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Identity Complexity, Intersectionality and Sexuality: A headache for policy-makers?

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Aims

- To address debates about categorisation/non categorisation
- Focusing on a particular area – LGBT equalities in local government
- With attention to different levels/contexts



Structure

- Methodology
- Policy context and key findings
- Intersectionality and strategic essentialism
- Identity fluidity at individual and community levels
- Identity rigidity at the discursive level
- Insiders and outsiders
- Conclusion



Methodology

- Large ESRC funded study of local authorities in Northern Ireland, England and Wales
- Interviews with stakeholders (local/national)
- Interviews with local authority councillors
- Participative Action Research



Policy context and key findings

- Tranche of recent legislation and policy directives
- Normalisation of LGBT equalities work and emergence of notions of 'good gay citizen' BUT:
- Implementation patchy and cross-cut by spatial, political and differences between/across LGBT groups
- Tensions around sexuality, faith and sectarianism



Illustrative quotes

- *LGBT equality is becoming more accepted and understood, but at the same time there are still quite a lot of people who don't understand why we're doing it or have the attitude of **"its OK so long as you don't kiss in front of me, or shove it in my face"**, who don't see equality as actual equality (Stakeholder, Wales)*
- *We've been fortunate with this last government over the last ten years that they've made the changes that are necessary and they've done it in such a way that... public resistance is minimal... [a] new agenda of equality and diversity, which is much broader and deeper I think than just gay and lesbians (Local Authority Officer, North East England)*



Intersectionality and strategic essentialism

- Jeff Week's 'necessary fictions'
- Trans theorists such as Riki Ann Wilchins (1997)
- Leslie McCall (2005) and other feminist and intersectionality theorists – strategic essentialism as a basis for political organising



Illustrative quote

- *...people complain that the T in LGBT is the tail on the dog, I said, 'yes it is, but it's a big dog with teeth', you know, on our own we're a tiny little animal that people just ignore but if we're part of that grouping, it's much harder to ignore us 'cause we've got a much bigger organisation, erm (-) (Trans Community Activist (A), Wales)*



Identity fluidity at individual and community levels

- Homonormative antipathy to gender and sexual fluidity
- Normative transgender, and gender variance
- The community struggles around diversity
- International and multicultural dimensions



Illustrative quotes

- *...there is that culture in pubs and clubs and I still hear comments like 'Oh don't bother talking to her, she's bisexual' and its like 'It's 2009, hello, we're not in the bloody cave now', and I do, I go on one, and I think 'Oh here I go again', but I don't get it, I don't get it. 'Oh, don't trust a bisexual woman because they'll cheat on you with a man'. (Union Officer, Southern England)*
- *What needs to happen is, is in any service context, I need to be able to disclose the full aspects of my life and I need to have some indication that I'm able to do that; but if I am in a relationship with my husband and we've got three kids, but I personally identify as bisexual, housing provider don't need to get that right now; and all I need the housing provider to do is not treat the lesbian who comes next badly. So I can't mix her head up too much with too many different things. [LGB Community Organisation Representative England]*



Identity rigidity at the discursive level

- Let us not forget the advances – sexual orientation and transgender now part of the equalities remit in the UK
- The embracing of diversity by statutory sector and some other players
- Mainstream perspectives and box ticking
- The discursive erasure of complexity



Illustrative quote

- *‘we’re the experts on sexual orientation equality; and therefore people come to us and bring their own sectoral knowledge to the table and we apply the gay stuff to it really.... we’re very pre-occupied with service delivery and the way in which service delivery is effected by good employment practices and therefore are very mindful of how Local Authorities and Local Government deliver effective services’ (Representative of LGB organisation)*



- Equalities policies as a 'blunt tool'
- Fluidity and complexity as sites of queer resistance
- Fluidity and complexity as unintelligible to well-meaning policy makers/front line workers



Conclusion

- Strategic essentialism is a useful political tool
- The multi-sited nature of the social world poses problems – what is progressive in one context is conservative in another
- Intersectionality and recognition of diversity are helpful
- But there is a danger of losing class basis for political action



Our outputs

- <http://research.ncl.ac.uk/selg/>
- *Sexuality, Equality and Diversity* (Palgrave Macmillan forthcoming 2012, paperback and hardback)

