

Surveying sexual orientation: asking difficult questions and providing useful answers

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Abstract

Social survey data is essential to measuring equality, to assessing change over time and to the evaluation of the impact of new policies. In this article, we have identified and evaluated the survey evidence for assessing equality in relation to sexual orientation in the UK. We have reviewed the available survey data in relation to key policy areas such as criminal justice, employment and health.

Our analysis suggests that there is only limited survey evidence on the circumstances of gays, lesbians and bisexuals in the UK. This poses major barriers for driving forward an agenda of social justice in relation to gay, lesbian and bisexual citizens. Robust research methodologies need to be developed and resourced in order to gain a representative picture of the socio-economic circumstances of gay, lesbian and bisexual populations in the UK and to assess how they maybe changing over time.

Key Words: sexual orientation, equality, survey data, evidence

Introduction

New Labour put in place a range of 'gay and lesbian' equality policies (Wilson, 2007) including: equalizing the age of consent, 'civil partnerships' recognizing lesbian and gay couples, increasing access to fertility treatments (HFEA, 2005), fostering and adoption (The Adoption and Children Act 2002; see Wilson, 2007). Alongside these, steps have been taken to protect lesbian and gay citizens from physical harm as well as socio-economic discrimination including: the repeal of Section 28 (Local Government Act 1988), the recognition of aggravated assaults and 'hate crimes' against 'homosexuals' (2003 Criminal Justice Act), school policies tackling bullying based on (perceived or stated) sexual orientation, anti-discrimination legislation in relation to employment (Employment Equality - Sexual Orientation Regulation 2003) and protection from discrimination in the delivery of goods and services (The Equality Act (Sexual Orientation) Regulations 2007). Finally, the Commission for Equality and Human Rights, established in 2007, is the first government body established to ensure sexual orientation will not be grounds for discrimination in the future.

The concern in this paper is that these policy initiatives need to be underpinned by a robust evidence base for measuring impact and social change. There is only limited data concerning population size, demographics and socio-economic circumstances of 'non-heterosexual' citizens¹. Many academics, activists and government agencies rely upon an estimate that around 6% of the UK population is gay or lesbian. However, the original source for this figure is unconfirmed. For example, the Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations 2003 Regulatory Impact Assessment (DTI, 2005) estimates the LGB population to be between 5% and 7%. Yet the report acknowledges that this figure is extrapolated from a myriad of sexual orientation related surveys some of which focused on sexual behaviour rather than identity. It is notable that the special edition

¹ The variety identity labels utilized within this article reflect of those used within the specific legislation or research discussed. The broad label 'non-heterosexual' here highlights the difficulty with employing lists to capture the diversity of identities and fluidity of sexuality. Generally, we employ LGB to indicate lesbian, gay and bisexual; where appropriate we include T indicating transgender/transsexual.

of the Radical Statistics journal (2003) on sexuality, which of value highlighted that there is very little quantitative evidence upon which to draw on in this area.

Our discussion in this paper predominantly focuses on quantitative data gathering but within this are expressions of concern relevant to qualitative research. We provide a review of the existing evidence base and highlight some common methodological difficulties in measuring the socio-economic circumstances of gay, lesbian and bisexual citizens in the UK. It is only with robust evidence that the social justice agenda in relation to gay, lesbian and bisexual citizens, under the remit of the new Commission for Equality and Human Rights, can be taken forward.

Methodological Issues 1 – Asking, and not asking, difficult questions

When evaluating quantitative data such as that collected via surveys, it is important to question the appearance or claim of 'objectivity' in design, analysis and timing. Aside from the stated aims of the research, there may be explicit or implicit arguments for specific policy changes. Stated aims may target a particular issue or group of people while reported outcomes may note things which speak to implicit intentions. Moreover, some outcomes may be only tangentially related to either state aim or implicit intentions of the researchers. If such tangential outcomes were unintentional, then one must question whether the outcome might have been different if the issue/group were explicitly integrated during the design phase. For example, below we note research which was motivated originally by concerns in the field of sexual health and as such asked questions regarding sexual behaviour. However, such information about sexual behaviour (e.g. men who have sex with men) does not necessarily provide clear information about sexual identity (e.g. men who identify as gay or bisexual).

Only a few of the major UK surveys ask about sexual orientation. Key surveys for measuring socio-economic circumstances including the Census, the Labour Force Survey and the General

Household Survey do not include a question on sexual orientation. These surveys tend to ask about the respondent's household and marital status, but same-sex couples are often treated as housemates whereas opposite sex respondents living in the same house are treated as cohabiting. As part of the Office of National Statistics (ONS) harmonisation of questions on marital status, cohabiting as a couple can include same-sex couples.

Empirical data collection in the field of sexual orientation is fraught with inconsistencies regarding the sexual identity of respondents. Sexual behaviour and sexual identity are not synonymous - one may choose to explore or satisfy sexual desire through a variety of behaviours but may not identify with a socially constructed or medically defined demarcation of 'gay', 'homosexual', 'lesbian', or 'bisexual'. Questionnaires may acknowledge this by listing a wide range of possible sexual identities asking participants to choose which label suits them best. This empowers participants by enabling them to articulate their own identities but may simultaneously impose on them only one category and fail to offer representation to bisexuals and transgender/transsexual citizens (see Coxon, 2003; Garnets, 2000; Reynolds, 2001). Each of the sexual orientation labels carries a political history and in making such identity choices participants may be acknowledging a particular political positioning.

The recent ONS consultation around the inclusion of a question on the 2011 UK Census identified similar challenges of defining sexual orientation resulting in problems of data quality and accuracy. The ONS have concluded therefore that it is not possible to include such a question in the census (ONS 2006 and GROS 2006). The ONS also state that the acceptability of a question on sexual orientation may reduce the overall response rate to the census. The ONS cite evidence from research in Northern Ireland which actually seems inconclusive and also evidence from a DTI staff survey which revealed that the refusal to answer a question on sexual orientation was low (see ONS 2006 and Breitenbach 2004). It should be noted that similar problems in relation to other

proposed census questions such as ethnicity, health and religion have been overcome or at least accommodated in order to include them in the census. In fact, it was expected that there would be considerable item non-response to the voluntary question on religion in the 2001 Census yet the religion question turned out to have high completion rates. Sexual orientation is, however, seen by many as a private issue. Given the comparatively recent decriminalization of homosexuality, the continued, actual or perceived, threat of discrimination/harassment and the embryonic policies securing the basic rights of non-discrimination, respondents may be hesitant in identifying themselves as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender/sexual (for example, Statistics New Zealand 2003). Valentine (1993) has highlighted the way lesbians try to avoid discrimination by negotiating heterosexual or asexual identities. Relatedly, Coxon (2005) notes the problems of recall in studies of sexual behaviour and points to the usefulness of diaries as a research tool, using computer aided qualitative data analysis. Coxon (1999) suggests that diary data can prove more accurate and richer than retrospective survey questionnaire data when measuring behaviour.

Even in-depth qualitative interviews may interpret identities articulated rather than making this a significant line of questioning. For example, in interviewing lesbian mothers issues of identities may reflect legal arrangements and/or challenges to social norms such as biological mother/social mother. In interviewing transsexuals articulated identities may reflect the various stages of transitioning and/or medical and legal interpretations of the transitioning process. As noted in one study below, expressions of sexual identity may be fluid over time and context.

Attitude surveys may signal personal *experiences* or individual *perceptions* of discrimination/harassment. Reactions to policy proposals may indicate, for example, one's own pride and self confidence, as well as political anger, moral/religious guilt, feelings of suspicion of the political motives of the research(er). Surveys of heterosexuals regarding 'attitudes towards x' will reflect understandings of the heterosexual majority e.g. of stereotypes associated with identity

categories; of relative 'otherness' in relations to one's own experience, religious belief, knowledge of sexual identity and behaviour's of friends and family. Moreover, attitudes towards 'rights for (unknown/other) homosexuals' may differ significantly when compared to one's own perception of the extent of the powers of the state to legislate for/regulate '(us) heterosexuals' or (known/familiar) gay men or lesbians.

The varying regional policies compound difficulties with collecting quantifying statistics identifying LGB population numbers. McManus' (2003) highlights, in a review of evidence in Scotland, that there is only limited evidence across the different aspects of the lives of LGB populations. Though in relation to Northern Ireland some evidence is available from the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey as outlined below (for discussion of Northern Ireland see Breitenbach, 2004; for Scotland see McLean and O'Connor 2003 and for Wales see Chaney and Fevre, 2002).

Given the lack of substantial data in this area, policy advisors and academics tend to utilize those that exist and in doing so are forced to generalise nationally on the basis of particular case study research. Frequently national government surveys which may include questions on sexual orientation have sample sizes that are too small to provide robust numbers for analysis. This limits their usefulness in examining the circumstances and experiences of LGB citizens. In the absence of a government census addressing issues of sexual orientation in the UK, I.D. Research, a lesbian and gay market and social research company, set up the UK Gay and Lesbian Census in 2001 (2002 report). According to their work, a sample of 10,500 was achieved prompting their self description as the largest ever survey of any gay and lesbian population in the world. It includes coverage of such issues as housing, family patterns, income and homophobia.

Policy makers rely upon evidence to suggest either why policy initiatives are needed or what quantifiable impact such policies might incur. As outlined above, a best guess of the size of the UK

gay and lesbian population is around 7%. The research organisation Stormbreak estimates that the proportion of the adult population that is gay or lesbian is between 7-8% (Stormbreak 2003) and then using a conservative 5% estimate they claim 1.4 million people who are working in the UK are either lesbians or gay men. Clearly, the 'numbers question' is crucial to determine the proportion of the population who may be affected by any policy. Moreover, the matrix of identity signifiers, political/policy context and numbers within a population must be carefully recognised and negotiated before utilising research findings and population estimates.

Methodological Issues 2 - Fluid Use of Answers

Relying upon behaviour as a signifier of identity, the 1990 National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (NATSAL) suggests that 90% of men and 92% of women reported exclusively heterosexual experience and attraction (see Wellings *et al.* 1994). NATSAL also highlighted urban concentration, with Greater London having twice the number of gay men than the rest of the country. However, the actual numbers of respondents identifying as LGB were low, which limits robust analysis. Such findings may fail to capture the socio-political context, e.g. they may reflect the comparative ease with which one can be 'out' in such a largely anonymous urban environment. The NATSAL also highlights the difficulty of categorising sexual orientation and attraction. For example, the following categories are used in the 2001 NATSAL: "*opposite sex only*", "*more often opposite sex, and at least once same sex*", "*about equally often to opposite sex and same sex*", "*more often same sex, and at least once opposite sex*", "*same sex only*", "*never had sexual experience with anyone at all*"; "*refused*".

In the 2001 NATSAL the target sample population was younger – those aged 16-44. Over 12,000 respondents were interviewed. A booster sample was included for ethnic minorities. In a separate question in 2001, 10% of respondents (n1184) also stated that they'd had a homosexual

experience. The 2001 NATSAL identified a lower concentration in of LGB population in London. This may reflect an increased willingness of respondents outside London to identify as LGB for survey purposes and/or an increasing social acceptability of homosexuality. For further discussion about categorisations and sexual orientation see Wellings *et al.* (1994); Snape *et al.* (1995) and also NATCEN (2005).

Coxon (2003; 2005) notes that what evidence there is on the circumstances of LGB populations in the UK has tended to focus on behaviour in relation to AIDS and health promotion, rather than quality of life or experience of inequalities. Below we consider in detail the evidence available on the socio-economic circumstances of LGB citizens across four key policy areas: public attitudes; criminal justice, health and employment.

Evidence and Data Sources Review

Attitudes and Discrimination

There are a number of surveys that have measured public attitudes towards homosexuality in the UK. The 1990 National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (NATSAL) found that 70% of men and 58% of women aged between 16 and 59 believed sex between men was always or mostly “wrong” (Wellings *et al.* 1994). In the second NATSAL in 2001, the sample population was 16-44 year olds and indicated shifts in attitudes towards homosexuality. For example, in 2001, 48% of men and 29% of women felt that sex between men was always or mostly “wrong”. It is notable that whilst women and men have comparable rates of disapproval about sex between women, men are much more likely to disapprove of sex between men² (see Wellings *et al.* 1994; and Snape *et al.* 1995; and NATCEN, 2005). Crockett and Voas (2003) using the British Household Panel Survey over two decades examined changes in attitudes to homosexuality. They found that in 1983 just

² It should be noted that the findings in the two surveys are not directly comparable and that the figures reported here are unweighted.

over half the population stated that homosexuality was “wrong”. By 2000 this had fallen to a third. Men were found to be more likely to believe that homosexual relations were “wrong” (Crockett and Voas 2003). The authors conclude that attitudes to homosexuality have changed rapidly over recent years but add that society is highly polarised over the question of whether same sex unions are “wrong”. Although homosexuality was only decriminalized in 1967 in England and Wales and in 1980 in Scotland (see Wellings *et al.* 1994), Crockett and Voas (2003) found that around half the UK population cannot recall a time when it was criminal to be a homosexual.

The Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey (NILTS) began in 1998. This survey includes questions on sexual identity (using show cards) and on attitudes towards homosexuality. It is a cross sectional survey of people aged 18 and over with around 1,800 respondents in 2001. The survey found that 53% of women thought ‘homosexual sex is always wrong’ compared to nearly two thirds of men. Young single women (aged 18-35) were the least likely to think that homosexual sex was wrong (see Breitenbach, 2004).

The NATSAL in 2001 collected information on respondent’s religion and ethnicity and thus one can examine how attitudes towards homosexuality compare across different populations. There is evidence of considerable variation across different ethnic and religious populations. The lowest levels of disapproval of homosexuality were amongst those who stated that they were Church of England, Anglican or had no religion. The highest levels of disapproval were amongst respondents who were Muslim. In relation to religion, Crockett and Voas (2003) found evidence of higher levels of disapproval of homosexuality amongst Christians than the wider population.

Other surveys, for example, the British Social Attitudes Survey (BSA) include a question on attitudes towards sexual orientation. The BSA is a repeated, cross sectional study of a multi stage random sample of around 4,500 people across Great Britain. However, whilst providing a useful baseline of attitudes to homosexuality over time detailed coverage of issues in relation to sexual orientation is limited. The ONS Omnibus Survey which began in 1990 included a range of questions

on sexual behaviour and attitudes towards LGB people. The survey is a repeated, cross sectional study which takes place eight times a year with around 1800 respondents. It asks questions on same-sex cohabiting, which could be used to estimate sexual orientation, but there are limitations to what this question can measure. For example, scope for analysis by age, social class, region and a rural/urban comparison is limited because of small numbers.

On a much smaller scale, Davies (2004) has conducted survey research with over 500 university students in the UK to explore attitudes towards gay men. In line with previous research, Davies found that men were more likely than women to express negative reactions toward gay men and that such attitudes towards gay men are part of the larger construct of traditional gender roles (see also Kite and Whitely, 1998).

Whilst the evidence on public attitudes is important the surveys do not offer substantial or compelling evidence on a range of social policy and social welfare issues or on people's actual behaviour. As a result the socio-economic circumstances of gay, lesbian and bisexual citizens remain unmeasured. Difficulties with attitude surveys are perpetuated when large data sets are used for other purposes. For example, the Discrimination Against Gay Men and Lesbians Survey (DAGMLS) (1993) was designed examine the nature of discrimination against gay men and lesbians in Britain with samples drawn from the National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (NATSAL). It is worth noting how the researchers acknowledged the difficulty of negotiating survey intentions and sexual identities. The NATSAL did not ask about self-perceived sexual orientation, but focused on sexual experiences and behaviour. This was because the NATSAL was undertaken to chart sexual practices with a view to modelling the spread of HIV infection. The DAGMLS participants were asked directly to identify their sexual orientation (DAGMLS 1993). This resulted in different categories of participants: homosexual, heterosexual and those who had shifted identities between the two studies. This highlights the difficulty of interpreting between data sets with differing intentions and signifiers of sexual identity.

It is also important to note underlying difficulties with attitudinal surveys: namely, that the act of participating in these particular surveys implies a knowledge of the 'socio-political' scope of the survey and as a result, respondents may 'otherize' their responses i.e. commenting upon what 'is good for society' rather than their attitudes towards individuals. In the USA, particularly within psychology research, analytical methods of measuring homophobia have been developed including scale based analysis that compares attitudes towards gay men and lesbian women (see, for example, Raja and Stokes 1998).

Crime and Criminal Justice

Whilst the Criminal Justice Act (2003) recognised prejudice against homosexuality as a potential factor in aggravated assaults, it did not offer a statutory definition of a homophobic incident. As a consequence, crime figures submitted to the Home Office by police forces do not routinely identify crimes motivated by homophobia. Homophobic crime is included within the figures for other offences according to the nature of the action. The Criminal Justice Act 2003 does ensure that where an assault involving or motivated by hostility or prejudice based on sexual orientation (actual or perceived) the judge is required to take it into account when sentencing.

The key survey for measuring crime in the UK the British Crime Survey (BCS) does include questions on verbal and physical assault and includes a question on whether homophobic attitudes were the reason the respondent was assaulted. However, the BCS does not ask about the sexual orientation of the respondent nor does it specifically ask about homophobic crimes. It is therefore of limited value when examining the experiences of LGB populations within the criminal justice system.

Figures released by the Metropolitan police have given some insights into the levels of homophobic crime. During the first six months of 2001, 745 homophobic incidents were reported.

In 2004, the figures rose by 12.5%, from 1,365 in 2003 to 1,536 (MPS 2004). A survey of police authorities conducted on behalf of the Independent on Sunday suggests that homophobic crime had increased by 23% in 2004 (see Bloomfield and Barret, 2004). A survey of 750 gay, lesbian and bisexuals in Birmingham in 2002 revealed that one in two respondents had suffered homophobic harassment or violence in the last five years. This research also found that 27% experienced repeated harassment from the same perpetrator (BCSP 2002). According to one Metropolitan Police advisor, there are 5 or 6 homophobic murders in London each year (Guardian, 17th October, 2005). Nationally, the Criminal Prosecution Service has, however, reported an increase in conviction rates for hate crimes committed against members of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender communities (CPS 2004). In 2003, 73 of the 103 homophobic cases resulted in a conviction (CPS 2004).

Stonewall argues that there are likely to be problems of under reporting in relation to homophobic crime due to respondents being unwilling to state their sexual orientation and that new methods need to be developed to capture this information. In Stonewall's own research between 1991-1996 regarding homophobic violence, 4,000 gay men, lesbians and bisexuals responded. Overall 34% of men and 23% of women reported having experienced violence because they were gay, lesbian or bisexual (Mason and Palmer, 1996). More recent research by Stormbreak (2004) found that, in their small-scale panel survey of 521 lesbian and gay people, 45% of respondents in London had experienced a homophobic crime with 20% of these being actual physical assault. This research also found that only 1 in 3 homophobic crimes were reported (Stormbreak 2004).

It is also notable that in a related survey of perceptions of violence in Manchester and Lancaster 'gay spaces' (Skeggs, 2005) it was found that gay men and lesbians worry about safety within these areas while heterosexuals perceive 'gay spaces' to be safe. However, this study was limited in its geographic scope (within the cities perceived 'gay spaces') and only asked respondents who were already comfortable enough to be in these spaces about their perception

of safety. For discussion of homophobic violence in Scotland see Ramsey (2001) and Morrison and Mackay (2000). McManus (2003) highlights how, in Scotland, less research has been conducted on violence against lesbians when compared with gay men.

No comprehensive research currently exists concerning domestic violence within same-sex couples within the UK. However, several studies highlight the problem and consider a range of evidence on violence within same-sex relationships. There is some evidence that certain police units, particularly those covering urban areas, are logging data on this crime (see Burke and Follingstad, 1999; Collins and Vallely, 2001; Limbrick, 2002; and Henderson, 2003).

Health Issues

The discovery of HIV/Aids in the late 1980s motivated various attitudinal and health related research. The SIGMA Research Gay Men's Panel Study ran from 1987-1994 and involved a five phase cohort study of gay and bisexual men. The main aim included estimating the prevalence and incidence of sexual behaviours, taking blood-samples to investigate rates of HIV sero-positivity and sero-conversion, to examine the social and sexual lifestyles and culture of gay and bisexual men and to monitor the trends towards safer sex practice. As a longitudinal study, the major focus was on change in these processes. The first wave included 1,115 men, in the last wave there were 401. The core of those interviewed in every wave was 209. This constitutes one of the largest studies of gay and bisexual men in the world and it was an integral part of the WHO Global Programme on Aids' 7-nation Homosexual Response Studies. It has shared research instruments with a number of USA and European projects. A component part of the SIGMA data consists of 1,975 month-long sexual diaries. The machine-readable coded versions of the diaries are lodged in the dataset and the natural-language microfiched and anonymised versions are held at the Wellcome Contemporary Medical Archives Centre. Where cohort members kept diaries, their datasets can be linked via

serial number.

The Gay Men's Sex Survey has been conducted annually since 1997. The survey includes questions about where the respondent lives, ethnicity, education, religion, their sexual experience including paid sexual encounters, HIV testing and sexual health including check ups and education about sexual health. Before 1996, the sample for the Gay Men's Sex Survey was taken from those attending gay pride festivals. From 1996, the questionnaires were distributed by a range of gay and HIV health promotion agencies and the survey now has over 8,000 respondents (Reid *et al.* 2002).

There are also many small surveys assessing the health needs of particular groups of people within health care services. These are primarily motivated either by 'needs assessment' requirements focused on particular groups or by local volunteer agencies who want to make claims for government funding to meet a defined need. Some voluntary sector organizations concerned with mental health issues have researched difficulties with sexual identity and coming out. A few studies considering the health care needs of lesbians can be found in the volunteer sector and from local community organizations. For a more comprehensive examination at lesbian health issues one must look to other countries, primarily the USA (see Solarz 1999; see also research listing on www.lesbianhealthinfo.org/research).

Overall, the issue of health care and service provision has been dominated by the concerns over HIV/Aids and therefore the voices articulated in this field of research tend to be those of men rather than women and tend to focus only on gay men's health issues. The Drug Prevalence Survey in England asked the sexual orientation of male respondents but as McManus (2003) points out the survey does not ask about the sexual orientation of females. McManus also notes the lack of UK research on alcohol use amongst lesbians (see also Bridget 1994).

Employment

Employers in the UK have only just begun to collect information on sexual orientation. This may provide a valuable source of data in the future if employees are willing to provide the information. Currently, the major gap in existing evidence is that the key source for measuring labour market circumstances in the UK - the Census and the Labour Force Survey, do not collect information on the sexual orientation of respondents. The existing survey evidence on the experiences of LGB workers is limited.

In 1993, Stonewall conducted a survey of 2,000 lesbian and gay people (Palmer 1993) which found that 48% of respondents had been harassed at work because they were known or suspected to be gay or lesbian and 56% had felt it necessary to hide their sexual orientation in some jobs and 33% in all jobs. Moreover, 68% of respondents stated that they hid their sexual orientation to everyone or someone at their current job. Only a few small studies offer more recent data. For example, a TUC survey of 450 gay, lesbian and bisexual workers found that 44% have faced discrimination at work (TUC 2000). Stormbreak (2003) have conducted small-scale research on the incidence and nature of discrimination in the workplace. Their nationwide survey of 150 gay and lesbian people found that 64% of gay men and lesbians reported experiences of discrimination in the workplace. The main types of discrimination reported were: ridicule, verbal abuse, exclusion from benefits for partners, lack of promotion and exclusion from social activities.

The Discrimination Against Gay Men and Lesbians Survey (DAGMLS) in 1993 was one of the first studies to consider perceived discrimination by agencies and facilities and actual discrimination in the labour market and the housing market. It was the one of the first surveys on these issues to be based on probability sampling and so in theory should be more robustly representative of the wider population. While a useful benchmark, this evidence is dated.

It can be argued that given the potential for discrimination in the workplace, even within research units and the academy, research on sexual orientation may be left aside by established and junior researchers as an area that might identify them as lesbian or gay, regardless of sexual

orientation, within their profession or employment.

Small-Scale Case Study Research

Numerous smaller scale UK surveys examining LGB populations have been limited academic research projects within the voluntary sector or political organisations. These tend to be local need-led surveys focused on specific issues such as drug/alcohol abuse, suicide, violence, access to fertility treatment and health promotion. Specific examples include: O'Connor and Molloy's (2001) qualitative research in Scotland concerning the experiences of lesbian and gay young people accessing housing services and McFarlene's (1998) similar research regarding mental health services.

The organisation Stormbreak works with a panel of gay and lesbian respondents exploring broader issues of concern. For example, the 2000 Stormbreak Gay Life and Style Millennium Survey asked 283 visitors to a Stormbreak exhibition about their experiences of being gay including childhood, sexual relations/health, even the Iraq War. Stormbreak acknowledges that the commercial lesbian and gay scene is likely to be representative of only a minority of the lesbian and gay population and is likely to lead to skewed results. Stormbreak claims their panel of members have been developed to overcome such problems as *non-scene* lesbians and gays are represented. The plethora of small studies may lead support groups and individuals to experience issue sensitivity effects and research fatigue.

A number of larger UK cities (Manchester, London, Newcastle) have begun to consider economic impact on the city's economy following the growth in leisure industry and/or 'gay villages'. While much is made of the 'Pink Pound', no study offers a clear understanding of how this may, or may not, be representative of either disposable income or general economic positioning of lesbians and gay men in the larger economy. A small scale study funded by the city of Glasgow found social

exclusion and poverty to be major factors in the lives of lesbians and gay men (John and Patrick, 1999). Similar findings were evident regarding on poverty amongst lesbians and gay men in Ireland (Combat Poverty Agency, 1995). Although these studies provide valuable insights, questions are raised by the small and unrepresentative samples.

Finally, small scale research has focused on particular groups within the lesbian and gay population. Heaphy and Yip (2004) have examined the lives of non-heterosexual people aged 50+. Their research involved over 250 interviews covering such issues as identity, relationships and social care. They found that over 33% of men and 23% of older women had hidden their sexuality through out their lives. Moreover, they found evidence of respondents feeling less welcome in LGB spaces as they got older. Considerable concerns were raised about care home provision for LGB people including evidence of hostility from health care professionals (see also Pugh, 2002).

Yip (1997) detailed the lives of gay Christian men and highlighted the difficulties encountered in relation to the Christian church. Research by Weller *et al.* (2001), on behalf of the Home Office, also included consideration of the experiences of lesbian and gay Christians and found evidence of discrimination and exclusion. Further research by Yip (2004) has involved qualitative research into the lives of British non-heterosexual Muslims. The research found that most of the non-heterosexual Muslim respondents did not participate in Muslim social and religious activity. As a result, their spirituality is forced into the private sphere.

Within the growing research field of lesbian and gay families, the most groundbreaking UK research is Weeks *et al's* (2001) ESRC funded survey of 96 non-heterosexuals concerning family life. Likewise, Shipman and Smart (2007) have conducted a study into gay and lesbian views on marriage recognition. Burgoyne and Clarke (2007) consider money management in gay and lesbian couples. The experiences of gay adoptive and foster parents are the topic of Hicks (2005) and Hicks and McDermott (1999).

There are only limited studies of the social profile of gay, lesbian and bisexual people with

disabilities (Brothers, 2003; see also Shakespeare 1996 and 2000). Brothers (2003) argues that the lack of research may reflect the fact that society does not see disabled people as sexual.

Conclusions

Our review of the available data on sexual orientation in the UK confirms some changes in attitudes toward homosexuality over the last fifteen years. However, in two key policy areas, employment and crime, a number of studies suggest continued discrimination affecting workplace conditions, economic status, personal safety and the welfare of lesbian and gay citizens. In the area of health, there is considerable evidence with regards to the sexual activity and sexual health of gay men but little is known of other health issues and there is almost no evidence on lesbian health issues.

However, while there are some grounds for making claims with regard to policies affecting the lives of lesbians and gay men, the evidence remains fragmented, of limited focus and the diversity of methodological approaches compounds efforts to make political or policy generalizations. The existing evidence is often dated and/or based on small scale ad hoc studies. The lack of random samples limits how representative the data is and therefore how generalizable the results or how reliable any policy recommendations can be if based on this evidence. Current surveys that focus on sexual behaviour or issues around HIV/AIDS offer few grounded conclusions about the lives of all gay men and lesbians.

The political context surrounding statistics and the signifiers of identity/labelling in relation to the evidence base on sexual orientation provide a number of research and methodological challenges. Robust longitudinal research methodologies that synergise qualitative and quantitative data need to be developed and resourced in order to gain a representative picture of the lives of LGB populations in the UK.

The decision not to include a question on sexual orientation in the 2011 UK Census leaves a major gap. The challenges of including other questions such as the respondent's religion have been overcome. It is notable that whilst there is no question on sexual orientation, the Canadian Census includes a question on living in a 'same-sex common-law relationship' for the first time in 2001 (Statistics Canada 2006). This has become a particularly important issue in Canada since government legislation extended common-law marital status to homosexual relationships. The Irish Census also now allows for people of the same sex and living together in a household to indicate that they are partners (Breitenbach 2004). In the UK, the ONS have admitted there is a major evidence gap in relation to socio-economic circumstances of LGB citizens in the UK and so perhaps this a tentative step forward.

Recent legislation allowing civil partnerships in the UK may lead to more detailed statistics about those in such relationships and it is important that one relevant question on civil partnership status is included in national government surveys. It will be important to see the results of the Census Test which allows respondents to identify that they are living in a civil partnership. This data will not necessarily offer conclusions that would be applicable to the whole of the lesbian and gay population. Nevertheless, it is increasingly recognised that sexual orientation/identity should be a part of any demographic research (Reynolds, 2001).

Whilst the inclusion of questions on sexual orientation in a number of national surveys is being considered by the Home Office and Department for Trade and Industry it is clear innovative methods and booster samples will be required. Otherwise dedicated surveys are needed. Both of these approaches have been used in order to capture the circumstances of ethnic minorities in the UK. It is notable that in order to reduce response and non-response bias issues Meyer *et al.* (2002) in the USA have experimented with using random telephone surveys in order to recruit lesbian and bisexual women respondents. There are cost implications for the use of these methods but they

are likely to provide a more accurate evidence base for policy making and the effective allocation of resources.

Research methods in the field of sexual orientation need to recognise the complexities and histories of the academic and political debates in relation to sexual orientation and particularly the relationship/dissonance between sexual behaviour and sexual identity; levels of 'outness' with family/friends/colleagues and legal versus social identities. The methods also need to be able to capture the diverse aspects of the lives of LGB populations and the potential multiple inequalities faced. In relation to the international evidence base, Sell and Becker (2001) have called for more clear standards, definitions and measures for the collection of sexual orientation data.

There is more scope for the use of administrative records in relation to building the evidence base on sexual orientation in the UK. However, data would need to be collected via such organisations as employers, GPs or other service providers and it is not clear how viable this is in relation to the populations in question. Only recently have employers in the UK begun to include sexual orientation in equal opportunities policies. The recent large-scale Civil Service-Wide Diversity Study included a question about self-identified sexual orientation (ORC International, 2002). However, there are issues around the disclosure of such information in the workplace. Research by Dex and Purdam (2005) has found that employers feel that applicants and staff are likely to be very reluctant to give information on sexual orientation. A similar issue is apparent in relation to employees disclosing information on disability. A recent report of the European Group of Experts on Combating Sexual Orientation Discrimination recommends that employers do not ask questions concerning sexual orientation and that employees do not participate in such schemes (Waaldijk and Bonini-Baraldi, 2004). Whilst Stonewall (2005) maintains that gaining this information is crucial to monitoring equal opportunities policies. Breitenbach (2004) argues that research

methods and equal opportunities assessment in relation to these populations need to take account of the ethical issues of privacy and intrusion.

Clearly without the evidence, the extent of discrimination and claims for equality cannot be monitored. Policy makers will not be able to assess the impact of new policy initiatives and address issues of equality including basic personal safety, protection from discrimination in employment as well as in relation to access to services for health and welfare needs. In the absence of a comprehensive national survey on relevant policy issues in the UK, policy makers are left with a few small scale research projects targeted at particular groups or promoting organizational agendas. In light of the recent policy agenda motivated by the goals of social justice and equality, it is crucial to develop a more comprehensive long-term research strategy and evidence base regarding the socio-economic circumstances of lesbian, gay and bisexual citizens in the UK.

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