

Solidarity but not similarity? LGBT communities in the twenty-first century

Executive summary

**Eleanor Formby,
Sheffield Hallam University**



Introduction to the study

The term 'LGBT community' is increasingly used in policy, practice and research, yet there is little explicit discussion of what the application of the concept of 'community' means to lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) people. This study therefore sought to examine understandings and experiences of LGBT communities, and assess implications for (LGBT) health and wellbeing. The study had two elements: first to bring together existing (predominantly UK) literature from a range of subject disciplines, including geography, health studies, history, psychology and sociology; second to consult with a range of LGBT people via an interactive website, short online survey (627 respondents), and a series of in-depth interviews and discussion groups (44 participants). Question areas were geared towards understanding views on, and experiences of, communities currently, in the past, and in the future. This summary gives a very brief overview of the themes and issues emerging within the research.

Understandings of 'community'

Language use: acronyms, labels and meanings

- Concerns were raised about the LGBT acronym itself, related to 'ownership', agency and diversity
- Some people felt that trans issues were, but did not belong, "stuck on the end" of LGB, whilst others felt that there was 'strength in numbers' in combining particular gender and sexual identities together
- There was some consensus that the complexities of identity cannot easily be encapsulated in an acronym, but at the same time a desire for an understandable 'label' with which to describe oneself and share with others (however there were clear concerns about being labelled by other people)
- Participants also identified an advantage in a label or acronym facilitating visibility and (the potential for) appropriate service provision
- The associated invisibility of other identity "options" (such as pansexual and polysexual) was problematic for some participants

Identifying communities

- There was some consensus that the word community has generally become more widely used to describe groups of people, which not everyone felt was appropriate
- Ownership was again highlighted in that some people did not want to be positioned in an LGBT community because of their particular gender or sexual identity
- Apprehension that the word community could contribute to stereotypes and/or social 'divisions' was identified
- The concept of one universal LGBT community was viewed with cynicism, or sometimes anger
- Advantages to the concept of community were also suggested, however, especially when pushing for legislative or social change; it was believed that community implied strength and credibility

- Use of communities in the plural was viewed more positively as this recognised the diversity within and between particular communities, for example regarding age, ethnicity, gender or social class
- Some people suggested that 'heterosexual allies' should be included within LGBT communities

Community as 'space'

- 'Space' featured prominently in understandings of community, often focussed on the commercial scene which, whether or not individuals engaged with this space, could operate as an important visible, and to a certain extent symbolic, sight of safety, connection and/or identity validation
- For some people, 'the scene' and other geographical spaces (sometimes referred to as 'visual communities') took on almost legendary status which contrasted with lived experiences of unequal access, whether related to geographical inability (because 'LGBT spaces' are often concentrated in specific urban areas) or linked to individual circumstances such as age, disability, ethnicity, gender or lack of financial resources
- Existing literature has also examined rural gay and lesbian geographies, and the place of private homes and/or temporary spaces within the concept of community, particularly for lesbians (Bell and Valentine, 1995; Johnston and Valentine, 1995; Valentine, 1993, 1994)
- Around half of survey respondents identified that the community or communities they felt part of were physical and near where they lived (53%), virtual/online (48%) and/or 'a feeling' (48%) (responses were not mutually exclusive)
- Other LGBT communities identified within the survey included work-based communities, university-based communities and particular social groups
- Particular spaces were thought to provide comfort and/or safety that was not necessarily felt elsewhere; a potentially negative broader social context was often the reason that people chose to socialise 'on the scene'
- There were some concerns about the scene, however, whether related to the quality of venues and/or perceived risks of LGBT people isolating themselves
- Notions of communities tied to scenes were particularly problematic for young people (aged under 18) who could not (yet) access the scene (legally) which meant their ability to meet other LGBT people could be limited, outside of specific social/support groups
- An understanding of community as space was also applied to particular events (such as Pride) and/or specific social/support groups away from the scene
- Some participants clearly felt that the scene did not constitute a community

Community as 'feeling' or 'connection'

- Existing literature has identified communities of 'identity' or 'interest' (Weeks et al, 2001), as well as 'imagined' communities (Anderson, 1983), meaning that community can be understood as 'place' (as above) and/or 'practice' (Weeks et al, 2001)
- These theories could be applied to data from this study which strongly suggested perceived communities based on a 'feeling', mutual understanding and/or assumed 'connection'
- Sometimes this was related to a feeling of 'belonging' or 'acceptance', and sometimes it was more concretely linked to shared experiences of 'coming out' and/or hostility within wider society
- This was particularly significant when individuals felt or were excluded from their 'families of origin' and/or broader communities (see also Weeks et al, 2001)
- Communities of 'choice' or 'need' may therefore be distinguished from communities of 'fate', i.e. the ones we are born into (Homfray, 2007; Howes, 2011)
- There was often an acknowledgment of diversity within and between LGBT communities, for instance linked to age, (dis)ability, ethnicity, geography, gender, political affiliation, social class and/or wealth
- This meant that although there was often a sense of solidarity, participants were also clear that this did not mean similarity
- Not having to 'self-censor' was key; many participants talked about wanting to feel comfortable or relaxed whilst holding their partner's hand, for example, which some felt was only possible with other LGBT people

- Not everyone felt they had a connection or things in common with other LGBT people; for instance sometimes people tended to socialise just with other lesbians or gay men
- Connecting with other LGBT people was seen to be particularly important whilst 'coming out'
- Some people sought or found friendship with other LGBT people who were identified as "like-minded", suggesting that there could be "communities within communities" (which could overlap and were sometimes expressed as 'networks')

Risks and omissions

- Because not everyone is 'accepted' or feels they 'belong' within LGBT communities, some participants questioned the usefulness of drawing on the concept of community
- People identified that services delivered to LGBT communities were sometimes only delivered to particular elements of LGBT communities, with bisexual and trans people identified as frequently excluded or ignored

Community development and engagement

Socialising and 'connection'

- Participants identified wanting to engage in/with LGBT communities for a variety of reasons, one of which was to socialise or interact with other LGBT people
- Ability to meet 'like-minded' people was seen as important in aiding 'connection' and/or mutual support
- Some people believed that communities had not facilitated friendships, because communities *were* friendships
- Sometimes the role of organised social and/or support groups in facilitating friendship was highlighted
- Being able to meet and/or socialise with other LGBT people was identified as particularly important when people were making a 'new start', which could be in a new geographical area, or might relate to personal circumstances, such as a relationship ending
- Participants also talked about the role of LGBT communities when seeking sex and/or partners

Avoiding broader social contexts; creating new communities

- Much discussion of how specific LGBT communities developed was in relation to broader (negative) social contexts; many participants felt that the friendships, groups or communities they formed were directly related to social contexts, for example described as "oppressive" or "less comfortable"
- The perceived need to escape the 'self-censorship' that many participants engaged in, in wider society was clear, which meant (some) people looked for safe (LGBT) spaces without the need to "edit" themselves

Politics, activism and seeking social change

- A key area that participants identified as contributing to the development of communities was in relation to activism and particular political campaigns
- The Stonewall 'riots' in New York, the campaign to repeal Section 28 and 'equal marriage' were the specific examples most often cited
- It was highlighted that such examples of activism/campaigning brought people together and helped form or strengthen friendships and communities
- Not everyone was interested in politics, however, which was a cause of lament for some
- A number of participants emphasised the need for communities to be 'vigilant' about potential attacks on LGBT rights, so that people could 'mobilise' if/when necessary

Experiences of 'community' and impacts for wellbeing

Inclusion, exclusion and 'diversity'

- The survey asked people to say whether they felt part of one or more LGBT communities: the largest proportion of respondents (48%) 'somewhat' felt part of one or more LGBT communities, followed by those that 'strongly' did so (25%), and those that did not feel part of one or more LGBT communities, or did not know (27%)
- There were a variety of examples of communities and/or spaces being experienced as unwelcoming and/or exclusionary, in addition to spaces that were felt to be less appealing and/or appropriate for some people
- A number of issues were raised relating to diversity and potential exclusion (or 'hierarchies') within and between communities, including awareness or experience of ableism, ageism, biphobia, 'fatphobia', racism and transphobia
- The scene was described by a range of participants as 'male-dominated' and/or specifically focussed on young gay men
- Social class, 'privilege' and/or (lack of) financial resources were seen to be significant, with some participants clear that the 'pink pound' is not a 'reality' for everybody
- Intersections of faith and sexual identity were also raised, and have been discussed more fully elsewhere (see e.g. Browne et al, 2010; Duggan, 2012; Hunt, 2009; Yip, 1996, 2008)
- Some LGBT parents suggested that they did not always find it easy to find a 'place' for themselves within LGBT communities that were described by some as not child-friendly, yet the desire for visible LGBT communities to demonstrate the 'normality' of same sex relationships to their children was identified
- As a whole, data clearly pointed to the diversity of experience that may be overlooked in assumptions and/or language use relating to LGBT community, particularly in the singular

(Un)safe spaces

- There were also positive experiences of space and community, for instance when accessing the scene whilst 'coming out'
- Often the 'need' or 'want' to go out on the scene was expressed in terms of comfort or safety; being able to (publicly) show physical affection was the most frequently cited example
- The scene could lose its appeal, though, as people got older or 'bored' with it, and/or developed relationships where they were less likely to go out
- Negative responses to people's 'image' on the scene were reported, with implicit 'dress codes' sometimes operating as physical barriers to accessing LGBT space via the 'policing' of door staff at scene venues
- Heterosexual people accessing scene space was sometimes identified as problematic for LGBT people
- Sometimes there was nostalgia for (less commercialised and/or more political) scenes or communities of the past
- Where people lived in areas that did not have visible LGBT space, and sometimes for those that did, specific groups often provided an opportunity to share experiences and provide each other with mutual support or 'credibility'
- Groups most often mentioned in relation to community and/or mutual support were work-based, or provided within the voluntary sector, though university-based groups were also identified
- The desire for safety and/or visible LGBT space could mean that people's 'choices' about where to live were influenced by their gender and/or sexual identities
- This included leaving hostile environments as well as moving towards particular urban areas

Pride events: partying with politics?

- Pride events were identified as significant for creating/aiding community

- Such events clearly meant different things to different people, with the greatest contrast between those who saw Pride, essentially, as a 'party', and those who saw Pride more politically/as a 'protest'
- A minority believed that Prides could be both 'party' and 'protest' at the same time
- It was suggested that Prides could bring people together, combat isolation and facilitate a sense of community, thereby supporting individual (LGBT) wellbeing
- The celebratory aspect of Pride was also said to enhance self-confidence
- The importance of 'safe space' and lack of 'self-censorship' was again highlighted
- One potential disadvantage linked to Pride events was that LGBT people might become associated with "extremes" in the public eye
- There were also concerns raised about increasing commercialisation of Pride events
- Linked to this, the issue of certain groups being excluded from Pride events (such as the homeless) was also raised
- A number of participants expressed a desire for Prides to become more political (again), though this did not appeal to everyone
- The (increasing) emphasis on alcohol during Pride events was viewed as problematic by some participants

Online communities

- The place of 'virtual' communities in providing (safe) space for LGBT people to meet and/or interact was also identified during the course of the research; a number of participants had met their partner this way
- Finding out information to support one's identity and/or wellbeing was also highlighted as possible through the internet
- The ability for web-based interactions to support people experiencing isolation in their physical lives was emphasised by some, most often in relation to young people and trans people
- The importance of the internet for trans communities has been raised previously by Whittle (1998), who stressed the impact that this "safe area" has had upon friendships, expertise sharing, and political activism
- A small number of people expressed concern about online activities, for example the possibility of using online networking sites to target people for hate crime

Wellbeing and support

- A sense, or experience, of community was reported to be clearly linked to LGBT wellbeing, for instance in combating isolation and heightening confidence and self-esteem
- Survey respondents were asked to identify if feeling part of one or more LGBT communities had had an impact on their physical health. Results were inconclusive: 37% did not think there had been any impact, 36% felt a positive impact, 23% did not know or did not feel part of one or more communities, and 4% thought there had been a negative impact
- Survey respondents were also asked to identify if feeling part of one or more LGBT communities had had an impact on their emotional wellbeing and mental health. Results here were far clearer: 74% felt a positive impact, 16% did not know or did not feel part of one or more communities, 6% did not feel any impact, and 4% felt a negative impact
- Results were similar for the same question related to impact on 'quality of life': 72% felt a positive impact, 16% did not know or did not feel part of one or more communities, 10% did not feel any impact, and 2% felt a negative impact
- A range of participants involved in the in-depth aspects of the research emphasised the potential impact of feeling part of a community or network of LGBT people on health and wellbeing, often in relation to the benefits of developing friendships with certain people, whether through specific LGBT groups or online
- The visibility of LGBT people was felt to be important for 'validating' one's self-identity
- Some participants talked about particular friendships becoming akin to family

- LGBT communities were suggested as being particularly important whilst 'coming out' so that people could gain information or support from people who had gone through similar experiences or feelings
- Some people stressed the benefits of being 'out' for strengthening their wellbeing and/or their ability to build and maintain friendships and other relationships
- Being able to feel 'accepted', comfortable and relaxed (without self-censorship) was highlighted as important for wellbeing

Potential 'dangers' for wellbeing

- A number of participants identified perceived "dangers" linked to LGBT communities that could harm individual wellbeing, such as alcohol and/or drug consumption, lack of safer sex, and pressures to conform to particular images or patterns of behaviour
- The impact of the scene was complicated, for example, by being seen to offer both affirmation and safety, at the same time as posing potential 'risks' to individual or collective wellbeing
- Potential exclusions on the scene or within communities were said to contribute negatively to some people's emotional wellbeing

Aspirations for the future

'Acceptance' or 'utopia'?

- When thinking about aspirations for the future, participants raised themes of visibility and 'acceptance', for instance in relation to being able to show physical affection in public without fear or apprehension
- When some people tried to imagine a future with a more positive social context, there was often uncertainty about what that would mean for LGBT communities, i.e. do they only exist because of prejudice or discrimination? If this was no longer there, would people want or need specific LGBT communities?
- Some people felt that it was 'unrealistic' to think about a day when there would not be prejudice or discrimination and instead focussed on changes they would like to see now, which included more 'inclusive' LGBT communities

Moving forward with or without legislation

- Some participants raised issues about particular legislative change they would like to see; issues connected to 'gay marriage' often featured
- Not all participants saw legislation as the (only) answer, however, and raised the need for changes in broader social attitudes
- Some participants specifically raised the need for more inclusive language, for instance in talking about biphobic and transphobic as well as homophobic bullying

Service provision and alternative spaces

- Service provision and alternative spaces were issues of concern to some participants; much feedback about future spaces related to the desire for more non-scene LGBT spaces
- It was felt by some that more (non-scene) 'community spaces' could improve LGBT health and wellbeing; there are clear questions about how to fund and support such non-commercial venues

Education and support for young people

- When thinking about the future, some people identified the need for 'education', for example to eradicate stereotypes about LGBT people
- Others specifically talked about improving provision and inclusion within schools
- Participants also talked about support for young people more generally

Conclusions

- In summary, the terms 'community' or 'communities' were often applied to groups of LGBT people (who may or may not know one other), whether physical, online or imagined via a shared feeling of 'acceptance' or 'belonging'
- The study highlighted three key elements, or foundations, to LGBT communities: place/space, (shared) identity, and (to a lesser extent) politics (see also Homfray, 2007; Weeks, 1996)
- A social context of potential/assumed adversity was also key to perceptions of, or the desire for, community; safe spaces were identified as key to avoid 'self-censorship' regularly employed in wider society
- For many participants, communities were conceptualised in broader terms than 'just' friendship groups, most clearly in a sense of (wanting to) share space with, and feel connected to, other LGBT people with whom there may be no personal ties - a sense of solidarity beyond known relationships
- At the same time as there was a sense of solidarity, however, participants also stressed that this did not mean similarity, highlighting the varying experiences and needs within LGBT communities; this was often coupled with a strong desire to challenge existing assumptions
- A sense or experience of community had clear links to reported wellbeing, including combating isolation, heightening confidence and self-esteem, and sometimes improving/maintaining physical health
- However potential 'risks' related to elements of community were also identified (e.g. alcohol/drug consumption)
- Caution is needed when the term community is used in the singular and/or when it is assumed that LGBT people are more alike than not
- It was suggested that the concept of community poses both potential benefits in terms of affirmation and the suggestion of safety, at the same time as posing potential 'dangers' through perpetuating misconceptions and stereotypes about LGBT people
- Policy and practice that draws on the concept of community in the future should attempt to acknowledge the diversity, inequality and power dynamics embedded within LGBT communities, and within broader society - use of LGBT communities in the plural is just the start to this

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For further information about the study visit: www.lgbtcommunityresearch.co.uk.

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About the author

Eleanor Formby is a Senior Research Fellow at Sheffield Hallam University. A Sociologist by background, her research interests and expertise broadly encompass the health and wellbeing of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans people, and young people. She has published a number of journal articles and research reports in these fields.

Eleanor Formby
Senior Research Fellow
Centre for Education and Inclusion Research
Sheffield Hallam University
Unit 7 Science Park
Howard Street
Sheffield
S1 1WB
0114 225 6060
e.formby@shu.ac.uk
www.lgbtcommunityresearch.co.uk
www.shu.ac.uk/research/ceir

**Sheffield
Hallam
University** | Centre for
Education and
Inclusion Research