of ‘good’, ‘bad’ and even ‘ambiguous’ citizens have been formed through (and in relation to) sexuality and gender in the present conjecture. This is one of the reasons we have explored contestations of care and social reproduction alongside sex and intimacy in this project.

It is hardly surprising that our discussions quickly strayed away from a clear focus on sexuality and gender, to address caste, class, generation, and race etc. In many ways, one of the things that the pandemic has exposed (once again – it is not new, of course) are the faultlines within assumed universal categories like ‘woman’ or the coalitional imperative of ‘LGBTQ+’. In our ongoing research and collaborations, we continue to explore the cracks opened by these faultlines, not to valorise citizenship, but to reveal possibilities for new coalitions and alliances, those that are ‘yet to come’.

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