

Chapter 5

Conclusions

The Need for, and Value of, Research

Why do research and what is its practical use? At least four reasons can be advanced to answer this question. First, research can help service providers avoid making assumptions about both the nature and type of users' experiences, issues and needs. Second and following from the first, research can help inform service development. Third, research can correct the often distorted view of the world presented by the liberal media and other sections of society, for example that Britain in the 1990s is an inclusive, modern and multicultural society. In the author's opinion, this is often a reflection of the world as we would like it to be, rather than the one it is. Fourth, to facilitate social change. Social change in the right direction requires debate, debate requires arguments and arguments require analysis, hence the need for research.

Social Exclusion and Inclusion

ReachOUT's research project is concerned with the health and housing experiences, issues and needs of young bisexuals, gays and lesbians and the particular experiences, issues and needs of those who are Asian and Black. These young people's experiences and issues often reflect or result from social *exclusion*. More specifically, they reflect or result from disadvantage, discrimination and oppression. Evidence to support these assertions is to be found throughout this report.

The research project is also concerned with the needs of these young people, as reflected in the report's recommendations to improve local services, both mainstream and specialist. These can be distilled into the basic need to be included and listened to i.e. social *inclusion*. More specifically the need for quality services that are non-judgemental, that offer choice, that are supportive, that welcome diversity and services that are standardised in terms of equality of access and opportunity.

Ultimately the research project and report aim to raise awareness of these young people's experiences, issues and needs among agencies, workers and the wider community so as to make everyday life easier for bisexual, gay and lesbian youth.

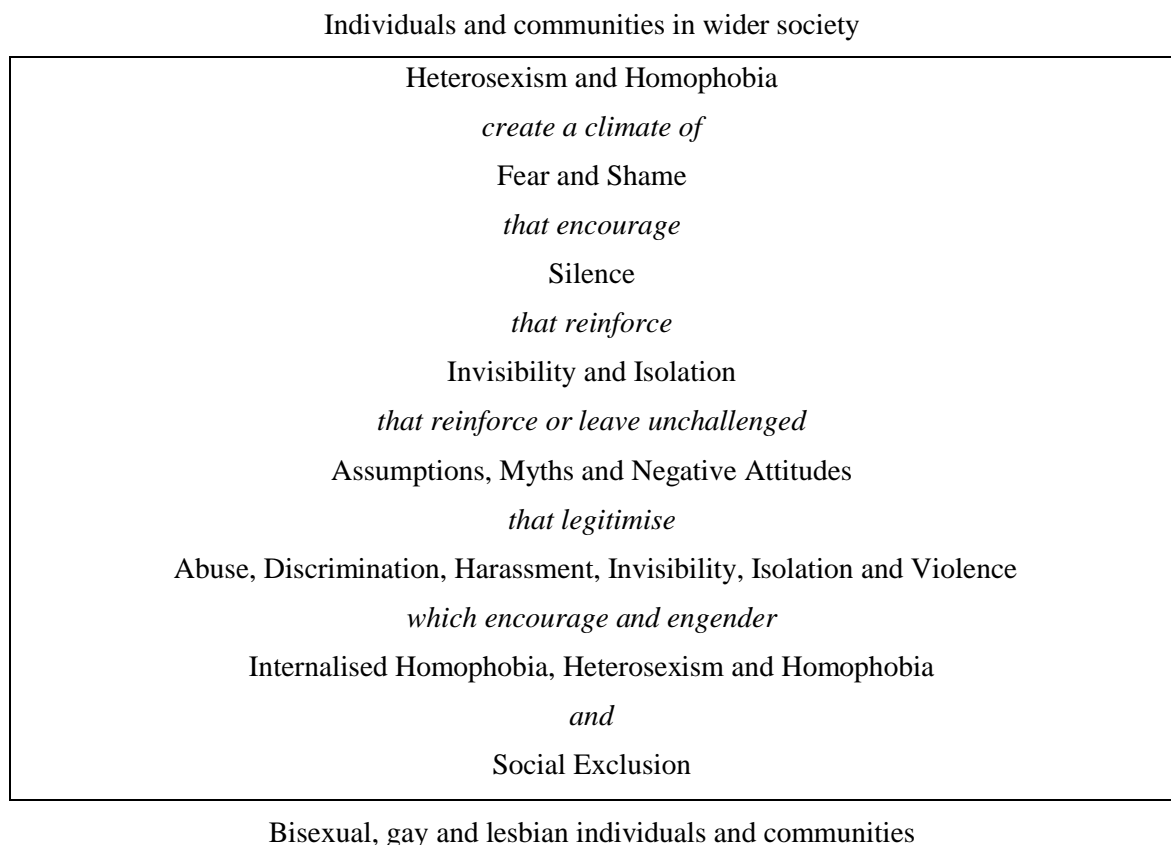
In September 1999 the Government launched its anti-poverty campaign to create "opportunities for all", based largely on aiming for unquantified improvements in 40 key indicators of poverty and social exclusion. These indicators ranged across education, employment, health, housing, low incomes and vulnerable groups. The latter included pledges to reduce teenage pregnancies, to encourage more teenage parents into education, employment and training, to reduce the numbers of people sleeping rough, to

reduce cocaine and heroin misuse, to reduce the fear of crime and to help the elderly live more independently (Brindle, 1999).

Although the campaign and its pledges are to be welcomed, it seems clear that for reasons of political expediency the Government has focused largely on economic exclusion. Arguably this can be tackled through the redistribution of resources and wealth. However, this is not necessarily the case for all forms of social exclusion, for example tackling the more attitudinal and deep-rooted forms of exclusion – those based on ethnic identity, gender and sexual identity – which were conspicuously absent from the campaign.

The findings of the research project indicate that there is a vicious cycle of social exclusion faced by many young bisexuals, gays and lesbians that needs to be tackled, see Figure 46. Heterosexism and homophobia – in the form of abuse, discrimination, harassment, invisibility, isolation, violence, etc – create a climate of fear and shame for many young bisexuals, gays and lesbians at some point in their lives. This fear and shame can encourage silence. This silence reinforces invisibility and isolation. Invisibility and isolation can reinforce assumptions, myths and negative attitudes (these often go unchallenged and may even be absorbed by bisexual, gay and lesbian young people, hence internalised homophobia). They legitimise abuse, discrimination, harassment, invisibility, isolation, violence, etc. This is a vicious circle that needs to be broken.

Figure 46: The Vicious Cycle of Social Exclusion facing some Young Bisexuals, Gays and Lesbians



ReachOUT's Research Project

ReachOUT's research project attempted to identify the local picture in comparison and contrast with the national picture, i.e. the findings of other studies. It attempted to identify the 'what' as opposed to the 'why'. More specifically, it aimed to identify *what* the typical experiences, issues and needs of young bisexuals, gays and lesbians are in terms of health and housing and *what* the typical experiences, issues and needs are of those who are Asian and Black.

The research project did not focus so much on the why, i.e. why certain outcomes or processes? The distinction is important. This was an action research project, of practical application. It was not an anthropological or sociological study and it did not attempt to construct models or formulate hypotheses. For example, it attempted to identify the incidence of eating disorders and body dissatisfaction rather than why these occurred. Where some evidence was available, I suggested several factors that might be at play. However, these were only suggestive. Fuller explanation, i.e. why, requires more in-depth analysis and the longer-term tracking of those who have an eating disorder. Although necessary, this was beyond the scope of this research project. The purpose of the research project, the research methods employed and the time available meant that it was not feasible to ask why. The author sympathises with readers who felt the frustration of commonly asking why as they proceeded through the report. If it's any consolation, the author shares that frustration.

In terms of the research project participants the sample was not a random one: participants were targeted. This reflects the reality of conducting research with a hard to reach section of society in a limited time with limited resources. However, the author estimated that approximately 24 per cent of Reading's bisexual, gay and lesbian young people (aged 15-25) were surveyed and/or interviewed. The author is therefore confident that this is *a local study of bisexual, gay and lesbian young people's experiences, issues and needs* and therefore is of relevance and use.

The research project often confirmed what other studies have found concerning the realities of life for bisexual, gay and lesbian youth in terms of health, housing and the issues of those who are Asian and Black. In other words, ReachOUT's findings (the local picture) often mirrored the national picture. However, the research also uncovered additional information and issues, especially around Asian and Black young people. ReachOUT's research project therefore contributes to the discourse and the body of knowledge of bisexual, gay and lesbian youth studies.

The research project found that there are few experiences and issues that bisexual, gay and lesbian young people face *specifically*. Most are experiences and issues that are *pronounced* in comparison with the youth population generally – resulting from their minority position in society (heterosexism, homophobia, etc.) or in the case of Asian and Black young people, their position as a minority within a minority (racism, etc.). Many issues are *general*, shared in common by young people whatever their sexual identity.

Although the research project identified several typical experiences and issues it is not useful to think in terms of the *likelihood* or *probability* of young bisexuals, gays and lesbians facing these. This encourages assumptions and stereotypes and is not useful when working with users or when attempting to improve services. It is preferable to

think in terms of *vulnerability*: that young bisexuals, gays and lesbians are vulnerable to certain experiences and issues – sometimes specifically, sometimes in a pronounced way and sometimes in common with other young people. The consequence of this vulnerability is the need for intervention by agencies and workers (and the wider community) to counter it and support these young people. The key questions are what sort of intervention, how and where?

ReachOUT's research project found several health experiences and issues that some young bisexual, gay and lesbian people are vulnerable to:

- High alcohol consumption and alcohol problems.
- Bullying because of real or perceived sexual identity.
- Selling sex.
- Domestic violence.
- Use of certain types of drugs.
- Eating disorders (particularly among gay men).
- Homophobic abuse, harassment and violence.
- Certain mental health problems (depression, suicide and self-harm).
- Poor quality sex education.
- Not practising safer sex.

The research project also found several housing experiences and issues that some young bisexuals, gays and lesbians are vulnerable to:

- Spending a substantial proportion of income on housing costs.
- Problems meeting their housing costs.
- Being made homeless.
- Experiencing housing problems because of their sexual identity.
- Limited housing options.

Some of these were specific to bisexual, gay and lesbian youth, others pronounced and others shared in common in young people generally.

The research project also found several experiences and needs that Asian and Black young people are vulnerable to, at the individual, family, Asian or Black communities, bisexual, gay and lesbian community, institutional and wider social levels.

In terms of the institutional framework, the research project identified a mixed picture. In terms of the policies and procedures of local agencies (including schools) and the experiences and practice of local workers, some agencies and workers were striving towards providing inclusive and quality services for young bisexuals, gays and lesbians while others were not.

The consequences of this mixed picture for young bisexuals, gays and lesbians are multiple. These young people cannot assume or expect that the agencies they access will have policies that are inclusive. They cannot assume or expect that the agency's staff will have the necessary experience, knowledge or skills (developed through

training for example) to meet their needs. They cannot assume or expect that the services they receive will be of a high standard or uniform in terms of equality of opportunity. They cannot assume or expect that the services they are accessing will monitor their existence or evaluate their needs. They cannot assume or expect that they will not encounter homophobic staff. They cannot assume or expect that workers will not wield their power – as gatekeepers, or providers (or not) of information or through their decision to refer (or not) – against their interests. Put simply, these young people are vulnerable to the vagaries of ‘patchy’ service provision locally. Young people may access local services for advice, help and support and not find them. Young people in schools – vulnerable to abuse, bullying, harassment, violence, etc. – may be left vulnerable by a school that is unwilling or unable to include and support these young people.

In effect, these young people are doubly vulnerable: vulnerable to a range of experiences and issues (as discussed above) and vulnerable because of the vagaries of the institutional framework. Importantly, the research project found notable discrepancies between the views of agency co-ordinators/managers and workers and school headteachers about the progress they were making on bisexual, gay and lesbian issues (how safe their agency or school is for young people to be out for example) and the experiences and views of young people on these matters.

The research project found that there are a range of health and housing experiences and issues that young bisexuals, gays and lesbians are vulnerable to. It also found that there are a range of experiences and issues that Asian and Black young people are vulnerable to. Finally, the research project identified the inadequacies and limitations of the institutional framework and its consequences for young bisexuals, gays and lesbians: a double vulnerability.

Importantly, the research project found that young bisexual, gay and lesbian people were sometimes responsible for discrimination, exclusion and oppression as members of one section of society against another. The research project found evidence of abuse, bullying, domestic violence, harassment, racism, sexism and violence. This is a reflection of the fact that the bisexual, gay and lesbian youth population is but a microcosm of society in general. Consequently, bisexual, gay and lesbian youth are not just the victims of social forces and processes – heterosexism and homophobia for example – but they are also sometimes responsible for the reproduction and hegemony of these and other forces and processes (through denial, internalised homophobia, racism, sexism, etc.).

The Recommendations

The purpose of the research project and the report and its recommendations is to improve services locally, both mainstream and specialist (like ReachOUT). The research project was therefore a practical one in its design and intent.

The recommendations that follow are not those of the author alone but were devised together with young people and local agencies and workers.

The recommendations are practical and achievable, some in the short-term other in the longer term. However, they all require sustained effort and political will to overcome any resistance to change that may be encountered. Although resistance may result from homophobia and outright hostility, it is equally likely to result from lack of resources, skills and time.

Progress will require the direction and leadership of several key agencies and workers. ReachOUT alone cannot drive this process: it is a small voluntary organisation with limited resources struggling to deliver its core services to meet its users' needs. However, ReachOUT in partnership with key agencies and workers can achieve the goal of improved local services.

Although the research findings and recommendations are particular to Reading, they are not specific. The experiences, issues and needs of young bisexuals, gays and lesbians in Reading, and the recommendations to improve local services, are likely to be of relevance and significance in other parts of Britain and wider afield. ReachOUT hopes the research report will be of interest and use to other bisexual, gay and lesbian youth projects, other bisexual, gay and lesbian services, specialist providers and mainstream services in other areas. To that end, ReachOUT will distribute the report widely.

General Points

ReachOUT's development over the last five years, as an advocate and provider of services for young bisexuals, gays and lesbians, has been rapid. This is due in no small measure to the commitment, work and vision of those involved in the early days of ReachOUT and later, its Management Committee, staff and young people. The courting and subsequent support of allies has also been invaluable.

This development and progress – for example the growth of ReachOUT's Youth Group in terms of numbers and diversity, the development of new ReachOUT services in response to identified need, the anticipated improvements in local services following the publication of the research report and the development of new bisexual, gay and lesbian youth projects in areas previously without provision – has had, or will have, a significant impact on local agencies, workers and the wider community. In the process, ReachOUT has made, and will make, a real difference to the lives of many bisexual, gay and lesbian young people.

There is great scope for further development and progress: there are young bisexuals, gays and lesbians in Reading who have not accessed ReachOUT's services but who may benefit. There are young people in other areas of the county who may benefit from more local projects. And there are agencies and workers who may benefit from the expertise and knowledge of ReachOUT's workers and young people, from the research it has conducted and from the relationships it has developed with young people (in terms of those wishing to access this hard to reach section of society).

However, ReachOUT needs help. It cannot fulfil its potential alone nor can it provide all the services young bisexuals, gays and lesbians need. ReachOUT's needs support – financial, political and otherwise – to fulfil its potential and it needs the

bisexual, gay and lesbian agenda to be adopted and pursued by mainstream agencies and workers. Significant and sustained progress will require this dual strategy.

Tackling the exclusion of bisexual, gay and lesbian youth may be difficult but it is not impossible. The recommendations of the report, and of many others preceding it, suggest practical ways in which this can be done. This is the challenge to decision-makers, funding bodies, policy-makers, service planners and providers and the wider community, both locally and nationally: to ensure social *inclusion* not exclusion.