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Where are all the bisexuals? Bisexuality and local government equalities work in the UK

Surya Monro, Diane Richardson,
and Ann McNulty



Policy Context

- Range of LGBT equalities legislation introduced since 1999
- **Recent legislative/policy developments include**
- Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations, 2003
- Civil Partnership Act, 2004
- Equality Regulations (Sexual Orientation), 2007
- Equality Act, 2010



Policy context

- Introduction of standardised implementation mechanisms
- The shift towards community engagement and partnership work



Conceptual context

- The changing nature of citizenship
- Organisational and institutional processes
- Democracy and participation
- Intersectionality



Methodology

- Large ESRC funded study of local authorities in Northern Ireland, England and Wales
- Interviews with stakeholders (4 Local Authorities and partners, national stakeholders, councillors)
- Participative Action Research



Findings

- Discursive erasure
 - Bi is simply ‘off the radar’
 - Bi erased in wider community too
 - Bi is included in acronym in high level policy documents but not elsewhere
 - Bi collapsed into either gay/lesbian or straight identities



Quote

- *I mean fear is prevalent here, it really is among the gay community, and I think the bisexual community feel it more because, em, you've got the gay community on one side that's hostile towards them and you've the straight community, you don't quite understand whether they want to be a Mary or a, do you know what I mean, a Martha or an Arthur' (Gay community member, Wales)*



Findings cont.

- Cultures of homophobia and biphobia
 - Office banter
 - Anxiety about sexuality
 - Over-eroticisation of LGB identities
 - Notions of greed and unworthiness



Quote

- ‘...how can you be bi, and fancy both?...**its seen as indecisive and kind of having your cake and eating it**’ (Local authority officer, Wales)
- ‘...the thing with bisexual people, it’s an interesting sort of dilemma really, because somebody I did hear, at the conference, that some people regard them as **being greedy, because they can’t make their minds up** ... (Fire and Rescue Services Diversity Officer, England).



Findings cont

- Implementation
 - Difficulties knowing 'what bisexuals need'
 - Invisibility of bisexual role models/communities
 - Lack of bisexual-sensitive policies
 - Wider difficulties with recession and cutbacks



Quote

- ***‘you can’t have multiple relationships recognised if you wanted to and then you know so basically you can’t have anyone other than just two parents being recognised as carers. So poly people in families can be in a really difficult position. I think it becomes a big issues when people have kids and up until that point there’s less of an issue. You know maybe some things like being recognised if your partner goes into hospital or something; but it’s particularly around families, that people can feel very insecure because you know you could just have your kids taken away or you know you could have no access to kids that you’ve been looking after for your whole life if you aren’t biologically related to them’*** (Bisexual activist England).



Findings cont.

- Community engagement
 - Biphobia (overt and institutional) in the lesbian and gay communities hinders bisexual equality work
 - Issues with bi community capacity are an issue



Quote

I: ...**bisexuals sometimes is a bit too tricky.**

Q – Right and can you explain why?

I – *Because trying to explain service delivery in a context where, bisexuality, identity is important in that service delivery is quite difficult to explain in a one-meet opportunity. So your sexual orientation is only ever relevant in the moment in which you're being served to be honest.... What needs to happen 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 to much with too many different things.** [LGB community organisation England]*



Concluding thoughts

- Current equality initiatives are not without their problems BUT provide an opportunity for change
- Bi people currently 'carry' projections of other communities – there is a need to challenge heteronormativity and homonormativity
- Need to develop specifically bi policies/good practice guidelines that policy makers and practitioners can engage with – as well as addressing difficulties with rigid categorisation of gender/sexuality



Further Information

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