

Consulting Group on Gender and Sexuality - Research data document pack

This document pack contains a summary and reflections treated as data for the Consulting Groups project (2022). The Consulting Groups project was part of UKRI-funded Future Leaders Fellowship (FLF) project Access Folk and developed by the FLF lead Prof. Fay Hield and Dr Esbjorn Wettermark at the University of Sheffield with project management from Dr Helen Grindley. This themed document pack is one of several related to the Consulting Groups project, all of which can be viewed and downloaded from The University of Sheffield's Online Research Data repository (ORDA).

To cite this document:

Skaista, Roary and Consulting Group on Gender and Sexuality. 2022. *Consulting Group on Gender and Sexuality - Research data document pack*. Access Folk, University of Sheffield, UK

Issues relating to Gender & Sexuality in Folk Singing

Safety

- Traditional sexist and heteronormative values in songs can lead to perpetuation of problematic behaviour, causing safety issues for women and LGBT+ people
- Self-perpetuating demographic of older straight men at folk events because women and LGBT+ people don't feel safe to attend or aren't out if they do attend, meaning that they are less visibly present there and so the problems persist
- Informal nature of folk scene often comes with a lack of safeguarding policies
- Safety issues are self-perpetuating if policies are not put in place, as bystanders are scared to call out unacceptable behaviour and perpetrators are thus emboldened that it is ok - stories of assault at singarounds where no-one helped
- Concern that people would be offended by a conduct policy at folk events
- Power held by booking agents/hosts over artists - artists being pressured into sleeping with booking agents/hosts in exchange for gigs/accommodation
- Folk events are often held in pubs, which can be a safety issue both due to people losing their inhibitions/judgement/capability to fend off unwanted attention and becoming victims, as well as perpetrators becoming emboldened by alcohol

Community

- There is a sentiment of everyone being welcome in the folk scene that is not borne out by evidence and leads to an unwillingness to examine problems
- Problematic expectations by other members of the community - members policing the LGBT+ content of social media posts when setting up a folk club
- Demographic of older straight men in the scene can be unwelcoming to younger people, women and LGBT+ people, even if they aren't directly discriminatory
- Problem in sessions that they are predominantly male, with people who aren't men finding that they are spoken over, played over and rarely able to start tunes or lead songs, with session leaders seemingly unaware that this is occurring
- Many agree that more explicitly LGBT+ sessions and projects are needed, but care must also be taken not to stratify the folk scene completely through this
- Intersectionality is important, especially as there is a lot of overlap between LGBT+ people and disability, particularly neurodivergence, so to make events accessible in one area thought must be put into making it accessible in others
- Many feel that the folk dance scene is more inclusive than the folk singing scene, so there may be some lessons to be learned from the folk dance scene

Roles

- Child-caring responsibilities are heavily gendered and lack of support with this leads to access barriers both professionally and in informal networks
- Female/femme people are less likely to be taken seriously, especially when it comes to areas traditionally considered male - sound engineering
- Many women and LGBT+ people involved in organising and running voluntary events, which is empowering and good for representation, but also free labour
- The onus is often on disadvantaged people to do the work to make spaces that they feel comfortable in, when they are often the ones with less power to do so
- Sessions are often run by men and populated by men, which can make them difficult for others to enter into - standing up for women/femmes in a space dominated by men needs to be done, but can create a bad atmosphere
- Those brought up female are socialised to be quieter and less confident in public, which is a huge barrier to taking part in sessions, so good session leaders are really important in making sure that everyone who wants to sing has a chance to
- An openly LGBT+ compare/session leader can inadvertently turn an event into an LGBT+ event, which isn't great as all spaces should be open to being run by people of any gender/sexuality without the space becoming about their identity

Live Performance

- Pay disparity along gender lines, which is a barrier to access for women/femmes
- Booking bias based on gender and sexuality - story of LGBT+ artist noticing less interest in being booked after coming out, as well as predominantly male line-ups
- Compares often use outdated, non-inclusive and sexist/patronising language both for performers and audiences - "ladies and gentlemen", "young ladies"
- Compares not well-versed in different pronouns, leading to performers being misgendered as they're announced, which isn't a good start to a gig
- Accomplishments of female/femme artists often not listed in promo materials or by compares, but instead their appearance or "pretty voice" mentioned
- Gendered expectations about what instruments are played and what topics are sung about - female/femme artists not expected to be instrumentalists, but are expected to sing "prettily" and not sing angry political or protest songs
- Concern when singing as a woman and/or LGBT+ identifying person that you are representing your gender and/or sexuality, rather than just singing a song

Representation in Song

- Traditional songs are often sexist and therefore uncomfortable to sing
- The heteronormative values in trad folk can lead to people feeling excluded, as today's women and many LGBT+ people don't see themselves represented
- Where there is LGBT+ representation it is often treated as very strange or even mocked, causing LGBT+ people to feel victimised rather than normalising their experience - songs about crossdressing can be uncomfortable for trans people
- The impact of some songs can vary depending on who is singing and in what context - songs about crossdressing female sailors can be empowering to both women and trans people in some scenarios, but offensive in others
- Reticence to change traditional lyrics for fear of losing historical authenticity
- Desire not to lose songs from the folk repertoire because of problematic lyrics
- Worth bearing in mind that traditional songs may not even be representative of the times they were written - the many songs about women willing to sleep with strangers when in fact the treatment of such women historically was very harsh

Gender & Sexuality in Folk Singing Reflective Paragraph

The Gender and Sexuality Consulting Group seemed to be relatively well-mixed in terms of gender presentation, although because people were not obliged to state their gender identity or pronouns, it is impossible to know the demographics of the group in terms of gender identity. Looking back at the attendance list, however, and based on how people presented, what pronouns they gave and what they said about themselves, I believe that the largest group out of all people who attended any of the sessions was women (7 out of 14), followed by men (5 out of 14), with two non-binary people. Given that only four out of 14 gave pronouns (one he/him, two she/her and one they/them), however, and the rest of my information comes from how people presented and what I can remember them saying about themselves, this analysis should not be taken as fact.

Knowing the demographics of the group in terms of sexuality is even more difficult, as very few people explicitly stated their sexuality. However, again from how people presented and what was said, so with the same caveats concerning lack of actual information on people's identities and therefore at the mercy of my own assumptions, I gathered that there did not seem to be many cisgender men or women present who identified as gay, bisexual or pansexual, nor did there seem to be many (if any) binary transgender men or women. Of the two non-binary people who I believe were present, one identifies as transgender and pansexual (I can say that for certain because that's me!), but I do not know about the other. Again, all of the above should not be taken as fact due to the lack of concrete information on peoples' identities.

Another point worth noting on the demographics of the group is that I believe all of the LGBT+ people were significantly younger than a lot of the straight people there, causing there almost to be two subgroups, one of older cisgender straight people and one of younger queer people. Again, however, I have no actual information on ages to back this up, only my assumptions based on appearance which I am aware may be flawed.

Thinking about other minority groups, it is probably worth mentioning that several of the people in this group did disclose a disability and/or neurodivergence in conversation, although I do not know how many. As far as I could tell from appearance, the group seemed to consist entirely of white people, although ethnicity is also not always visible and again I have no information on the ethnic backgrounds of the people present.

Bearing in mind the above analysis and its limitations, I believe that the issues relating to gender and sexuality in folk singing were very well covered in our discussions and therefore the summary points. There was, however, a potential under-reporting of discrimination and other issues, as there were a couple of occasions in which some of

the older men in the group stated the opinion that there were no issues relating to gender and sexuality in folk singing, or at least in the folk clubs that they attended. Whilst I do not wish to de-validate their opinion, I believe that this view may well come from their lack of lived experience of issues due to not being part of these marginalised groups, rather than reflecting the truth. This was particularly apparent when a man and a woman who run a folk club together had somewhat different views on something that had occurred there. Whilst I do not wish to ignore anyone's viewpoint just because it doesn't reflect my own, I think it is important to consider lived experience and, in the case of groups which are known to be discriminated against, give more weight to the views of those within said group than those outside of it. I hope therefore that not too much weight will be given to the view that "everything is fine", which seemed solely to come from the men in these meetings, in the further analysis of the discussions.

Specifically in terms of sexuality and gender identity, I think that the summary points, whilst fairly comprehensive, may not be representative of the entire LGBT+ community given the very small sample size of people identifying as such in the group. In several of the discussions I took part in I believe I was the only queer person, so any conclusions we came to were likely to be heavily from the point of view of a non-binary pansexual person. In going further with this research I'd suggest trying to more opinions from cisgender men and women who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual or pansexual, as well as from more transgender people in general and particularly binary trans men and women, as their experiences may well differ from mine.

There is also the issue of the scope of this specific consulting group to consider. A couple of people brought up the view that including gender and sexuality in one group was too broad a scope and that women's issues and those of LGBT+ people should be considered separately. I can understand this point of view, as a lot of the summary points can probably be divided into those that primarily affect women and those that primarily affect LGBT+ people. However, as a queer person who is almost always read as female, I also know from experience that there is a lot of overlap in discrimination that I face because of being queer and discrimination that I face because of being read as female. I have been subject to homophobia and sexism at the same time in the folk scene and I believe that I am not alone in this experience. I believe the reason for this is because both women and LGBT+ people are seen as deviations from what is considered the "default", a cisgender straight man. So whilst they can of course be completely separate identities, the discrimination faced by these different marginalised groups often comes from the same source and therefore is probably worth being considered as part of one big issue. I therefore personally feel that it was right to consider gender and sexuality in one consulting group, as long as one or other of these topics is not left out in favour of the other and as long as it remains clear which groups

are being discussed in relation to which points. I have attempted to avoid ambiguity in my summary points by being very descriptive in my language when talking about particular groups, so as long as this sort of approach is continued in any further research this concern should not pose too much of an issue.

It is also worth considering the intersectionality of issues relating to gender and sexuality with those relating to other characteristics. As mentioned above, I believe there was fairly good representation of disability and neurodivergence within this group. Age was on the whole fairly well represented, although with the caveat that there seemed to be fewer older LGBT+ people, so this may be a group worth trying to find more insights from in further research. The really important voice which is missing, however, is that of People of Colour. POC women and POC LGBT+ people often have a very different experience in this country to white women and LGBT+ people, so I think it is very important to try to seek out some insights from them, as this research will otherwise end up very white-centric.

In conclusion, I believe that what was discussed in the Gender and Sexuality Consulting Group is fairly reflective of the issues relating to gender and sexuality in folk singing, with the caveat that some specific groups within the remit of variance in gender and sexuality were possibly under-represented, whilst some further research into the intersectionality between this group and other minority groups, particularly People of Colour, may be important in understanding the full scope of the issues relating to gender and sexuality in folk singing.