

Chapter 2

Research Design

2.1 Literature Review²

Given the three research themes – Asian and Black, health and housing issues – the first step was to conduct a literature review. The aim of the review was to ‘map’ the contours of the discourse around Asian and Black, health and housing issues pertaining to young bisexuals, gays and lesbians. The review provided an overview of other studies’ findings and the state of knowledge to date. The results of the review also provided a framework for this study, it assisted research design and it provided the wider context for this study’s findings.

Several sources were used for the review:

- ⇒ Personal contacts, both researchers and workers, who offered advice and sources of information.
- ⇒ Dissertations from 1990 (using ASLIB’s *Index to Theses with Abstracts*).
- ⇒ A personal collection of relevant articles from the *Guardian* and *Observer* newspapers (from 1995 to 1999).
- ⇒ Previous literature reviews.
- ⇒ Research papers from conferences.
- ⇒ Social science periodical articles from 1975, when material on bisexual, gay and lesbian youth issues began to appear (using the ASSIA CD-ROM system).
- ⇒ Publications and reports by local and national agencies.
- ⇒ Publications (using Reading University’s LINNIT library catalogue and search system).
- ⇒ Other sources using the Internet.

Given the enormity of the task, the review had many limitations. It would be useful to highlight just three of them: two relating specifically to the review and a third reflecting the state of knowledge.

First, to ensure the research project kept to schedule, a huge volume of material had to be reviewed in just two months. Constrained by resources and time, it seemed sensible to focus on what was considered to be most relevant. Particular attention was paid to landmark studies, frequently cited material and contemporary work. This subjectivity is problematic as important and revealing work may have been missed.

² Andy Mullen (1998) *Bisexuals, Gays and Lesbians – Ethnicity, Health and Housing: A Review of Literature*. See Appendix 1: Other Publications Available.

Second, no personal arguments or opinions were presented, there was no narrative and no attempt was made to critique the research reviewed (data collection techniques, findings, methods, etc). These were felt beyond the scope of the review given the limitations already discussed. Yet these tasks are important; work needs to be scrutinised to see if it stands up to academic rigour and indeed contributes to the state of knowledge.

Third, care had to be taken to distinguish between data sources that demonstrated the existence of particular experiences – for example, anecdotal evidence, case studies, sample studies, single observations, etc. – and sources which reliably established typicality – for example, large-scale random sample studies. Most material was of the former type and therefore should not be taken as demonstrating typicality.

The search for material started from 1975 as most material dates from then. Subjects surveyed include: abuse, AIDS, alcohol, Asian, bisexual, Black, commercial sex workers, depression, discrimination, domestic violence, drugs, equal opportunities, equality, ethnicity, gay, HIV, homelessness, homophobia, homosexuality, housing, lesbian, mental health, racism, sexual health, suicide and women. This wide sweep was intended to net as much material as possible.

Given the paucity of material on young bisexuals, gays and lesbians in particular, the option of a layered approach was taken using higher layers of abstraction to increase the material available. An example should illustrate this approach. Having found very little material on young bisexuals, gays and lesbians who were Asian or Black the search was expanded to a higher level of abstraction, reviewing material on young Asian and Black people (because some may have been bisexual, gay or lesbian). Again, little material was found so the search was expanded to another even higher level of abstraction, reviewing material on the Asian and Black communities in Britain.

The purpose of this approach was two-fold: first, to net as much potentially relevant material as possible, and second, the higher levels of abstraction also provide context, i.e. the social realities of young bisexuals, gays and lesbians. For example, a young Black lesbian is young, living in a society that often marginalises young people; lesbian, living in a heterosexist and homophobic society; Black, living in a predominantly white culture and society; and a woman, living in a predominantly patriarchal society. Each of these may influence and shape her experiences, issues and needs. Reviewing material at higher levels of abstraction works towards the ‘bigger’ picture.

Asian and Black Issues

The main issues arising from the review pertaining to Asian and Black bisexual, gay and lesbian youth included:

- ⇒ The widespread criminalisation, disadvantage and racism faced by Asian and Black individuals and communities in Britain.
- ⇒ The process of identity-formation as 'Asian' and 'Black' in white-dominated, often hostile, wider society.
- ⇒ The general invisibility of Asian and Black bisexuals, gays and lesbians: within the bisexual, gay and lesbian community, the Asian and Black communities and wider society.
- ⇒ Racism within the bisexual, gay and lesbian community.
- ⇒ The process of identity-formation as Asian or Black *and* bisexual, gay or lesbian.
- ⇒ Cultural problems of language and 'labels' of sexual identity.
- ⇒ The added restrictions on Asian women in terms of choices, identity and lifestyle.
- ⇒ The pressures of marriage for Asian bisexuals, gays and lesbians.
- ⇒ Families and communities as sources of support *and* sources of oppression.
- ⇒ The Asian notion of *izzat* (meaning family and community duty and honour).
- ⇒ The importance of religion to Asian bisexuals, gays and lesbians.
- ⇒ Mental health issues arising from stressful lifestyles and the leading of double lives.
- ⇒ Sexual health issues arising from a lack of information, and sexual roles.
- ⇒ Homophobia in the Asian and Black communities.
- ⇒ Peer pressures on young people.

Health Issues

The main health issues pertaining to bisexual, gay and lesbian youth included:

- ⇒ The age of consent – the age at which young people were aware of their sexual identity and the age of their first sexual experience.
- ⇒ Alcohol – the high levels of use and abuse and the fact that the bisexual, gay and lesbian scene is predominantly based around alcohol-selling venues (bars, clubs and pubs).
- ⇒ Bisexuality – the debate about whether bisexuality is an identity or a phase and the existence of biphobia within the gay and lesbian community and wider society (reflecting the dichotomisation of sexual identity).
- ⇒ Commercial sex work – its implications for mental and sexual health and physical safety.
- ⇒ Domestic violence – that violence occurs within same-sex relationships, that violence can be physical, psychological and/or sexual and that the victims of violence are often self-abusive.
- ⇒ Drugs – the high levels of use and abuse.
- ⇒ Eating disorders – the high levels of disordered eating and body dissatisfaction, especially among young gay men.
- ⇒ Generic health services – service users’ experience of homophobia within health services.
- ⇒ Homophobic abuse, harassment and violence at home, at school/college/university, on the streets, at work, etc. and the low levels of reporting to the police.
- ⇒ Mental health services – service users’ experiences of homophobia, the pathologisation of homosexuality and the perception of homosexuality as a mental disorder.
- ⇒ Suicide – the high level of attempted suicides and the fact that attempts seem to be more determined and violent.
- ⇒ Sex education that is poor quality and often inappropriate for bisexuals, gays and lesbians.
- ⇒ Sexual health – the high incidence of HIV, particularly among young gay men, the state of knowledge around HIV and sexual health, the influence of alcohol and drugs on sexual behaviour, the lack of consideration for bisexual and lesbians’ sexual health and the high level of risk-taking.

Housing Issues

The main housing issues pertaining to bisexual, gay and lesbian youth included:

- ⇒ Housing and homelessness legislation and policies which prioritise families over single and young people, leaving them with fewer housing options and opportunities.
- ⇒ The discretion involved in local authorities' interpretation of legislation and consequent regional variations.
- ⇒ The general imbalance between housing demand and supply.
- ⇒ The different types of homelessness and the fact that young people, ethnic minorities, women, and bisexuals, gays and lesbians tend to be the 'hidden homeless'.
- ⇒ Housing problems associated with young people's often lower income – because of lower wage levels, higher unemployment rates, the limitations and restrictions on the young people's welfare benefit entitlement, etc. – and their constraining effects on housing options and opportunities for young people.
- ⇒ The experiences of bisexual, gay and lesbian people in care, and care leavers.
- ⇒ The issues of right of succession, harassment, joint tenancies, and equality in council allocations.

It was clear from the review that there was a general paucity of research in terms of bisexual, gay and lesbian young people's experiences, issues and needs. This was certainly the case in Britain where isolated small-scale studies and anecdotal evidence seem to be the norm. It is generally agreed that the United States is about twenty years ahead of Britain in terms of research, although again, most studies are only small-scale.

In terms of Asian and Black young people who are bisexual, gay and lesbian, the major themes seem to be culture, identity and racism. In terms of health, it is interesting to note that most work to date has focused on mental and sexual health, particularly HIV. To a certain extent, this reflects the funding priorities of public health bodies and academics alike. In terms of housing, the dominant themes seem to be discriminatory legislation, policies and practice and the lack of specialist provision.