

Institution: UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM
Unit of Assessment: D28 Modern Languages and Linguistics
Title of case study: Increasing Awareness of Issues Affecting LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer) Communities and Cultures in Italy
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>The research has had a demonstrable impact in Italy, in the UK, and elsewhere, in the areas of Civil Society, Public discourse, and Cultural Life. Specifically, it has a) supported LGBTQ community initiatives; b) helped LGBTQ individuals to meet societal challenges and thereby improved their well-being; c) increased public awareness and understanding of human rights infringements experienced by LGBTQ individuals in Italy; d) generated publications and debates on the incorporation of the term 'queer' in Italian discourses; e) directly influenced the writing practice of a contemporary Italian novelist and indirectly her readership. Beneficiaries: individuals and groups studied in the ethnographic research; LGBTQ populations in Italy and elsewhere, and sections of the public concerned with the politics of sexuality and gender.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>The research, which began in 2004, has sought to achieve impact by taking as its model and inspiration the pioneering work of Hoggart at Birmingham on the 'uses of literacy'. Specifically, it addresses an important but under-researched area of Italian social and cultural life, namely the lived experiences and social and cultural perceptions of LGBTQ communities. By the innovative application of cultural-analytic methods and by forging new critical arguments, the work has thrown critical light on the political and cultural discrimination of LGBTQ individuals in Italy. The findings demonstrate the persistence of widespread homophobic attitudes and practices in this society where, despite the provisions of the 1997 EU Amsterdam Treaty, anti-discrimination legislation remains inadequate and ineffective, so that LGBTQ individuals remain vulnerable to frequent discrimination, while same-sex couples still have no right to legal recognition of their relationships. Conversely, the research has also shown the positive role played by cultural representation in many forms in changing individual and collective perceptions of these issues.</p> <p>The research has included both textual analysis and ethnographic fieldwork, which has taken the form of interviews with members of activist communities, and innovative Social Network Analysis of a lesbian community in Bari. Ross conducted fieldwork in Turin, Bari, Rome, Milan and Bologna, which informed peer-reviewed publications on the following issues: 1) the socio-cultural construction of lesbian identities and lesbian cultural visibility in Turin; 2) the relationship between LGBTQ identifies and public spaces in Turin; 3) the political strategies employed by LGBTQ activist groups during Berlusconi's term as Prime Minister 2001-06; 4) initiatives around lesbian and gay ageing in Italy. Textual analysis includes critical evaluation of the following: 5) discourses of 'lesbian' identities and desire between women in Italian literature; 6) media representation of gender and sexuality in Italy.</p> <p>Through ethnographic fieldwork and the analysis of cultural representations, the research has revealed the importance of social and cultural visibility to LGBTQ communities. Visibility functions as a means of gaining socio-cultural status and recognition, which may improve the 'liveability' of LGBTQ lives, by increasing confidence, facilitating 'coming out' and challenging homophobia. Visibility may also lend vital strength to political campaigns to improve human rights for these populations. Through qualitative interviews with social actors, research has explored the relationship of LGBTQ populations to public spaces, showing how while the majority of public spaces in Italy are dominated by heteronormative and even homophobic discourses, these discourses can be challenged and subverted, for example through a pride parade or a public presence of LGBTQ populations (Ross 2013). This can have a positive effect on the well-being of such individuals. Through interviews with LGBTQ activists and politicians as part of the British Academy funded project 'Resisting the Tide: Cultures of Opposition during the Berlusconi Years', Ross revealed and analysed the range of approaches adopted by activist groups in their struggle to secure improved human rights for LGBTQ communities in Italy (see output R1 below). Further</p>

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qualitative interviews and Social Network Analysis have revealed how lesbian and gay community initiatives, in particular projects which seek to address the needs of ageing populations, can improve cultural transmission between generations, help isolated individuals, through resilient social networks that offer a model for wider society (R3). Textual analyses have critiqued Italian mainstream media for its narrow, homophobic approach to sexuality, and discussed alternative media forms, such as LGBTQ community magazines and websites. Ross has also published groundbreaking articles on the representation of lesbian identities and desire between women in Italian literature (R4).

The research was conducted at the University of Birmingham by Charlotte Ross, Senior Lecturer in Italian Studies, as sole author. She collaborated as co-editor with Susanna Scarparo (Monash University) for the 2010 special issue of *Modern Italy* (R4), and with Daniele Albertazzi and Clodagh Brook (both at University of Birmingham) on the volume *Resisting the Tide* (R1).

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

- R1) Ross C. 2009. Chapter 15: Collective Association in the LGBT movement. In *Resisting the Tide. Cultures of Opposition Under Berlusconi (2001-06)*, eds Daniele Albertazzi, Clodagh Brook, Charlotte Ross, Nina Rothenberg. New York: Continuum: 203-216 (**listed in REF2**).
- R2) Ross C, and Scarparo S. (eds) 2010. Gender and Sexuality in Italy. Special issue of *Italian Studies*, Vol. 65, no. 2 (**listed in REF2**).
- R3) Ross C. 2012. Imagined Communities: Initiatives around LGBTQ Ageing in Italy. In *Modern Italy*. Special issue: The Politics of Sexuality in Contemporary Italy, eds Chiara Bertone, Isabel Crowhurst, Giovanni Porfido, Vol.17, no. 4: 449-464. [DOI 10.1080/13532944.2012.706997]
- R4) Ross C. 2012a. Identità di genere e sessualità nelle opere di Goliarda Sapienza: finzioni necessariamente queer. In [*«Quel sogno d'essere» di Goliarda Sapienza. Percorsi critici su una delle maggiori autrici del Novecento italiano*](#), ed. Giovanna Providenti, Rome: Aracne: 243-42 (**listed in REF2** as reserve for d/w).

Grants:

- a. March 2007 (with D. Albertazzi and C. Brook). British Academy Large grant (budget FeC: £84,891). Project title: 'Resisting the Tide: Cultures of Opposition during the Berlusconi Years'. Final report submitted and accepted.
- b. May 2011. AHRC Early Career Fellowship (budget FeC: £45,690). Project title: Eccentricity and Sameness: Lesbian Cultural Identity in Italy, 1883 to the present day.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Nature and extent of the impact:

Given the persistence of widespread homophobia on most levels of Italian society, and its overt and covert endorsement from many quarters (Church, press, politicians, everyday rumour-mills), it is obviously very difficult to influence public attitudes, language and practices. For related reasons, organised action for change in Italy has secured fewer changes to legislation than elsewhere. Yet precisely these difficulties indicate the importance of any impact that can be achieved through research and related activities. Two main avenues are open to interventionist thinking in this area. One involves working directly with members of the LGBTQ population in specific locations. The other lies in targeting key opinion-formers and helping them better to understand the nature of the problems and the reasons for their persistence and, in consequence, to develop new forms of discourse and actions aimed at incremental change. This case study claims only that the research and the social actions related to it have contributed demonstrably to what is likely to be a very long and slow process of re-shaping public consciousness. It has done so in the following ways:

- a) It has supported LGBTQ community initiatives. Ross's research (R3) has contributed to **renewed activity in community initiatives** such as the lesbian cultural centre and housing provision for older lesbians currently being developed by the Associazione Desiderandae in Bari. The 21 lesbian-identified participants in the research told her explicitly that discussions with her and her analysis of their experiences had inspired them to invest more energy in the project and to adopt a more critically-reflexive approach to the initiatives that they are planning [see source 2 below]. One interviewee in Bari commented: 'the material you are gathering for this research will become a **useful tool for us** in the future'. Another said that 'the fact that you are here, asking us

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to reflect on our project Lesbizio, has already **encouraged** us to get things moving again'. This publication has also informed the Wikipedia article for 'Imagined Communities', thus enabling the **creation of a widely accessible online resource** that pays attention to LGBTQ rights and cultures.

b) It has helped LGBTQ individuals to meet societal challenges and thereby improved their well-being. Ross's research has been widely disseminated, for example through free public events, using social media, and through her bilingual Italian/English blog. The published research has informed the content of **6 free public talks** and events in **Italian and English**. As a result, it has impacted positively on the well-being of a variegated demographic in several ways. The talk that she gave in Bologna in April 2013, on 'lesbian' literature was felt to be important both for lesbians and women in Italy more broadly, since it galvanised groups and individuals who feel disenfranchised by national politics and the mainstream media [7]. The blog has had a positive effect on some individuals' self esteem. One follower commented: 'It makes me **feel stronger about my identity**, knowing this research is happening and being discussed'. Ross's talks as part of the Shout Festival of Queer Culture in Birmingham have contributed to the success of this initiative in **improving the well-being, self-confidence, self-esteem, health, feeling of security and social integration of LGBTQ individuals in the Midland area**. Research on the impact of the festival indicates that it has had a positive effect on those who attended events, but also on those who simply knew about them, as well as on their families, friends and associates. It has enabled more transparent cultural discussion of issues that are often treated as though they are somehow shameful, and contributed to lowering levels of social isolation, depression, and alcohol use (see report *Worth Every Penny*, [8] below).

c) It has **increased public awareness and understanding** of human rights infringements experienced by LGBTQ individuals in Italy. Individuals with whom Ross has developed relationships and shared her research since 2006 have confirmed that her analysis has had a positive effect on their **understanding** of LGBTQ cultures and experiences in Italy, enabling them to gain a new/different/more nuanced and theoretically-informed view. The following public talks have been delivered: a discussion in Italian at the Circolo Mario Mieli, a Rome-based LGBT association, March 2011; a talk in Italian as part of a study day on lesbian histories in Italy, Florence February 2011 (webcast available online, [1]); a talk in English as part of the Birmingham Shout Festival, November 2011; a talk in Italian on lesbian cultural visibility at the 'Immaginaria' cinema festival, as part of Lesbiche Fuori salone, Milan, November 2012; a discussion in English of a documentary on lesbian representation in the Italian media as part of the Birmingham Shout festival, March 2013; a talk on 'lesbian' literature in Bologna, April 2013. Ross also disseminates her research in both English and Italian via her **blog** ([6]). This includes posts, film reviews, reflections on her work and an opportunity for comment. While audiences for the talks have been relatively small on the whole (25-150), making the research available through the web has increased its reach: the page featuring the webcast of the talk given in February 2011 has had 57,874 visitors (September 2013); the blog has had 4,149 visits. These visitors are mostly based in the UK or Italy, but some are based in other countries, including Japan and Iran (statistics available on request). Audiences and followers have commented on the lack of available literature on this topic and thanked Ross for opening up channels of debate: 'I am finding [the blog] a very interesting and important project as it really does **fill a big gap**' [6]. One heterosexual respondent explained that reading the blog had helped him/her to **rethink his/her attitude** towards lesbians in relation to broader culture: 'the blog is challenging my prejudice that lesbianism = 'inward-looking culture' [6]. This remark shows how the research has deconstructed ungrounded assumptions that may be held by the broader population about the inward-looking character of lesbian culture. Responses to questionnaires for the Shout talk on 'lesbian' literature (November 2011 [4]) confirmed that audience members had learnt a great deal about lesbian cultural representation in Italy. Respondents declared that **they would broaden their reading practices and seek out the texts** discussed that are available in English translation (novels and DVDs with subtitles). They explained that they had been inspired to reflect on how the Italian texts relate to their own experiences and readings from different cultures. One attendee noted: 'As an Asian it has ignited my interest in tracing Asian lesbian historical depictions'. In conversation with Ross, attendees confirmed that they had not previously been aware of the disparity between the legal rights and

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standing of LGBTQ individuals in the UK and in Italy. Similar comments were made during the discussion of the documentary that Ross chaired for Shout in March 2013. Respondents to an event questionnaire [5] stated that it had made them '**much more aware** of the homophobia in Italy'. It inspired a thirst for more information: 'it **made me want to research it** [lesbian representation in Italy] and find out more'. It sparked a desire to think in more detail about 'visibility issues and media shaping of the discourse [on lesbian identity]'. These events challenged assumptions that the experiences of LGBTQ individuals are roughly comparable across Europe and stimulated audiences to do their own research on the subject.

d) It has generated **publications and debates** on the incorporation of the term 'queer' in Italian discourses. Ross's peer reviewed publications (2010), have led to a discussion on the reception and adoption of the Anglophone term 'queer' in Italy. Part of this debate has been **published** as *Queer in Italia*, ed Marco Pustianaz (Pisa: Edizioni ETS, 2011), involving the participation of 21 activists and scholars. This book is aimed at a **general audience** and has been presented to the public in Rome and other major Italian cities. It is widely available in bookshops and on the web. References in the book *Queer In Italia* state that the project was inspired by the special issue of *Italian Studies* which Ross co-edited and by questions that she raised (p.143). A video of the presentation of the book in Bologna, September 2011, is available on YouTube and has been viewed 236 times [3].

e) It has directly **influenced the writing practice** of a contemporary Italian novelist and indirectly her readership. Ross's research on lesbian literature, disseminated via talks based on her publications (e.g. 2012a above) has impacted on a contemporary novelist, inspiring her to rethink her approach to lesbian cultural representation: 'you have had **a positive influence on my creative process**' [7]. Specifically, this novelist is rethinking her current project in light of Ross's reflections on the political importance of positive visibility for lesbian populations. This direct influence on cultural production will indirectly impact on the broader readership of this novel.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- [1] Video of talk on Ross's research, Florence, February 2011. 57,874 visitors (September 2013). <http://www.societadellestorie.it/index.php/risorse-e-materiali/73/171-video-della-sis>
- [2] Interview responses and private communications with members of the Associazione Desiderandae in Bari. www.desiderandae.it.
- [3] Viewings of YouTube video of the presentation of 'Queer in Italia'. 236 viewings (September 2013). <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NOuKIRJEVf4&feature=related>
- [4] Responses by audience members to a questionnaire carried out on 11/11/11 after a public talk about the research given as part of the Birmingham Shout festival 2011. www.getreadytoshout.org.uk/. (Digest available on request).
- [5] Responses to Shout questionnaire March 2013. (Available on request).
- [6] Comments and emails in response to the blog. 4,149 visits (March 2012 to September 2013). <http://charlotterossresearch.wordpress.com/>. Available on request.
- [7] Responses via email by audience members to a public talk as part of 'Soggettiva', Arcilesbica Bologna's cultural programme, April 2013. (Available on request).
- [8] *Worth Every Penny of Every Pound: Demonstrating the social value of investment in equality. A Social Return on Investment report measuring the benefits of Equalities Infrastructure Organisations*. National Equality Partnership, April 2011, Ange Jones and Oliver Kempton (available on request).
- [9] Wikipedia article 'Imagined Communities': http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Imagined_communities