

Tanya Domi:

Hi, this is Tanya Domi. Welcome to The Thought Project recorded at The Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Fostering groundbreaking research and scholarship in the arts, social sciences, and sciences. In this space, we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking and big ideas generating cutting edge research, informing new Yorkers and the world.

Tanya Domi:

Joining us today is Mica Baum-Tucillo, who is a queer educator, social worker and scholar. Mica's work focuses on using participatory social science and critical humanistic inquiry to support community and activist projects for justice. She is a research associate with The Public Science Project at the center for human environments, a Publics Lab fellow, and a doctoral student in critical social personality psychology at The Graduate Center. Audre is a high school student at the Urban Academy, a public alternative high school in Manhattan. Where they began learning about their love for art, their own experiences as a young Latina lesbian, and their friend's experiences with family have inspired them to work on this project at The Public Science Project. And they feel that affecting families in a positive way makes this project so important. Audre will be attending City College in the City University of New York in the fall.

Tanya Domi:

Leo Lipson is a gender queer visual and performance artist and student. They work to spread trans joy, education and positivity through their art for people of all ages. Leo will attend the Art Institute in Chicago in the fall. Recently, the Public Science Project at The Graduate Center engaged in a new research project entitled The Beyond Acceptance Research Collective is a group of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer and gender expansive youth and adults who conducted a critical participatory action research project about the experiences of LGBTQ+ gender expansive youth have with their families. This project began with a concern about the high number of LGBTQ+ gender expansive youth who were struggling with their families, and a desire to better understand what kinds of support would be helpful. LGBTQ+ gender expansive youth have a lot of knowledge about family and the research centered their experiences and expertise. This project was funded and supported by the New York City Unity Project and the city of New York's department of health and mental hygiene. During pride month, the Thought Project is featuring LGBTQ+ gender expansive research at The Graduate Center. Welcome to The Thought Project Mica, Audre, and Leo.

Mica Baum-Tucillo:

Thanks so much for having us, Tanya.

Audre:

Yeah. Thank you for letting us come on.

Tanya Domi:

Okay. So Mica, why don't you give us some background about this really incredibly unique and interesting project that's been done? Beyond Acceptance Research Collective Project, and how it was developed under the auspices of the Public Science Project?

Mica Baum-Tucillo:

Yeah, absolutely. So you said it's a collaboration with the Department of Health and the New York city Unity Project. And those organizations came to the Public Science Project for our expertise in doing critical participatory action research, and in developing creative methods to center the wisdom expertise of young people. And the Public Science Project is a research organization and network that works in solidarity with social movements, community-based organizations, young people, and people who are marginalized by our political and social systems to develop critical research. This project really speaks to the fact that there's really not enough quality research about LGBTQ+ and gender extensive young people and especially research that's led by LGBTQ+ and gender expansive young people. A lot of research in this area focuses on acceptance and shows a lot about the negative impact of rejection for

queer youth. And while this is really important, our inquiry, because it was participatory and grounded in the wisdom and expertise of queer young people and queer adults, who bring really deep lived experiences to the work, it allowed a really deepening and complicating and reframing of this.

Mica Baum-Tucillo:

So the notion beyond acceptance really speaks to this right, being fully accepted and loved for who you are, is important. But also recognizing the history and structural and systemic oppression and struggle and resistance that LGBTQ+ people and gender expansive people have been involved in for so long. So this project goes beyond the idea of being accepted. Right? Towards something bigger, towards social transformation. And this is really particularly important to note in this moment in pride month, where the focus really needs to be of course, on celebration and pride, but also on the history of resistance and activism and political transformation that LGBTQ+ and gender expansive people have been so committed to and fought for, for so many years. So using PAR, Participatory Action Research as our research methodology really widened our perspective by centering LGBTQ+ and gender expansive young people as critical creative knowledge producers, and really as architects of the research. Right?

Mica Baum-Tucillo:

So designing research questions and methods and framing interpretations and products. And Audre and Leo will get to reflect and talk a little bit about their experience with that and I'll talk about mine as well. But I just want to say that as we developed our methods, we really wanted to make sure going back to this idea that a lot of the framing is around acceptance. We wanted to really make sure that we were understanding harm that queer young people experienced, but that we also wanted to dissent a tendency to only focus on harm. And psychology as a discipline has a long history with that, really emphasizing injury and trauma and vulnerability. And this can create a unidimensional or static representation of experience. And so we really were able with critical participatory action research to flip that around and change the paradigm.

Mica Baum-Tucillo:

And of course, recognize and understand young people's pain and vulnerability, but also contextualize that, within a framework of desire and complex selves and life force and energy and criticality. And while we're also bringing attention to vulnerability as a structural issue, not just an individual or interpersonal one. So the point around that, just our youth co-researchers, our team and the participants in the research would agree about how important it is to highlight the brutality of heterosexism and homophobia and transphobia and cisgenderism and the subsequent vulnerability it creates. But also really showing that while in the midst of this precarity LGBTQ+ and gender expansive young people are also creative and fabulous and strong and caring members of their communities and deep thinkers and advocates [crosstalk 00:07:56]

Tanya Domi:

Resilient. Yes, all of those things.

Mica Baum-Tucillo:

Totally. And so we wanted to develop a project that really celebrated that creativity and complexity, and that represented it in our products, which we'll talk about. But ended up being zines and comics that were really beautiful and enjoyable and also difficult and complicated and spoke to the complexity of family relationships.

Tanya Domi:

Wonderful. So I just want to say, somebody that became a national activist, lesbian activist 30 years ago, this year. We have seen the ball move from tolerance, tolerance, acceptance, decriminalization, to this incredible moment that Audre and Leo are participating in, I just want to reflect upon that. And I'm like, "Wow. Wow. Wow. Wow. Okay." Just want to say that to all of you. So Audre, why don't we start with

you? And I want to hear how you got involved and tell us about your role as a Cove researcher and a participant. I want to hear your story. Explain how you were already in the project?

Audre:

Okay, so when I had joined this project, I was really excited. I think I was very, at first, intimidated. Once we started talking with everyone, I realized that it was just like a group, artists and writers and we really just wanted to tell the story of all these people that we were going to meet. And I was just very interested in... I just love storytelling from an artist, art perspective. And so I was just, I immediately knew, okay, whatever we do, it has to be something that's art related. And I was really interested in writing the stories. And we had to pull from our focus groups, the stories and we made Frankenstein's monster out of them and put different parts of different people's stories into making these new fictional ones, that represented different people. So I knew immediately that I was going to be involved in writing this new story and doing the art for it.

Tanya Domi:

What did you do as a co-researcher? So you participated as an artist, what did you do as a co-researcher? Tell us your activities and how you were involved in that aspect of research?

Audre:

At first, what I was doing was getting people to come to these focus groups. I remember I asked because school and also just people that I associate with, a lot of them are queer youth. And a lot of them have their own experiences with their family that they were willing to share. And so I just even made friends with some people that I didn't really know that well, by getting people to come. And then once it happened, I really enjoy talking to a group of people, even new people and getting their stories from them like that. So that was part of what I did. I was talking to all these new people and getting them to open up about really serious and really emotional topics to talk about, especially to a group of strangers. It was definitely interesting and that was part of what I was doing as a researcher. I was helping facilitate those discussions and then putting those discussions into a story.

Tanya Domi:

That's pretty cool. So Leo, tell me how you came into the project and what your experiences as a co-researcher and a participant... Tell me what you did and learned.

Leo Lipson:

A lot of it was just talking to people and making connections, we already had going for us that we're both queer. So it was a starting off point to talking to people, of course. But yeah, there was a lot of reaching out to new people who I didn't know, but then eventually got to know through the interviews. And then also through just getting their social media information and becoming friends with them. It didn't really feel like research, honestly. A lot of it was just having conversations and a lot of the conversations were things that I could connect to.

Leo Lipson:

Because a lot of these experiences are similar, but also a lot of them are completely different. So I learned so much about just how other people exist in the world and exist in relation to their families, and how they feel about it. Well, I feel like a lot of things in my life has been teaching me this, but there's so many different ways to be queer. There's not any one story or one path to go down. So I don't know, kind of just showed me the variety and experience of the queer community and it's beautiful. Yeah, so after we did the focus groups, we looked at the transcripts and discussed them and picked out the common themes of all the stories of what we were hearing.

Tanya Domi:

What were some of those common themes?

Audre:

I remember just the biggest thing that we had gotten from it was... Well, I remember that at first we hadn't even been named Beyond Acceptance. I don't think that was an immediate thing we did. That was what we had found out after talking to people, is that they really wanted something more than acceptance. They wanted beyond it, they wanted the history, the reconciliation with their families own past with gender and stuff. And that was the biggest thing, but also for more themes and stuff, I'd have to think because it was definitely two years ago.

Tanya Domi:

Okay. Well that's actually what Mica told me as well, that you didn't go into the project with the idea of Beyond Acceptance, but the findings led you to that assertion. That's pretty remarkable. I mean, like I've said, the ball has really moved and you all claimed it through your stories.

Mica Baum-Tucillo:

I just want to add something, what Leo and Audre were talking about in terms of reflecting on their own identities and how that positions them in the research, is something that PAR is really committed to. And one of the ways we started the research, which I know we all feel is ancient history and also pre COVID.

And so [crosstalk 00:14:35] lots of we start-

Tanya Domi:

Oh God, that's a long time ago.

Mica Baum-Tucillo:

... Yeah. And we really started by mapping our relationships, our own relationships to our gender and sexuality, to queerness, to family. To other aspects of our identity and race, immigration, age, disability, ethnicity, class [crosstalk 00:14:55]

Tanya Domi:

You mapped out your own relationships.

Mica Baum-Tucillo:

Exactly. Developing a real strong objectivity and reflecting on how our identity is as researchers and scientists, and our experiences and our knowledge impact what kind of questions we ask and how we ask them, and how we develop our methods and how we interpret our data and all of those things. Right? And then in terms of actually developing the focus group protocol, [crosstalk 00:15:26] We did that all together as a collective, we developed a whole series of questions. And maybe Audre, you can talk about the sort that we did. Do you remember doing that sort with the different interview questions and then reorganizing and reviewing and editing and all of that?

Audre:

I definitely remember all of us making up a lot of questions and then going through them and deciding which ones were best, but I don't know if that's what you're talking about.

Mica Baum-Tucillo:

Yeah, exactly.

Tanya Domi:

That's what you call sorting.

Audre:

Okay, then great. Yeah, I'm trying to remember that.

Tanya Domi:

I'm just reflecting back what Mica said.

Audre:

I remember doing that. I remember at first, a lot of just brainstorming and giving out ideas for what we thought was going to really give out the best answers. And then we filtered through them and we were

like, "Well, do we want to talk about this and how much time do we have?" And like, "What is really going to give us the best answers?" And then also I remember, it wasn't just all questioning and questioning, we had our own follow-ups that we would think of in the moment. But then we would have things where people could build little replicas of their families to show us visually. It would really spark the conversation because people would be like, "Well, here is my model clay family, and then over here is me and I'm separated from them," and we'd be like, "Well, what's that about?" And so-

Tanya Domi:

It must have gotten emotional too-

Audre:

Oh, yeah.

Tanya Domi:

... Really emotional. Right?

Audre:

Yeah, it was. It definitely got emotional.

Tanya Domi:

Leo, what are you thinking? Are you reflecting on that activity and how did you participate directly?

Leo Lipson:

While planning the physical activities with the focus groups, we had a whole bunch of materials, just random stuff and art supplies and things. And asking people to make models of their family and explaining it. I hadn't really done anything like that before.

Tanya Domi:

So you were a facilitator?

Leo Lipson:

Yeah. But we also took part in it before the focus groups. It was just a new visual way of thinking about it. And I think a lot of the participants also hadn't really done things like that before either. So it was also-

Tanya Domi:

I've never done that before. I want to do that model clay reconstruction. Oh my God.

Leo Lipson:

Yeah. So I think it opened new thinking doors for people. And a lot of it's very personal to the participants, but it's also personal to us. We were able to connect to people in that way. And I think that is really special.

Tanya Domi:

That's wonderful.

Mica Baum-Tucillo:

So to give some context, the mapping is a qualitative method. That's pretty commonly used in PAR projects. And like Leo and Audre are both saying, it allows folks to creatively represent something in a visual way. And it also can really shed light on dynamics that aren't so easily available through narrative. Sometimes it's hard to talk about something, but then when you visualize it or put it out in the map, it creates a whole different perspective. And I have real memories of people really representing themselves in really funny and interesting ways. There were all kinds of materials, pipe cleaners and cotton balls and Altoid tins, and little frogs that people used and different kinds of little, tiny animals. It was really fun. And it was like a queering of family mapping in a way, because we really broke open some of the boundaries around more traditional family mapping. Which is a pretty common therapeutic method in a lot of contexts. So that was fun.

Tanya Domi:

Cool. I want to hear about the zine, so I want to hear about the comics, how that all started to emerge in the process of participating and the methods. You went from interviewing and then mapping your own relationships and then interviewing, doing focus groups. And then how did the art, obviously, if you're doing clay depictions of your own family, you're already in that milieu of creating. But how did it get into, we're talking about the comics, I mean, it's just wonderful to see. In terms of the genre in books, there's been a roaring comeback on graphic novels. Alison Bechdel, very famous lesbian novelists has done incredible work in that area. And it has a new book out, as a matter of fact about being physically fit, which is an obsession of hers apparently. I want to hear guys. Audre, are you an artist?

Audre:

I am and so is Leo.

Tanya Domi:

[crosstalk 00:20:22] is two. Excellent.

Audre:

So there were four of us, who were for the youth aspect of it. I remember once we had all this research, we were like, "Okay, well, what are we going to do with it?" And we had already known from talking to each other and explaining how we identify, most of us said artists. And we also had a poet and-

Tanya Domi:

Which is an artist too.

Audre:

... Yeah, exactly. She was interested in writing and I personally love writing too. So we were like, "We can combine all of this." And I think Leo was the one who's brought up like zines and how they have...

They're short and sweet, you can do many things with it. And so we brought in, actually zines that... Leo had zines and then another person in our group had zines and we looked at them, we were like, "Okay, we can use this method and medium to make our stories." And I remember I made the comic, but now after they've gone through a lot of more process to be published, they look literally amazing and incredible. And I'm just so proud of all of it. And so, yeah, I think we definitely knew we wanted to do something artsy going in.

Tanya Domi:

So Leo, tell us about your art and how you leveraged it? Sounds really interesting.

Leo Lipson:

Well, the thing about zines is it can really just be anything you want, because a lot of them are self-published. So for me, if I get a ton of information, I'm not going to be able to read a paragraph because I get distracted really easily. And if it's information as something as important as resources for families to show them how to better support their queer kid, then that's something we want to deliver easily to the person, so that people will actually read it and learn from it. So, yeah, I am a cartoonist among other things. I used to make these auto-biographical comics about my transition and post them on Facebook and stuff. So I took a lot from that into the comic that ended up in the zine, the one that I wrote. The stories of the comics were all comprised of the different stories that people had told us in the interviews, each comic wasn't anyone's person's story, that it was a compilation.

Tanya Domi:

It's kind of a mashup?

Leo Lipson:

Yeah, exactly. So I think we all tried to make it visually appealing and also put a little aspect of enjoyment into reading it, so you're not just getting a ton of information. And honestly, I think comics are a great way to deliver information, even outside of this project, most of the time, people don't want to read a

big block of text, and pictures help so... And along with the comics, we had a glossary and a list of resources for parents... Whole bunch of other stuff.

Tanya Domi:

I was flipping through the zine and I saw that you have a lot of information in there.

Leo Lipson:

Yeah. Even just that super good resource. And then the comic also backs it up, puts it in context, gives the reader examples of real life experiences. Because someone could be reading that and be like, "Oh, I don't do that." And then read the comic and realize that that is a situation that they have been in with their own kid. And then they realized that, "Oh, maybe there are ways that I can be better with this."

Mica Baum-Tucillo:

Can I add something to that?

Tanya Domi:

Please, please.

Mica Baum-Tucillo:

It was really incredible. The youth co-researchers were really responsible for developing and illustrating these stories in the comics. And it was a really challenging thing of taking these complex stories from a really religiously, racially, disability, gender, sexuality, diverse group of 23 young people who we interviewed and synthesizing them into these representative stories that felt like they hit on these different themes. And the issues in these comics are really complex in terms of dealing with attachment and independence and other aspects of identity intersecting with gender and sexuality and family history and transition and all of those things. And I think one of the things that felt really important while we were doing that process, which was deeply wonderful and complicated and difficult was that critical Participatory Action Research really emphasizes baking accountability into the research process.

Mica Baum-Tucillo:

And so we kept thinking about who are these products accountable to? And we really wanted to make them enjoyable and useful to young people and to families who want to support queer young people. So I think that in terms of doing public facing scientific work, this way of using a combination of zines and comics and reports and videos... We also have two videos that we haven't talked [crosstalk 00:25:58] about, and a website that is kind of like a research archive that offers all these resources feels like a really important way to interact and make science more public.

Tanya Domi:

Absolutely. And now let me just ask, is this been presented yet to the city? Have you done a presentation for them?

Mica Baum-Tucillo:

By the city, do you mean the Department of Health and community project?

Tanya Domi:

Yeah, I'm sorry. Department of Health and mental hygiene and the public? What is the first lady's project is-

Mica Baum-Tucillo:

The New York city Unity Project.

Tanya Domi:

Yes, Unity Project.

Mica Baum-Tucillo:

This is focused specifically on supporting LGBTQ+ and gender expansive views in New York city, yeah.

Tanya Domi:

Right.

Mica Baum-Tucillo:

Yeah. So we've shared all the materials with them and we're in conversations with them about how they want to roll it out on their platforms. And as you can imagine, the Department of Health in particular is pretty busy with-

Tanya Domi:

Overwhelmed.

Mica Baum-Tucillo:

... Managing COVID. But they've been a wonderful partner and it's been really great to work with them. And we definitely hope that as we kind of share out and roll out the materials that we'll be collaborating with them as well.

Tanya Domi:

Well, we're going to roll it out here at the Thought Project also on our blog, Medium Blog. And I hope that Leo, you'll do maybe a graphic, designed for that blog.

Leo Lipson:

Sure.

Tanya Domi:

What do you think about that?

Leo Lipson:

Yeah, just send me the link to it, I can get an idea.

Tanya Domi:

It's a medium page, yes. And there's a lot of cartoonists that have medium pages as well. I just want to ask one more question. Tell me about the video. So the videos, there's two videos, I've looked at those, were either of you involved in the production of those videos?

Leo Lipson:

I was a little bit tell.

Tanya Domi:

Do tell, do tell.

Leo Lipson:

Well, I used this program to animate the three characters from the three comics. So we could make them talk and move and stuff like that. So I didn't do most of it, I just made the puppets for the characters, the digital puppets. But yeah, it had us each talking about what the project was in her own words, or in our own voices. We recorded it over a Zoom call and I think it's a nice little intro to the zines.

Tanya Domi:

That's great. That is great. Well, I want to ask you one last question though. And that is, Leo, tell me what's next for you?

Leo Lipson:

I am going to go to college in Chicago for art education.

Tanya Domi:

Art education at the art Institute?

Leo Lipson:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Tanya Domi:

Oh, that is a gem. That is a gem. That is a special place, Leo.

Leo Lipson:

Yeah. This project actually showed me how much I like using my art for educational purposes and just interacting with other people.

Tanya Domi:

That's wonderful. Thank you so much and good luck to you. Good luck to you. That's wonderful.

Leo Lipson:

Thank you.

Tanya Domi:

Okay. And Audre, what about you?

Audre:

I am going to be going to a CUNY in the fall. I'm going to be going to city college and I'm going to be an English major because I love writing stories and I love [crosstalk 00:29:37] so, yeah.

Tanya Domi:

That is wonderful. I have to say, I have told some of the professors that The Graduate Center that are in English or Comp Lit and that if I could come back as a different scholar, that I would come back as an English or Comp Lit, because they write about everything. They write about everything. And I do social science-y human rights research on the bulk and we have method. There's certain things that you have to do, what you do in social sciences. And so, but when you're in English or Comp Lit, you're talking about certain methods, you just get to write. So good for you, CUNY is fortunate to have you.

Audre:

Thank you so much.

Tanya Domi:

Thank you. And Mica, what's going on in your life?

Mica Baum-Tucillo:

We're working on a bunch of fun projects. Really great work at the Public Science Project and in my program. And I'm sure I'll catch up with you at some point soon. In the meantime, I just want to share, if people want to look up the website-

Tanya Domi:

Please.

Mica Baum-Tucillo:

... You can go to tinyurl.org/beyond-accepted, and you can check out all the materials we have. You can read about our methods and our findings and watch our videos and check out our zines and comics and all this wonderful artistic work that we've all been working so hard on, and that Audre and Leo have worked so hard on. And another youth co-researcher and I are planning a blog, so look out for that on the medium.

Tanya Domi:

Yes, that's right. Our work is not done. So Leo-

Mica Baum-Tucillo:

Never.

Tanya Domi:

Our work is not done, it just goes, it rolls. So Leo and Audre, thank you so much for coming here and joining us today. And I wish you all the best. And we will see you on the other side, check soon for the medium page for The Thought Project, because we're going to have more about this incredible research

This transcript was exported on Jun 08, 2021 - view latest version [here](#).

beyond acceptance. So, thanks for tuning into The Thought Project and thanks to our guests, Mica Tucillo, Audre and Leo Lipson of the Public Science Project at The Graduate Center, CUNY.

Tanya Domi:

The Thought Project is brought to you with production engineering and technical assistance by Kevin Wolfe of CUNY TV. I'm Tanya Domi, tune in next week.