

Janis Hutchinson Oral History Interview

Clayton Hiebert

Seth Lauer

McKenzie Johnson

Nicholas Hanson-Holtry

2014-03-30

McKenzie Johnson: So today, we are interviewing Dr. Janis Hutchinson. She's a professor at the University of Houston and active member in the Houston LGBT community. Uh, do you mind introducing yourself a little bit?

Janis Hutchinson: Uh, yes, um, well, I've been in Houston since, uh, '84. I came from Kansas, Jayhawker, University of Kansas, and I'm a medical anthropologist. Uh, I look at health and culture, um, and various communities, particularly minority communities, such as the African American community. I've been working, or, um, functioning, interacting in the LGBT community since the early '90s here in Houston, and I've been a member of various organizations, uh, in Houston including Sisters, uh, from a number of years ago. So I've always been involved somehow in terms of community service, and now we have an organization called U3, Ugima: Unleashed and Unbound, and this is a service community in the LGBT and African American communities. Uh, we volunteer in, uh, for different organizations, at women's centers, uh, youth centers, uh, nursing homes, um. In April, we're going to be, uh, collecting shoes for, uh, prisoners, uh, at, uh, returning, uh, citizens from prison at Saint John's downtown. So we do various activities there, and my research in the LGBT community is more recent, although I've been thinking about it, planning it, uh, for probably a decade.

MJ: Could you tell us a little bit more about your most recent research?

JH: Uh, the most recent, I'm looking, uh, I'm collecting oral histories, uh, in the African American community among, uh, African American lesbians. So what I'm doing is I'm looking at older black lesbians. You have to be over the age of 45, because in looking at the, uh, literature, uh, there is literature out there on lesbians, mainly white and mainly younger women. So when I looked at the literature, and it's also mainly California and New York where the research has been done. So this is, uh, older black lesbians in the South, which I think will fill a niche there, um, in terms of our understanding. So that's been an interesting process in terms of recruiting people, interviewing people for this project, um, and getting a diverse population. Uh, that has been a challenge actually.

Seth Lauer: Well, speaking of like getting a diverse population, what sort of ranges do you observe in the women in terms of like sexuality, how they identify, uh, gender identity, their race, and anything else that's important, like how they, more, more how they personally identify than...?

JH: Um, well, actually, it varies, uh, because one of my questions is what's been more important to you, or how would you identify, and the question deals with, uh, you could be a black gay man, uh, a straight man, uh, a white lesbian, a black straight woman. Which one of

these categories are most important to you? And sometimes women pick, uh, a black straight man, uh, which was surprising. Uh, oftentimes, they pick, uh, black lesbian. Uh, sometimes they pick, uh, just a woman. So it's diverse in terms of how people identify, um. Some people identify more, um, in terms of being a black lesbian, what does it mean to be a minority within the LGBT community. Others identify more with maleness, and it could be gay male or straight male, uh, in terms of how they function, who they interact with, how they see themselves. So that was kind of of interest. I'm gonna try to delve into that some more.

Clayton Hiebert: How did you recruit people for your study?

JH: Well, how I've been recruiting people for my study, uh, it has been a snowball effect, uh, so meeting people, uh, and then, uh, having them refer other people, but the problem there is that you get into cliques. So you get this group, you get this group, but, and you know, I'm a professional person. A lot of my friends are professional people, uh, but I don't want the, um – we hope to get a CD and probably some books out of this, uh. I don't want it to be about just black professional women. I want it to be more diverse than that, and that has been a challenge, uh, getting people to participate. Uh, and then I meet people. So you go to places and, uh, you set up an interview, and people are reticent, uh, to some degree because they're not sure how it's gonna be used or maybe how they're gonna look in it, uh. And some people have wanted to edit their, um, uh, their, uh, recording of it, uh, which I'm all right with as long as the essence of what they're talking about is still there. Uh, because we don't want to change that. We want it to be real. We want it to be authentic, and we want it to say what you want it to say, what you mean within yourself. And so, uh, recruitment is really a challenge, uh, because I want people in different occupations, uh, people who have, uh, maybe been married or been in a heterosexual relationship and others who have not, uh, getting that kind of diversity, uh, people with children, without children, uh, that type of diversity, uh. And, uh, a thing that has come out of it also has been, of course, relationship with mother, parent, uh, how close are you to your family, um. How did they feel about it when you came out? Are you still in, um, contact and interacting, and part of your family? And in general, that's true. You know, um, times have changed, uh, and being gay isn't the, um, well, when I was younger, uh, you just didn't want to say it. You didn't want to be marginalized. It wasn't acceptable, and when I looked around at the people who were, uh, lesbians, I was like that's not me anyway. So, you know, that was then. This is now, uh. Being gay isn't that issue that it was. I'd go to, I guess you'd call them straight clubs, how they, you know. This whole straight and gay, uh, is blurring now, and that's a good thing. So we just go and be wherever we want to be and enjoy life, and I meet people and everywhere. And so I'm able to recruit people like that, but you do have to go out to places and, uh, you know, I'm not a late person. I'm not the clubber that I used to be, so, uh, but recruitment is important, and so I go out there in diverse environments and do that. And so, you know, it can, you can do it. It takes some work, but you can do it.

SL: What are you eventually hoping to accomplish with your study, like what differences are you trying to make or what, what are you trying to show, I guess, in essence?

JH: Uh, I'm trying to show an understanding of black lesbians in the 21st Century. I'm hoping that a hundred years from now, there'll be a video like this where people can see what was it like to be a black lesbian in, in 2000, you know, 2014. Uh, what was going on then? What was

going on in their lives? How did their lives change, because this is a transitional period? You know, being gay isn't a big thing and I never thought I would see gay marriage, you know. I'm alive. I'm really happy to be alive now and see the changes that are taking place. So, uh, I'm hoping that this will contribute that history to it. So I'm gonna document the women's lives individually so that people can see what their individual lives are like, and also, we're going to do something more conceptual, academic, analytical, uh, looking at how they feel about things, their interactions with, in the environment, and, uh, try to understand what's going on within this population. So I'm hoping that, um, we'll know more about us. That's what I hope.

Nicholas Hanson-Holtry: So with that goal in mind, have you noticed any important differences from the literature that you said primarily has come out of California and New York? Have you found anything new about the population that you're studying here?

JH: Hmm, well, we're still, I'm still interviewing. And I've only interviewed about 20 women so far, um. Since it is an older population, um, I haven't gotten to that kind of analytical part of it. And in thinking about them, what I'm seeing sort of goes along with some of the literature in terms of like chores and how people think about, uh, dress and appearance, how that sort of, um, is a symbol of, uh, your role, you know. So we talk about, um, roleplaying and these type of stereotypes, and people conform to that kind of thing. That's still, um, uh, something that's general out there. So I haven't seen the, uh, other than, you know, because it's an older population, so that's a difference, and since it's an older population, one of my questions is well, what, what, who's gonna take care of you as you get older, and what I'm finding is that people don't know. And I think the good thing about this study is that it's helping people to think about that, you know. What are you gonna do as you get older, and, uh, we don't know about any LGBT, uh, facilities for us, uh. People don't know about that. People don't have the children. Who's going to take care of them? So they don't have that, and it does cause them to pause and think about, um, well, what's going to happen to me when I retire, and also financially, how am I gonna retire. So people haven't really put the cost in there to kind of, uh, figure that out, um. But, you know, that's the interesting thing about, uh, doing research too and I thought this out when I was doing my, um, condom use study. The process of interviewing people makes them think about what they're doing, and so that becomes, the interview can be like an intervention. It's a kind of intervention 'cause people are thinking now. So I think that's what's happening here too.

NHH: How many women do you hope to interview and how long do you envision this project lasting?

JH: I hope to interview 50 women and I hope to be, uh, finished with the interviews by the end of the summer. That's my goal.

SL: Okay, so you chose to interview specifically black women who love other women. Um, so do you, what do you see as the intersectionality between race and, um, sexual, or, yeah, sexual orientation, or do you think there is a lot of overlap in the situations or?

JH: In terms of our being, race is a constant.

SL: Right.

JH: Uh, and within that constant, they love women, uh, and so, uh, you're talking about some kind of difference by race, um. I don't know that I could address that.

SL: Mm hmm.

JH: Um, or that there would necessarily be a difference that that I should assume. I don't know that.

SL: Okay.

MJ: Do you think that there's sort of an extra sort of societal stigma placed upon people with, so like they're African American but also identify lesbian, or gay –

JH: Mm hmm.

MJ: – or however they identify. Do you think that like adds another level?

JH: Uh, well, you know, for women, I would say probably it doesn't add that extra level, for, um, black women, because, you know, we can do things like hold hands. We can do things that are seen like acceptable acts. For, uh, a black male to be gay, now that's an issue in the black community. Uh, that's more of a no-no, unacceptable, uh, get, uh, put down, I think, much more so than a black lesbian, um. For some reason, being a black lesbian is more acceptable than being a black gay man.

NHH: Is there a reason why you chose to study women who love other women as opposed to African American males who identify as gay?

JH: Uh, because I'm a black lesbian, uh, although I have been pushing my, uh, black gay male friends to do a similar study because I think a similar one needs to be done. Uh, but, you know, I can only do so much and I'm trying to do this right now, but I think that is important and, uh, I'm still pushing for that. And we need that in particular here in Houston, in the South, because again, that's a gap. You know, everything's East Coast, West Coast. What about the South?