

# Connected Communities

Connected lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans communities? A scoping study to explore understandings and experiences of 'community' among LGBT people

Eleanor Formby



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## **Executive summary**

This study examined understandings and experiences of LGBT communities, and assessed implications for health and wellbeing, employing a literature review, online survey and in-depth interviews and discussion groups. LGBT communities are often understood as communities of 'identity' or 'interest'. Study participants frequently used the term community to refer to groups of LGBT people (known to one another or not), whether physical, online or imagined through (shared) feelings of 'belonging'. The study highlighted three key elements/foundations to LGBT communities: place/space, (shared) identity, and (to a lesser extent) politics. Participants and existing evidence highlights the importance of shared experiences of stigma/discrimination, and a resulting sense of 'connection'. This does not negate the need to acknowledge/address diversity and inequality or exclusion. Safe spaces were identified as key to avoid 'self-censorship' regularly employed in wider society, though participants engaged with other LGBT people for a variety of reasons. Sensing/experiencing '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.

## **Key words**

Belonging, community, diversity, exclusion, identity, self-censorship, space, wellbeing

## **Introduction and study methods**

It has been suggested that "the emergence of distinctive sexual subcultures and communities is part of a wider process that has marked the modern world, and is becoming ever more characteristic of the era of late or post-modernity" (Weeks 2003: 80). The term 'LGBT community' (to include gender and sexual identity groupings) is increasingly used in policy, practice and research (e.g. see Government Equalities Office, 2010), yet there is little explicit discussion of what the application of the concept of 'community' to LGBT people means. Indeed this absence has been noted previously (Keogh et al, 2004; McLean and O'Connor, 2003), though lack of agreed conceptualisations of community has also been noted more widely (Walkerdine and Studdert, 2011). This scoping study therefore sought to examine understandings and experiences of LGBT communities, and assess implications for (LGBT) health and wellbeing.

Supported by an interactive website, the study included a review of existing (predominantly UK) literature examining LGBT communities, 'connections', space/place and social/support networks. This included literature drawn from a range of subject disciplines, including geography, health studies, history, psychology and sociology. The review was supplemented by data drawn from

consultation with LGBT individuals, groups and 'stakeholders'. Primarily this was via an online survey, to which there were 627 respondents, and through the involvement of 44 participants in individual/paired in-depth interviews and/or one of five discussion groups (see Formby, 2012 for further detail). Question areas were geared towards understanding views on, and experiences of, communities currently, in the past, and in the future.

## Existing research

Work grew on the 'geography of homosexuality' in the 1980s and 1990s, initially focusing on areas of physical concentration (commonly dubbed 'gay ghettos'), mostly of gay men, and often in specific American cities (Bell and Valentine, 1995a; Brown et al, 2007; Valentine, 1993a). Frequently studies linked community to the establishment of 'gay' social space, regularly the commercial 'gay scene'. This field has since broadened, however, to include assessment of the place of private homes and/or temporary spaces within the concept of community, particularly for lesbians (Johnston and Valentine, 1995; Valentine, 1993b, 1994). Research has also developed to examine more rural gay and lesbian geographies (e.g. see Bell and Valentine, 1995b).

Historically, the growth of what was often called 'the gay community' (which subsequently became 'the lesbian and gay community', before broadening further, with varying levels of acknowledgment of plural communities) has often been linked to broader social changes. These include decriminalisation of sex between men; 'gay liberation' politics; activism and peer support in response to the emergence of HIV/AIDS; and the campaign to repeal Section 28<sup>1</sup> (Kollman and Waites, 2011; Weeks, 2007).

Building on the broader pattern of communities being understood as place-bound to being understood as potentially also identity or interest based, sociological work in this field (and elsewhere) has emphasised the importance of communities of identity and a sense of 'belonging', particularly for marginalised or stigmatised groups (Homfray, 2007; McKenzie, 2012; Walkerdine and Studdert, 2011; Weeks, 1996; Weeks et al, 2001). Nevertheless, there has been acknowledgment that despite the potential for shared experiences of stigma, prejudice, inequality or discrimination, so too is there the potential for significant diversity within and between LGBT communities, for instance related to age, (dis)ability, ethnicity, geography, gender, political affiliation, social class and/or wealth (Heaphy, 2012; Hines, 2010; Weeks, 1996). However, the idea (and/or 'reality') of community can support both individual identity, and be strategically employed to suggest commonality and strength in numbers when pushing for social change (Weeks, 1996). Shared 'ritual' practices, such as Pride events, in turn support this notion/feeling of community (Weeks, 1996). Influential research by Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan published in 2001 (re)affirmed the significance of community for 'non-heterosexuals', highlighting the role of friendships (and 'families of choice') in asserting and supporting a positive individual, and collective, identity. This is significant when individuals may be excluded from their 'families of origin' and/or broader communities (Weeks et al, 2001). The suggestion here is that community can be understood as 'place' and/or 'practice' (Weeks et al, 2001). 'Communities of choice' or 'communities of need' are therefore distinguished from 'communities of fate', i.e. the ones we are born into (Homfray, 2007; Howes, 2011).

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<sup>1</sup> Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988 prohibited the 'promotion' of homosexuality as a "pretended family relationship". It was repealed in Scotland in 2000 and in the rest of the UK in 2003.

A number of writers have drawn on the work of Benedict Anderson (1983) to discuss 'imagined communities' (Bell and Valentine, 1995a; Hines, 2010; Valentine, 1995; Valentine and Skelton, 2003) potentially manifesting in strong feelings of 'connection' and/or a sense of 'solidarity' with other LGBT people. There can be a desire for, and/or an assumption of, shared understandings and meanings, or a 'vocabulary of values' (Weeks, 1996), which negates the need for 'explanation' or 'self-censorship' (Simpson, 2012; Valentine, 1993c; Weeks et al, 2001).

## Study findings: Belonging, connectivity, space and the impact of social context

Many of the above issues were borne out in discussions with project participants. There was often evidence of a sense of (albeit intangible) 'connection', or more clearly in assumed shared experiences (such as 'coming out' and/or hostility in wider society). 'Space' also played an important role in understandings and experiences of community, with the commercial scene featuring prominently in the data. Whether or not individuals engaged with this space, it operated as an important visible - and to a certain extent symbolic - sight of safety, connection and/or identity validation. For some, the scene and other geographical spaces took on almost legendary status which did not match lived experiences of unequal access. This could relate to geographical inability or barriers linked to personal circumstances such as age, disability, ethnicity, lack of financial resources, gender, or 'image'. The scene was further complicated by offering both potential affirmation and safety, at the same time as posing perceived 'risks' to individual or collective wellbeing (discussed below), as well as being criticised for increased 'commercialism', said to often heighten particular issues of exclusion (Casey, 2007).

The place of friendships in community was often implicit, but nonetheless important. 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 (see also Homfray, 2007). Often there was a subtle difference between **a** community (if not **the** community), and **my** community (for which one can read network of friends and sometimes family or geographical area). A (causal) relationship between these two communities was often difficult to disentangle, but could perhaps be expressed as 'communities within communities', as one participant suggested. Local or personal friendship communities therefore may contribute to, and help form, broader LGBT communities, whether these are spatially, or more conceptually, understood. As Homfray (2007: 170-171) argued, "groups and individuals may be linked by common points of contact or shared issues of interest... forming something of a spider's web of connectivity". This, then, could be a 'connected' community.

Within this community, or more accurately these communities, participants identified wanting to engage with other LGBT people for a variety of reasons. These included socialising, seeking sex and/or partner(s), for information or guidance, political activism, and looking for a safe or 'relaxed' space without the need to (drawing on one participant's words) 'edit' oneself. The role of organised social and/or support groups was sometimes highlighted, as was the role of gender or sexual identities in contributing to particular migration and/or international travel patterns. The perceived need to escape the 'self-regulation' that many participants engaged in, in wider society was clear. Frequently individuals spoke of wanting to hold their partner's hand, for example, which not all felt was possible outside of particular (LGBT) spaces, such as commercial scenes and Pride events, or with particular groups of friends. Escaping 'self-surveillance' could

also be facilitated via 'virtual communities' in (safe) online spaces (see also Whittle, 1998). These desires amount, or contribute, to an 'imagined' community; as Weeks (1996: 83) suggested, "the idea of a sexual community may be a fiction, but it is a necessary fiction".

Study participants, however, were also clear that a sense of solidarity did not necessarily mean similarity, particularly given that 'LGBT' includes both gender and sexual identity 'categories'. 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, yet many people did often refer to a sense of (assumed) 'like-mindedness'. Again there was often a subtle difference based on who was bestowing community status; if this was from within LGBT communities then 'difference' was more likely to be overlooked than if community status was being bestowed, or assumed, externally. In other words, there was a sense that the language of community needs to be 'by us not about us'.

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 in terms of mental health and emotional wellbeing, as well as contributing to physical health for some. At the same time, though, a number of 'dangers' emanating from aspects of community were identified, primarily concerning the commercial scene. These perceived 'risks' included (high) alcohol and/or drug consumption, lack of safer sex, and pressure to conform to a particular image or pattern of behaviour. The potential exclusions identified above were also said to contribute negatively to some people's emotional wellbeing.

In summary, the terms 'community' or 'communities' were often applied to groups of LGBT people (who may or may not be known to one other), whether physical, online or imagined via a shared feeling of 'acceptance' and/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'.

## **Implications for policy and practice**

It could be argued that, with many caveats and nuances, the phrases 'LGBT community' and 'LGBT communities' have some validity because (some) LGBT people choose to use them, and in doing so give the terms (some) meaning, albeit meanings that are not always shared. Particular caution is needed, however, when the terms are used by people who may have less understanding and believe that there is one singular community and/or that LGBT people are more alike than not. The concept of community was seen to pose both potential benefits in terms of the suggestion of affirmation and/or safety, at the same time as posing potential 'dangers' through perpetuating misconceptions and stereotypes about LGBT people, which were very real concerns for some participants. Policy and practice that draws on the concept of (LGBT) 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; there is no one community, just as there is no one experience of the commercial scene, so there are very real potential pitfalls in over-simplification, and clear implications for diverse needs in terms of service planning and provision.

## Future research

Many of the issues raised above warrant further exploration, including closer examination and/or theorisation of the impact of diversity and intersecting aspects of identities on understanding and experiences of community. This could include, for instance, looking at how experiences of ageing and/or ethnicity cross-cut with experiences of trans communities? What are the implications for any future support needs? Work on the experiences of other marginalised groups could also usefully be linked with LGBT experiences to explore similar issues about the influence of a potential/assumed adverse social context and what this means for community understandings and/or wellbeing, as well as the role of mutual support (whether formal or informal). Further study could also build on this project to examine international work in the field in order to synthesise this with evidence from within the UK and see how this might inform future theorising and understanding.

*A full report of this study is available: Formby, E. (2012) Solidarity but not similarity? LGBT communities in the twenty-first century. Sheffield: Sheffield Hallam University.*

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For further information about this study visit: [www.lgbtcommunityresearch.co.uk](http://www.lgbtcommunityresearch.co.uk).

## The Connected Communities

Connected Communities is a cross-Council Programme being led by the AHRC in partnership with the EPSRC, ESRC, MRC and NERC and a range of external partners. The current vision for the Programme is:

*"to mobilise the potential for increasingly inter-connected, culturally diverse, communities to enhance participation, prosperity, sustainability, health & well-being by better connecting research, stakeholders and communities."*

Further details about the Programme can be found on the AHRC's Connected Communities web pages at:

[www.ahrc.ac.uk/FundingOpportunities/Pages/connectedcommunities.aspx](http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/FundingOpportunities/Pages/connectedcommunities.aspx)

