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Gender and Sexuality Reading Group's second meeting

The Gender and Sexuality Reading Group met on Tuesday April 30 for the second meeting of the term. We had a rich discussion centred around the introduction, “**Histories for the present,**” and a reflection piece by **Charlotte Lydia Riley, “Masculinity, expertise, and the academy,”** from *Men and masculinities in modern Britain*, edited by **Matt Houlbrook, Katie Jones, and Ben Mechen.**¹

Our conversation started by discussing our initial reluctance and scepticism of the piece based on the title of the book and its focus on men and masculinities. However, the present-centred approach and intersectionality adopted in the introduction won us over. Although presentism is often critiqued in history, we agreed with the authors that it was important to relate these issues to the present, especially because of their contentious nature. The intersectional approach made the book feel fresh, and prevented it from simply becoming a man's version of history. We also noted that it's important to consider present-day issues in order to understand and embrace intersectionality.

We then examined the authors' methodology and their use of the study of individual lives. We pointed out that when trying to combat stereotypes, it can be helpful to explore specific examples of people who break those stereotypes. These individual stories can make history more relatable and personable, and some of the most compelling history starts with very specific details, like individual lives and stories, before broadening out. However, we also noted that investigations of individual lives generally rely on the writings and archives left behind, and it's often the more marginalised people and communities who do not, or are unable to, leave behind extensive records.

We transitioned into a discussion of Riley's reflection piece, and appreciated the written descriptions of some of the challenges in academia. The binary approach to the reflection, which focused on female versus male historians, made us wonder about the experiences of historians outside of the gender binary, and the instances when female historians might take on male historians' characteristics.

Our discussion finished with a consideration of ethics and the experience of being an insider or an outsider in our research. We addressed the ethics involved in interviewing, and whether it was important to share the same experiences as our interviewees. We also touched on the tensions between wanting to conduct specific research and trying to avoid profiting from others' trauma or difficult experiences.

Our next GSRG meeting will be scheduled for mid to late June, and we welcome suggestions for readings. The reading group is open to postgraduate students and staff at Birkbeck, as well as from external institutions, so please pass on the information to any colleagues or friends who may be interested.

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¹ Houlbrook, Matt, Katie Jones, and Ben Mechen, eds. *Men and masculinities in modern Britain*, (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 2024).